

Buddhist Peace Fellowship

Chapter Handbook

(last revised Summer 2009)

Since 1978, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship has brought the social teachings of Buddhism into action in the world. While the BPF executive office develops programs, projects, and publishes *Turning Wheel*, the heart of BPF is membership participation and our chapters. Thank you for the time and energy you have offered to start and maintain a chapter – your group is one of the most powerful vehicles for BPF to embody the values of socially engaged Buddhism in society. This Chapter Handbook is intended to offer information and support to help your chapter to thrive.

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1. What is a Chapter?

A BPF chapter is a local or regional group whose members have joined together to support each other as socially engaged Buddhists. A group establishes chapter status as an expression of special affinity with BPF. Becoming a chapter can give focus to the exploration and work of socially engaged Buddhism. BPF’s intention is to expand the Buddhist understanding of interconnectedness and compassion to include social justice and peace concerns, and to act from our understanding. The foundations of Buddhist teachings — the four noble truths, insights into the nature of greed, hatred, and ignorance, the virtues of generosity, equanimity, and nonviolence, and cultivating the unique tools of Buddhist practice — can all help us to approach suffering from a unique vantage point.

Through our chapters, we explore different ways of being together that reflect egalitarian partnership models of community, learning to care for each other and our world at the same time. Because we are grassroots-based and non-denominational, the arena is wide open to create communities and groups that reflect these explorations.

Chapters should encourage and welcome people who are generally supportive of the spirit and goals of BPF and would have a strong interest in becoming a BPF member. We ask that you encouraging people at some point to formally join BPF. We rely heavily on membership dues and individual donations to operate our organization, so the more members you are able to help us recruit, the better our capacity to offer resources to support your chapter.

2. How Can the BPF Office Help?

The BPF office can support chapters in many ways. The office can furnish mailing labels and a list of the BPF members and the Buddhist centers in your area, and send brochures, copies of Turning Wheel, and other materials to make available at your meetings. Your chapter will also be listed in our BPF publication “Turning Wheel”. In addition chapters can submit articles / chapter updates in a specific area in Turning Wheel called “Indra’s Net “. We offer support and advice through regular emails and phone contact with the Chapter Coordinator. When our budget permits, we have a small fund for start-up money available to new chapters. This money can help with planning a first event, doing mailings, etc. Please do not hesitate to call for information or advice. As a chapter you will receive mailings from the office with updates and suggestions about BPF’s current focus.

It’s also possible that is a Board member or other BPF staff may be able to visit your chapter to speak about BPF, share some history, and offer encouragement.

3. Benefits of Being a Chapter

Perhaps the most important benefit of being a chapter is joining a community , in the U.S. and worldwide, who are exploring the integration of dharma practice and social activism. In addition to this benefit, some of the other privileges that come with chapter status include:

- Listing your chapter’s contact information on the BPF website (www.bpf.org).
- Provide a page within our website for your use to share events and other information .

4. Chapter Responsibilities

Being a chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship carries with it responsibilities as well as privileges. In the largest sense, your primary responsibility is to represent BPF, while maintaining your individuality and personal expression of peace. Please be careful to operate from the dharma principles of nonviolence and non-duality in both your speech and action. Remember that there is no enemy outside ourselves. We can take forceful action while still regarding others with respect and love, and honoring their unique contribution to the world. Any activity that an individual takes should be cleared with the chapter first if it is to be done on behalf of BPF or the chapter. We have an unprecedented opportunity to share Buddhist understandings with the peace community and learn from them the Western tradition of social justice.

Our aspiration is to do so with care and openness as well as creativity and inspiration, and in the spirit of community. In addition to this overarching responsibility, we ask that chapters to fulfill the following responsibilities in order to keep their chapter status active:

- Each chapter must use its state name in relationship to BPF's name in all materials, for example: BPF/California Chapter
- Each chapter is responsible for ensuring that its activities and programs are consistent with the BPF'S vision, mission and programmatic focus.
 - A chapter can request to represent BPF at conferences and events and press interviews with mention of the executive office location and include name and contact information of the Executive Director of BPF. This is to keep clear lines of organizational leadership in the world.
- We ask that you keep us informed of your activities — email to the central office, your flyers, newsletters, and project reports on a regular basis, and write brief chapter updates for Turning Wheel.
- We ask that each chapter participates in an annual reflection process conducted by the chapter coordinator so that the BPF Central office is aware of how things are going for your chapter.

5. How to Stay in Communication

There are several ways to stay in touch with each other and with the BPF office:

- **Virtual Chapter:** This ning group offers ways to become involved in supporting the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and its goals. It's a place to be active and engaged through conversations, sharing of resources and information, chat, projects, ideas, and actions. It's open to members of regular BPF chapters, BPF members who do not participate in a regular chapter, and engaged Buddhists who are not BPF members. <http://bpfvirtualchapter.ning.com>

- List Serve: On occasion, the BPF Chapter Coordinator will send emails directly to you about news from the BPF Central Office and important events and action alerts. you can subscribe to our list serve by sending an email to bpfchapters@bpf.org. In addition, please take time to check the BPF website, www.bpf.org, on a regular basis.
- BPF encourages our Chapters to call BPF National office directly if you have any questions.

