



## Vermont Insight Meditation Center 2016 Annual Report

Susan Dreyer-Leon, President; Claire Stanley, Guiding Teacher; Doug Wessel, Treasurer; Paula Swenson, Secretary; Alison Taylor, Board member; Petria Mitchell, Board member; Jeff Bower, Board member

### **The Wheel of the Dharma Keeps Turning at Vermont Insight Meditation Center—Guiding Teacher Report**

Steady as she goes would be a way to characterize 2016 at Vermont Insight Meditation Center. In our Eleventh Year as a non-residential Insight Meditation Center, the Sangha and the Dharma continued to grow, deepen, and strengthen. Some of the other affiliated Insight Meditation Centers around the country have begun to say that “The next Buddha is Sangha.” While no one can confirm Buddhahood among us, there is a continuing strength and compassion that is obvious to anyone who attends our offerings, whether it is a Sunday morning teaching, an evening course, a morning sitting with Practice Leaders, a daylong with a Visiting Teacher, or a Friday Night Sangha sitting.

A newcomer to Vermont Insight just remarked to me that in addition to our clear Dharma offerings, it was also evident that our sangha was welcoming. This is a person who has meditated in many centers in the country and who finds the congenial atmosphere of our Center to be both inviting and engaging.

While the Vision and Mission were written eleven years ago, and then revised six years ago, they remain at the core of our intentions and the choices we make when considering our offerings. Here, for all of us to remember, is the deepest intention we hold at VIMC:

#### VISION STATEMENT (statement of purpose)

Vermont Insight Meditation Center is a Buddhist spiritual center dedicated to the study and practice of Vipassana (Insight meditation) and committed to the possibility of liberation for all beings. The center supports and encourages the development of community based upon the ideals, teachings, and practices in the tradition of Theravada Buddhism.

#### MISSION STATEMENT

Vermont Insight Meditation Center (Vermont Insight) is a spiritual center and place of refuge dedicated to the study and practice Vipassana (Insight meditation)

according to the Theravadan Buddhist lineage. Vermont Insight provides optimal conditions for practice in the context of daily life where members can meditate and study Buddhist teachings in their local community. Opportunities for practice vary from weekly sitting groups to daylong or weekend retreats, from weekly study courses to extensive study formats, from programs for adults to programs for children and young adults. Periodically, there are also invited guest speakers or retreat leaders from Insight Meditation Society from Barre, Massachusetts or other Buddhist centers in the United States. Wise and sustainable fiscal management of Vermont Insight allows all people access to the teachings.

May we all continue to hold our Vision and Mission in the forefront of our minds as we continue to study, practice, and embody the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

The weekly and monthly offering of teachings remained steady in 2016 as in previous years. We offered courses focusing on the core teachings of the Paramis, the Three Refuges, the Four Noble Truths, the Brahma Viharas, the Three Characteristics, the Seven Factors of Awakening, and The Eightfold Path. In addition, three Introduction to Meditation courses took place, meeting a need for more individuals to taste the Dharma for the first time. Finally, a new offering was given this Fall in the relationship between the Core Teachings of the Buddha and the manifestation of Racism in society and in our own hearts and minds. Three students from that course traveled all the way from Northampton and Easthampton to attend, along with local Sangha members.

**A deep bow of gratitude** to our core group of teachers: Cheryl Wilfong, Manny Mansbach, and Jack Millett. Without you, the teaching of the Dharma at VIMC would not be happening. Thank you for offering evening courses, Sunday Dharma talks and teachings, and Daylongs throughout the year. Vermont Insight is extremely grateful to you!

As Guiding Teacher of VIMC, I particularly appreciate the opportunity of collaborating with my teacher colleagues, and the opportunity to teach the Dharma here. It is a priceless gift to be able to teach the Dharma at Vermont Insight. May each one of us on the core teaching team continue to deepen our heartfelt connection with the Dharma and our understanding of it in order to pass on this gift to the many who come to VIMC.

