

# THE URBAN RETREAT

## **The Idea Behind It**

We originally developed the idea behind the Urban Retreat as part of an overall strategy at the Sheffield Buddhist Centre to help people integrate their practice into their everyday life. We have a large and thriving Sangha at Sheffield, but while we felt people were easily developing friendships and a sense of community, we wanted to think of ways to encourage them to 'go deeper': to make the Dharma really transform their lives.

The advantage of the Urban Retreat is that it enables people who find it difficult to go away for a week's retreat to bring a retreat into their normal working and family commitments. Instead of being put off going on retreat altogether because of a lack of spare time or money, they build a period of deeper practice and reflection into their normal life.

However it goes deeper than this. The Urban Retreat has a strong transformative effect on anyone who takes part because they start to reflect on how to make their normal life supportive conditions for their practice, how to live an ideal urban life. It is common for people to experience very positive mental states on retreat, but on their return have the 'post-retreat blues': a period of difficulty as they watch their mental states return to their habitual level in their ordinary surroundings. It can be very painful to find that your everyday conditions cannot match up to those on retreat, and watch as those conditions affect your mental states. The Urban Retreat is a way to bring retreat conditions into the everyday, and most people find that by changing their conditions for a week they learn valuable lessons for the future.

## **The set up of the retreat**

The retreat begins with a day event at the Centre. This has three purposes. The first is that in order to take up the commitments it is vital to feel that you are doing it as part of a group, which offers encouragement and support. This theme is brought out in the retreat in different ways, which I shall go into later, but the main thing is to get people together at the beginning and at the end. If you could start the retreat after a weekend that would be even better as it would allow more time for meditation and ritual practice together, but people who come on the Urban Retreat often find it more difficult to commit for more than a day.

The second purpose is to provide ways in which people can reflect on their lives and bring out what they want from the retreat, what would help them to get there and what hinders them from getting there.

The third purpose is to bring out of that reflection what they might be able to take up over the coming week and to support them in doing that. It is vital that everyone makes their own commitments that they are likely to follow through. If they take up someone else's suggestions that don't fit into their everyday life, they will feel disheartened and a failure when they are unable to do them. Therefore, a large part of the day is spent filling in a diary sheet for each day of the week that enables them to think through what they could do as part of the retreat. The second part of the day

focuses on creating a supportive structure to implement their commitments using the seven point mind-training principle of the 'five forces'.

The retreat ends with a day retreat to enable people to share their experience with others and to reflect on anything useful they might have learnt about setting up good conditions and bringing their practice into their everyday life in the future.

## **The Diary**

We ask people to fill in the diary in order to concretise their reflections and to write down all they intend to do during the coming week. The point isn't to overwhelm them or put them off, but to help them to implement their intentions. Therefore it is very important that people don't feel that they have to fill in every box for every day, but to remind themselves of what they plan to do. There is a separate page for every day to allow space for making each day's commitment appropriate to what they are doing that day. It is also important for people to reflect on what they did each day in order to see what lessons they can learn for the future, and to give them a more focused discussion on the last day retreat.

Most people start off by writing too many commitments down on the first day retreat and have to change the diaries during the week. It is worth pointing out at the beginning that that is okay. We are doing the retreat in order to learn about how to bring our practice into our lives in a realistic way, and part of that learning process is to be flexible. What we don't want is everyone to feel guilty and a failure because they had expectations that they couldn't fulfil. I usually advise people at the end of each day to reflect on how the day went, writing down something in that day's diary, and look at the next day's diary changing whatever is appropriate.

## The first day retreat

### 10:00 AM - INTRODUCTION TO THE DAY

A chance to introduce people to the idea of the retreat and the benefits it might have, making the points that:

- On retreat people don't do the things that they normally do to enjoy themselves like watching tv, going to the pub, clothes shopping etc, but they find that they are usually happier and have more positive mental states. Often the things that we normally do to make us happy have the opposite effect.
- We can find that when we come back from retreat the positive experience we have had is different from our experience in every day life, and though we may have big plans on our return it is hard to integrate those plans into the conditions of our everyday life. The Urban Retreat is an effective way to integrate the retreat experience into our normal life.
- It can be more difficult to set up the retreat conditions into our every day life, but it is more effective in the long term because the changes we make are more integrated with our life and are more sustainable.
- It is up to do what you decide to do, and the retreat is designed to build a supportive structure.

We then ask people to go round giving their name and any experience they have of the effect of retreats, or what they hope to get out of the Urban Retreat.

