

Teaching the Little Buddhas

Ed McCarthy

It's a quiet Sunday morning on the Providence Zen Center's first floor in Cumberland, Rhode Island, USA. Members and visitors practice sitting and walking meditation in the main dharma room, with a dharma talk scheduled for later that morning. But it's a different story in the upstairs dharma room, where a dozen young children are participating in PZC's dharma school. They are learning a lesson on patience and impermanence by building a house of playing cards. The group's excitement is barely contained as the house grows taller and they shriek collectively as it finally collapses under its own weight.

Why a Dharma School?

Apart from Asian immigrants, most Americans come to Buddhism from another faith. Although there is growing interest in Zen and other Buddhist practices, the Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project estimates that only 0.7 percent of Americans identify themselves as Buddhists. That number may grow as more adults start practicing Buddhism, but it's likely to be slow growth because American Buddhists have one of the lowest rates of children practicing their parents' faith.

That's not completely surprising, because relatively few current practitioners outside of Asia were born into Bud-

dhist families. Consequently, first-generation Buddhists often lack the cultural imprint that other faiths pass to their children, both formally and informally. For example, most Christian churches in the United States have ongoing religious education programs, popularly known as Sunday school, for their members' children. Other religions, such as Judaism and Islam, provide similar learning opportunities. These programs can draw on a wealth of resources for teachers to help young children learn their parents' faith and morals. In contrast, teaching resources for young children of first-generation Buddhists are scarce, and each organization must develop its own program.

The lack of transmission between generations raises a problem for Buddhist groups because it means that "organic," intergenerational growth is unlikely to generate continuity. That means most Buddhist organizations, including PZC and other Kwan Um Zen groups, must rely largely on retaining current adult members and recruiting new ones to sustain themselves.

There's another issue, though, one that's perhaps more important than membership rosters. Learning about meditation, mindfulness and the Buddhist tradition can provide valuable lessons for children. Even if the children eventually leave the practice, the teachings can help prepare them for the challenges they will face in life.

A Brief History

Before the dharma school started, it was common at PZC to see parents splitting their time when attending ceremonies like Buddha's Birthday. One parent would attend the ceremony while the other parent walked their child or children around the center to keep them occupied. Mark and Karen Dennen, PZC members and parents, realized that offering children's activities during these ceremonies could simultaneously teach the children about Buddhism and allow both parents to attend the ceremony.

Classes started on a small scale in early 2010 and launched officially in December 2010. The Dennens conducted a class during the Buddha's Birthday Ceremony in 2010; their children were two of the first class's four participants. The PZC abbot at the time, George Hazlbauer, then connected Mark with PZC-member Jim Chung-Brcak. The two devised a plan to organize a

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Photo: Brenton Sheehan

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dharma school, offering regular monthly sessions to coincide with PZC's Sunday morning practice, so parents could attend practice without having to worry about childcare.

Class Structure

Originally there were two classes: a younger group (4–11 years old) and an older group (12–18 years old). Over time, though, almost all the children were in the younger group, so the teachers modified the format to focus on younger children and increased its frequency to twice monthly. The number of students grew and classes nowadays often have over 12 students with most parents participating, as well.

Christian Sunday school classes in the United States usually combine spiritual practice (prayer), an activity (craft or game) and a written story (usually from the Bible) around a central theme. The dharma school teachers decided to adopt a similar format. But while there are similarities between Buddhism and Christianity, there are some major differences. Most important, there are many weekly curriculums available for Sunday schools of all ages, but the dharma school instructors had to make up their materials as they went along.

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Teachers typically pick a theme for a series of classes, such as Eightfold Path or the Four Noble Truths, and develop classes based on the themes. They vary activities to hold the children's interest. For instance, children bake cookies and plant bulbs in the garden to learn about patience and impermanence. To learn single-mindedness,

they practice tai chi.

Each year has had a general theme: the paramitas in year one, Jataka tales in year two and the historical Buddha in year three. The theme for the current 2013–14 year is service. Using stories has proven to be an excellent way to teach, and the program uses two books, *Buddha at Bedtime* and *Prince Siddhartha: The Story of Buddha*, which provide short stories teaching the value of the virtues.

Each class follows the same format so there is consistency for the students. The children recite a modified version of the Four Great Vows (see sidebar) and there is typically a meditation or mindfulness practice. That practice, which lasts for about 10 minutes, might include sitting, watching the breath or using objects to focus concentration. "Then there is a lesson component," says Chung-Brcak. "It's usually some sort of story or fable tied into the more immediate theme of the class or the theme of the year that we're working on and there's usually a discussion and activity around it."

Zen is about responding to what's in front of you, right here and now, so teachers enliven the stories with experiential learning to illustrate that point. For example, in one class students read a story about a boy saving a panda from a forest on a wet and stormy night. "We then had one volunteer blindfolded and she played the part of the boy from the story," Chung-Brcak explains. "The other students arranged chairs in the room to resemble a forest, and the girl had to listen very carefully to the instructions of her peers as they verbally guided her to the stuffed panda toy at the other end. Doing so, we talked about how practice involves paying attention to those around you and keeping motivation to help someone else."

