

Web Literacy - a Rough Guide for Triratna Chairs

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Introduction

This short document aims to offer Triratna Buddhist Centre Chairs a basic overview of what they need to know about the internet. It won't turn anyone into an expert, but it should enable them to talk to their **webmasters** a bit more fluently. It includes a summary of necessary **jargon**, highlighted in orange, and current projects and resources available in Triratna. It's not always easy to get your head round but once the basics have been learnt it gets easier and easier. You can see it as a **51 Mental Events of the Internet!** There's a more technical exposition on the Triratna Centre support website, written by Satyadarshin - see triratna-centre-support.org/internet-strategy.



History and Trends

The FWBO/Triratna has been on the internet since it (the internet) first appeared, and these days there are a myriad of Triratna-related websites - over 400 by one count, reflecting our diverse and decentralised nature. In general our web presence has been fairly uncoordinated, with most if not all Centres developing their own websites using their own webmasters and not consulting one another either technically or stylistically. Again, this reflects the nature of our particular community. 2011 saw the appearance of thebuddhistcentre.com, where the European Chairs Assembly and FreeBuddhistAudio are collaborating to create a Triratna-wide website which should put us at the cutting edge of the internet for some time to come at least.

Functions of a Website

These days a website (or a web presence - see below for the distinction) is totally indispensable if you want people to find you. However it can be used for a multiplicity of purposes besides advertising, here's a list of some of them -

- Displaying basic information about the Buddhist Centre: who, what, where, etc
- Visibility and Findability
- Communication of the 'feel' of the Centre, including its style, energy and aesthetics
- Map of where you are
- Calendar of what's on
- Diary of what's happening
- Photos of who's who
- News, blog
- Chat group
- On-line bookings for ease of administration
- On-line Payments, ditto
- Automated email replies
- Fundraising
- Links to wider Triratna
- On-line Library eg translations
- Visitor statistics, eg tracking where people who use your site live, plus trends over time

What's going on when you click...

The Perfection of Wisdom sutras could have been written for the Internet! Like everything else, it's void, yet it manifests the appearance of real existence in a most convincing manner - and we certainly go for refuge to it! It relies on a multitude of components all interacting seamlessly to create the illusion: it's worth having at least a little understanding of what's going on when you click a link.

I'll imaginatively step through the process from two points of view, the first of a person who simply wants to look up something on the internet; the second of someone who wants to put something on

the internet for others to see. I'll make a point of using all the relevant jargon, doing my best to define it as I go!

Looking up a website

If you want to use the internet to look up something, the starting point will be you and your computer - or maybe, these days, you and your **mobile device** such as a **tablet** or **smartphone** - which is basically a phone with access to the internet and other goodies such as **GPS** (Global Positioning System) built in. Using your **browser**, a special program for accessing the internet (eg Internet Explorer, Chrome, Firefox etc), you will type in or click on a **hyperlink** (**link** for short). Hyperlinks are a simple but crucial invention which more or less made the internet possible; they are the underlined pieces of text you see in webpages. They contain, as it were underneath the visible text, a clickable link to somewhere else, which allows you to metaphorically 'jump' through **cyberspace** to any other page on the internet. The link is the **web address** of the other webpage, known more properly as its **URL**, or 'Uniform Resource Locator'. The billions of interconnections that have built up through these links has created the **world wide web**, ie the 'www' you see in web addresses. **Surfing** is the process of cruising from link to link in search of what you want. Different websites are more or less easy to **navigate**, and an awful lot of effort goes into improving their **usability**.

Information will flow back and forth using one or another telecommunications channel - very likely telephone-line-based **broadband** (**dial-up** being a thing of the past!) but quite likely the relatively new **mobile broadband** where the signals are transmitted through the air rather like a mobile phone. In this case you'll quite likely be using a **dongle** plugged into your computer; this is effectively a special mobile phone dedicated to connecting computers to the internet using the mobile network.

If you don't know immediately which web page you want, most likely you'll head straight to a **search engine** such as Google (URL www.google.com), type in your **search query**, and get a million results - you'll very likely click on one of the top few. The **ranking** of the results is therefore very important.

