



Vision, Energy, Action

A guide to inspiring young Buddhists

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Introduction

The following is a working document of ideas collated from conversations, observations and reflections on Buddhist centres that report success in attracting and inspiring young people.

These ideas are presented so as to give a starting point for centre chairs and teams to discuss how to inspire the next generation of Triratna Buddhists, and include key questions to stimulate discussion. The spirit of the document is mostly practical and tries to give examples of specific actions rather than expounding the principles.

The document itself is arranged into four sections according to the commonly observed stages of young people's involvement in a centre:

Publicity deals with the way Buddhist centres communicate themselves to a wide audience, specifically young people.

Inspiration looks at how to create conditions in Buddhist centres themselves for young people to 'catch' the Dharma.

Connection details how to encourage friendships between young Buddhists and the development of young Buddhist groups.

Depth looks to the future and possible avenues for further development.

In the spirit of collaboration and sharing good practice, please let Prajnaketu know if you have any questions, clarifications, additions, or comments on the ideas included.

May it be of benefit!

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Oxford

July 2016

Executive summary

These three factors are common to Sanghas in which young people thrive:

Bold Altruistic Vision

Many young people have a strong social conscience; they are aware of the injustices and problems faced by the world, and want guidance on what they can do about them. So young people often respond positively to a presentation of the Dharma which is idealistic, emphasises community, and highlights the need to train ourselves to be effective agents in addressing global issues.

Energy

Young people love energy, excitement, adventure, challenge.

Tangible Action

Young people often want something tangible to do, something that they can throw their energy into, and to be able to see the effects of doing so.

5 Top Tips

Here are some immediate practical steps you can take to encourage young people at your centre:

1. Invite Prajnaketu for a young-ish outsider's perspective on your centre's online/printed **publicity**. (see pp7-19)
2. Where possible, run introductory courses and other events on a **dana** basis, lift the limit on numbers, remove the need to book, and invite young people to be on teams and visible up front. (p21)
3. Experiment with placing **meditation at the end** of your events, rather than the beginning. (p21)
4. Hand-pick young people for small pre-mitra **discussion groups** and to volunteer on centre teams as early as possible in their involvement. (p24)
5. Publicise, and encourage young people to come to, **national Young Buddhist events** (Big One, Sub25s) and subsidise/pay your young facilitators (or prospective young facilitators) to come on the **training weekend**, normally held at Adhithana in February. (p25)

Key Question: how many young people come along to, and are actively involved in, your Centre? Why do you think this is? What strategies and principles have you already applied to encourage more young people to be a part of our Community? And what have you learned from doing this?

Publicity

From few young people to some young people

Bold Altruistic Vision

First, many young people respond to **boldness, ambition, and a myth of being part of something bigger than themselves**. The myth of building a community that has a clear altruistic dimension alongside personal development has been central to Bhante's teaching (think: New Society, Building the Buddhaland, Transforming Self and World, the Bodhisattva Ideal &c.) and is as attractive as ever. It's also very attractive to see other people of (all ages) who are passionate about changing the world and are clearly putting it into practice. My view is that **the more the Triratna Buddhist Community looks outwards at what we can offer the world, the more attractive it will become to young people**.

Dana forms a strong part of this: it appeals to the idealism of young people – as an immediate way of addressing the consumerist economic paradigm that is the cause of so much suffering in the world – and also to the fact that a lot of young people struggle financially. It's very common for people in their twenties to have student loan debts of £35,000-£40,000 – so publicising that our Dharma events are run on a dana basis removes one obstacle to young people getting involved.

What does this look like?

Highlighting on websites that we are **part of an international movement** whose aim is to make the Buddha's teaching of personal liberation and social transformation available in the modern world.

That the more **contemplative elements** of Buddhist practice are conditions for making this transformation possible, **not ends in themselves**: *"To help the world become a better place we need to become a bigger person. We need to train ourselves in becoming wiser, more courageous, creative, empathetic and committed"* (LBC Winter retreat publicity 2016)

Making clear in our publicity that **world-transformation starts with dana**: we run our events on a dana basis because if we want to change the world we need to think more in terms of contributing than consuming. And this goes for the teachers as well as the participants. Try to avoid talking about dana exclusively in terms of 'covering costs': it's the basis of a **radical new way of relating to what we value**. *"Generosity is of fundamental importance in Buddhism... our aim is to inspire a culture of generosity in the way we share Buddhist teachings."* (Sheffield Buddhist Centre website)

Key Question: What is the vision of your centre and (how) is it communicated through your publicity?

Energy

This vision can also find expression in vocabulary, images, and content that communicates **energy**.

Vocabulary

Involve active, dynamic words and concepts. For example:

