

Dharma Practice with Spunk

The sound of the bell fades away. My eyes open, resting on Kwan Yin and the glowing candles filling the small altar in the center. Around me, the circle of people is filled with blue jeans and spaghetti straps, and wallet chains. The group stirs, some eyes sleepy and some bright with excitement, gazing back at me.

This is not just any Beginning Meditation Class. This is an image of the Teen Program, where young people gather together to learn the dharma, how to meditate, speak their truth, and create community. For some of the teens, this class is their first meditation experience. Others have been attending Teen Meditation Classes for years and have well-established daily practices. A common question I receive from parents and the wider community is “what happens during these classes?” What is the teen response to meditation?

The teenage years are a time of deep questioning and a longing for wholeness. The Teen Program introduces meditation as a tool for conscious self-investigation and the development of heartfelt wisdom. Teens are guided in practicing basic vipassana mindfulness meditation, walking meditation, and metta meditation. Meditations last from fifteen to thirty minutes. Common teen responses to the meditation practices include experiencing deep relaxation and self-acceptance. I am in awe concerning the regularity of profound insights that arise for teens during a meditation around such themes as the nature of impermanence, interdependence, or the “dissolving” of the boundaries of the physical body. Mindfulness practice is also extended into daily life activities. In their daily lives, teens voluntarily choose to work with practices like refraining from using a habitual speech phrase that causes harm, bringing mindfulness to walking down a hallway at school, or pausing to “breathe” for a few minutes when they are feeling angry.

For any person, being involved with a group of people who are committed to sharing their truths is a precious gift. For teens, this experience is particularly poignant. In the Teen Program, a process called Council Practice is used as a vehicle for mindful speech within the group. In council practice, a talking piece is used to specify the speaker and several guidelines are provided to hold the container of the practice. For ongoing teen classes, the practice holds several purposes. It is used as a “check in” tool, which invites the teens to reflect and share about their daily lives, also allowing them to track their changing experience over time. For more intensive council practice, the group will respond to a question. A typical question is something like “What is one challenge you are facing in your life and how do you respond to it in a wise moment?”. Councils are filled with laughter and tears as teens share their stories, feelings, and insights. As they share their deepest truths, teens experience the joy and peace of being accepted and supported by their peers. The teens often talk about the importance of feeling seen and heard, and the positive impact of feeling less alone in the world.

The activities and experiences offered in the Teen Program lead to the blossoming of teen sangha. It is a community based on safety, truth, and acceptance. Whether at the Teen Overnight going on the midnight hike or at Abhayagiri Monastery getting up at 4:30am to

chant and meditate with the monks, the power of a positive peer group encourages teens to push their limits and take risks in a way that is nurturing for all. Each teen is “going for it” in their inner world in the most inspiring ways.

For me, teaching in the Teen Program has been some of the most personally rewarding work I have done at Spirit Rock. I love the spunk and spontaneity that teens bring to their practice. Although we share many moments of seriousness over suffering or insight, we spend just as many playful moments together participating in experiential games, walking meditation, or simply sharing the humor of being human. I am thrilled by listening to the teens talk about how amazing it is to listen to the sound of a bell ringing or to take a step in walking meditation. As a young adult, this youthful enthusiasm matches my own passion for practice. I know all of the phenomenal Teen Council Teachers would agree with me when I say that I learn just as much, if not more from the teens as they learn from me.

I would like to close with a poem recently written to me by a twelve year old, which portrays both the playfulness and depth of understanding of a young person at Spirit Rock.

Think of peace
Think of joy
Imagine they were just toys

Think of kindness
Think of love
Imagine they had been taken from above

Think of weapons
Think of war
Imagine they were no more

Think of power
Think of greed
Imagine they were too much to feed.

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It brings me great pleasure to be able to announce the addition of a Middle School Meditation Class Series that will serve the practice of Middle School aged students such as the author of this poem. The class will begin at Spirit Rock in October 2002.

May we each remember and honor the playfulness and wisdom of the teens in our world.

Heather Sundberg
Family & Teen Program Manager