

About Teaching

Teaching children Dharma is one of the most wonderful and challenging opportunities in life. It is wonderful for many reasons, which include enjoying the children's ideas, sharing their humor and enthusiasm, admiring their art and talent, understanding and encouraging them to overcome their difficulties, and being inspired by their efforts, their beautiful personalities and their expressions. It is challenging mostly because the teacher must constantly - every day and every minute of the day - be aware of and practice the moral values he or she is teaching. As the Buddha says:

One should first establish oneself in what is proper; then only should one instruct others. Thus the wise man will not be reproached. One should do what one teaches others to do; if one would train others, one should be well-controlled oneself. Difficult, indeed is self-control.

Dhammapada 158-159 (12:2-3).

As a teacher, during the interval between the last class and the class in which a particular moral value is being taught, you can focus your practice on that moral value. Then you will teach with the confidence and understanding of one who practices what he or she preaches. In some instances, particularly with older children, you might even have your own anecdote to share with the class regarding your experience in practicing that value.

You can teach your own children at home or with a small group, you can organize and teach a Dharma class at a local temple or meditation center, or you can assist or substitute for an ongoing Dharma class. More than ever, with the negative influences of modern society, children need guidance in becoming aware of their own moral weaknesses and how to overcome them -- how to practice the moral values in their daily life, given today's norms and challenges.

Youth can learn best in an environment of strict but loving discipline. Otherwise, teachers must raise their voices above children's murmurings and outbursts, and must interrupt the lesson to correct behavior, so the students' attention and the flow of the class is disrupted. An integral part of any spiritual or religious education is self-control and compassion for others. It is good to start a new class by asking the students to create class rules for all to obey, so they will accept their own rules. Rules should include entering and exiting the classroom quietly and in a line (like the monks), waiting to be called on before speaking, and observing silence in the meditation or puja area. Small prizes such as pens can be awarded for improved behavior if enforcement is necessary.

Lesson Plans

The teacher should review the lesson plan thoroughly prior to teaching the class, so that it will run smoothly, and so that any materials needed for the activities are ready for use in class. It is suggested that each of the following components of the lesson plan be included in each class, for the reasons stated below.

1. Opening chants, meditation, and review of last lesson

Group chanting helps to calm the students' minds so that they are ready to learn in a disciplined environment. Buddhist chants, group prayers, mantras and/or bhajans or group devotional singing create a serene vibration, purifying the environment.

Meditation helps to further calm and focus the mind. The teacher should make sure the students are sitting with a straight back, relaxed shoulders and eyes gently closed, and discreetly observe whether the students are sitting still during the meditation.

Review of the last lesson means that the teacher calls on a student to summarize the story from the previous class. Most students enjoy an opportunity to speak, so it encourages students to try to remember the story, which helps to develop their memory. For shy students, the opportunity to summarize the story helps them build confidence in speaking to an audience, in a relaxed and accepting environment. The review creates continuity in the stories, and helps students who missed a class to be up to date.

2. Question to think about before the story

The question is only a suggestion of the topic that the students should focus on in the story, and is not to be answered aloud. It elicits students' memories of their own experiences with the moral value so that they can personally relate to it and so that it is clearly understood.

3. The story

Whether students are very young or teenagers, they all love to hear stories particularly when they are presented in an interesting way. Observe a professional or popular storyteller for inspiration on how to tell a story. In general, the teacher should feel free to use tools of drama: facial expressions, voice that acts out each character in the story, body language, hand movements, pauses to create suspense, and humor when appropriate. The story should be mostly memorized by the teacher before presentation to the class, so that the teacher has good eye contact with the students. Descriptive embellishments may be added for effect by the teacher, such as a vivid description of the scene, or the physical appearance of a character.

4. Questions after the story

The questions included with each lesson can be modified or substituted to adjust to the ages of the students. Some questions are very simple, to encourage the youngest and shyest students to answer. Encourage all students to participate in answering the questions.

5. Quotation of the Buddha about the moral of the story

The quotation gives the direct teaching from the Buddha for the lesson, and the discussion following it relates the quotation to the students' daily life. One student should be called upon to read the quotation.

It is very important to teach the moral values that children are most lacking. So, the quotation need not reflect the one obvious moral value in the story. For example, in "Devadatta and the Swan," obvious morals of the story are compassion and to abstain from killing or injuring animals. Because most children naturally have compassion for animals, there is little need to address those issues. Therefore, the moral chosen for that lesson is to avoid arguing, given that many youth nowadays tend to argue about the slightest things.

6. Application of the moral in the story to our daily lives

Preaching morals to students does not mean they will practice them. They know generally what they should and should not do, but in their day-to-day lives, they often tend to flow more with popular trends than to go against the flow in favor of higher moral standards. Many pre-teens and adolescents act one way while with their parents or in class, and quite another when only with their peers. Therefore, it is particularly important to discuss the very challenges to maintaining good values that they actually face with their peers. They should be encouraged to bring up these problems so they can be discussed freely in the class. Students prefer to participate in a discussion rather than to be preached at.

However, the discussion should be well moderated by the teacher. It is most effective for the teacher to ask often for the students' responses, opinions, and/or experiences during this segment of the lesson, as it encourages them to think more deeply and more fully absorb the lesson.

The text provided is best used as merely guidance for the teacher, who should supplement or revise as appropriate to reflect the students' ages, needs, and culture.

7. Activity to reinforce the lesson

Children are usually very creative and enjoy expressing themselves in various arts, so role plays, drawing, painting, sculpture, games and puzzles may be included as activities to make the class fun and exciting, and as fun ways to remember what they learned. In general, activities are meant for students to carry the lesson beyond the classroom, perhaps as an artwork for display in their home or at the temple.

If some activities are too advanced for some students in a class with mixed ages, the younger ones may use crayons to draw and color pictures as an alternative.

8. Closing chant

The closing chant is to encourage the practice of loving-kindness. Also, a class should end as a disciplined group, and the closing chant is a method of encouraging this discipline.