

Social Outreach

by Rodney Smith

The theme of connection runs throughout the Buddha's teaching. In meditation practice we learn to connect with our inward world of thoughts and feelings understanding them not from a sense of me or mine but as the natural expressions of mind. Relaxing with this inward process allows space around our outward divisions. The heart comes into play and we have an expanded sense of oneness and integration. Actions from this view have the intention to heal all forms of division and separation. This is the realm of service work and engaged Buddhism. Service work, briefly defined, is engagement among equals for the betterment of all concerned.

One of the missions of S.I.M.S. as stated in its original charter is to provide community outreach – service within our community. Social outreach is the culmination of a mature spiritual understanding that sees all things as worthy of contact and connection. The meditator assumes responsibility for anything that disrupts that understanding and works towards reconnecting. No one and no thing is left out of our hearts. This task is not easy, but that is the life work of the Buddhist practitioner.

S.I.M.S. would be remiss in its responsibility if it did not foster a greater sense of community integration among meditators (sangha) and among residence of greater Seattle and the world at large. We do not have lofty ideals of how we can help. We have no expectation of saving humanity with our practices or interest in transforming Seattle into a Buddhist revival. That only creates more division. We are interested in the single individual or group who invites us to service and in healing ourselves to that work as it is performed.

Some of the opportunities that we have had in recent months to respond to the communities include an invitation by the VA Hospital and Hospice of Seattle to host a six-week beginning meditation class. The VA course consisted of 15 people who formed their own sitting group once the course was completed. I am following up with monthly visits and dharma talks to encourage its continuation. In May the Oregon State Penitentiary offered to host a day event between myself and the

hospice inmate team in the morning and the Buddhist inmate group in the afternoon. The chaplain in the prison had noticed that as the inmates spent more time serving other dying inmates, they not only became model prisoners themselves but were also transformed in heart and mind. I was struck by the inmate's degree of sincerity and focus. There was little wavering. They knew what they needed to survive within and outside the prison walls. In the same vein I was offered another invitation to lead a meditation group at the Monroe Corrections Facility but because of time limitation passed it along to senior sangha members.

The monthly "Insight into Death and Dying" classes which begin in October have social outreach as one of its objectives. Most of the participants will also be volunteers for local hospices. During this series we will tie into the class structure not only the insights gleaned from working with the dying but also the challenges of service work in general.

Another challenging event that took place in April was a day long in Everett, WA for people in twelve step programs. I learned an enormous respect for people who have passed through such severe life challenges that they know the bottom rung of despair. When you have been to ground level, you cannot be shaken or diverted. From this group a regular meditation group is now forming around Ken Brandon, a senior student and twelve-step sponsor.

In April Kim Bush and I held a teen meditation class. Even though only four teens attended, we all felt rewarded by the experience. Kim is training at IMS in Barre, Massachusetts this summer with their teen program. With his input we hope to enlarge our teen events in 2001.

I can envision SIMS taking more of a lead in other social outreach actions. Perhaps as a sangha we will want to sponsor a homeless shelter or combine forces behind another socially conscious project that further unites the community. The possibilities are limited only by our ideas.

I should note that most of these events provided little if any dana for the teaching. They were not chosen with reimbursement in mind. The mission of S.I.M.S. has always been to respond to need and cast our financial fate to the greater sangha.

Your regular contributions to SIMS and its teachers allow these gatherings to continue. Your dana not only supports the immediate class, daylong, or retreat but carries the means for the continuation of other services as well. Thank you for all you have given.

May all beings be free of pain.