



SEATTLE INSIGHT MEDITATION SOCIETY

Serving the Northwest Community

Spring 2012

Selfless Practice

by Rodney Smith

Recently at a Buddhist conference a fellow Vipassana teacher asked a group of his peer teachers how they worked with students who had a sudden realization of selflessness. He said he had noticed that a few of his students were so shaken by this revelation that they temporarily lost their ability to function in the world. They could not return to the old view of themselves and felt unable to move their lives forward from the self-emptiness they had discovered. A couple of us responded that this degree of disorientation might be due to how we teach the practice. Perhaps if we taught selflessness from the beginning, students would be expecting this revelation when it did occur and would have a context within which to meet and hold this insight.



This question lies at the heart of a new form of practice that may allow students to meet potentially disorienting realizations with the casualness of more mundane insights. If we are taught from the beginning that an authentic spiritual practice has to go through the door of selflessness to mature, and if we are given sufficient preparation through exercises and investigations that are meant to ripen that understanding, then perhaps even the most profound revelation would have an existing context to season quickly into normalcy.

Skillful teaching attempts to expose the struggles that occur within the false view of separation. As each of us works through the profound difficulties of our isolated position, a revelation often follows that reveals a very different paradigm of interconnection. This new paradigm does not contain an “I” center, and therefore is breathlessly infinite. Once glimpsed, this new paradigm can create disorientation as we attempt to fit the new view into our old life. But if the teaching has been encouraging an integration of a few key factors of this new paradigm all along the way, I have found this disruption to be minimal.

Essential to this undertaking is to keep the Buddha’s teaching very simple so that the mind does not create a complex terrain to navigate. The teaching is pared down to the essential continuum

of struggle and the ending of struggle—and all activities are gauged by their place along this continuum. We begin to notice that as we struggle less, there is an accompanying feeling of greater space (less “me”), and as we struggle more, there arises a contracted sense of “I, me, and mine.” At this point we are beginning to understand selflessness as equivalent to space that is the same as non-struggle.

**This journey is a journey of
the heart, and the heart is
quiet serenity.**

Next we very gently reconfigure our life in terms of interconnection, even though we have not fully realized this truth. We do this in a number of ways: first we learn to embrace all experiences regardless of their emotional appeal, we re-own our projections through radical accountability, we question the truth of our narrative that infuses each object with ownership, and finally we validate the space around the content rather than the content itself. Practicing each of these begins to prepare us for the full impact of the new paradigm even as we dwell predominantly in the old.

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President's Message

by Linda Taggart

Many of you have read the SIMS history we posted on our website last year. (For those who haven't yet seen it, the PDF can be found on the "Who We Are" page under the "About" tab.) From my behind-the-scenes view of our large and very busy sangha, it is striking to me that SIMS's roots go back to a small group of dharma students who invested in "a vision and a hope." Their determination and energy eventually led them to Rodney and the formation of SIMS, an effort that has touched many people's lives.

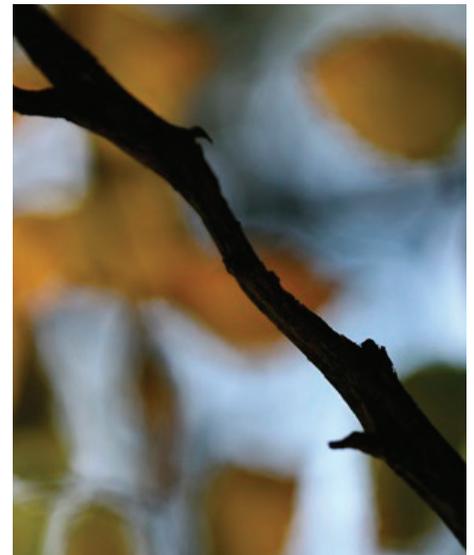
Now, twenty years later, SIMS has grown and changed, but its core organizational strength continues to be the generosity of its members. All of our activities are planned and executed by volunteers and it is incredibly nourishing and supportive for me to work with people who help in so many different ways.

We're seeing more classes and events than ever within the sangha. In the past three years, Rodney and the local dharma leaders (LDLs) have significantly increased the number of beginning meditation classes each year from four to ten, bringing the dharma to hundreds of new students. The LDL group also teaches four post-beginning classes annually, plus many of them teach several other dharma-related classes during the year. Rodney has invited seven different teachers to teach

nonresidential retreats this year (up from six in 2011), furthering SIMS's mission of bringing distinguished teachers to the Puget Sound region. In addition to hosting dharma classes, SIMS offers members a variety of kalyana mitta groups, neighborhood sitting groups, and special interest groups—another way the sangha continues to build community. SIMS also sponsors several social engagement projects per year.