6. Chapter Structure

Chapters vary widely in how they structure themselves. Some operate on a casual basis and rotate leadership and facilitation frequently. Others use a more formal steering committee structure, designating coordinator .To support BPF we strongly encourage all Chapter participants to be members of BPF. Some chapters have found it useful to develop a set of working guide lines and to designate service roles . Chapters in their early stages may benefit from spending quite a bit of time discussing these matters and coming to a shared agreement about what kind of structure best fits the needs of its members. Some chapters have begun their work together by holding a day or half-day retreat and composing a chapter mission statement.

You may wish to explore different types of decision-making models, e.g. consensus process, to determine which will work best for your group. Even if you don't have a steering committee or chapter coordinator, at the minimum you will need to designate one person as the chapter's Contact – this is the person whose name, phone number, and email address will be listed in Turning Wheel and on the BPF website. These are some of the roles you may want to invite people in your chapter to fulfill:

- Contact person: This is the person whose name, phone number, and email address will be listed in Turning Wheel and on the BPF website. This person is responsible for receiving and responding to inquiries from people who are interested in coming to your chapter's events and becoming a member. It is helpful if this person is comfortable with e-mail technology and has a natural talent for networking.
- Literature coordinator: This person is responsible for staying in touch with the BPF Central Office to request BPF brochures, articles, and other materials so that the chapter has a supply to share with those attending meetings and others interested in BPF's work.
- Hospitality coordinator: This person is responsible for locating meeting sites as well as for ensuring that refreshments and drinks are available at meetings, and attending to other details that help to cultivate a sense of community.

7. How to “Be” a Chapter

The “how” of holding a chapter meeting or gathering is just as important, if not more so, than the “what.” That’s why we’re including this section before you get to ideas about what to do in your chapter! Chapter meetings are a precious opportunity for us to put into practice the same principles that we are trying to support in society: honesty, compassion, loving kindness , and an awareness of the injustices that all of us have been conditioned into such as racism, classism , sexism, etc. Our collective intention as a BPF community can be to transform these injustices starting within our own circles, as a way of liberating all beings from suffering. Each chapter has its own style. Some get together because of a particular crisis which then becomes the main focus — as happened after September 11, 2001. Others begin with interest and zeal but no particular project in mind. Some chapters need time to get to know each other and study engaged Buddhism together before beginning a project or activity. Others organize around an activity first. Try to have patience and go slow at the beginning, letting the group get to know each other. You may want to do some community building exercises, break into small groups and pick a topic to speak about, or take one of the precepts to study in the context of social engagement and activism. Brainstorm at the beginning on projects or activities, and then look at the list and see which one has the most energy for people.

Sometimes groups get stuck when there are too many choices or too many divergent views. This is normal for groups. Remember your practice, use the silence, and be creative. Look for the reason underneath the “stuckness”:

- is one person wielding too much control?
- are there unresolved feelings or dynamics?
- is the group becoming closed to new input?

Change modes, move around, draw or sing together, drink tea. Have each person speak from their own truth about the issue. Remember that the group does not have to agree on any one project or meeting style; if people have different interests you can create subgroups which keep the larger group involved through activities and reports. Experiment at the beginning and be creative: hold a vigil at a local arms depot or nuclear plant, hold a bake sale as a fundraiser for a local project, have a meditation & discussion day with nonviolent living as the focus, have a study group, invite a speaker from a homeless shelter or other local group.

There can be a tension between “acting” and “being” in chapters. The dynamic between internal and external work is part of what BPF is about. This tension can be held and explored within the context of chapter building. Some chapters go through periods when they meet more irregularly; do not be discouraged by this — it can be a natural ebb and flow of energy in the group. Coordinators and

chapters are encouraged to support current and incoming members with interests and activities divergent from the larger group focus, to create other avenues for socially engaged Buddhist activity.

Suggested format of a BPF Chapter meeting

Standard Opening Items

1. Begin and/or end with a meditation period
2. Invite people to have a brief personal check-in around the circle
3. Schedule next meeting and choose next facilitator
4. Invite people to take on meeting tasks: Bell-ringer; Topic Monitor; To Do List /Future Agenda Items (next meeting's facilitator); Note taker
5. Review agenda for additions or possible deletions, considering whether any items may be better delegated to a single person or subcommittee
6. Review "Meeting Guidelines" below:

General Meeting Guidelines

- Take one or two breaths between each speaker
- Go around the circle so that each person has an opportunity to give his/her views on an issue uninterruptedly
- Be conscious of listening to others speaking, and not interrupting
- Reduce discussion time by passing if one agrees with what has already been said
- Make sure there is closure by reviewing minutes at the end of each topic, identifying any decisions made and tasks to do.
- Ring a bell of mindfulness every 20 minutes to re-gather breath and refocus
- After bell is rung, if energy level is still high, facilitator may request that the floor revert to him/herself to check whether we are on topic. Watch the tendency to centralize within your group, to create hierarchy, and to look elsewhere for direction. While it can be helpful and important to have a facilitator or coordinator, it's often best to keep these roles fluid. Some of the following suggestions can help soften these leanings:

- * be inclusive rather than exclusive, welcoming people and ideas equally
- * rotate facilitation and roles so that each can have a voice in the proceedings
- * meet at different people's houses or different Buddhist centers
- * have potlucks for community building, days of mindfulness, poetry-making days, pick-up-litter days, etc.
- * be aware of caring for your members, making sure that each has a voice and that the needs and concerns of all are heard and addressed
- * designate a "vibes-watcher" for each meeting. This person can comment on the general group mood and process, note if there are certain people who are talking a lot and others who have not yet spoken, etc. Another tool to support this kind of meeting is to invite the group to create some communication agreements.