Making a Website

Looking at it from the opposite point of view, imagine you or your Buddhist Centre have some stuff - some **content** - that you want displayed on the Internet. You'll need to decide whether you want to establish a simple **website** or a full **web presence** - meaning you're findable in many places on the internet, including **social networks** such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. The latter is the better way to think - basically you need to be easily findable in the places your audience is likely to be looking.

To create a new website you'll need to register a **domain name** such as www.mybuddhistcentre.com and choose a company known as your **ISP** (Internet Service Provider), or **host**, to give you space on a special computer known as a **server**, where the physical files that make up your site actually live. This can be pretty much anywhere in the world - you really don't need to know where. This '**cyber-space**' increasingly known as the **cloud**. Both the domain name and server space will be rented, and will need annual renewal and a small fee paid, though thebuddhistcentre.com team can provide free hosting (ie server space) and managed name renewal

for Triratna-related projects. Commercially, a domain name might cost £10/year and server space £50/year. Both your domain name and server space will come with **passwords**; managing password security is an important part of your overall **risk management**. Lose your password and you've lost your website! Webmasters come and go, your passwords should remain! The server should handle basic tasks like **backup** automatically, however like all conditioned things it is not totally reliable and some **down time** is possible and indeed inevitable.

Once you have a domain name and an ISP you need to set up your **web forwarding service** so your nice new domain name is linked to the computer where the physical files live. This is generally free and involves your domain name being translated into a series of numbers known as an **IP address**, which can then be used by computers to find the actual computer where your files are. Again, thebuddhistcentre.com team can do this for you if you need help getting set up.

Writing a Website

Writing a website involves a multitude of technical decisions, plus the composition of the actual text. These include the **computer programming language** the site is written in, and the basic structure, or **architecture**, of your site. It may for instance include one or more **sub-domains** - these are represented in URLs as a prefix, eg. ecopractice.fwbo.org, ecopractice being a subdomain of the main fwbo.org site. It will also include various pages, which come afterwards eg. thebuddhistcentre.com/news. Sub-domains are more like mini-sites within your main one which can be configured with separate security and styles; pages are more like pages within a magazine.

The text itself must be written with several **web audiences** in mind, both human and non-human. Complete strangers who come across you for the first time need a simple clear introduction to what you offer. Regular visitors need clear signposting within your site to the specific information they are looking for. And...

Search

Very importantly, there are other computers, especially **spiders**, or **robots**, sent out by search engines to systematically **crawl the web**, indexing each and every page they find. It's only once your site has been visited by one of these that you can be found at all by a search engine. The whole field known as **Search Engine Optimisation**, or SEO, is dedicated to making your text appear higher on search engines' listing. Techniques for doing this include anticipating what people will be typing into their search engines (eg, the combination Buddhism+Bristol is more likely than Triratna+Bristol) and including these words prominently in your site; **cross-linking** (or **link exchanges**) where you ask other websites to link to you and for you to link to them; adding **tags** or **tooltips** to your hyperlinks (tooltips being the little explanatory boxes that sometimes appear when you hover over a hyperlink) and making sure the linked text refers in some way to its destination (eg instead of saying "for details of the Vajraloka programme click [here](#)" you'd say "the [Vajraloka program](#) gives details...") Basic maintenance also matters, eg. making sure your **external links** to Triratna sites aren't out of date.

Behind the Scenes

Web pages come in two basic forms, **static pages** and **dynamic pages**. They are generated by the server in very different ways. Static pages are like someone who hands you a pre-printed flyer when you ask them a question; dynamic pages are like a man at an information booth whose reply is put

together specifically for you from information stored in their memory. An example of a dynamic page would be a page from www.thetrainline.co.uk giving you the trains between points A and B on day C subject to conditions D - there are so many possible requests that it could not possible pre-prepare replies to all possible queries. Another would be when you have bought something on-line, where obviously the confirmation screens are unique to you. Dynamic pages obviously require the server to do more work; this would be an example of a **server-side process** as opposed to a **client-side process** where your computer does the work.

Your website will consist of a number of linked files written in one or another **language** such as **HTML, PHP, Perl**, etc - these can be very complex to learn and use but it's probably necessary to employ them on your site if you are to have a unique and customised space for your project.