CHALLENGE *Adventure*

Training **RADICAL**

LIMITLESS

STRENGTH

Immersion **Intensity**

Reality Unlimited potential

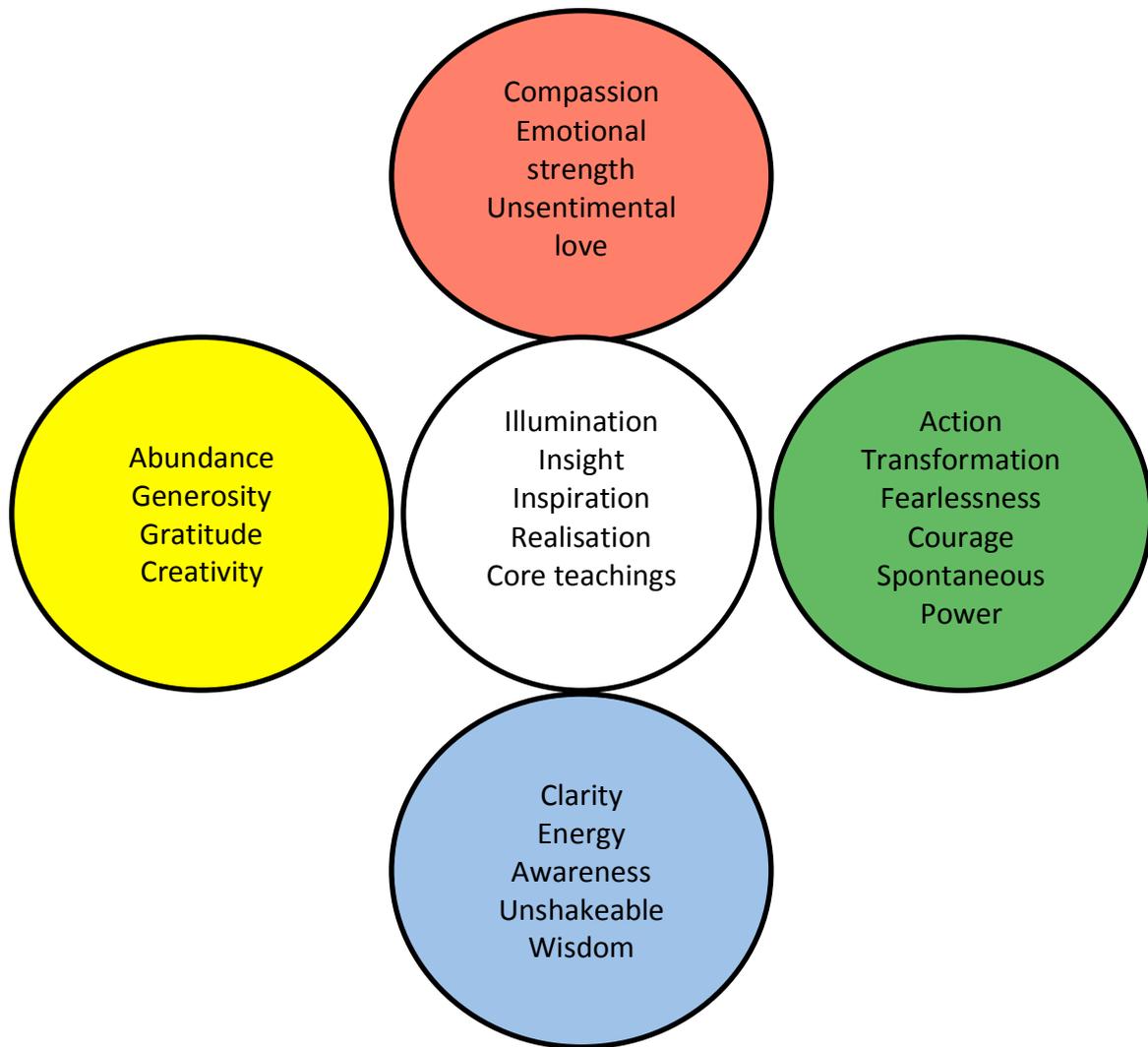
MASTERY

Expansion Infinite

Vastness *Freedom*

WORLDWIDE **Community**

The qualities of the five Jinas are ready-made for this:



Use sparingly (preferably not at all!):

Mindfulness
Gentle
Relaxation
De-stress
Peaceful
Inner-calm
Accepting
Well-being
Peace of mind

Course Names

Rather than “Buddhism and meditation level one”, which can appear prosaic and reminiscent of adult education, give your introductory courses catchy names:

Break Out: an introduction to Buddhism and Meditation

Wake Up!

Zero to Buddha

Train your mind, Change the World

Mastering the Mind

Change your Life

Photos/Images

Often Buddhist centre publicity is beautifully presented, with very high quality photos, images and formatting. It is important that publicity looks good! This can also, however, give the **impression that a centre is established, already worked-out, and rather professional** – so care needs to be taken to ensure that there is a balance between aesthetics and communicating a vision of building a community *together*.

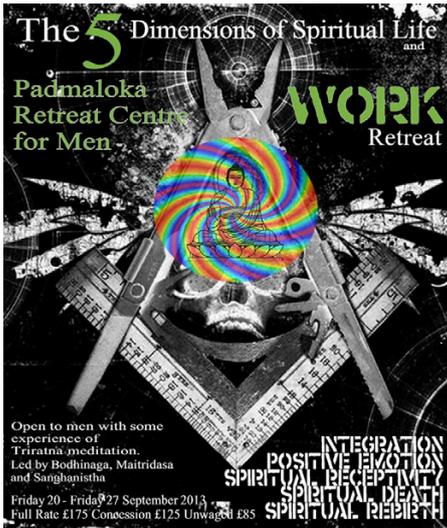
Also, images that communicate the qualities of the jinas mentioned above and are identifiably Buddhist are rare! Part of the project of our Community is to develop a visual vocabulary for doing this, and a large part of this is going to involve subverting the stereotypes. It’s very exciting! A few general principles for images, with examples, are below:

Effective	Less effective	Examples
Recognisably local	Stock images – photos or clipart (are easy to spot and automatically ignored): things like dew-speckled lotuses, pebbles balanced in a pile...and pictures of people who are clearly professional models	Street meditation; a busy pedestrian street near your centre; public transport; a local landmark seen differently
Involve real people who the audience might meet at your centre		Photos of speakers interacting with audiences; mug shots of centre team and teachers (e.g. Norwich)
Show movement or action	Empty shrine rooms; stacks of meditation cushions; an over-emphasis on images of groups of people with their eyes closed.	A room full of people saluting the shrine; Someone making an offering to the shrine; photos of social/environmental activism
Convey Buddhist principles e.g. of the five Jinas, Bodhisattvas	Yoga poses, healthy living clichés	See below



Figure 1 - Stock 'meditation' images are easy to spot, generally ignored, particularly off-putting to men, and are a missed opportunity for communicating the radical nature of the Dharma

Key Question: To what extent do the images in your publicity support or subvert the worldly stereotypes of Buddhism and meditation?