Of course, with lots of classes, events, and participants comes lots of work. Eight board members, Rodney, and I try to make sure that all the myriad of details are attended to, but we're just a small part of the effort. It literally takes hundreds of volunteers and hours every year to support the diverse and dynamic organization SIMS has become. Through the generosity of many, venues are reserved; teachers are transported and housed; classes are scheduled and taught; calendars, newsletters, and monthly emails are accurate and timely; Tuesday-night sits, classes, retreats, and kalyana mitta groups are running smoothly; and so much more. We also have volunteers who maintain our website, manage our database, keep the books straight and the bills paid, analyze our finances and insurance needs, upload talks and videos, answer phones, pick up mail...and the list goes on and on.

I know I speak for many when I relay my heartfelt gratitude to those of you who contribute so much. It is because of our sangha that the legacy of a few with "a vision and a hope" continues on with strength and vitality.



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Dancing with Life and Death

by Joyce Michelson

Our KM group began as a spiritual book group prompted by a desire to study Phillip Moffitt's *Dancing with Life*. The four of us came together to learn from each other, as well as from Phillip Moffitt. We were ready to roll up our sleeves and wrestle with the dharma.

Krista was the founder of our group, affectionately nicknamed "The Muppets"—a takeoff on "Moffitt"—by the grown daughters of another of our members, Parker. Our fourth member was Kathleen, a retired teacher and SIMS sangha member who had been very close to Krista's son. Kathleen had recently been diagnosed with a rare form of heart cancer and had been given a prognosis of six months to live.

As our discussions gradually moved from dharma philosophy to personal experience, we began to disclose more guarded facets of our lives. The urgency of Kathleen's situation began to set the tone of our discussions. The job dilemmas, relationship changes with newly adult children, and marital

challenges paled in comparison to Kathleen's progressing illness. We were motivated to find the essence of each drama we exposed, and what surprised me greatly was that Kathleen remained so interested in *our* lives and helping us see through illusion.

Kathleen always looked beautiful in her stylish headwear made of antique kimono material. She was amazingly upbeat, while courageously facing her sickness squarely in the face. There was no cover-up here—she was going to live life to the fullest to the very end.

Kathleen wanted to know the truth about existence right now—what *really* is the absolute? The immediacy of her situation evoked the most in-depth explorations, to the best of our abilities, of consciousness, awareness, and the realm of the absolute. We went beyond skillful means, as there was no time for anything less than a full-on facing of the truth.

As Kathleen's condition worsened, and one after another experimental

medicine and procedure failed to arrest the spread of the cancer, Kathleen came to our meetings with her breathing apparatus. She continued to come even when she could go nowhere else. The effect this had on the rest of us was felt very deeply. She said these heartfelt explorations meant the world to her. We all felt this way.

When our dear friend came no more, Krista lovingly placed a paper heart in her empty chair, a symbol of our loss and our wonder. Where was she now? Gone into the nameless mystery that she so fervently sought to identify. Her spirit seems to live on in our intense discussions and devotion to finding truth. Our deaths seem more real now, and the temporary, changing nature of our experience is more obvious.

To this day we keep a heart in her place, which sets the tone of our meetings—kindness, sincerity, and deep questioning.

The Power of the Brahmaviharas

by Tuere Sala

Sometimes it shocks me how much of an advocate I am towards the Brahmavihara practices. The Brahmaviharas, sometimes called the divine abidings, are lovingkindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic or appreciative joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). The practices are a series of phrases designed to cultivate conditions that awaken the heart. For many years of practice I could not see any value in saying the phrases. I thought of them as nothing

more than repetitive affirmations. I would say the words while thinking "what is the point of this"; "I hate this"; "this is stupid." I was looking for a deeper, more meaningful mediation. The Brahmavihara phrases seemed superficial, so I thought they were not "real" meditation. All that changed for me during a seven-day retreat.

This was not my first retreat, but it was the first time I experienced a retreat with difficult emotions, thinking,

and images. I spent the first two days struggling through each meditation and walking period. I kept telling myself to go home, but I would not. I just kept showing up for each sit no matter how difficult. I used the walking periods to let go of any residual tension and start again at the next sit. On the third day at lunch I began to notice how connected I was to everyone in the dining hall. I felt the kindness of people I had

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Embrace Guatemala

by Janet Lockwood

SIMS sponsors several social outreach projects each year. Embrace Guatemala was brought to the sangha by Janet and Jerry Lockwood—here Janet relates the organization’s background. To learn more about the sangha’s projects, visit “[Social Outreach](#)” on the site.