The core group of Practice Leaders continues to hold the space for Weekly Sitting Practice from 7AM to 7:45AM and on Friday evenings. The new and exciting development in 2016 was the extension of the Friday evening sitting time. The first sitting is from 5:30 - 6:15 and the second sitting is now from 6:30 - 7:15. Many people attend both sittings on Friday evenings and we are very pleased to be able to offer Friday evening sittings to the local community.

**A deep bow of gratitude** to Drew Kovach, original Co-Founder of VIMC, Practice Leader and stalwart Morning Meditation person for the last ten years. Remember: we are talking about 52 weeks of the year!! And to Rose O'Connor who took up

another day of the week, and then to Paul Rodrigue who took up another day of the week, so that the core Tues, Wed, Thurs morning sittings were covered. As mentioned above, there are now rotated Practice Leader led sittings on Monday morning and Friday evening. Mary Mathias, Fiona Cook, and Ann Fielder are part of the rotating team of Practice Leaders. Vermont Insight is extremely grateful to you all!

Daylong Meditation retreats in 2016 ranged from an Equanimity retreat with James Baraz in January, the annual Women's Retreat with Claire Stanley in February, the second annual Weekend Retreat with Jack Millett, Manny Mansbach, and Cheryl Wilfong in March, a daylong with Chas DiCapua from IMS on the Body and Practice in April, a study retreat on Desire with Mu Soeng from BCBS in May, an Insight Dialogue Retreat with Janet Surrey and Florence Meleo-Meyer in July, a daylong on the Five Spiritual Powers with Manny in August, a retreat with Rebecca Bradshaw on the Judging and Comparing Mind in September, a retreat on Working Skillfully with Trauma with Rae Houseman in October, and a half-day retreat with Andrew Olendzki on Not-Self in November.

**A deep bow of gratitude** to all the teachers who have travelled far and wide to grace our center with their generosity and understanding of the teachings.

In 2016, the Dharma Friends group focusing on parents of young children continued to unfold. The venue is now at the home of Taina Lyon, and she and Paul Rodrigue are co-leading and providing primary support to this particular Dharma Friends group. May this important group and the unfolding of the Dharma in our community continue to grow. Paul Rodrigue also continues to lead a Dharma Friends group, hosted at Bonnie Hill's that focuses on the Eco-Dharma. Participation in this group is also strong.

**A deep bow of gratitude** to Paul for holding the space for those two groups to meet and sharing the power of community.

**And another deep bow of gratitude** to the rotating facilitators of the Wednesday evening Dharma Friends group that has been going for over eight years now -- every Wednesday evening -- in the Cherry Room at Solar Hill. Thank you to Breeze Verdant, Marki Webber, and Nora Riley who have held that group for so long.

With this report submitted by Claire Stanley, Guiding Teacher for Vermont Insight, it is clear that the Dharma continues to deepen and grow in our local and wider community.

May wisdom and compassion fuel our liberation in this very life.

Claire Stanley, Vermont Insight Guiding Teacher

## **Administrative Support Committee**

Our all-volunteer team has once again held together the administrative end of Vermont Insight as our programs and participation increase. The team members: Rose O'Connor, manages the mail and bank deposits, with occasional back-up from Mary Mathias. Marilyn Odeh, our registrar, keeps track of registrations and produces lists for events as well as answering emails which come to our main email. Doug Wessel, VIMC treasurer, balances the numbers and produces the necessary reports working with our bookkeeper. Paula Swenson continues to edit the newsletter, manages the online registration platform and helps our website developer, Anne McKinsey whenever possible. Roger Wilkens sends events to the Reformer Calendar. Claire Stanley develops the course descriptions and coordinates the event schedule. Fiona Cook develops the flyers and coordinates a team of volunteers who post the flyers. Susan Monnelly keeps our Facebook page updated.

A new registration platform, Event Espresso was launched on the VIMC website last February in time to process registrations for the Women's Retreat on February 28. As of February 12, 2017, there were 440 registrations online for courses (159) and retreats (269). All in all, 216 individuals registered for events at VIMC in 2016. Event Espresso simplifies the registration process for our Sangha members and on the back-end collects contact and payment-status information for the registrar.

