

Buddha-Dharma and meditation for young people.

By Malcolm Huxter, Buddhist meditator and clinical psychologist 2004

Adolescence is usually a time of exploration and experimentation and when peer relationships are all important. Sometimes this exploration can lead down destructive pathways. Buddha Dharma, on the other hand, provides pathways of awareness, discovery, relatedness, understanding and love. These wholesome pathways of discovery can include meditation practice.

In the past I have worked as a psychologist with adolescents seeing individuals, running groups and conducting adolescent retreats. Currently I work as a clinical psychologist with adults and still see teenagers from time to time. As well as working professionally with young people I met Buddha Dharma as a teenager. I have also been a father of three teenage boys and have lived in communities where young people are part of the social milieu. These experiences have all helped to provide understanding about how helpful Buddha Dharma and meditation practice can be with young people. In my opinion, Buddha Dharma and meditation practice can be adapted to all ages and cultures and it is mentally, emotionally and spiritually liberating regardless of age or culture.

The word "Buddha" comes from the verb root "budh" which means "to awaken" or "to understand". Siddhartha Gautama became a Buddha about 2550 years ago and he taught ways to "understand" or "awaken". For me, Buddhism refers to an approach to life that leads to "waking up" to illusive and often unhelpful patterns of body mind and speech and committing to either reducing these patterns or ceasing them altogether.

Dharma has a number of meanings, which include: the way things are, the way reality works, the basic laws of the universe, the truth, the teachings of the Buddha and that, which supports the teachings of the Buddha

The term "meditation" has many definitions and for some it can conjure up mystical and esoteric ideas. Buddhist meditation usually refers to energetically practicing some form of mindfulness and concentration.

During the period of working intensely with teenagers, I was careful not to proselytise, but found Buddhist psychology provided a framework from which to work. Dharma can only be realised by each and everyone by and for themselves. Nonetheless, relating to others with acceptance, kindness, genuineness, compassion and authenticity provides the opportunity for these people, regardless of their age, to awaken to the taste of Dharma. It seemed that Dharma could provide a way for young people to manage issues important to them, reduce emotional distress as well as cultivate wholesome and healthy ways of being and relating in the world.

The "four noble truths" are the principles on which Buddhist psychology and meditation practice are based, and can give us a way of understanding life's difficulties and ways to manage them. The four truths are, in essence, two

cause and effect relationships. At the most basic level the four truths are 1/discontent or stress 2/origins of discontent 3/freedom from stress and 4/pathways to freedom. The four truths are based on the understanding that all things change, that all things are contingent on other things for their existence and that all things are characterised by a pervasive sense of unreliability or uncertainty.

The first truth can include all possible stressful emotional difficulties that young people may experience. It can include emotional pain, anguish and despair. The second truth points to how many of the emotion difficulties can be caused by emotional, behavioural, and thinking patterns, often cyclic, that are unpleasant and lead to further distress. The third truth shows that it is possible to find emotional freedom from or with life's difficulties. When there is no cause for stress, it does not arise. The fourth truth is that there are ways or paths to freedom. That is, there are ways to know, be aware, think, act, still our minds and be present. Cultivating wisdom with meditation and acting in accordance with wisdom, serves to short circuit and exit from negative cyclic reactions.

The nature of the first truth can be diverse. Every age group has unique challenges, which can be difficult. Some challenges found in adolescence include:

- coping with the body as it grows and becomes flooded with various hormones,
- trying to work out who and what we are suppose to be in the world,
- individuation from parents with an identity separate from them,
- coming to terms with sexuality,
- working out how to relate to others,
- knowing where and how to direct passionate idealism and energy,
- learning how to cope with extreme emotions, especially ones related to falling in and out of love or being in conflict,
- dealing with thoughts that can swing between inspiration and torment,
- balancing impulsive destructive urges with spontaneous creativity,
- and comprehending the mystery of life.

Regardless of age, when the four truths become evident, it is refreshingly liberating. Realising that we have a choice in how to respond to life's difficult challenges (the fourth truth) is a powerful insight that is healing and beneficial (the third truth). Awakening (the third truth) to the love found in relatedness and connection with other beings is another realisation that can resolve the pain of isolation, despair and anguish (aspects of the first truth).

The way these realisations arise varies from individual to individual. That which is relevant for particular age groups also varies. In my experience, young people respond enthusiastically to Buddha Dharma and meditation practice when it is meaningful, applicable, appropriate, understandable and relevant. Meditation is one way that young people can discover the four truths for themselves.

In my experience, many young people initially lack confidence with or shy away from the idea of meditation because they conceive it as the practice of being isolated, alone, quiet, still, boring, not thinking or having an empty mind. Practices that are seen as either very alien or unwanted. Though meditation may include periods of quietude and stillness it can also be vibrantly dynamic and engaging.

When young people realize that meditation practice is not necessary only sitting still on a cushion and can include movement, creative activities, being engaged, having fun, and relating to their peers, they are more interested to try it.

There are many different types of meditation and ways to meditate. Two common Buddhist meditation practices are mindfulness and loving kindness. Mindfulness refers to remembering to be attentive to present moment experience in a manner that is non-judgemental. As well as a meditation practice, mindfulness is understood as a coping skill and a mode of being. Mindfulness is a powerful tool to short circuit reactive and compulsive cyclic patterns and it can be practiced in all postures and in any situation. For example, it is possible to be mindful surfing, dancing, eating, listening to music, playing music, watching TV, hanging out with friends, walking down the street, or simply sitting and breathing.

There are many creative ways that young people can learn and practice mindfulness. Mindfulness provides a way for young people to be present and creatively engaged in life without being hijacked or lost to patterns that may lead down destructive pathways.

Loving-kindness refers to heart felt care, friendliness, concern or kindness for oneself and other beings. Loving-kindness melts divisions and enhances the sense of inter-relatedness that we have with other living beings. According to Buddhist texts, loving-kindness can promote health, beauty, restful sleep, the ability to fall asleep easily, pleasant dreams, peacefulness, concentration, interpersonal harmony and can greatly undermine the affliction of hatred, ill will or aggression. Like mindfulness, loving-kindness can be practiced as a formal sitting meditation or it can be cultivated and shared in daily activities as we interact with the world around us.

Both mindfulness and loving kindness can address and help resolve many of the dilemmas or challenges faced by adolescents. Both mindfulness and loving-kindness provide ways of being and relating in the world.

Having the opportunity to understand Buddha Dharma and practice meditation does not require young people to become “Buddhist” or abandon links with other spiritual or religious beliefs and practices. On the contrary, Buddha Dharma and meditation practice can be integrated with other spiritual and religious beliefs in a complementary manner.

In summary, Buddha Dharma leads to being free from habitual destructive emotional, thinking and behavioural patterns. Meditation involves

mindfulness, concentration and energy and is part of the way to awaken and be free. Buddha Dharma and meditation practice can be enthusiastically adapted and integrated by adolescents when it is meaningful and relevant. Mindfulness and loving-kindness are two meditation practices that are also ways of being and relating with oneself and world around us. These two practices can lead adolescents to peacefulness, interpersonal harmony, and emotional freedom and wellbeing.

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A one-day workshop about Buddhist meditation for young people aged between 15-18 yrs is scheduled for May 2005 at the Buddhist library. Mature younger people as well as older people willing to have some fun are also welcome to attend. This workshop will involve interactive discussion about Buddhist meditation, fun exercises, instruction and a chance to practice the basics of mindfulness and loving kindness meditation.