## What are Triratna Websites Communicating?

*Earlier this year I gave a talk during which, amongst other things, I reviewed the content of our websites. I've had a lot of requests to write that up, so here is a summary of my findings.*

*Vajragupta, July 2010*

**What I looked at:**
In the spring of 2010 I reviewed 22 websites of UK urban Triratna Buddhist Centres.  I looked at the homepage, introductory events page, meditation page, and the Buddhism page. In other words, I was examining what a member of the public visiting the site for the first time would most likely look at.

In particular, I explored four things:
a) **What we were offering** to new people, and the balance between meditation and Buddhism.
b) The **language** used to describe Buddhism and meditation.
c) The **images** used to convey what Buddhism is, and who we are.
d) How much emphasis there was on the ability of the Dharma, and us as Dharma practitioners, to have a positive, **transformative influence in society**.

This is what I found…

**a) What we were offering to new people, and the balance between meditation and Buddhism.**
*  Typically, a Centre would offer 3 or more  "Buddhism and meditation courses" running each year and also drop-in meditation classes, meditation days, meditation courses.
*  Meditation was much more to the fore than Buddhism. There were at least two-and-a-half times more opportunities to learn meditation, than to learn mediation and Buddhism. And I only saw one course just on Buddhism.
*  Even with the Meditation and Buddhism courses, Buddhism often seemed to be less prominent. For example, a typical blurb might say:"and in the second half we'll look at some principles of Buddhism…" i.e. subtly, unintentionally, it communicated "meditation first, Buddhism second".
*  I wondered whether this was the right balance, or whether we could have a lot more Buddhism courses, introduction to Buddhism talks, ethics courses etc. Were we being driven by money and getting the punters in? Were we being driven by an idea that Buddhism might not be so popular, or people not so interested? And is that true?

**b) The language used to describe Buddhism and meditation.**
*  I cut and paste all the "blurbs" about Buddhism and  meditation into one word file, and then did word counts on all the words that were used to describe what Buddhism was. The results are below.
*   There is nothing wrong with the words that were being used, but they seemed to give a one-sided impression. They portrayed Buddhism as about the inner life, personal growth, gentle, peaceful, not being stressed, and so on. This seemed to very much go along with the current zeitgeist about Buddhism.
* Other words – like "courageous" or "selfless" or "fearless" – did not feature, and even the word "confident" only cropped up twice.

| 1 | aware, awareness, mindful, mindfulness | 51 |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | calm, calmer | 24 |
| 3 | wise, wisdom | 20 |
| 3 | kindness, kinder | 20 |
| 4 | open, openness, accepting, acceptance, tolerance | 19 |
| 5 | positive | 17 |
| 6 | compassion | 16 |
| 7 | growth, potential | 12 |

| 7 | joy, happiness, warmth, contentment | 12 |
|----|----|----|
| 8 | inner, individual, personal (transformation) | 10 |
| 9 | peace, peaceful | 8 |
| 10 | stress, stressful | 5 |
| 11 | focused | 4 |
| 11 | social, political (transformation) | 4 |
| 12 | creative, creativity | 3 |
| 13 | confident, confidence | 2 |
| 13 | resilient, courageous, fearless, selfless etc. | 0 |

**c) The images used to convey what Buddhism is, and who we are.**
\* Then I did a count of the images and photos used on those pages of the website. They divided themselves into four categories.
\* There were 31 Buddha images or other Buddhist icons, and the vast majority of these were peaceful, meditating Buddhas.
\* The next biggest set of images was of flowers, candles, and "soft" nature images.
\* After that came photos of the Buddhist Centre building, and then pictures of the local sangha in groups or people meditating.
\* There is nothing wrong with these images in themselves. Obviously, we want to communicate that our centres are beautiful and inspiring places to be. But, again, it seemed out of balance. The overall impression given was that our Centres are nice, peaceful, soft, comfortable places where you can come to de-stress yourself from modern life. It was, to be honest, all rather bland and uninspiring.
\* There was an almost total lack of more dynamic images. One exception was on the Manchester Buddhist Centre site. They have a photo of a woman meditating, but she is sitting in a city square with shoppers and people walking by. The image was what someone would recognise and expect to see – someone meditating – but then it was also questioning people's ideas about meditation in clever way by placing her "out there" in the world.

**d) How much emphasis there was on the ability of the Dharma, and us as Dharma practitioners, to have a positive, transformative influence in society.**
\* This was the finding that shocked me most. On 22 websites the idea that the Dharma, and Dharma practice, was about transforming the world was only mentioned 3 times. Even in those cases it was just one clause in one sentence about Buddhism.
\* In other words, this side of the Dharma doesn't feature at all strongly in the way we talk to the public about what we offer. It is practically invisible.

**What to do?**
\* I think we need a radical look at how we are portraying ourselves. My fear is that we do this only superficially – i.e. we tweak a sentence here on our website, and add in a slightly different photo here. I think it needs something much more thought-through and thorough. For example, it would be great to get some of our designers, artists, and photographers coming up with images that really convey what Buddhism could be in the modern world. There's a lot of work to do, but its inspiring, creative work!

**If you want to watch or listen to the whole talk…**
You can find it on video here: http://www.videosangha.net/video/Messages-of-the-Dharma-Keep-it
Or on audio here: http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=LOC334
(The video version is the second time I'd given the talk and is a bit more refined!)