Throughout the Fall, Anne McKinsey worked on a new mobile-friendly website to be launched in early 2017. Anne put her professional touches on our logo and the board approved the results as she kept them abreast of the development. A page explaining our new Endowment Fund was added to the website with information of how to donate to it. Coming in 2017 will be a button on the web site to make donations directly to the Endowment Fund. The administrative team is looking forward to working with Dave Evans who will come on board to volunteer some of his expertise to help solve some of our technical issues.

With deep gratitude to all whose hours of service make the day-to-day operation of Vermont Insight run smoothly,

Paula Swenson

## **Set-up Committee**

The Set-Up Committee continues to function smoothly and efficiently with two Sangha members ready to join the five long-time volunteers who take turns setting up and closing Neighbors Hall each Sunday morning. The Set-Up Committee is the behind the scenes network that makes sure Neighbors Hall is warm and welcoming for meditators who come to the popular Sunday morning sits and dharma talks, daylong programs, and special events. This committee ensures that teachers and practice leaders arrive each Sunday with their focus fully on teaching and connecting with participants, not having to worry that the hall is ready to go. In

addition, committee members take on the role of greeting in-coming participants and offering a brief orientation to newcomers.

Respectfully submitted by Alison Taylor

### **Compassionate Action Committee**

Although a formal Compassionate Action Committee does not yet exist, VIMC continues its effort to help address local needs. A group of committed volunteers comes together each winter month to offer a hearty meal for the homeless and underemployed; Vermont Insight is one of many community and faith groups who make this happen from November through April. The coordinating organization for this effort is Groundworks Collaborative. VIMC offers financial support to the Heat Fund with a yearly donation to help our neighbors in Windham County keep their homes warm.

Respectfully submitted by Alison Taylor

### **Sangha Development Committee**

This committee meets every 6 to 8 weeks to plan social events and to assess the success of events that have taken place. Events have continued to include pot luck suppers at various Sangha members' homes, summer kayak outings, woodland hikes, and the winter monthly movie nights and discussions which take place downtown at the Marlboro Graduate Center. The hike led by Fred Taylor around the Manitou trails was well attended and successful and the Sangha Development Committee has talked about exploring a possible relationship between Manitou and VIMC for other programs.

Respectfully submitted by Alison Taylor

### **Finance Committee Report**

Members: Doug Wessel, Judy Coven, Mary Mathias, and Cheryl Wilfong

The responsibilities of the Finance Committee are to oversee the financial stability of the organization, to provide support for the Treasurer, to consider issues raised by the Board related to VIMC finances, and to make financial recommendations to the Board as appropriate. This year Committee members included the current treasurer (Doug Wessel) and three former treasurers (Judy Coven, Cheryl Wilfong and Mary Mathias). The Committee thanked Judy Coven for her service as retiring

treasurer and for her responsibility, commitment, diligence, thoroughness and support in passing the torch to the current treasurer.

The Committee began the year by making recommendations to the Board in preparation for 2016 budget planning. QuickBooks was purchased at a substantial non-profit discount to allow for the treasurer to access financial records prepared by our bookkeeper for coordination and data analysis.

The Retreat Assistance Fund proposal to increase the daily stipend from \$30 to \$60 per day for up to nine days annually with no restriction on the number of retreats (previously only one retreat annually was allowed) was supported. The Committee recommended that end of year tax letters to donors be sent via email to save postage and time with optional paper copies available upon request. Mailing costs overall are much reduced due to more targeted campaigns with mainly electronic communications.

The Committee recommended adding website buttons for donations to the Retreat Assistance and Endowment Funds, noting that sangha members might feel bombarded by financial requests. The Board requested that liability insurance coverage for Board members be explored and the Committee is reviewing a quote. We will also be reviewing investment options for our reserve funds. The Committee recommitted to using a professional bookkeeper and recommended providing teacher stipends for course expenses.

