

Dharma Mentoring

What follows is a summary of what Dharma mentoring can mean, how it connects to our values, the the implications, benefits and limitations to look out for, and some examples of how it has been tried. It is based on a set of questions and propositions that can be roughly summarised as -

1. From the perspective of those making a first connection with our community - how do these new people meet those more experienced?
2. These newcomers often notice the friendships between order members, sense the value of it, but don't know how to enter into these already established networks of friendship.
3. Making connections often falls on the shoulders of the small number of people who lead the activities that these people attend (especially the case at smaller centres/groups), so;
4. How can we draw on the wider resources of the Order to help newcomers?
5. Dharma mentoring can offer a kind of "entry level" kalyana mitrata without raising expectations, whilst leaving open the possibility of longer & deeper connections naturally developing.
6. Expectations and time limitations are managed with an agreed time frame (eg '30mins once a fortnight for three months', or '15 mins a week for the duration of a meditation course').
7. It can be enjoyable and rewarding for Order members: you get to witness new people making a connection with the Dharma, and by communicating your own experience your own understanding of the Dharma deepens.

What is Dharma Mentoring?

A number of centres and groups have used what we can call 'Dharma mentoring' as a way of making a personal connection with people who come along to classes and courses.

Within Triratna the form ranges in size from, for example, the 100+ young people offered mentoring as part of the London Buddhist centre's recent meditation challenge, to an Order member leading a small group, reaching out to a few Order friends to help those attending classes make wide Triratna connections.

It can take different forms, but usually means a one-to-one meeting on a regular basis for a fixed period of time with someone relatively new to a centre / group offered by an order

member to discuss their meditation or the broader issues of applying the Dharma to one's life.

Although this is mainly aimed at Order members to be the mentors and newcomers to Triratna to be the recipients, Dharma mentoring is an expression of the altruistic dimension of Buddhist practice and is therefore, in principle, applicable to all other levels of experience.

Placing mentoring within the overarching principle of Kalyana Mitrata

Because mentoring has a wide secular use, it's important to contextualise it within our own Buddhist 'culture' and language.

We place a high value of personal connections in the Dharma life - kalyana mitrata is at the heart of the order. Bhante created an Order that was not simply delineated by a teacher disciple vertical relationship. He described himself as a kalyana mitra and not a guru. Subhuti has described the order as growing '*at the pace of kalyana mitrata*'.

By deliberately placing mentoring under this guiding principle we can, hopefully, guard against it drifting to a more professionalised and less explicitly Dharmic use and understanding.

The formal structure of kalyana mitrata applies primarily when someone is training for ordination. At the same time Kalyana Mitrata is a more general principle of engaged communication and shared understanding that can apply at all levels of experience. This is based on a fundamental premise that a Dharma life is a shared life: we witness and are witnessed by others who have the same understanding and values as ourselves.

As kalyana mitrata is a principle, how that principle gets expressed can take many forms. Therefore we need not be afraid of the language of mentoring. Though this language and the secular practices it refers to, do come with some limitations, it is a way of engaging people into a broader culture. Done in the right way, a mentoring framework can draw on order members who do not necessarily teach classes at a centre but who would be willing and able to make some connections with new people coming to these activities.

Though it does mean listening and witnessing another person, the mentor does not have to have some special expertise to be effective. Anyone with experience of trying to translate the vision of the Dharma life as we understand it, into the intentions and actions of our daily lives, will have something to offer.

What are the potential benefits?

Easier for newcomers to make connection

Having a structure for matching up newcomers to order members is helpful - it's not easy to ask someone more experienced to spend time with you. Lessons from mentoring

programmes have established that it is easier for people to ask for these connections if there is a form that is offered to them (perhaps especially men- generally less good in taking initiative in friendship!).

It manages expectations on both sides

By establishing a form and a time frame (eg “30minutes once a week for 4 weeks”), expectations are clear from the beginning. This may be especially helpful for order members to sign up for: starting a friendship with even a subtle expectation that it might be for life (as with formal kalyana mitrata) means that you take it very seriously indeed. There is a profound sense of responsibility that comes with this understanding. With the downside that order members may be so cautious that they don't get going.

It's great for order members too

It is a great way of deepening one's own understanding of the Dharma. In subhuti's words “in witnessing another persons going for refuge, my own is called into question”. Sanghadeva, who has regularly run outreach groups in Triratna, says it is one of the most satisfying experiences to witness the “Enlightening process” take shape in another person - the process by which they realise they can work on their minds and start to see some fruits of their efforts.

It can be a good altruistic dimension for mitras training for ordination

Although not everyone is suited to or capable of mentoring, a programme can include mitras training for ordination as mentors - under supervision - as part of their training in how to best help other people. Even without extensive meditation experience most people know the struggles of trying to create and sustain good habits and work effectively on mental states.

It can be a great way to engage young people

It is a good way of engaging younger people, who may well be familiar with mentoring from school, college, or modern workplace schemes. Alongside this, there may a perception among older order members that they don't have anything to offer young people- ‘why would someone in their 20s want a friend their parent's age!?’ Using the language of mentoring may empower order members to have the confidence to offer their experience to younger people.

