Bringing Buddhist values into front line work with young offenders

Amaragita

Amaragita has worked for the last twenty years in the field of employment and training. She works as a trainer, coach and consultant designing and developing programmes which enable individuals to gain insight into themselves and their work practises, by investigating the principles and paradigms which support deeper awareness and effective working. The work involves enabling empathetic connections to be made with self and other which frees energy to find creative solutions to long term blocks and resignation that can set in when working with challenging clients. She brings her experience of fifteen years' meditation and buddhist practise both to her work and the retreats and courses she runs. For more information contact her on Amaragita@devaloka.freeserve.co.uk

'Whatever you have done or whatever has been done to you – you still have a future.' Did I dare say this to a drug dealer or a violent young offender? How convincing would it sound to a girl on her fifteenth social worker, or a youth who has spent his life in the care system?

When I was young I had a series of strong dreams in which was working with street children in South America. These dreams expressed an urge to rescue young people from difficult situations. But I did not imagine that my career would involve helping young people who parents, social workers, teachers and probation officers considered unreachable, or working with large groups of 'youths at risk' to turn their lives around.

I had worked in community development, and as a consultant in conflict resolution, team building and personal effectiveness. That work was rewarding, but I wanted to work with people at a deeper level. Then a friend started a charity called Youth at Risk, that is devoted to working in a new way with young offenders and vulnerable young people.

I was excited by the innovative approach and I have been for ten years. The work has enriched my life and offered a way to investigate questions that have always driven me: 'Can I make a difference?' 'What does it mean to effect change in the world?'

Over the last decade I have worked in most of the roles in the Youth at Risk programme, and since becoming a mother two years ago I have been a consultant. My key role was as a trainer, leading the residential part of a programme for people in their teens and early twenties who have been identified by their local authority. These are young people who are in trouble with the police, in the care system, fostered, adopted, or who have been physically or emotionally abused.

During the residential week we guide young people in various states of distress and mistrust through a series of 'conversations', in which they speak the truth about their lives. They learn to identify their own limiting beliefs and see the havoc these create. A huge infrastructure is needed to create this residential and its nine-month follow-up. Vital to the whole process is the army of volunteers who are willing to give their time and energy. Fifty to a hundred adults are recruited from the local community, all of whom need to be trained in how to support the young people.

Gillian was brought up in Northern Ireland, where brutality and crime are commonplace. Aged 18 she was referred to Youth at Risk by the Probation Service for joy-riding and stealing cars. At first she hated the other young people and resisted talking about her past in front of strangers. On the residential, however, Gillian broke down in tears and spoke about her trauma and abuse. 'I felt I was responsible and I had no self worth. I just wanted to be rebellious – and stealing cars was exciting.' Back in Belfast, she has since stayed out of trouble and has new hope and direction.

It takes courage to take on these young people, who are experts at spotting your weaknesses and vulnerabilities and often seek to undermine you. The process may involve them hating you, swearing at you and storming out. To stand with equanimity in the face of this requires awareness and training. While learning to lead these groups, I would frequently wonder if I was being heard. I felt embarrassed, sweaty, and unsure what to say. It also involved my trainer pointing out ways in which I wasn't ready to lead – when I couldn't stand firm in the face of someone's anger, or I wasn't yet able to question someone in a way that enabled them to feel heard.

What kind of intervention enables change? This is the central question for Youth at Risk. During their training each adult discovers that the issues confronting the young people are essentially the same as those they face themselves. To many adults these chaotic young people may seem alien, but, in truth, they are just on a different part of the spectrum of what it is to be human.

Youth at Risk training is not about acquiring skills or knowledge. Volunteers and professionals are asked to become aware of where they reach their own limitations. The places they, too, are stuck. For example, some of the adults have

given up on relationships with family or friends; others feel powerless with their own children; some are addicted to work; some are alcoholics; some have a resentment they cannot shake off; others have always wanted to drive or to return to education and lacked the confidence to do so.

The issues we face as adults wanting to help young people may not be dramatic or life-threatening, but trying to address these puts us in the same zone of resistance and denial. We often know what we need to do but cannot overcome the barriers to doing it. Recently I was struggling with a bad back and, already stretched to find time for work, my daughter and my meditation practice, I couldn't seem to fit in back exercises. In practice I felt powerless to make the necessary changes. By experiencing the uncomfortable zone that commitment to change puts us in, the adults gain a visceral empathy with the young people who will be in this zone throughout the programme.