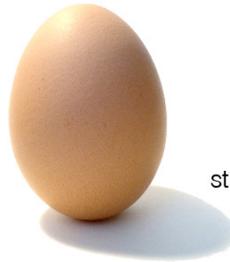


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The Individual
and The Spiritual Community
 going beyond conformity and individualism

Led by young Order Members
 26th - 28th September
 £50 deposit + donation
 padmaloka.org.uk



break out



starting Monday 3rd August

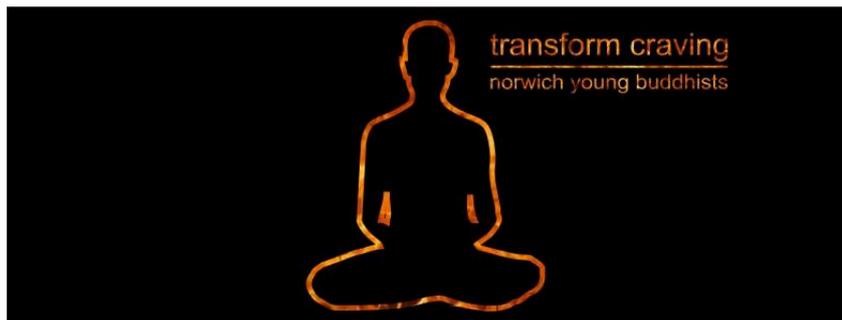


Figure 2 - Images exploring Buddhist principles (Clockwise from top left: Padmaloka on the Five dimensions of spiritual life; Padmaloka on Sangha; Norwich young Buddhists March 2016 on Ratnasambhava; Oxford April 2015 intro course; Norwich young Buddhists April 2016; LBC young Buddhists June 2016.



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COURAGE

IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD...

Figure 3 - Examples of home-made images. (Clockwise from top left: Norwich website; Oxford intro course June 16; Cambridge young Buddhists May 2016; Oxford intro course October '15; Sheffield intro course poster July '16; Nottingham 20th Anniversary; Oxford drop-in meditation poster;)

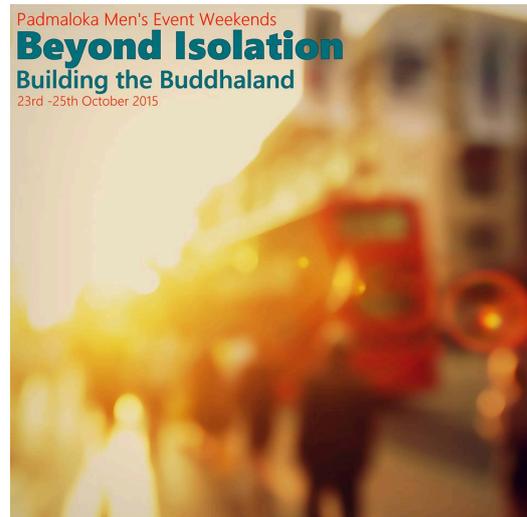


Figure 4 - Real people, local places. (Clockwise from top left: Berlin underground; Birmingham young Buddhists; Padmaloka (outside LBC?); Brighton; Norwich young Buddhists, from Norwich website)

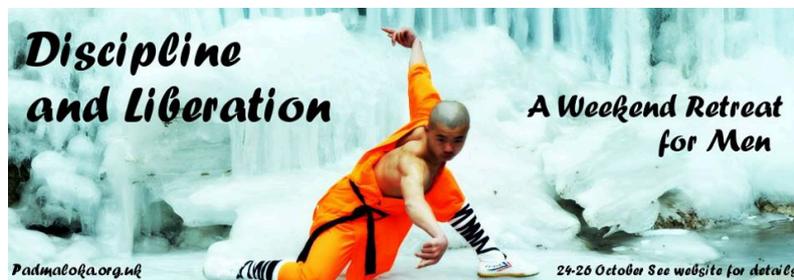
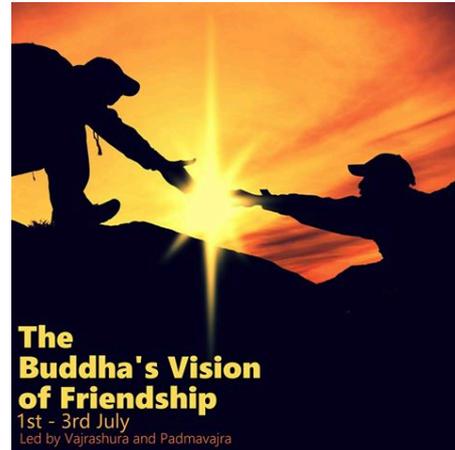
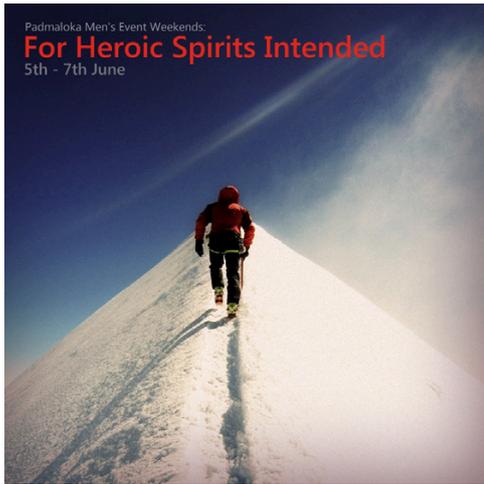
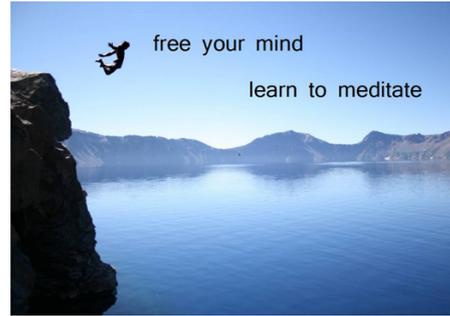


