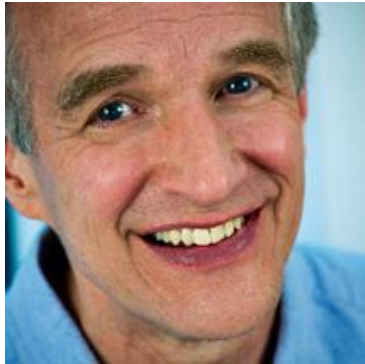




Celebrating Rodney

Miles Yanick



Last month sangha members honored Rodney Smith as he “retired” from his regular teaching role after more than 20 years. The event, held at the SIMS Center, brought together hundreds of sangha members, past and present, from among the thousands of people around the country—and the world—whose lives Rodney had touched over his 30-year teaching career.

But the event was not just a celebration of Rodney or his career: it was a reunion of friends, many of whom had not seen each other for years. And the reflections and thanks given in their formal remarks became a collective telling of the story of an organization—recounting its origin, tracing its history, and pointing to its future.

The program began with the future, as Tim Geil and Tuere Sala shared what Rodney had meant to them as practitioners and what they have taken with them from his teachings into their new roles as SIMS’s co-guiding teachers. As Tuere expressed, “A teacher who is steeped in the dharma can help you go to places you would not go. So Rodney was... my guide; we went into some very dark places together and he would help me turn the light on.” To support one person like her was special, “[b]ut when you support hundreds of people to face the kinds of things that many of us have faced, it is the kind of far-reaching generosity that the Buddha set out 2500 years ago to have us do.”

Next, past board president Linda Taggart traced the first part of Rodney’s spiritual path, from Ohio in the 1970s to his arrival in Seattle in 1992. Rodney was first “hooked” when, by chance, he attended a Ram Dass event and read Dass’s then-popular book, *Be Here Now*. Before long, Rodney left his home in Cincinnati for a two-and-a-half-year self-retreat at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts, where he stayed on as a staff member afterwards.

In 1979, Rodney left IMS and went to Burma, where he was ordained as a monk by the renowned Mahasi Sayadaw. From there, he travelled to India to study with Nisargadatta Maharaj, whose sincere but irascible manner made a lasting impression on him. As Rodney explains, “It seems that throughout my spiritual journey I am forever being scolded, dismissed, or ridiculed. In retrospect it was because I was stubborn and there was no gentle way to crack me open.”

Rodney eventually found his way to the forest monastery of Wat Suan Mok in Thailand, where he studied with Ajahn Buddhadasa for the next three years. After further travels and practice in

India and England, Rodney disrobed and returned to IMS. Says Rodney about this time, “Like most people it took many years for that latent potential, which lies in all of us, to arise on its own in me.”

It was at IMS that Rodney met his wife, Ellen, whose “natural kindness, sensitivity, and compassion” he describes as “authentic models for us all.” The two soon left IMS again and moved to Houston, where Rodney began a career in hospice care. It was there 1985 that Rodney first started teaching, at the request of his teachers.

At this point in the story, Rosie Schwartz, the next speaker at the event, took over from Linda describing how Rodney and Ellen found themselves living in Seattle, where Rodney was continuing his hospice career. Rosie spoke of how she and a small group practicing together in Seattle attended a retreat at Cloud Mountain with Steve Armstrong. At the retreat, Steve told each of them separately that there was a new teacher in town, Rodney Smith, and that they should reach out to him. So they called Rodney and invited him to one of their meetings—and he came.

At that small gathering 25 years ago, it was agreed that Rodney would work with the group as their teacher. Five years later, Rosie, together with Chris and Evan Prenowitz, made a bigger request: they asked Rodney to quit his hospice job and become the full-time guiding teacher of their fledgling spiritual organization. Eventually he did that too. And together these eight dedicated people, including Rodney and Ellen, with the hard labor of love, created SIMS. As Rosie described it, the work was demanding but “so intimate, and we all cared about it so much.”

The next speaker, SIMS’s first board president Evan Prenowitz, acknowledged the many volunteers over the years that had brought SIMS through to the current day. As Evan explained, the original intent of SIMS was not just to offer the dharma but also to create a community. Keeping SIMS a volunteer-run organization has been central to its success in honoring that intention. The shared commitment, embodied in work, has been one of the organization’s great resources.