The adults need to be aware of their own habits in relation to the four core principles on which the programme is based. These are the principles of possibility, self-expression, responsibility, and community. And the training challenges them to explore these areas in their own lives. If it has helped, they can have a more authentic communication with the young people. Their approach can be 'do as I do' rather than 'do as I say'.

possibility

The principle of **possibility** points to what lies beyond everything we inherit from our history and conditioning. It suggests that something else is possible; we are not the limited set of actions and reactions that we often imagine ourselves to be. We can encourage ourselves to move towards the unknown and create something more meaningful. As a Buddhist, I see this principle embodied in the Buddha. During my training I often experienced self-doubt; I thought I could never be what was required – resilient, hard-as-nails, and compassionate enough to melt a barricaded heart. So I used this principle of possibility to counter self-doubt.

For a young person with a strong stammer, who left school at 13 without qualifications and had served two prison sentences for violent crimes, what is the likelihood that ten years later he would be at university studying criminology? Based on everything he knew, he thought there was no such possibility, and anyone suggesting the idea was either deluded or must want something. Yet this is a really happened, and the change really took place.

In order to glimpse this sense of possibility we need receptivity**.** The residential is a safe place in which the young people can open up and be receptive. But much work needs to be done before they can choose to come on the residential. Far from enticing them, we emphasise how difficult it will be: no TV, video, comics, sweets or drugs. We insist that violence is not an option, and that we will physically intervene if they become a danger to themselves or anyone else. The programme is not designed for them to have fun – if they have fun it will be by accident! If they want something different for their lives, they will have to *be* different.

Generally the young people we work with are unaware of the costs of their actions because they are in a continual state of self-distraction, through anger, drugs, violence and withdrawal. By removing these distractions, they see more clearly what is at stake. They see that actions have consequences, and realise how much they don't want to end up in prison again, or homeless, or cut off from their family. A residential is like a meditation retreat, in that you have the space to experience what you have been denying and avoiding.

The second core principle is **self-expression,** the quality of communication that helps us move away from behaviour patterns that keep us stuck, and towards whatever we aspire to. Above all this involves communication that fosters a sense of connection to others. It enables us to speak our deepest fears, our dreams and our most valued accomplishments.

On the residential the atmosphere of safety and receptivity allows the young people to *tell the truth* about their lives: to speak publicly about what they have suffered and perhaps experience pain in the telling. I often find it very emotional hearing their stories. It is demanding just to listen without judging, and communicate that you are 'on their side'.

s e l f - e x p r e s s i o n

It is crucial that they listen to each other and see they are not alone. They learn that they aren't freaks: they may have had experiences that were unjust and cruel, but that doesn't mean they're evil or deserved what happened. Listening to others' stories sparks their compassion and therefore that sparks compassion for themselves for themselves. So the layer of self-hatred begins to soften.

They realise that perhaps they matter, and therefore what they do matters. Usually they admit that, while they talk and act as if they don't care, actually they do care.

One young man, who had been a drug dealer, described how someone at school had laughed at him after his sister had died; this was the point when he decided not to care about anyone. He was able to contact his frozen feelings and begin to see the consequences of his actions more humanely.

The third core principle, **responsibility**, points to our ability to choose a response that empowers us and moves us in a positive direction. It involves everything that allows us to see the biggest possible picture in the clearest way, and then take the most appropriate action. I see this principle embodied in the teachings of Buddhism.

On the residential, once the young people have spoken of their pain, it is possible to move to something more difficult: encouraging them to take responsibility. We look at what is really causing their suffering in the present. Usually they blame people in their past, or blame themselves and believe they are innately bad. Slowly they see it is the meaning they have attached to what happened that causes their present suffering. For example, they have given themselves labels like 'I'm worthless', or 'I'm unloved', which they must prove right. These are the core beliefs that need to change.

Bringing core beliefs to light shows how these have determined their actions. Then the hardest part begins: the practical reality of choosing actions that are not consistent with

responsibility

the old meaning. In these discussions something can crack open to reveal a possibility. Something that only the individual can see or feel. Taking different actions based on a new belief – like 'I matter' – gives evidence for the new meaning. Then begins the process of slowly shifting their mindset from 'I don't matter' to 'I do matter, I'm a contribution'. We also encourage them to realise that they are responsible for this new meaning.

Personally I have particularly benefited from exploring the area of responsibility. We urge the young people to see they can now make choices that move them away from suffering. Just because they can't see a choice, it doesn't mean they don't have choice – even if they don't like it. They can choose not to be victims of their circumstances, even if they have been victimised. This is such a challenging prospect that even devoted Dharma practitioners find it hard to live by. Nowadays, when I think of myself as a victim and subtly blame others for my suffering, I can recognise the process, laugh at it and know I can do something about it. It may take me months, even years, to shift; but after so much focus on responsibility, I have a clear understanding of what it means.

