

## Youth and Buddhist Activism

By Swan Keyes

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Loud, withdrawn, idealistic, skeptical, humorous, sexual, overwhelmed, joyous, justice-seeking. We are the collective shadow of the adult world. We are the “other” that everyone once was.

This society demands that young people be less than we are. From the moment we enter the school system, we are pressured to shut down, be still, stop asking questions, follow the rules, stop dreaming, be “realistic,” be productive.

Until we are taught our place in the social system we are a threat. We rage against the system and its injustices. Sometimes we just cry. Other times we educate, overturn, create new possibilities.

Buddhist communities offer an interesting home to young people, alternatively welcoming, inspiring, confining and uptight. I’ve been finding a sometime-home in various Buddhist communities since I was 16. Often frustrating but offering the treasures I seek: practice, awareness, relief from dualism.

Before I came to the West Coast and found BPF, those communities were always apolitical. During the Gulf War it was fine to send *metta* to the victims of our bombs, but to want to get off my cushion and *do something* showed attachment. There was no place in my sanghas for outrage. I can’t count the times a grown-up shook his head at me, saying, “When I was your age I was like that, too” (read: Don’t worry, honey, you’ll grow out of it).

Fortunately, I’ve also encountered those people who are always busy being born. My stepdad is a 60-year-old perpetual teenager, using hip hop and Zen in his high school classes. At 81, my grandmother has breakthroughs using imagery and meditation to help kids with disabilities learn to read.

We young people can’t keep our spirits alive in this society without the support of elders who know the struggle and are able to keep their hearts and minds open. I realized when I met vipassana teacher Sylvia Boorstein last year that I needed to cry on this grandmother’s lap. She offered that lap, didn’t try to fix me, just held me and cried with me.

So when Sue Moon asked me what I’d like to tell older people with this editorial, I thought of Sylvia and other friends and came up with this recipe. Here are a few things everyone can do to be an ally to younger generations:

- 1) Listen to and engage young people. Take us seriously. We are teachers as well as students. Don’t be afraid to offer support, but also don’t assume we

want advice. Ask what is needed to make y/our sangha welcoming to us. Help us take positions of leadership.

- 2) Cultivate your own wholeness. As a teacher of mine once said, if you can fully feel your own outrage, grief, fear, joy, sexuality, love, then the scapegoats of society—youth, people of color, people with mental illnesses, seniors and others—don't have to hold those feelings for you.
- 3) Educate yourself about your identity in our oppressive social system. In what ways are you targeted? How are you privileged? Do you remember the ageism you experienced as a child or teen? Maybe you are suffering from it again as a senior. If you are white and liberal, have you learned about how your "color blindness" can cause suffering? Meditation alone will not teach you these things. Books, groups, and allies are necessary. It's not enough to say, "We're all human," and ignore power differentials.

In closing, I give a deep bow of gratitude to all of you and say farewell, as I will be leaving my position as Development Director of BPF shortly. I have felt respected and heard as a young person here and I know I have made a difference. I am glad to be part of this community that uses spiritual practice to make our world a more humane place.