Limitations and risks

The danger of ‘Professionalising’ personal connection

We try and introduce newcomers to a way of practising the Dharma that is “whole of life”, and is not just about meditation and one to one mentoring. There is a risk that introducing mentoring at the beginning of someone's connection with Triratna gives and leaves an impression of a formal, professionalised approach, that won't reflect the full richness and subtlety of an order where the principle mode of relation is kalyana mitrata

Mitigate against this by: explaining the principle & practice of kalyana mitrata very early on, point to resources (eg, books such as Buddhism and Friendship, or Thicker than Blood), make it clear that the mentoring meetings are not the same as personal or professional development.

Similarly, it isn't being a counsellor, coach or therapist.

There is a danger that meeting up with someone one to one becomes something akin to a counselling or coaching session. Maybe the person talks about their life in psychological terms - the only language they have available to them, maybe its the nature of the format of a one to one meeting, maybe it's the order members desire not to put off a newcomer by using a Dharmic framework too soon or in a heavy handed way.

Mitigate against this by: Framing mentoring around meditation. This is not the only way mentoring has been offered by centres, but there are some advantages. Meditation is a key foundation practice and a meditation course is still one of the main ways in which people being their connection with our community and with Buddhism. It gives a clear 'Buddhist' framework and helps to objectify one's subjective experience. At the same time, using meditation as the starting point usually means other important areas will be brought to the surface. If not meditation, you might introduce a clear Dharma framework early as the basis for the meetings - such as ethics, meditation and wisdom.

How to manage a programme and monitor mentors?

Secular mentoring programmes usually have a supervisory function built in, at least in theory, sometimes referred to as supervision or 'mentoring for mentors'. One concern is that, while the idea is to reduce the workload of those order members leading classes/ courses and widen the field of friendship, creating a pool of mentors and a new 'system' inevitably creates extra work. This includes, trying to build the pool of mentors, dealing with any issues that arise in the course of mentoring, making sure ethical guidelines are understood and followed, reviewing when the mentoring is over, following up when connections are lost and so on.

Mitigate against this by (a) recognising that it will almost certainly create extra work, (b) maintain a perspective that hopefully that pays off in the longer term, and more people share in the richness of making connections and (c) minimise the risks by making sure guidelines are understood, including ethical guidelines, (d) making sure you are confident in the mentor pool, which leads to the next question:

Who can be a mentor?

It may simply be enough for those running activities to ask a wider group of order members that they already know and have some connection with.

At the same time not everyone will be suited to this kind of connection. It may depend on character, someone's current context, or state of mind. How to choose and to do that with clarity and sensitivity? If Dharma Mentoring is contextualised within the practice of kalyana mitrata, then it makes sense to apply the same or similar criteria as those for

becoming a kalyana mitra. These criteria include at least one of two km's being 'settled and mature in the order', with a suggestion of being ordained five years. This may not seem so important for effective Dharma mentoring. Indeed, becoming a Dharma mentor may be very good kalyana mitrata training for new order members (and mitras training for ordination). If we leave aside the time in the order, the criteria are established as:

- In harmony with your own preceptors / kalyana mitras
- Some tested experience of forming kalyana mitra type connections
- Good grasp of the Dharma and an effective meditation practice
- In a chapter
- Adequate opportunity for contact
- No ongoing difficulties with order members and an alignment with the principles of the Order

To apply these, any potential mentor can be asked to have a discussion in their chapter using these criteria, and if the chapter agrees the chapter convenor writes up the discussion, giving the chapters' blessing, noting anything to watch out for, and sends it to whoever is running the mentoring programme.

Using online platforms, but not restricted to them

Now that many of us are much more familiar with video calling and the zoom platform, many new possibilities open up. Mentors do not need to be local to the centre. People attending classes could be from, time zones notwithstanding, anywhere in the world. It might be a good principle to try and match mentors with local-ish requests for mentoring to allow for face to face meetings, but mentoring connections need not be limited to this. And even when a local meeting is possible a video call might be - not better - but a less time consuming perfectly adequate alternative..

Making use of the Order Convenor network - pilot proposal

One of the reasons for researching this topic was to see if the order convening network could help ask for order mentors and match them up with those leading classes. At the European Chairs assembly meeting in January there were several positive responses from those running groups and small centres where the pool of order is not large and they don't have the resources to run their own Dharma mentoring programmes. We could, for example, test out this idea with a couple of groups to start with, make an order ask, and see if it works and can be applied more widely.

Dharma Mentoring Examples

Here are a few examples of how mentoring is already being used at different scales from group to large centre. The endnotes give a little more useful information.

1.The Dublin Buddhist centre.

Followed a similar model to the London Buddhist Centre, sending out a simple, clear email to local order members.

2.The London Buddhist centre meditation challenge.

A four week “meditation challenge” offered a short meeting once a week for anyone under 25 who joined the challenge.

3. Vajracaksu’s experience of a building up a small Sangha.

He used to be able to meet up with everyone! Now it has grown this isn’t possible. Whenever someone becomes a Mitra he tries to find them an Order member buddy of the same sex to Skype/ZOOM with once a month for a hour.