In another example of presenting the teachings, students were discussing Great Question, Great Faith and Great Courage. To enliven the concept, teachers made "mystery boxes," an idea from the school's fundraising chair, MiNa Chung-Brcak. Students had to feel inside boxes and write their guesses for the uniquely textured items hidden in each box, such as pomegranate seeds or cornmeal. It took one-pointed effort, total concentration and a constant question of "what is this?" to engage with the task, and students experienced the three essential elements of Zen in one practice. "Building off that exercise the students then tried getting their parents to guess what was in the box based only on their descriptor words and not by experiencing what was in the box," says Jim Chung-Brcak. "We used this to illustrate how difficult and cumbersome it is putting experience into words. It was much easier for the kids to 'know' what was in the box by experiencing than it was for the parents by hearing

Starting a Dharma School

Mark Dennen

- Take Zen Master Seung Sahn's advice and just do it—procrastination won't get you anywhere.
- Start small and build. Hold the school once a month or every few months to gain experience. Use the Web and social media to publicize the school. The PZC dharma school is online at www.facebook.com/PZCDharmaSchool.
- Get the right resources. A book on meditation for children is a great way to start with a dozen different techniques. Include a children's book about Buddha or Buddhist stories and you have much of the material you need for multiple classes.
- Look for lessons and activity plans from children's education programs in other faiths, depending on what's available in your country and language. If those resources teach the same values of compassion, forgiveness, and so on, why not use the same activities?
- Keep meditations relatively short to accommodate the children's attention spans.
- Ask the students' parents to help with the program. Many Buddhist parents welcome the opportunity to serve and contribute ideas.

about the experience.”

Building Community Links

The Flat Buddha is an ongoing project. This activity is based on the popular Flat Stanley project that started in Ontario, Canada in 1965. Schoolteachers use the project to teach their students about geography by having students mail a drawing or image of Flat Stanley, a young character in a series of novels, to other participating students around the world. The recipients photograph themselves with Flat Stanley and pose him for pictures in their homes, schools, and so on. They then return the photos and a letter to the senders. (There is a Flat Stanley website with additional information at www.flatstanley.com)

Dharma school students have taken the same approach but with a Flat Buddha. They mail the Flat Buddha to different Zen centers. Members at those centers take pictures of the Flat Buddha at different locations and mail him back to the students with a letter. It's not just a fun project—it also teaches the students that they are members of a national and international sangha. “Not only are the kids connected to the kids in their dharma school class but they're also connected to the people at the Providence Zen Center and the Providence Zen Center is connected to something bigger,” says Chung-Brcak. “It expands their horizons about how big the community is and its different aspects.”

Students also participate in selected PZC ceremonies, such as bathing the Baby Buddha during the Buddha's Birthday Ceremony, and in occasional special projects. In August 2012, the school hosted a retreat for students and their parents that drew 19 families, including participants from other Kwan Um Zen centers around New England. Unlike a meditation retreat for adults, it was more activity-based. Activities included martial arts, stories, art, cooking and yoga, with mindfulness and meditation sessions interspersed during the day.

The school's theme for the 2013–14 year, selfless service, gives students another opportunity to see their role in the larger community. The students were asked to suggest ideas for a service project and they decided to help children in need, especially those in hunger. That led to a fundraising effort in the form of a bow-a-thon that will be held at the next Buddha's Enlightenment Day ceremony

at PZC. Students will collect contribution pledges for each bow they make; 50 percent of the proceeds will go to support the dharma school and 50 percent to a community service agency in Rhode Island that helps poor families.

Organization

The school's organization has evolved since the first classes. Originally Mark Dennen served as teacher for the older students with Chung-Brcak teaching the younger group. After the groups combined, both served as teachers for the one group. In an effort to follow PZC's administrative structure, Chung-Brcak became the school's director, responsible for communications among parents and with PZC. Dennen is now the head teacher with responsibility for overseeing the curriculum. José Ramírez JDPSN is the guiding teacher and several parents serve on additional committees for gardening and arts and music.

Multiple Benefits

Parents say that attending the school has a positive impact on their children. Kimberly Testa first brought her son Ijah, now age 9, to the school in December 2010. Testa, a Cumberland resident who is not a PZC member, learned about the program from a website article on local activities for children. She had read about Buddhism when she was younger and thought that the school might interest Ijah. They have been attending regularly since then and Testa reports that Ijah continues to enjoy the sessions. “He said they teach you how to be nice, respectful, how to meditate and how to be mindful,” she says. “He said it's fun, you do activities and they read you books. And I notice that he does pay attention. A lot of times the kids are sort of shuffling about and wiggling in their cushions but it's sinking in. I really feel like the seeds are being planted.”

PZC's dharma school format can work in any Zen center, including those in other countries, Chung-Brcak maintains. Zen centers normally focus on providing practice opportunities for adults; having a dharma school allows families to practice together. “It's about the kids having an opportunity to learn about a spiritual tradition that's important to their families,” he says. “It allows them to learn about compassion, thoughtfulness, patience and important lessons about living and life. At the same time, they can feel like they're a part of a community that's out there for them.” ◆

Children's Version of the Four Great Vows

- Living things are numberless, but I will try to help them all.
- Distractions are endless, but I will try to focus through them all.
- The teachings are many, but I will try to learn them all.
- The path of the Buddha is long and difficult, but I will travel it.

Ed McCarthy is a freelance writer and practices at the Providence Zen Center. He thanks Jim Chung-Brcak, Mark Dennen and José Ramírez JDPSN for their generous help with the article. To learn more about the dharma school at the Providence Zen Center, e-mail pzcdharmaschool@gmail.com.