Getting Started

To make matters easier there are more and more free website-creation **packages** available which you can simply register, tweak and use. Often these are **blogs**, whose original structure was a simple list of **posts**, or diary entries, arranged in reverse chronological order (ie. latest first) like a long scroll. Blogs have now got more sophisticated, with 'pages' as well as posts, and therefore offer a much richer set of possibilities for creating simple websites. Plenty of Triratna sites are built using **Wordpress, Blogger, Blogspot, Drupal, or Joomla** - all of which offer free blogging platforms. thebuddhistcentre.com, for example, is built using Drupal.

More technically, this approach is known as a **content management system** or **CMS**. It requires two separate components: a database which contains all your content - text, images, program info, etc; and a set of '**cascading stylesheets**', or **CSS**, detailing how the contents of the database are to be displayed. There is a rigorous separation of the content and the style, this means the stylesheets can easily be changed to give your entire site a whole new look, and one person without specialised skills can update the content.


Typically, websites will also contain little bits of specialised code on every page to do things like track where your visitors come from - **Google Analytics** is great for this.

Going Mobile

These days more and more people choose to access the web using one or another **mobile device**. In fact people speak of the **mobile web**, which is set to grow and grow. In the US, more than 50% of all web traffic now happens this way! Mobile devices have smaller screens than computers and your site will need a very different layout in order to be useable. If you get a chance, compare Facebook on your computer with Facebook on someone's smartphone to see the difference! A good website needs to contain stylesheets for a variety of devices: when a page is requested there will be a dialogue between the two computers along the lines of "*what kind of screen have you got?*" - "*I'm a smartphone*" - "*ok, here's the smartphone version of the page*". The dialogue can potentially be extended to cover things like language, web browser, etc etc... It is really very fiddly to get a webpage to look good on all browsers and all devices.

Because of the different capabilities of mobile devices when compared to computers (eg mobile screens are generally small and interactions more restrictive (no keyboard or mouse)), one of the best

ways to offer web material through mobile devices is to develop specialised **apps**. This is short for **applications**, small programs running on your mobile designed to display specific content (sometimes hosted on the web, sometimes within the app itself) to best advantage. Unfortunately they are expensive to produce, costing at least as much a new website and often a lot more for complex apps. One way to get round this (at least to some extent) is to develop websites in a format used by apps and compatible with most newer mobile devices. **HTML5** is the most common programming language of this sort for the web and is becoming the new standard as a result.

If you are going for a web presence you will want to be visible on various places on the web. In the interests of efficiency you will want to upload your information in one place and have it automatically copy itself elsewhere. The simplest way to do this is to use **RSS feeds** and an RSS reader. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and is represented by little “” icons - they are a simple but very powerful way to copy information automatically from one place to another. Not surprisingly however this is becoming unpopular with companies like Facebook and they are taking steps to downgrade it in favour of apps written for their own platform. You will therefore also need to be a bit proactive and develop a **web strategy**, getting clear on how you can best use the distinctive features of each web space (your website, your pages on thebuddhistcentre.com, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) in different ways. The dream is for your content to ‘**go viral**’, ie for your readers to find it so compelling they can’t help forwarding to all their friends, and them to theirs and so on ad infinitum... Sadly without a major Buddhist celebrity sex scandal it’s unlikely to happen!

Areas of website work

Quite likely you’ll be feeling pretty pleased if you’ve got someone happy to act as your **webmaster**. Hopefully they will be able to keep your site technically up to date and free from nasty things like **viruses**. However it’s worth bearing in mind that there are a multitude of very different tasks associated with maintaining a good web presence, and not all of them will best be done by your tame geek. Here’s a list of some of the main ones -

Content:

Updating news and images
Updating events
Reviewing and refreshing overall style
Reviewing feedback and non-spam comments across whole web presence
Tracking visitor numbers and trends
Tracking search engine results

Technical :

Updating local software and host software
Updating anti-virus
Trouble-shooting
Reviewing your overall technical solution
SEO
Extending visibility
Checking appearance across different browsers
Repairs as necessary

Triratna Resources and Projects

Here’s some of the resources you should be able to draw on within Triratna.

- The European Chairs Assembly Development Team - try lokabandhu@triratnadevelopment.org
- thebuddhistcentre.com team - try candradasa@thebuddhistcentre.com
- The **webmasters forum** - join at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FWBOWebmasterSupport>
- Free Buddhist Audio - free hosting for Dharma talks.