Many Buddhist scriptures end with the Buddha's disciple breaking through to Insight after hearing a particular teaching and then declaring, 'Excellent … most excellent, the veil is torn – there shall be no more rebirths for me.' I have witnessed a similar veil being torn from young people. They have been repeating habits – cycles of drugs, violence and alienation; then they realise how damaging that is and see the possibility of different life. If they want they can choose to stay in the new life they have glimpsed.

I have seen people shifting from one life to another in this way. In a sense

they are being reborn. It's tangible, more tangible for me than imagining a series of future 'lives' leading towards Enlightenment. But witnessing this shift in others has encouraged me. It gives me faith in my own ability to change.

Once, while working with a volunteer who had suffered extreme physical violence, I experienced something unusual. As she looked towards the possibility of a new life – a blank slate, a place of relative freedom – I began to feel and inhabit her terror. I felt for myself that stepping into this unknown future was more terrifying than her past horrors of being dragged around her flat by her hair.

It is sobering to realise how hard it is to face the unknown – even though as a Buddhist I have taken up practices that are preparing me to say 'yes' to it. If the Buddha knocked at my door today – if I was eyeball to eyeball with Reality – I might well say, 'Sorry she's out, could you come back later?' I have benefited greatly from being able to draw parallels between these young people's experiences and my own; and sometimes even found it fun.

The fourth core principle of **community** highlights the importance of relationships in sustaining us. Volunteers agree to being a 'committed partner' or mentor to each young person for nine months or a year. The young people commit to their mentors on the residential in a simple ceremony and for the next nine months they have somebody who may well be more committed to their aspirations than they are themselves. Without this support it would be difficult for the insights gained on the residential to take root in their lives. If someone is having a hard time then people send cards or offer resources. They learn from each other's successes and failures.

For many years I was quite resistant to the practice of sangha or spiritual friendship and community. But seeing the benefits to young people of a consciously created community that has a shared purpose of individual growth has helped me to appreciate sangha. At its best, a living, growing, learning community has a powerfully beneficial effect. In the Youth at Risk context it only lasts a year, which is a great shame (although in their chaotic lives that is a significant length of time). We all benefit from a positive community – and this is missing for many people. I feel privileged to have found an equivalent for myself with

other Buddhists, and that's why I can recommend it so highly to these young people.

It took me four years of continual effort to be in a position to lead the residential successfully. I learned to ask questions that challenged the assumptions young people made about themselves. I learned to be fierce and demanding in holding up the mirror and saying: 'Look, you have a choice: what are you going to do?' Over the past ten years we have had some extraordinary successes, people who have turned their lives around dramatically, and a number have gone on to become staff at Youth at Risk. There have also some young people who have died.

Broadly speaking, 75 per cent achieve the goals they set for themselves – for example, 'get back into education', 'find a job', 'have a better relationship with the parents'. I don't think anyone can remain untouched by the process. They will have experienced adults making extraordinary efforts to communicate honestly and allow them to feel loved.

Being black may have given me a bit of credibility but not much, because once you start challenging, defences go up and it doesn't matter who you are. As a woman I have learnt there are certain ways I can challenge young men, which from a male trainer would cause confrontation. In other ways as a woman I cannot be what young men need. Many of their issues stem from feeling abandoned by their fathers, and at certain times it is crucial for a young man to have an adult man being tender but challenging. I can hardly overstate the damage that comes when young men grow up without a fathers and I have come to the conclusion that boys need their dads. Obviously not violent and abusive ones, but the absence of a male 'elder' can wreak havoc on a young man's self-perception.

Frequently, while working with groups of chaotic young people, I have experienced something quite beautiful. Someone begins to speak and those listening feel a positive desire for the individual to find something for themselves. Then something just cracks open. There is a strong energy of empathy and care and the room feels like a sacred space. People are seeing each other with eyes of love and solidarity. Everyone is truly listening. The collective mind stills for a few moments, and magic has entered. It is the love principle emerging amid pain and difficulty. The Buddha Amitabha has made a guest appearance. Sadly, but understandably, it is temporary – and that very evening there could be a fight.

I believe that these are experiences the young people seldom forget. Even though some don't make the changes we would all like to see they have had a direct experience of opening up to something out-of-the-ordinary. Perhaps it was just a flicker, but it was significant. It touched us all. And perhaps, after being sent back to prison, they may wonder, what *was* that? Hopefully, along with other experiences of kindness and meaning, it might prompt someone to choose a life with less suffering for themselves and others.