Figure 5 - Dynamic images. (Clockwise from top-left: Cambridge young Buddhists May 2016; Norwich drop-in meditation; Norwich 'Going Deeper'; Padmaloka Great Gathering; Padmaloka Men's Event; Bristol mitra ceremony on website; Padmaloka Men's Event)

Key Question: How might you present the more dynamic qualities of the Awakened mind in your publicity images?

Content

A lot of young people respond positively to publicity that challenges, and **differentiates the Dharma** from, the soft, passive, undemanding, individualistic image that Buddhism sometimes has in Western culture. Doing this can be perceived as edgy and exciting, and there can also be a degree of pride in being part of something distinctive – as well as being truer to the spirit of the Dharma!

So for example (all from the LBC spring 2016 programme):

- Emphasise **clarity** and the **systematic** nature of Dharma practice to differentiate from 'New Age'. E.g.
"These courses are a step-by-step guide that can transform your perspective on the world and provide you with tools you can use for a lifetime"
- Emphasise the **Transcendental** to differentiate from 'self-help' and therapeutic contexts. E.g.
"This [introduction to devotional practice] takes us through the stages that help us glimpse, move towards and realise our limitless potential"
- Emphasise **altruism, compassionate action, and community** to differentiate from 'lifestyles' or 'well-being'. E.g.
"Being a Buddhist and joining the Sangha is not like joining a group, but a radically new way of living and relating to others. With shared practices and ideals we not only become more of an individual, but form the nucleus of a new society; one that is beneficial for ourselves and the world."
- Emphasise **mystery and adventure** to differentiate from adult education. E.g.
"[These mornings aim at] how to move beyond ordinary, divided consciousness into Samadhi."

Non-Dharma activities

Care should be taken around advertising other activities such as MBSR, yoga, pilates, t'ai chi, therapy, and even meditation as a standalone activity. These can be perceived as sleepy and dull – by people of all ages – which, while being attractive to some can be really off-putting to young people, particularly to young men.

These activities are very worthwhile in themselves, but in terms of conveying the bold altruistic vision of Triratna, it is important to show they are **clearly subordinate** to the Dharma. Especially with MBAs/MBSR/MBCT, be aware of how the standard messages for these reflect on your Dharma activities. For example, blurbs for MBAs often expect participants to commit to 45-60 minutes of practice, 6 days a week, attend all the sessions, and tout the expertise of the teachers. Care needs to be taken in order to ensure that the centre's Dharma events are not perceived as the soft-option in comparison (which of course they aren't!).

Key Question: Look at the signs outside your centre, the arranging of notices for these activities inside, and printed / online publicity: what is the weighting between Dharma and non-Dharma activities? What might you do to address this?

In my view, advertising the Dharma 'indirectly' through these activities actually gives the impression that we believe the Dharma cannot stand on its own merits. 'Buddhism through the front door' done well is a strong and attractive message to convey.

Tangible Action

Photos and images are a really good way to get young people involved in contributing to your centre: many young people are technologically very savvy and creative. You might want to **hold a competition** every few months for people to **submit photos or images** of their own which convey these qualities – the winners get their photos shown in your publicity.

Alternatively, encourage the savvy young people in your centre to get together in a team and give them the freedom to create!

Elements of good advertising:

- Make the most of **word-of-mouth** – this is *the* most effective form of publicity. Create a culture of 'telling your friends' in your centre: e.g. supply participants at your intro courses with flyers for the next course (or the next week) to give to their friends.
- Emphasise how what we offer addresses the **needs of the audience**, (rather than talking mostly about who we are, what we do, long descriptions of meditations or Buddhist teachings) e.g. *'Looking to transform your mind? Want to live more creatively?'*
- Reduce **word count to a minimum** – especially on websites – if it takes longer than 2 minutes to read it, forget it.
- **Diversify** our strategy: there is no one-size-fits-all approach (see below).
- Provide a **clear next step**: e.g. (from the Sheffield Buddhist Centre homepage)

What is Buddhism? See the [Buddhism](#) page for more information.
How do I learn to meditate and get involved? See the [Newcomers](#) page.
Where does meditation fit in? See the [Meditation](#) page.
Interested in yoga or tai chi? Look at [Ashtanga Yoga](#), [Hatha Yoga](#) or [Tai Chi](#)
Already involved and want to know what's going on? See [Going Deeper](#)
How do I find the Centre or get in touch? [Contact Us](#)

Key Question: Who creates your publicity? Can you involve young people in the processes of creating, designing and distributing your publicity?