### 10:40 AM- WORKSHOP PART 1

- Ask the retreatants the question 'WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO GET OUT OF THE RETREAT? Or 'WHAT DO YOU NORMALLY GET FROM GOING ON RETREAT?' and put their answers on a flip chart. This gives us the goal of the retreat, such as 'connection with others', 'inspiration', 'perspective', 'joy' etc.
- Ask the retreatants to write down in large letters on a post-it sized piece of paper, one answer per sheet 'WHAT DO YOU KNOW HELPS YOU TO GET INTO THAT STATE?' or 'WHAT HELPS YOU TO GET INTO THAT STATE WHEN YOU GO ON RETREAT?' It is important that you tell them to keep their ideas to practical things they can take up, not general philosophical ideas such as 'letting go of anxiety': you should get words or phrases such as 'being in nature', 'meditation', 'exercise', 'being with friends' etc. You then group the responses into categories such as 'healthy lifestyle', 'disciplined life', 'meditation' etc, which you write on a flip chart.
- Ask the retreatants to write down in large letters on a post-it sized piece of paper, one answer per sheet 'WHAT DO YOU KNOW PREVENTS YOU FROM GETTING INTO POSITIVE MENTAL STATES?' or 'WHAT DO YOU GIVE UP ON RETREAT THAT HELPS YOU GET INTO POSITIVE MENTAL STATES?' Again, keep it to practical things like 'not going to the pub', 'no mindless telly', 'smoking dope' etc. You then group the responses into categories such as 'mindless distractions (media)', 'intoxicants' etc, which you write on the flip chart.

### 11:30 AM- TEA BREAK

### 12:00 PM- WORKSHOP PART 2

- **Reflection:** What can I do to encourage positive mental states in my everyday life for the next week? You could make suggestions, such as two formal meditations per day, a mindfulness break, mindful walking at some point and giving up alcohol, TV, drugs and sex (esp. with new partners).
- **Concretise:** Ask the retreatants to fill in commitments for each day in the first three boxes of their diary.
- **Dharma Buddies:** To give each other support during the week we usually suggest that people 'buddy up' with one or more people during the week. They

decide how much they want to keep in contact: either by phone or email, or even meeting up in person. They can decide on the day how they are going to keep in touch during the week and write it down on the diary. They either have a clear sense of who they might like to meet up with, or they can come in one big group and we sort it out from there.

1:00 PM-

LUNCH

2:00 PM-

APPLICATION OF THE FIVE FORCES

We don't want the Urban Retreat to be another thing where our enthusiasm is short lived and we forget to carry out our intentions, like new year's resolutions, we have to find a way to actually bring those intentions into our lives. The 'five forces' are a very practical way of enabling us to follow through our decisions and desires.

- **The Force of Motivation:** any process starts with us wanting to do it (interest) and deciding to do it (determination), and we need to constantly keep in touch with that desire and determination. We need to remind ourselves of our motivation everyday, first thing in the morning and last thing at night for example by incorporating it into our meditation or writing it down on a post it above our beds. To contact people with their motivation you can do a short meditation with a reflection at the end: see appendix 1.
- **The Force of Familiarisation:** We need to bear in mind all the time that we are on retreat: 'it is easy to be mindful, but difficult to remember to be mindful'. Therefore, reminders are very helpful in triggering our minds back to our purpose. People could choose to put notes around their homes, wear special jewellery, wear special clothes, choose a special screensaver, put a rupa in their car etc. Ask the retreatants for their ideas and put what you choose to do down in the diary.
- **The Force of the White Seed:** These are actions which you dedicate towards the Urban retreat. They could be 'as if' actions, where you do something that shows you believe in your intention, for example if you decide to give up tv for a week, you can put your tv in the cellar, or it could be an action that connects you with what you are doing on retreat, for example walking a different way to work, tidying up your shrine, cleaning the house/ Buddhist Centre, giving money that you save from not going to the pub to charity, buying flowers or incense etc. Ask the retreatants for their ideas and put what you choose to do down in the diary.
- **The Force of Destruction:** Anticipation. This is where you think ahead about what might stop you from fulfilling your intentions, and use maybe a bit of fierceness to prevent it getting in the way. For example, if you give up tv, but your housemates always have it on, you might let them know what you are doing and ask them not to let you watch! If the kids might undermine your intentions, you ask them to help you and provide a 'treat jar' every time they do something to help. Ask the retreatants for their ideas and put what you choose to do down in the diary. It is worth mentioning here that you can't always anticipate what might get in the way, and so we constantly need to use this force by responding appropriately to situations and updating our diary during the week. If you don't always do what you intended the point is not to beat yourself up, but to see what you can learn from that for the future.

3:30 PM-

TEA BREAK

4.00PM-

DEDICATION CEREMONY

- **The Force of Aspirational Prayer:** This has proved to be the most effective aspect of the Urban Retreat (much to everyone who has taken part's surprise!) We need to put ourselves in the context of our higher inspiration, our attitude of wonder and openness to enable us to see past our limited way of being and to connect us with our higher selves and the mystery of what we can become. We do this by giving people the option of doing a dedication ceremony which

reminds us of our motivation as well as connecting us to others on retreat. We also use mantras as a reminder, to connect us with our motivation, as a sound symbol of our higher selves/ the Transcendental, and as a prayer. Mantras can be used as an effective tool in situations where it is difficult to meditate, such as in the car etc. They are more easily accessible. We usually remind people it is okay to pray! It connects us with who we want to become, and it is a way to open out to the fact that we need help. On our retreats we introduce Green Tara as the most accessible Bodhisattva to guide us through the retreat, but people could choose their own.