In 2006 when my husband, Jerry, and I were at a yoga retreat in Guatemala, we met with Brian Stipek, an old friend and former co-worker. Since 1999 he has been helping Guatemala’s indigenous children and families find a better life. Brian lives and works with the local families in and around Nebaj, a small town in the Guatemalan highlands.

Guatemala has the second-highest poverty rate in the Western Hemisphere and has a centuries-long history of discrimination toward indigenous populations. In 2006 Brian formed Embrace Guatemala to assist Guatemala’s poor in various ways: building fuel-efficient wood-burning stoves; building kitchens and homes; providing student financial aid; teaching math and English classes in schools; providing schools with books

and students with school supplies; leading children/youth on field trips; delivering used shoes and boots from the U.S.; and purchasing medicine, food, clothing, and blankets for families living in extreme poverty.

The majority of Embrace Guatemala’s projects focus on education. Currently, more than 110 students in high school, junior high, and grade school are being assisted with tuition, uniforms, and supplies. In the past year one new school project was completed, an additional classroom was added to an overcrowded school, a large school playground was paved, and a village was helped to buy land for a junior high and computer center. Two junior highs and an elementary school were given 26 computers. In addition to teaching, Brian leads children on outings and directs a children’s choir that has traveled to several festivals beyond Nebaj, broadening the horizons and boosting the self-esteem of the youth.

One of the projects Brian has been working with since arriving in Guatemala is building cooking stoves. Traditionally cooking is done using a

campfire method, which leads to smoke-filled kitchens. The new cement block stoves use a stovepipe to vent smoke outside and cut firewood consumption in half. This allows families to save time collecting firewood, helps save the forests, and reduces fire-related injuries. In the past seven years, Brian has provided families with over nine hundred stoves.

All of the contributions to Embrace Guatemala go toward these projects. Simple building supplies and local labor are used, and families share in the costs to the extent possible. Brian pays all of his own expenses; the projects described above were accomplished with a budget of just \$47,000 in the year ending June 2011.

Embrace Guatemala is a small group, directed mainly by Brian’s efforts. But the changes brought about by donors’ generosity are many. We’re grateful for the sangha’s support and would ask those interested in Embrace Guatemala to check the SIMS site for more information.



Practice Corner

with Rodney Smith

Question: Does meditation still work when you get older?



Response: Many of us started meditating when we were young, filled with all the energy and enthusiasm of youth, but to think that the benefits of practice only apply to that age is a misunderstanding. I think it may be true that the benefits are most easily experienced by the “young at heart,” that is, if getting older means we become mentally fixed and defined within our opinions

and self-images. Discouragement does not have to accompany the spiritual adventure even when the aging process means compromised physical activity and mental acuity if we remember that letting go does not require vitality or preparation. We let go of our conditioning, the past’s influence on the present, and the aging reminder of what we have always been and done. We let go into the heart of wonder and amazement of what is eternally here, fresh, and alive.

If asked how old we are mentally, many of us would respond with a number younger than our chronological age. Except for the inevitability of memory lapses, in many ways our minds seem perpetually the same age or even ageless as we mature. On a recent PBS series entitled *Secret Life of the Brain* the point was made that the brain can rewire itself and can be

harnessed to enhance our skills and recover lost functions *throughout our life*. The secret is in keeping the mind open to new possibilities and learning within new circumstances.

Once after a lecture someone asked Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, the famous abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, “Why do we meditate?” He answered, “So you can enjoy your old age.” Suzuki Roshi seemed to be pointing to the accumulative effects of meditation on mental flexibility. Meditation keeps uprooting fixations so that the mind learns to live lithely with elasticity and ease. A pliable mind is an ageless mind, still curious and interested in learning. Whatever our chronological age, we can still ask questions and probe the mysteries of life, and from that perspective, what else can life do but keep us young at heart.

(Selfless Practice, continued from first page)

After a threshold of steadiness is obtained, often through strong volitional effort, allowing our attention to stay on an object, we begin to question the value and limitation of our will on our spiritual journey. We begin to understand that as we try harder there is greater struggle (and more “me”) and as we relax and surrender there is less inward tension (and less of a sense-of-self). Wise effort is the ongoing monitoring of this relationship and adjusting our practice accordingly.