Respectfully submitted by Doug Wessel, Treasurer

### **VIMC Financial Report for 2016**

VIMC ended 2016 in a strong financial position, enabling us to continue supporting our guiding teacher's ongoing education and providing financial retreat assistance for all of our teachers. In 2016, we approved providing teachers a small stipend for expenses for each course they teach.

The Board is grateful to the Sangha for its continued generous financial support of our annual and spring appeals. This support is critical for the continued vitality of the organization. Both the annual appeal and the generous support of a stable group of sustaining donors provide necessary funds for VIMC's operating expenses, and our spring appeal provides financial support for our guiding teacher's ongoing education.

The VIMC website has been upgraded and will go live in early 2017. Board member Paula Swenson spent considerable time and energy with our web designer helping in this effort.

This year saw a small increase in course registrations and a large increase in income from our daylong retreats. The Fundraising committee was created and produced a

successful Silent Auction at the Mitchell-Giddings Gallery in downtown Brattleboro. With the generous support of our appeals and our sangha's participation in our many and varied offerings, along with a sizable reduction in mailing and office expenses due to targeted electronic communications, VIMC ended 2016 with a surplus available as we explore the possibility of hiring a paid part-time administrative person.

Sources of Income: Sitting dana, spring appeal, annual appeal, movie nights, course registrations, daylong retreat registrations, sustaining supporters, gifts, special events, fundraising activities, endowment fund income.

Total Income: 2016: \$29,059

Expenses: Bookkeeper, charitable gifts (Windham Heat Fund, Dharma Seed), liability insurance, rents, office expenses, PayPal fees, postage and post office box, filing fees, telephone and internet, website development and maintenance, guiding teacher health and education, teacher and retiring board member retreat assistance, visiting teacher support, fundraising and special events costs.

Total Expenses 2016: \$27,504 (includes \$1,400 in committed funds)

NET SURPLUS 2016: \$1,555

Submitted by Doug Wessel, Treasurer

### **Fundraising Committee**

For this first time this year, VIMC established a fundraising committee separate from the Finance Committee. This is a good step forward for us and helps to relieve some of the dual duties of the finance committee. This year VIMC switched the method of our Annual and Spring appeals from primarily mailing campaigns to primarily electronic campaigns. We are thrilled to report no loss of income and a significant savings in mailing costs. Additionally, and with a huge debt of gratitude to Petey Mitchell and Jim Giddings at Giddings Fine Arts 181 Main street Brattleboro Vermont, we were able to hold our first annual Silent Auction. We had wonderful art donated from local artists and raised just over \$2000 for VIMC. We hope to make this an annual event. We are also hoping to be on this year's schedule to host a bake sale and fundraiser at the Vermont Welcome Center, which is a great way to promote VIMC and to raise money. Special thanks to Petey Mitchell and Cheryl Wilfong for making the Fundraising Committee a reality!

Respectfully submitted by Petey Mitchell and Susan Dreyer Leon

### **Facilities Committee**

The Facilities Committee was comprised of Paul Rodrigue, Cheryl Wilfong, Margaret Barletta, Diana Bander, and Judy Coven. Sangha members supporting the work of this committee included Muriel Wolf acting as librarian and Linsey Doolittle who maintained our flower arrangements. The committee met once during 2016. Our library system was improved and the number of books in the library was expanded. Muriel has done a wonderful job in this effort. We introduced a new Buddha statue with the permission of our landlord, Elaine Johnson. This Buddha is one of color and seemed especially appropriate given teacher efforts to expand sangha race consciousness. We've been monitoring accessibility issues related to odor (mold? or possible allergens?) and wheelchair limits. The odor problem has improved dramatically with the system that our landlord has installed. Wheelchair accessibility continues to be a problem however and one that is not a high priority for our landlord at this time.

Our goals for 2017 include further improvements to the library, maintaining cleanliness of our cushions, and exploring other available locations that might be available for VIMC to rent for part and full time use. Additionally, we're considering small steps to improve the appearance and utility of our space, such as decorating it with appropriate prayer flags and getting a larger outdoor bell, such as the type BCBS has and uses to alert attendees to gather as necessary.