Sooz Appel, SIMS’s third president, spoke next. She talked about Rodney’s “quiet achievements.” His laughter—at himself, at us, at our culture, encouraging us not to take things so seriously. His showing up, week after week, year after year, for so many years. His faith—to leave his job and dedicate himself to teaching. His commitment to lay life—the encouragement to find freedom there in the day-to-day, sincere practice. And his quirkiness—those penchants, predilections, and piques that make us human.

The last presenter, Krista Harris, didn’t speak—not in words. Krista is the founder of Interplay Seattle, an organization dedicated to the expression of mind, body, and spirit in dance forms. She performed a dance she titled *The Continuum: The Journey from Noise to Quiet*. With graceful movements that evoked deep emotion, Krista expressed the Buddhist path toward peace and liberation.

Finally, Joyce Michelson, SIMS’s eighth and most recent past-president, presented Rodney and Ellen with gifts, including a Road Scholar trip, to help “enlighten” this next phase of their life. As

Ellen remarked modestly, “We haven’t been frequent in taking holidays.” Then past-president Phil Crean and his wife, Cora Edmonds—donors of the SIMS Center—presented a plaque to go on the wall next to a photo of Rodney and a quote from him: “We return to the nothing we are through love.”

Sitting up on the stage and witnessing all this, Rodney, “seeing no purpose in checking [his] emotions,” was visibly moved to tears. “Thank you,” he said, “Deepest appreciation.” But, he said, the importance of these 25 years was slightly misplaced if focused on him: it was really the 25th coming together of the sangha. “It is from that central fact that we all have grown together for many, many years—and that I wish to appreciate tonight.”

As for what’s next, Rodney described retirement as just the turning of the wheel—the next phase. He confessed not to know what he would do next. And he wanted it that way—to be able to wake up each morning with no forced timeline and no specific agenda and see what happens. “I don’t know what that looks like,” he said, “but I look forward to that journey.... There is a new vista available to me.”

Rodney again thanked the many people who had brought SIMS to life and sustained it over the years—from the original board to past presidents and board members to SIMS’s current president, Barbara Erwine. “When I look out here and I’ve seen you sit there, as I have for so many years—attentive and supportive, I just... “ he bowed. After a moment of stillness, Rodney could not resist offering a final bit of dharma wisdom, a familiar theme and words at the core of his teaching: “Remember how close this quiet is, this stillness. Let us commit to never putting any distance between ourselves and this stillness, and let it nourish whatever phase of life we are in, and let the open-heartedness that comes through that stillness fully engage in whatever way feels like the right form and presentation of that engagement. These are difficult times. It needs our heart, and it needs our stillness.”

After the formal presentations ended people visited, shared stories and reflections, and reconnected with dharma friends from years past. There was abundant food and drink, including birthday cake (it was Rodney’s 70th.) A projector in the corner played a slide show: Rodney as a Boy Scout in Ohio, later with IMS staff in the 1970s, as monk, head-shaved and robed, and then with the many people who had been his community during the last 25 years with SIMS. (View the [slideshow](#) and [photos](#) taken at the event.)

As I watched the slides of the sangha gathered in Bloedell Hall below St. Marks, seeing myself in one of them, I was transported back to those heady days of having just discovered the dharma, this teacher, and this community. I felt such gratitude for having walked through those doors and found them all—as if waiting there—available to change my life entirely, from the inside out. Gratitude and a sweet, nostalgic sadness—that was 10 years ago now, and, of course, everything had changed. Now we were saying goodbye.

But as Rodney had remarked earlier, “You don’t leave the sangha: you leave it in good hands, which is what we have done.”

There are many “good hands” that now hold the sangha and will shape its future. SIMS continues

to meet for its weekly dharma sit every Tuesday evening and hosts multiple additional events each month, ranging from quiet morning sits to talks from world-renowned Buddhist teachers that fill the Center. As SIMS continues its mission of offering the Buddha's teachings on insight and awareness to all those who seek them, it carries forward Rodney's legacy and the hard work and dedication of the sangha members who have supported it through the years.

For links to the recordings of talks at this event, other dharma talks by Rodney Smith and more information about Seattle Insight Meditation Society, please see the SIMS website at: www.seattleinsight.org.