



SIMS and Teens: A Coming of Age

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SIMS Teen Meditation Classes

Fifteen years ago, Kim Bush (a long-time meditator and early SIMS board member who has since passed away) returned to Seattle from a teen event at IMS excited about the possibilities for SIMS to reach teens. The SIMS introductory teen meditation classes soon followed. Rodney taught the classes for the first five years, succeeded by Rosie Schwartz. When Rosie “retired” in 2012, Krista Harris took over. The series of four classes is now offered twice a year.

For Krista, it has been a joyful challenge to create and revise the curriculum for this class. “What ideas and practices are most important to teach teens in four 90-minute classes?” is a fascinating question for her. Krista has based the curriculum on teachings by Rodney and other Insight Meditation teachers, books about mindfulness for teens, her own experiences as a staff volunteer at the 2012 Teen Mindfulness Retreat sponsored by Inward Bound Mindfulness Education (see below), and a four-day teen-teacher training presented by the UK’s Mindfulness in Schools Project. Says Krista, “My practice has definitely matured and deepened by working with teens. I am incredibly grateful to have this opportunity.”

The teens who have participated in the class are grateful too. According to one participant’s comments about the experience, “In just 4 weeks, you have taught me techniques that I will probably use for the rest of my life. As someone who has struggled with anxiety and panic attacks for a number of years, I can truly say that the meditation class has eliminated nearly all of it.” Another participant wrote, “I feel like my life is slipping away from me. Learning to meditate has really helped me to come back to the moment.” (For more comments, go to the bottom of this article.)

SIMS and iBme Retreats

In 2012, SIMS member Diane Hetrick encouraged Inward Bound Mindfulness Education (“iBme”) to hold one of their Teen Mindfulness Meditation Retreats in the Pacific Northwest. iBme had built on the teen retreats started years ago by Vipassana teachers Michele McDonald and Steve Smith and had been successfully offering teen mindfulness retreats around the country. Several SIMS sangha members volunteered as staff at the summer retreats at Cloud Mountain in 2012 and 2013 (Krista Harris, Andrea Bakke and Sooz Appel), and Local Dharma Leader Keri Pederson served as one of the teachers for the first teen retreat. This year, the retreat will be held at a retreat center near Long Beach, Washington. Krista Harris and Sooz Appel will continue on the staff and are being joined by Chris Charles, who has been one of the adult leaders of the Teen Mindfulness Circle. (For information about iBme teen retreats, including this one, go to www.ibme.info/retreats/teens.)

Coming Full Circle

At the end of last summer’s iBme Teen Retreat, Sooz Appel was encouraged by teens from Seattle to organize a weekly sitting and practice-support group. Over the fall, others from SIMS joined the adult

leadership team. iBme teacher Shelby Leigh and SIMS Local Dharma Leader Rachel Fiala provided training for the leaders. Circle leaders also worked with Krista to develop a curriculum and ensure that the Circle would be a smooth transition from, and would complement, the introductory class. The team continued to adjust the curriculum based on input from teens about what was important for their practice and lives.

The Circle had its inaugural meeting January 13th of this year and met every Monday before breaking for the summer on June 9. Some of the teens who attend are “alumni” from one of the iBme retreats, some of whom brought friends; others came from Krista’s intro class in March; and others have found their way by word of mouth. The Circle meets in the shop of a wholesale coffee-roasting company. The setting is “funky,” with partially finished spaces and the lovely residual aroma of coffee, but it also provides an intimate space for a small group of 6-10.

As they look toward next fall, the leaders will discuss ways to make the Circle more valuable. Some examples that teens have already raised are more guided meditations (perhaps providing recorded guided meditations to use at home), more discussion specifically directed at dealing with stresses at school, and “how to get better sleep the night before a test instead of lying in bed worrying.”