Noticeboards



A number of centres have moved away from a traditional noticeboard with lots of different A4/A5 posters (e.g. above) to an integrated super-sized poster approach (below) – this is easier to read, visually more appealing, gives a sense of ‘official’ endorsement, and is organised according to date so people can see quickly what the next event is.



Figure 6 – Poster publicity from the London Buddhist Centre 2016

Parallel Publicity Streams

The last word on publicity is to spread it across different media in different ways – even having one or more parallel streams of publicity in addition to the regular publicity.

For example:

- Centre programmes might be professionally-produced with high quality images and finish
- Facebook events or adverts could be done by just choosing an image and a short blurb and/or video promoting the event.
- Student Unions or café adverts could be really cut-down, low-cost – even a bit ‘shabby’ – no images, no blurb, just bold hand-written text, photocopied onto bright paper. It’s cheap and easy to do, you can involve others in your centre, and it will appeal to those who are put off by the slicker kinds of advertising.
- Setting up a **separate website for mindfulness/yoga** &c. so as to differentiate from the main thrust of the centre’s activities.

In short, the stage of Publicity is about conveying, as **clearly and simply** as possible, that the Dharma works as a vehicle for transforming ourselves and the world, and that **the only way to experience this is in person**, rather than on the Internet or in a book:

“For thousands of years people have found that the practices of Buddhism really do work, leading to better mental states, clearer vision, and more meaningful lives. But don’t take our word for it — try it for yourself. To find out about our introductory classes see the [Newcomers](#) page.” (Sheffield Buddhist Centre website)

Inspiration

From young people to young Buddhists

So if there are young people now coming through the doors, how to inspire them to become young *Buddhists*?

Bold Altruistic Vision

What is your Buddhist centre about and how do you communicate this to people who come along? As I mentioned above, an idealistic and ‘sticky’ message to the effect that Buddhism is about **creating the nucleus of a new kind of society** is very attractive to young people. I was very struck in visiting the Sheffield Buddhist centre how the message of ‘building community’ was clearly understood by *everyone* I spoke to. So the stage of encouraging young people to become young Buddhists is about communicating what this ideal looks like on the ground, and how they can participate in it straightaway.

What to encourage and highlight, from the first evening (e.g. on an introductory course)

- A myth: we’re **building a community** together as a **direct, ethical response to the needs of the world**
- Participating in this community is about **sharing our lives** with one another – and that this will transform us and our relationships
- That this community is founded on **dana** – and explicitly challenges the transactional model found in the rest of society
- That the event is run by a **stable team** who clearly **exemplify spiritual friendship**, represent a **broad spectrum** of life-experience and involvement (e.g. recent course participants through to Order members, younger to older) and are **giving their time as an expression of dana**
- That the Dharma is radically transformative, if you practise diligently

What to avoid

- The feel of an adult education facility with class timetables, learning objectives, syllabuses, modules, fees, lesson plans &c.
- Lone ‘professional’ (i.e. aloof) teachers who change from week to week, collect dana on an event-by-event basis, and are not witnessed in communication with each other
- An emphasis on the Dharma as an individual coping strategy for an otherwise ordinary life – e.g. to experience less anxiety, feel healthier, help us sleep better, or get on better with our boss &c.

The main point here is ensuring that there is a continuity of vision between the centre’s publicity and what is communicated directly at your events.

Key Question: What is your centre team's vision of Sangha? How do you express this at events? What do participants think it is? If there's a discrepancy, how will you address it?

Energy

People tune into the energy of a centre very quickly, even if they're not consciously aware of it. Experience has shown that a slightly 'rambunctious' atmosphere is most attractive to young people. This kind of energy is one of the characteristic features of young Buddhists' retreats and, I believe, is a major part of their success. In a wider context it can be achieved in a number of ways:

Lots of other (young) people

The simplest way is just to have lots of people present – the effect of a buzzing space is attractive to a lot of young people (think: clubs, gigs, festivals, parties...). This can be achieved by **lifting the limit on numbers, removing the need to book, and running your events on a dana basis**. Young people (and men, apparently) are the most likely to leave booking until the last minute (= too late) and/or be put off by it. And running events on a dana basis opens them to the widest possible audience. The effect of a crowded space may not be universally popular, but I can't put it strongly enough that **we need to become confident and comfortable with large numbers of people coming to our centres!**

The Role of Meditation

It's been observed that the placement of meditation in an event can make a difference to the energy of a gathering. Placing meditation at the start can set a sleepy, 'precious', refined, or even awkward tone for the evening and can inhibit the extent to which people feel at ease and able to connect with one another when they arrive. This is particularly the case if people arrive for the first time into a silent room. The same can be said if a good chunk of the tea-break is devoted to 'coming round' from meditation: this is potentially time that could be used to build connections between people.

It's also been observed that holding meditation as a standalone activity tends to attract people who are more interested in calm and de-stressing, and remaining in their own 'bubble', and as such it doesn't facilitate sangha-building. I can recall going along to a regular meditation class at the London Buddha Vihara in the late noughties and sometimes I could get away with not saying a single word to anyone from arrival to exit – needless to say this is not what we want to be encouraging!

Starting off with a lively talk and discussion can help to set a positive tone to the event and also give you a chance to meet and appreciate the newer people who are coming along before everyone goes silent.

(There is also quite a lot of anecdotal – and scriptural – support for the idea that people are actually better prepared for meditation *after* a stimulating Dharma talk and discussion than coming straight from the street or work.)