- **Dedication Ceremony:** At the end of the day we usually dedicate the retreat with a dedication ceremony, and give everyone their own copy to use at home (appendix 3). After the first section we link everyone together with a piece of string tied round their wrist to act as a reminder, while doing the Tara mantra, and after the second section people make offerings and receive a gift from Tara, again during the Tara mantra. We usually end with three very loud saddhus!

## The LAST DAY RETREAT

### 10.00AM- MEDITATION

Since we have a Tara theme, we usually do the Tara mantra at the beginning of the meditation. We ring bells for the stages of the Metta Bhavana and include each other in it.

### 11.00AM- TEA BREAK

### 11.30AM- REPORTING IN

Depending on how many people there are, we try to report-in in a single group. It can be useful to give questions as guidelines such as:

1. Did you manage to keep your commitments? If not why not?
2. What were the effects of doing the commitments you managed to keep?
3. Did you think of others you would have liked to do?
4. What were the effects of the 'five forces', including the ritual element?
5. Did you notice how your mental states changed during the week?
6. What did you learn?

It can be easy to forget all the things that we have learnt on the Urban Retreat and even what it was like to live that kind of life for a week, so we give everyone a postcard (or suggest that they buy a postcard) at the end to write to their future selves reminding them of anything they may have forgotten. The team then take it on to send them to everyone in two or three months time.

### 1.00PM- LUNCH

### 2.00PM- MAKING PRECEPTS

At this point we split into smaller groups, ideally with the Dharma buddy you had during the week, and talk about anything you might like to keep up after the retreat. It is a good idea to write them down in the form of precepts. We usually write them down on something that you could keep on your shrine, such as a mirror. The danger is that if you write it on a piece of paper you will lose it and forget all about it quite quickly!

Once we have written our precepts down we report back to the whole group about what they are. One way of doing this is to agree that we will take it on for, say, 3 weeks to see if it is feasible, and meet up as a group at one of the classes (Sangha night being the most obvious) to see whether we want to carry it on after that.

### 3.00PM- RITUAL AND MEDITATION

We have had difficulty in developing a ritual that really expresses the spirit of the Urban Retreat. We usually do a Tara visualisation and a Tara puja, but any better ideas are welcome! The principle is to end with some practice and connecting with the overall vision of bringing spiritual practice into everyday life in order to realise your human potential.

## Urban Retreat- June 05

Method of meditation:	What time?	How long?	Did I do it?	What were the effects of doing it/not doing it?

Anything else that will put me in a positive mental state/ prevent me from being in a negative mental state?	When?	How long?	Did I do it?	What were the effects of doing it/not doing it?

What will I attempt to give up that stops me from being in a positive mental state?	Did I manage to give it up?	What were the effects of doing it/ not doing it?

Contact with 'dharma buddy'?	Notes

Did I contact my motivation in the am/pm?	Was I in touch with my motivation during the day?

What will be my reminders?	Did I do it?	What were the effects of the reminders?

What will be my 'white seeds' <i>i.e. any action that will nourish my intention</i>	Did I do it?	What were the effects of the white seeds?

What can I anticipate that will make it difficult for me to carry my intentions out?	How will I deal with this?	Did it work?

What Ritual?	What time?	Anything I want to add?	Did I do it?	What were the effects of doing it/not doing it?
What mantra?	When?	Did I do it?	What were the effects of doing it/ not doing it?	

## **Motivation and determination ~** Reflection.

First of all we remember what we are like when we are at our best.

We remember how pleasant this is for us, and the effect it has on those close to us.

Then we remember what it is like to be in bad state, whatever form this takes for us – ill will and irritability, addictive craving, or depression. We remember what this feels like, and the effect it has on others.

Then we go back to the first stage – what we are like when we are in a good state.

Now we connect with our desire to be in a good state more of the time. We remember how happy this would make us, the effect on others, and the alternative. We connect with our strong desire to put our decisions for this retreat into practice, for our own sake and for those close to us.

We remember that if we put our decisions into practice we will start a positive spiral. If we don't we will undermine ourselves.

We might imagine ourselves surrounded by those close to us, the people we care about. Our Dharma friends for this retreat. All of us here. Connect with our sense of solidarity, that we are all practicing for all of us. Sit with this sense of solidarity.

Then we connect with our firm determination to carry out the practices for this retreat, to really do the retreat, for all of us. Sit with this sense of determination.