The Circle is looking for more SIMS members, especially those in their 20s and 30s, to join the leadership team next fall. Several high schools are interested in what SIMS is doing, and one high school in West Seattle would like a teen class and perhaps another Circle in their neighborhood. With interest high, the group is excited about continuing to spread the dharma to and support local teens

The Results: Feedback from Teens Participating in the Winter 2013 Intro Class

One of the things that stands out most in listening to these teens is how driven and pressurized their young lives are, and how much they can benefit from the practice. Here are some of the comments provided by participants after the four-week class last winter:

“The mindfulness meditation class helped me learn to cope better with stress and pressure that I feel sometimes in the sports that I do. Also, as you pointed out in class our lives are very busy and sometimes I feel like my life is slipping away from me. Learning to meditate has really helped me to come back to the moment and live more in the moment.”

“Thank you for all you have taught us! In just 4 weeks, you have taught me techniques that I will probably use for the rest of my life. As someone who has struggled with anxiety and panic attacks for a number of years, I can truly say that the meditation class has eliminated nearly all of it. I haven’t experienced a panic attack in the past month and every time I’ve felt anxious, the feet/seat/breathe has helped immensely. I can’t even begin to thank you for all you have done.”

“I actually ordered the books you recommended (both the Power of Now and the Eight Week guide one!) because I want to continue being mindful to decrease the stress in my hectic life. Your techniques were really useful for the SAT (calming myself down before the test and the feet/seat/breathe during the test) and I’m actually going to set aside time (during my 10 minute breaks between studying) to meditate and just breathe so I’m not as tense and anxious. When I’m in a panicky mood (I was today because SAT scores come out tomorrow ahh!) I just imagine my thoughts like traffic (when I’m stressed there is a huge traffic jam and thoughts get stuck in my brain) so I try and decrease the traffic by letting the cars zoom by and tell myself that I can come back to that stressful thought later. Thanks so much for having these sessions. They were really helpful and a fun way to learn meditation.”

“I really appreciated the class and I would recommend it to other people who are interested in taking a meditation class. Some of my favorite parts were the body scan at the end of each class and the shocking ball exercise. I have so many favorite parts that it would take a long time to say all of them. I think that this skill is really important and I can use this in my life when I get stressed out about my homework. I bet a lot of teens feel the same way I do about homework and it would help them to learn a new skill to help them relax. Thank you so much for the great time and the class.”

“I thought the class was very useful and interesting. Now I am starting to meditate a lot more than before and am trying to start a routine of doing it every morning. I am going to try to go to the Teen Retreat. It seems like an excellent idea! This meditation method is also extremely helpful when doing Wing Chun.”

“The Teen Mindfulness Meditation class has been a wonderful experience for me. I have been able to attend three class series and they continue to change and teach me new things. The first class series I went to was the first time I had ever meditated and I immediately knew I wanted to continue. Although I have a mind that is often very hard to slow down and meditate with, through the support of the teachers and other teens in the class I have been able to notice growth and have gotten a lot better at meditating. I know that this is a skill I will be able to use throughout my life and I am very thankful to have had this opportunity to learn about mindfulness! During my regular school day, I have noticed myself being more aware and enjoying the simple things in life more often and more fully. Thank you for this opportunity!”

After class, a grateful parent exclaimed, “This class is so wonderful! My son is noticing things he never used to be aware of. Tonight he was pointing out the full moon and the stars in the sky and wanted to make sure I noticed them. Thank you so much!”

The Results: Feedback from Teens Participating in the Weekly Circle in 2014

“My school is extremely stressful and sometimes I’m so stressed I can’t even do my homework. Meditation has really helped with that. ... it’s been really helpful to just analyze the thoughts that go on in my head. Like often times now I think, ‘Is that a helpful thought?’ whenever I’m thinking things like, ‘I’m going to fail’ or other negative things.”

In response to question, “Has there been any carry over into your everyday life?” participants answered:

“Absolutely. Attending these circles has been a great reminder to keep a clear mind and to stay calm.”

“Yes, I definitely feel more mindful in my daily life and this class has helped me carry my meditation practice.”

“Yes, I feel a lot more mindful of my feelings and actions I feel everyday. I also find any opportunity to be generous.”

In response to the question, “What was helpful?” participants answered:

“I loved this. I really liked coming to a group where I could tell how I was feeling and just not feel pressure to say anything.”

“It was a safe environment to share personal topics and get advice back.”

“It was a nice reality check for me. It reminded me to be aware and respect myself and my mind more. Helped me learn about myself.”