You might, on a trial basis, **introduce an evening programme** such as:

Meet for shared food

Arrivals

Talk

Tea

Discussion

Meditation

Speakers

The people up-front can have a strong influence on the quality of energy at a public event. A rough-and-ready hierarchy for the speakers to choose, insofar as there is a choice, is:

- An order member *of any age* who is 'on fire' with the Dharma
- An order member of any age who is a lively, passionate and inspiring speaker
- The youngest order member around (if they don't already fit into one of the categories above)
- A young mitra who is training for ordination
- Everyone else

You may even consider asking your best speakers just to do public events rather than closed study groups, if there is a conflict of interest.

A good way to involve young mitras is to ask them to give 'Why I am a Buddhist' talks, or 5-10 minute talks on the theme – I've noticed that for every Sangha Night series at the Sheffield centre, one whole evening is given over to short talks from mitras.

An important point here is that **you don't have to be young to inspire young people** – Jeremy Corbyn is a good example of this in the wider world – but the speaker's level of energy really matters. And I can appreciate that this is a delicate matter to bring up! The London Buddhist Centre has developed a strong **culture of giving and receiving feedback** over the last few years – involving everyone at every level of communication – and this has been reported to have been a significant factor in the development of the high quality, engaging teaching there. There are also teacher training events at Adhithana every year.

Timings

A short (15-20 minutes a la TED), pithy talk with a few key points explained clearly also helps to maintain higher levels of energy, even if the speaker is not very energetic in themselves. Then give more time to small-group discussion.

Themes

Young people also respond well to the discussion of challenging issues from a Buddhist perspective. The following list is far from exhaustive!

Vegetarianism
 Sex/porn
 Technology/media
 Meditation as a kind of training
 Social change – Sangha as building a new society together vs individualism
 Environmentalism
 Death
 Buddhist ritual
 Secularism/scientific materialism
 Rebirth
 Global politics
 Careers/work
 Buddhism and charity
 Buddhism and other religions

Key question: What is the feeling of energy at your events? Exciting, rambunctious and challenging? Or quiet and peaceful? What, from the above, might you do to increase the energy levels?

Tangible Action: A Clear Next Step

Another key message is to convey regularly is that ‘there is still more to learn!’. The Dharma is *deep* and cannot be fathomed in the course of a single evening or even a series of courses. But how to access those depths, particularly in light of the sometimes bewildering array of events going on in centres, can be completely opaque to newer people. So the more **systematic and explicit we are in talking about next steps**, and **personally inviting** people to take them, the easier they will find it to pursue the Dharma more deeply – (this also conveys the principle that this presentation of the Dharma is systematic and works).

It’s worth also noting that “you’re very welcome to come to X” isn’t a reason to do it! It only communicates that we’re a friendly and welcoming community of people, which hopefully should be obvious anyway. The real reason to come is “**there’s even more to Buddhism, and X is your next step**”.

Key messages at different stages:

Stage	Next step(s)
First night	‘Come back next week’ (easy to forget!) and bring a friend Mention dates of follow-up course
Penultimate night of intro course	‘This is not the end’ – formally plug follow on course and/or retreat
End of follow-on course	Invite to Sangha night
Regular	Invite to (pre-mitra) study group
Mitra	Invite to join team on retreat...

Key question: How clear are the next steps in your centre? Ask young people within their first six months of arrival if they know what they need to do to take their involvement further.

Pre-mitra study groups

These seem to have been particularly successful with young men at the London Buddhist Centre: even before they have made a formal commitment, **hand-picking young people to join small groups** to study the foundation year of the mitra study course. From what I understand, these groups become crucibles for ordination training: deeper friendships between young people form, they see that they are being taken seriously as Dharma practitioners, and they can be challenged. For young men in particular, there is a definite attraction to **meeting with a purpose** – locking horns and interrogating the Dharma together. This is also part of a long-term strategy for creating the conditions for the future of the order: the LBC started doing this around 2011 and by 2016 they had an additional 4 young male order members, with many more in the process.

Volunteering

In Oxford, I make a point of encouraging everyone to participate in the running of the Sangha from the very first night of an introductory course. We ask for volunteers to help wash up, put away the mats and cushions, arrive early next time to help set up the room, bake a cake for next time, bring along flowers for the shrine...The idea is to make it clear that dana involves more than money and that everyone's contribution is valued.

In your centre, as soon as possible, you might try personally inviting young people to participate in teams which:

- Support introductory classes
- Design/distribute publicity
- Maintain an online presence – not just websites, but facebook, youtube, twitter, instagram, meetup, vine, snapchat...
- Maintain the centre building
- Organise BAM! Actions
- Fundraise for the centre or other causes
- Host socials
- Run festival days
- Do whatever needs doing!

Key Question: what opportunities are there for young people to be involved in the running of your centre? How might you involve them more?

Connection

Supporting friendships between young Buddhists

Generally, as a movement and Order we are well-versed in encouraging friendships between people. The principle here is simply to **befriend young people and put them in touch with other young people**. And then, as much as possible, let them get on with it.

This section is mainly about what centre teams can do to help start up and support young Buddhist groups. At the time of writing there are 26 young Buddhist groups in Europe and 31 worldwide (excluding India). These are mostly self-organised gatherings, ranging from a monthly 'wraparound' event (food before, or drink after, a regular Sangha gathering) with a few friends, to a varied programme of classes, socials, retreats and more.

The most successful young Buddhist groups are those that have been founded on the initiative of young, committed and capable friends who want to share their inspirations and an alternative way of socialising with other young people.

I have written a Young Facilitators' Handbook that deals with the processes of setting up and developing a young Buddhist group from the young Buddhists' perspective. Email youngtriratna@gmail.com if you'd like a copy.

