

Lay Residentials

For the past three years the Sheffield meditation group has packed its collective bags and left the city for a weekend together in the countryside.

We are by no means the only group doing this. Nor is it particularly new: R.M. Jiyu herself established a tradition of lay camp-outs, admonishing everyone to carefully follow an additional rule of training; namely, to 'Have Fun'. But it might be helpful to explain what is involved and why we find it worth doing.

Our residentials are a mix of retreat and sangha building. The idea arose firstly because as a group we didn't know each other all that well and wanted to remedy this. Although we meet weekly for meditation and a chat, the logistics make it hard to share at all deeply about our practice.

Secondly, we felt it was important for us as lay practitioners to start to be more of 'a lamp unto ourselves' without relying on a monastic presence as an intermediary or prop. While lay and monastic training are fundamentally one and the same, the specific conditions of lay training often call for the discovery of different forms.

We fund the residentials on the usual basis of donations appropriate to people's individual circumstances, with the Sheffield group underwriting any shortfall.

We hire a small hostel in a Peak District village. This is basic but comfortable – two dormitories, a well equipped kitchen and dining room, and a large hall for meditation. There is also a smaller room we use as a quiet space and library – having all brought a favourite Buddhist book to share.

Ahead of the events we devise a detailed schedule, though we may modify this at our first get-together on the Friday evening or as seems suitable during the weekend. This appears to chop up the time into discrete slots. But in fact we've found it helps turn all our diverse activities - sitting, cleaning, sharing our experience of practice, preparing meals, socialising – into one single, seamless flow of activity.

The morning schedules are largely quiet, with morning service and plenty of sitting. Because of the importance to the residential of sharing experience and getting to know one another, however, we only observe silence between vespers and the end of breakfast next day.

The later mornings are given over to a recorded Dharma talk and the small-group reflections and sharing provoked by it. The talks, like the whole weekend, have always been related to the same theme: the nature of the householder path (this year for example we chose RM Leandra's '*Lay and monastic training*' and RM Daizui's '*The trouble with training*').

The rest of the day is devoted more to social activities – going for a long walk together in the surrounding countryside or around the historic town, preparing and sharing meals, watching a Buddhist movie, etc. and ending with meditation and vespers.

The numbers each time have been between twelve and fifteen with one or two people just coming along for such time as they can manage. We invite anyone from any of the neighbouring mediation groups in the region to join us and on each occasion several people from other groups have come along.

This has had a couple of benefits. As well as helping to bring us together as a group, the weekends have helped us build bridges with people from other groups. Several of these now feel like 'ex officio' members of the Sheffield sangha and come along to other events we organise – walks, retreats etc. This also feels like part of a wider community building and a sharing of resources across the region.

On the other hand, we've found it a great benefit to have one or two faces who are relatively new to the practice or whom we've not met before. This seems to encourage everyone to be just a little more attentive to what we're doing and to the people we're doing it with than might otherwise be the case.

Although these residentials are in many ways quite ordinary they have proved immensely popular with those who've taken part, to the extent that we are now considering holding them every six months.

The shared responsibility and mutual assistance involved mean that all who take part sense and respond to a joint ownership of 'the project'. The weekends have provided us all with a much more concrete sense of what our lay sangha is: not just a group of like-minded individuals assembling for discrete Buddhist events, but a real community of daily practice, of training for and with others which remains continuous and connected even when we're apart.