4.Birmingham Buddhist centre

They decided to run their own mentor programme, that now has 20 mentors and 42 mentees.. Maitrisara says it is going well and they have already learnt a lot. She has written up the aims and process: see the endnote.

Endnotes: examples

1.The Dublin Buddhist Centre

The chair of the centre wrote the following email:

“As part of the 21 Day Meditation Challenge that the DBC is taking part in in collaboration with the LBC, we are offering meditation mentoring for 16 - 25 year olds and I'm looking for Irish Order Members to help with this. We're not doing terribly well in attracting younger people to our online events and this is a move to address this. The Berlin and Sheffield Centres are also taking part and the idea is that the order members from each centre would mentor people associated with that centre if possible.

So I am looking for Irish based order members - i.e. you! - who might be interested in doing this.

It would involve spending about 15" online each week for four weeks with a 16 - 25 year old. It could make a life-changing difference to a young person (I would have loved this when I was that age!)

The 21 Day Meditation Challenge is taking place from the 9th to the 30th January and there is more detail [here](#). And more detail on the mentoring [here](#).

Do let me know if this is something that you would like to do. And if so how many people you'd like to mentor. Also let me know if you have any queries.

I'm going to be doing this myself and hope some of you might like to join me”.

2.The London Buddhist centre four week meditation challenge.

It was aimed at those under 25 and matched them with an order member. The matching up was overseen and organised by two mitras (these were overseen by Maitreyabandhu & Subhadramati). This helped to create a bridge between newcomers and order members. The mitras could offer a tone of 'hey I'll pair you up with one of my experienced friends'. The meetings were short, usually just 15 minutes and focussed on meditation. Maitreyabandhu said if other issues came to the surface through meditation, he might arrange a separate longer chat with someone. At least one of the participants (there may be others) has arranged to continue meeting regularly after the challenge, in other words, is building a stronger, longer lasting connection.

3. Vajracaksu's experience of a building up a small Sangha.

aside from finding a buddy for his mitras he also says:

"For the past 2-3 years now when I give an 8 week meditation & Buddhism course I normally get another OM (often the person's material we're using like Ratnaghosha, Paramabandhu etc.) to do a Q&A session in week 7.

On one occasion when leading an online weekend retreat a few months back I got Rijumitra to do half of the practice reviews. But now so many people want to come on our online retreats that I've ditched that idea, it's simply far too much for me to handle; I make a little more time for Q&A with me re meditation.

Until recently when someone became a Mitra I would meet up with them once a month for 2 hours; now that we have 12 Mitras I can no longer do that (with 2 more in the pipeline for next month); I only offer to meet up once every 3 months for 2 hours; when we have 18-20 Mitras I will no doubt have to re-think all this".

4.Birmingham Buddhist centre

Mentoring project process Jan 2021

Aims

- To support friends and mitras to take their meditation practice deeper using a method of communication (phone, Zoom, walks) that would be viable during lockdown.
- To create connection between Sangha members with different levels of experience, specifically OMs with friends/mitras.
- To create a context for Order collaboration
- To enable people who didn't know each other to meet.

Process

Wrote to and spoke to Order members

Set up spreadsheet to collect notes on OM availability and preferences

Boundaries

At the recruitment stage we framed this as a 4 month project meeting 20-30 min every two weeks. In the first meeting, we suggested that the mentors agree with mentees expectations on both sides and discuss safeguarding and confidentiality.

Mentors

We decided to approach Order members we thought would make good mentors, namely would have the communication skills needed and those who had sufficient confidence in their own meditation practice. We made sure we included OMs who were a bit isolated or who we hadn't been able to engage in other projects. 21 OMs agreed comprising 13 men and 8 women. Number of mentees per person ranged between 1 and 3. Most offered to take 2.

Mentees

For the mentees, we were keen to enable a cohort who were post newcomer but pre foundation group as this is the group that have potentially missed out the most during lockdown and who are at most risk of drifting away. We therefore set the criteria at people who have completed one Going Deeper (level 2 post newcomer) course and beyond. There were 42 enquires, 41 were offered a mentor. These comprised: 5 GFR mitras, 18 mitras and mitras to be, 7 other friends, 6 people doing Going Deeper classes, 5 newish people (post newcomer).

Managing the process

The Chair and mens mitra convenor worked on the project together. In particular, they met to arrange pairings and double check their assumptions, pooling their knowledge of who people are and which relationships might work best. We held an initial meeting with the mentors one week into the project and we are also holding 2 meetings 10 weeks into process, one with mentors the other with mentees.

Resources

We set up two spaces online using Padlet where we could share resources and people could post other resources and mentors could ask for help from each other.

Considerations for pairing people up

There were more men OMs offering to be mentors and more women wanting to be mentees. It was just as well that we hadn't tied this to being a single sex project because if we had, we would have had quite a problem!! For safeguarding reasons, we paired mentees we didn't know well with OMs we thought would feel most confident with any safeguarding issues that might arise.