Supporting Vision

In the 60 or so interviews I've conducted with Young Facilitators, I've observed a common pattern of

- 1) initial resistance to the idea of young people's events
- 2) being encouraged to go to one of the (inter)national events by someone in the Sangha – often a 'Big One' autumn retreat or young facilitators' gathering
- 3) enjoying the retreat
- 4) wanting to set up, or get involved, in something similar locally

So the principal way in which you can support the start of a young Buddhist group is by **encouraging the young people you know to go on these bigger events** – ideally by bundling into a car together with other local young people for a road trip or travelling together by train. The combination of positive energy, seeing young order members giving talks and leading activities, and being in the presence of lots of other young people, often from many different countries can be a game-changer for some people.

The Young Order Steering Group also runs an annual Young Facilitators' training weekend (normally in February), which is intended for people who are running or hoping to run young Buddhists events locally. A good way to support the formation and development of your local young Buddhists group is to **subsidise** (or even pay fully) **your facilitators' travel and the cost of the weekend** ~£70. I know that the facilitators really appreciate this show of support.

Energy

The main thing here is just to take your facilitators or future facilitators seriously – offering what you can to help them set things up at your centre. And being excited helps too!

Tangible Action: supporting friendships and groups

Depending on the size or organisation of your Sangha you may find that the young people who come along don't know each other very well (and they may be quite ok with not knowing other young people). They may come to different evenings or just not really 'clock' age as something significant (that's fine too).

But for some young people it can be nothing short of a revelation that there are other young people interested in Buddhism, particularly if your centre's age demographic is skewed towards the middle-aged. Such people will find it tremendously inspiring to encounter others at their stage of life who are asking the same questions as themselves. You could **flag up who those others are**, put them in touch with each other, or arrange a time at the centre when they can come together (before another event for food, for example).

Of course, **ultimately the onus is on the young people to do something**, and they might not want to, or the time might not be right for it yet, or the personalities involved might not 'click'. It is understandable that a centre without a young Buddhist group might want one to form, but one should also be aware that wanting this too much can be a condition for it not happening!

If there are some young Buddhists who want to meet together at your centre, there are a number of tried-and-tested ways in addition to the above in which you can support them.

Keys

Give them a set of keys to your centre and suggest a time and venue they can have. Friday/Saturday nights can often be good times for young people as an 'alternative' social space. This is a strong sign of support that you trust them and that it is 'their' centre too. Obviously they also have to be trustworthy – but that's your judgement call.

Offer training

Every few months offer to meet with them to tune in with how the group is going, what their plans are, and if there's anything they need help with. You can also offer them training, a variant of which is that you pose them questions which they may encounter from newcomers and then they get given feedback on how it went. This can be very nerve-wracking but also very stimulating and affirming, **creating a culture of feedback** which, as mentioned above, conduces to the development of high quality teaching in the longer term. It can also be seen as a part of your local ordination training process, as many of the facilitators have asked for ordination.

Jnanaketu and Dharmashalin in Birmingham, amongst others have done this with their local facilitators team. (See Appendix 1)

Offer yourself

One format that has been quite successful is a **'grill the elders'**-type event. Where this has been done, one or more of the older Order Members in the sangha give short presentations on their experiences of a topic (such as work, sex, friendship, money, death, altruistic activity...) and then receive questions from the young people. From what I've heard, although this can be quite challenging it is enjoyable and stimulating for all concerned.

Key question: if you have a young Buddhists group meeting, what do you do to support them? What, from the list above, might be practicable to include in addition to what you already do?

FAQs

What counts as 'young'?

This varies from centre to centre. For the national events we normally stipulate a **limit of 35 years old**. Still, this isn't young by most standards! Some local groups extend this upwards to 40, but the ideal trajectory should be towards a lower age limit – think about an 18 year old encountering people nearly twice their age at an event for 'young' people!

We've had a young Buddhist group running at our centre for a while but the main facilitators have got too old/lost interest/gone somewhere else and the young Buddhist group has gone quiet. What can we do?

It is fairly common for groups and facilitators to wax and wane over time. This is not necessarily a reflection of any problems: young people are more transitory than other demographic groups, and the presence or absence of any number of factors can contribute to young Buddhist groups growing or becoming 'fallow'. One of the key things here from a centre team perspective is **not to worry about it too much**. Indeed, sometimes it takes the dropping-off of a young Buddhist group to galvanise others to take initiative. In the event of entering a quieter period, one might just want to return the principle of putting young people in touch with one another and encouraging them to go on the big national events.

How do we ensure that the young Buddhists don't just become a separate sangha i.e. not getting involved with wider sangha activities?

Personally invite them to get involved in hosting events for the wider sangha – film nights, barbecues, walks, festival days, giving talks at Sangha nights, joining the team for introductory courses...I encourage facilitators to point other young people towards the main sangha events, as that's where they'll get the best teaching. At the same time, if you find that young people aren't filtering through to the wider sangha, it's worth asking why that might be. Look again at the sections on Publicity and Inspiration of this document – is there anything else you can do here?

How do I start up a university group?

Most universities require a current student to start up a society or a group. If there are not already students coming along, you may want to offer taster sessions at a Freshers' Fair. This is something I need to look more into as few universities in the UK appear to have active Buddhist societies.

Are there criteria for choosing young facilitators and how they might run a group?