This journey is a journey of the heart, and the heart is quiet serenity. The heart does not create struggle by overcoming

problems but by assimilating them within the ease of well-being. Finally we hone our intention so that we feel the urge toward non-separation by discovering the benefits of an undivided mind while seeing the limitations of pursuing individual objects.

Each of these issues needs to be fleshed out much more, but the point here is to demonstrate there is practice that is in alliance with the freedom pointed to by the Buddha as long as it is aligned with the paradigm of selflessness. We back our way in to freedom by encouraging an orientation to practice that has the end accessible in the beginning.

Dropping Keys

The small man
Builds cages
For anyone he knows.
While the sage
Who has to duck his head
When the moon is low
Keeps dropping keys
All night long
For the beautiful
Rowdy
Prisoners.

–Hafiz

The Gift of Dana

by Linda Tennant

For over a hundred generations now since the Buddha's time, the dharma—the truth of suffering and the end of suffering—has been passed from teacher to student. This transmission has occurred through the generous giving and grateful receiving of the teachings by countless practitioners, year after year. My appreciation for this system of reliance on dana (generosity) has grown as I've seen how it deepens my practice, and how it expresses and nourishes our sense of interconnection.

Dana is a quality of the heart of the sangha. When we are offered an opportunity to give—whether it's a basket in the back of the dharma hall, an icon to click on the sangha website, or a volunteer opportunity—we are being offered the opportunity to step into a stream of generosity and trust that has

carried the dharma from human heart to human heart, through the generations.

For the teachers who rely entirely on dana for their livelihood, imagine the surrender, the trust required to make the commitment to show up, give freely, receive what is given, and allow themselves to be supported—without guarantees. And when we, the recipients of their generosity, are invited to give, no one is ever going to tell us how much is appropriate, and no one else knows how much we give. We are entirely accountable to ourselves. We are left, every time, to look into our own hearts, make discerning decisions about what we can wisely give, and open to what's going on in the heart in those moments when generosity and wisdom do not prevail, or when there is anxiety about “getting it right.”

With our dana, we support those who are offering the teachings today; we nourish our own experience of generosity, appreciation, and gratitude; and we make these teachings available to other students. In this way, we all participate in the web of generosity that sustains the sangha. What a gift.

To explore SIMS volunteer opportunities or to make a donation, visit “[Ways to Give](#)” on the SIMS website.



(Brahmaviharas, continued from page 3)

never spoken to and most I didn't even know. I carried that sense of connection and care into the sitting after lunch and when the sadness came I held it with that same kindness. Holding my difficulties rather than struggling with them to go away enabled me to see the pain I had been carrying around with me my entire adult life. I felt compassion for all that I had lived through and realized that I was feeling empowered, not pity. As I became stronger and more centered I stopped judging every experience as good or bad. I stopped labeling each emotion or thought. I just sat and watched whatever arose and watched as it faded away. At the evening talk, hearing the dharma, I was overcome with gratitude that I had the opportunity to be at that retreat. I appreciated that I could look into suffering with compassion rather than running from it with fear.

The insight of that retreat hit me about a week after I returned home while I was walking to work in the early morning hours. It hit me with such clarity that I had to stop walking and just feel the joy that was arising. I realized that the Brahmavihara practices were not just some sidebar practice we do once in a while. The Brahmaviharas were the power behind all practice. When I became connected in the dining hall, I was abiding in lovingkindness. I was no longer in my head—I was in my heart and the whole of the practice was open to me. The power of compassion and equanimity provided the strength for me to look deeply into pain I never wanted to see. In fact, I never could have looked at what arose but for the divine abiding of lovingkindness, compassion, and equanimity. Even the experience of joy supported me throughout the rest of the retreat to continue to look at what was arising with more and more subtlety.

Standing silently in the middle of the sidewalk I understood that it was the Brahmaviharas that brought the dharma to life and made a deeper meditation possible for me. I had mostly been driven by my thoughts, judgments, and opinions. I was leery of my heart and thought I could better shield myself from pain and harm by protecting the heart. In truth, I found it was the heart that provided my greatest protection. I saw for myself that the heart can hold all things and knows the rightness of all action. Cultivating the Brahmaviharas enables me to become more and more comfortable with the power and understanding of the heart. Now when I say the phrases I make sure I am connected to the heart, knowing that what I say could be the source of liberation for me and all sentient beings. May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you live with joy.