Respectfully submitted by Paul Rodrigue

### **Retreat Assistance Fund**

This year the fund supported nine VIMC Sangha members to attend residential retreats. We express the deepest gratitude to our donor for continued commitment to making residential retreats more accessible to all members of the VIMC community.

Respectfully submitted by Paul Rodrigue

### **Report from the Board of Trustees**

Jeff Bower, Susan Dreyer Leon (president), Alison Taylor, Petria Mitchell, Paula Swenson (Secretary), Doug Wessel (Treasurer).

The Board has had another very active year this year. The organization is in a very strong position both organizationally and financially, thanks to the generous support of our donors and the strength of our programs, particularly our Sunday morning sittings and daylong offerings. We do continue to need volunteer support on all of our committees. We are deeply grateful to those who routinely serve VIMC as volunteers and strongly encourage interested Sangha members who would like to get more involved to join a committee that meets their talents and interests. We will be doing some more active committee recruitment in the coming months.



We are currently operating as a six member board, with Claire Stanley, our guiding teacher as an ex officio (non-voting) board member. With board members on or leading every committee within VIMC, they are the glue that holds our organization together and we owe each of them tremendous gratitude. Their donation of time, energy and talent makes all the difference for in what VIMC can do. In 2017, Alison Taylor will cycle off the board after six years of incredible service. We take this moment to acknowledge her contributions to the board and her tremendous dedication to VIMC.

In addition to shepherding the daily operations of the center, this year the board has taken up the incredibly important work of succession planning for VIMC. We are not alone in this work. Many of our sister Sanghas around the U.S. are faced with a wave of retirements of founding and guiding teachers and VIMC wants to also be as prepared as possible for this transition. We are so lucky to already have a distributed governance and leadership model. Our Board of Trustees, committees and teacher council already share decision-making and administrative responsibilities within our organization. Still, there are many considerations for our community to discuss moving forward. The board will be leading a process of discussions throughout the Sangha in 2017 as we investigate how to respond to the inevitable retirement of Claire Stanley as our guiding teacher. We recognize that in addition to teaching and providing Dharma leadership for the organization, Claire has carried a significant share of the administrative responsibilities for running the center. The Board now believes that the time is right to hire a part time, paid administrative assistant as the first step in succession planning. This will allow us to begin to transfer some of Claire's administrative responsibilities to the organization as a whole. We continue to thrive as a mostly volunteer organization and we hope to continue to use this structure, but we also recognize that some piece of the workload are too much to ask of volunteers and we need a single person to have an administrative overview of the organization as a whole to coordinate volunteer efforts and hold the administrative space that Claire has been holding since our founding. Our financial position is strong enough to allow for this hiring at this time and we feel that a nice overlap with the end of Claire's time as guiding teacher will be very beneficial.

The Board will have additional discussions this spring about whether we intend to embark on a search process for a new guiding teacher, or whether we might, as some other Sanghas have done, move to a teacher council model for Dharma leadership and not have a specifically designated guiding teacher. There is much to think about and discuss and the board is looking forward to hearing from a broad constituency within the VIMC community. We will be convening in a variety of formats throughout the year and we strongly encourage Sangha members to join the discussion about the future of our organization.

In addition to these larger organizational efforts, the board has also worked this year on developing an Ethics committee and a process for addressing any ethical issues that might arise within the Sangha. At years end we are also in the process of

refining a proposal to create a Council of Elders, which can aid the board on issues where the board would like more voices and/or specific kinds of institutional memory to help guide decision making.

VIMC is a vibrant and growing Dharma community and we are deeply grateful to each and every person who lends their talents, energy, time, and love to the effort of the continued development of a compassionate, wise and welcoming space for practice, study and community.

May each of these offerings be of benefit to our Sangha and our wider town and region and to all beings everywhere.

Respectfully submitted by Susan Dreyer Leon, Board President.