8. Okay, We're a Chapter.... Now What Do We Do?!

The most important guidance we can give here is: find projects that are meaningful to your members, and find ways to get everybody involved in something that excites them. Some chapters form around a particular issue or project, others meet mostly to support each other in their peace work; still others create their own programs together responding to the needs of their community. While there's a wonderful degree of creativity in different chapters being able to choose what events they want to do, the solidarity and unity that comes about from many chapters engaging in the same activity on the same day can also be quite inspirational. The BPF Central Office develops campaign themes and ideas throughout the year that we'll tell you about and invite your participation.

A chapter may want to take on international issues in countries such as Africa, Vietnam, Central America, Burma, Cambodia, Tibet, or the Middle East; on issues such as disarmament, military spending, and social justice concerns; and on local issues which affect the group's local community: homelessness, working at a soup kitchen, or racial issues. Some work on several issues, some concentrate in one area. We encourage you to use Buddhist teachings as you examine a project or concern. Explore how they can help shed light on the situation and your response. Revisit the BPF vision and mission statements on the website.

Some chapter activities have included:

- Organizing a day-long symposium called "Creating the Conditions for Peace" -- invite local Buddhist teachers and activists to speak on panels covering topics such as wisdom and compassion, with questions related to current events
- Sponsoring days of mindfulness
- Working with refugees locally or raising funds for Cambodian, Burmese or Tibetan refugees
- Letter-writing campaigns for human rights
- Sending a member on a delegation to a troubled area of the world, e.g. Iraq, then host a community event upon their return to listen to their stories
- Participating in and organizing vigils and demonstrations (e.g. at nuclear plants and weapons bases)
- Sponsoring talks, retreats, workshops on socially engaged Buddhism
- Holding a "Turning Wheel Salon" gathering – using the theme of the current issue of Turning Wheel as a starting point for conversation on a topic (e.g. Black

Dharma, Art and Activism, Youth and Buddhist Activism, Class, etc.), invite people to bring poetry, music, or other sharings on the theme

- Studying together (e.g. precept readings or books on engaged Buddhism – see the bibliography on the BPF website for ideas)
- Working with local peace and interfaith groups on projects. Good partners are the American Friends Service Committee (www.afsc.org), which has regional office throughout the U.S. and internationally, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation local chapters (see <http://forusa.org/localgroups>)
- Reaching out to the Asian sanghas in area to help with their work or to simply learn more about each others' practice
- Writing to prisoners (see BPF's Prison Program web pages for details)
- Organizing a Change Your Mind Day (BPF is a national co-sponsor of this event, in conjunction with Tricycle magazine) If your meetings are study groups or organizational, we encourage you to take some action at each meeting, such as taking ten minutes to do letter writing, or bringing in clothes to be donated to a local shelter. We have created a "Chapter Resources" section on our website as a repository for articles, ideas, and other helpful documents from the BPF Central Office and Chapters.

9. Finances

Chapters operate on small budgets and work is done by active members who volunteer their time. You can also receive gifts from local chapter members or small event expenses. Bank accounts for chapter are discouraged in light of the national office's need to manage BPF financials. The BPF office does NOT offer its non-profit status for tax-deductible privileges to chapters *at this time*.

10. Legislative Lobby and Advocacy

Please see the Toolkit section for the application form. IRS regulations limit legislative lobbying to 15% of the overall activity of a 501(c)3 organization and strictly forbid certain electoral activities such as endorsing a political party or candidate. It is important that you keep the central office informed of any political activity and to check with us if you have specific questions. Please contact the national Chapter Coordinator for further information.

11. Annual Reflection

Every year BPF likes to evaluate and receive feedback from our chapter members to better our understanding of ways to continue to support Chapter activity. An evaluation form is sent out annually.

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Respect and cherish each other, remembering that we are all interconnected.  
Speak your truth without intent to harm anyone.  
If you are one who speaks easily and often,  
Be aware that others may need some space to be heard.  
If you do not speak easily, challenge yourself to speak up.  
If someone's just said what you were going to say,  
Pass or say ditto rather than repeating it.  
Use "I" statements (especially for personal or process issues).  
Listen to others with curiosity,  
And be aware when you are not open to what is being said.  
It's okay not to know.  
You can communicate passionately,  
But be aware when you are holding onto your opinion too tightly.  
Please avoid interrupting.  
Respect the practice of taking turns speaking.  
Anyone can call a "time-out."  
We will ring a mindfulness bell occasionally,  
And pause for three long breaths before continuing.