At the moment, almost every young Buddhist group runs in a different way, some with more formal arrangements, some very informally. By way of an example of a more formal arrangement, here are some principles from Dharmashalin, who has been acting as a kalyana mitra to the 'YoBs' (Young Buddhists) in Birmingham:

- GfR mitras who are *actively* engaged with the ordination process.
- Have been agreed by the Chair or one of the Mitra Convenors as suitable.
- Have a living meditation and dharma practice of their own.
- Attend the Training sessions run for GfR mitras and New Order Members (not all but at least enough)
- Are in harmony with the rest of the YoBs team.
- Are actively involved in some other aspect of the centres activities (study or supporting classes)
- Have an experienced Order member mentoring them as teachers or leaders. Someone they talk with about what they are going to do, and feedback to afterwards.
- Creating a culture of positive and supportive feedback. Primarily this occurs amongst the GfR team on those evenings (although you might want to actually give feedback later!). This also extends to your mentors.
- Be clear about your practice of the precepts especially the 'social' ones. i.e. sexual ethics in relation to people coming along and having a very low (ideally none) level of alcohol/recreational drug use.
- When at all possible all evenings are run by a team of 3 or more and no one person 'holds' the whole evening.

Depth

From young Buddhists to young Bodhisattvas

From what I've seen around the movement, and what I know about young people more generally, I believe we're only scratching the surface of what young Buddhists' involvement might look like and the potential lying in wait. Key areas I want to explore in the future are:

- Supporting groups of young people in setting up communities
- Small-scale start-up businesses
- Giving talks to university groups (not just Buddhist societies)
- Joint actions with other groups – Buddhist, non-Buddhist, environmental, social, political
- Other factors that support young people training for, and eventually living-out, their ordination
- Use of new media in attracting an even younger audience

Key Question: has your centre made any progress with the above? If so, please get in contact with Prajnaketu youngtriratna@gmail.com to discuss how to support these developments in other centres.

Appendix 1: Training ideas for young facilitators

The following is taken from some notes written by Jnanaketu relating to the training he has conducted with young facilitators in Birmingham.

Setting up the Conditions for Giving and Receiving Feedback

1. Pre-conditions:

- Metta.
- Awareness.
- Timeliness.
- Clarity.
- Specificity.
- Skilful intention.

2. Negotiating Conditions:

- Ask if recipient is ready and willing to receive it.
- Ask if the recipient has any ideas about how it would work best.
- Ask: how do **you** think it went?

3. Giving Positive Feedback First:

- What valuable/useful/important thing(s) I got out of your talk/teaching.
- What difference it makes/will/may make to me.
- How I felt when/after hearing it.

4. Giving Negative Feedback Second:

- Ask: would you like to hear something that just might enable you to communicate the Dharma (even) better?
- Give feedback kindly, clearly and without haste.
- Leave time to sink in.

5. Afterwards:

- Ask: what did you hear me say? And, if necessary, clarify.
- Ask: how are you feeling now?
- Check how you (the giver) are feeling now.
- Maybe talk about how that went.
- Make note for next time.

Common questions

This is a list of some of the kinds of questions that can be asked of young facilitators when they are running events and could serve as a launching point for a training activity.

Practical

What do you actually do at your meetings?

I am open to Buddhism but I don't know much about it. Can I come to the Young Buddhist retreat or should I first go on an intro retreat?

Why is there so much same-gender stuff?

All religions recommend generosity so they're all basically the same.

Ethics

How important is it to be a vegetarian? Some people say it's not healthy.

I've heard about confession as a practice. What's that about?

What are you allowed to do as a Buddhist? What do you have to give up?

What if I don't feel like being generous?

Bad things still happen to good people so what's the point of ethics?

It sounds like a lot of hard work – sometimes I just want to watch TV. Does that make me sinful?

When I was in Thailand they said you have to be a monk to be a proper Buddhist.

Meditation

What has meditation done for you?

When I try to meditate, I can't make my mind go blank.

Why can't I just meditate – why do I need 'Buddhism' as well?

In that metta bhavana meditation, I didn't feel anything except self-hatred. What can I do?

I saw lots of beautiful colours in my meditation – what does purple mean?

I had a really bad meditation – what does that mean?

I can't meditate – I'm way too busy.

Why do you do mindfulness of breathing?

Why do you do metta bhavana?

Why do you meditate?

Wisdom

What do Buddhists believe?

Do you have to believe in karma and reincarnation to come along/be a Buddhist?

How often, and for how long do you need to meditate?

What does Dukkha mean?

What is paticca samuppada?

What is Enlightenment?

General/ Triratna

Why Buddhism?

What's the difference between Breathworks and Buddhism?

Where does Triratna fit into the Buddhist world? What is distinctive about it?
Is Buddhism a religion?
Is the Dalai Lama your teacher? Why not?
What do you mean by study?
Make an announcement encouraging people to come on the next young men's /
women's retreat
What's Triratna?
What's the point of Buddhism?
Why are you a Buddhist?
What is your favourite story from the Buddha's life and why?

Acknowledgements

This document is a collation of ideas from many sources – too many in fact to name them all. Having said this, special thanks go to Vadanya and Gunasiddhi for giving their time to be formally interviewed; Maitreyabandhu and Subhadramati for leadership training; Dharmashalin and Jnanaketu for offering resources to be shared more widely; Singhamanas, Sanghanistha, Martin Harris, Ben Linsey-Bloom, Caroline Ivimey-Parr, Flora Botsford, Dhammarati and many others for their input on publicity; the young order Steering Group for offering constructive feedback on a draft of this document; the Young Facilitators’ Kula for stimulating and inspiring discourse on the future of the young Buddhists project; Nandavajra and the European Chairs Assembly development team for supporting this project and funding its distribution; the European Chairs Assembly for funding the post of Young Buddhists Co-ordinator; and finally to Bhante Uryen Sangharakshita, the greatest inspiration to young Buddhists of modern times.