

# Vermont Insight Meditation Center

## 2021 Annual Report

**Jeff Bower, President; Lisa Schmitt, Treasurer; Chris Arieta, Secretary; Steve Wanhg, Board member; Drew Kovach, Elder's Representative; Cheryl Wilfong, Teacher Council Representative**

### Note from the Board President

It was a very big year for our sangha. The good kind of big year!

We moved into a new space and began to balance the in-person and the virtual meditation experience. A creative crew banded together to turn the space into a meditation hall. A deeply-dedicated and indefatigable tech team arose to navigate all of the complexities of making this hybrid experience real.

Thanks to the generosity and energy of our teachers and their guests, Vermont Insight once again held a very wide array of classes and daylong retreats spanning the entire year with participation from points across the nation and around the world. The diligence and care of our practice leaders allows us to host nine regular sittings per week, holding the space for us to deepen both our practice and our sense of shared community.

The combination of the sangha's financial generosity and a disciplined approach to our expenses keeps Vermont Insight in a strong fiscal position.

We enter 2022 with a strategic planning process underway to provide continued stability and to lay the groundwork for our continued dedication to the study and practice of vipassana and commitment to the possibility of liberation of all beings.

In the pages to follow you will see summaries of the amazing, creative, and compassionate stuff that we did as a community in 2021. Please read through at your leisure, and see in those words the things that you all have done as a community of practitioners working to make the world a better place.

Submitted with gratitude by Jeff Bower, VIMC Board President, April 2022.

## REPORTS

### **Elders Council**

The Elders Council (EC), whose members are primarily retired Board members, was formed in 2017 at the request of the Board to provide guidance when needed on matters pertaining to the long-term goals of VIMC. Its members, who have 'institutional memory,' and a deep commitment to a sustainable future for the organization, bring to this role their long-time experience and understanding of ongoing change and vision for VIMC.

In 2021 the Elders Council met in response to the Board's request for feedback in looking ahead to VIMC's future. Early in the year it responded to a request to consider what VIMC should look like in a post-Covid world and came up with a vision statement that addressed that question. Later in the

year when asked to consider what VIMC's strategic planning should look like, it used that vision statement as the basis for its response to the Board. Finally, the Board asked the Elders Council for representatives to serve on its Strategic Planning Committee. Paul Rodrigue and Paula Swenson volunteered, and the Elders Council is grateful for their service on that committee on behalf of it.

Members of the Elders Council in 2021: Fiona Cook, Judy Coven, Anne Fines, Drew Kovach, Mary Mathias, Petria Mitchell, Rose O'Connor, Paul Rodrigue, Paula Swenson, Alison Taylor

Judy Coven, Elder

## **Facilities**

During 2021, VIMC moved into a new meditation hall at 11 University Way in Brattleboro. We repainted, arranged our cushions, hung clothing hooks... and most importantly, bought equipment to enable "hybrid" meditations and retreats. This has enabled us to host teachers and participants on Zoom from all over the United States and beyond. The Board is now looking into upgrading our computer equipment to improve the quality of sound in the meditation hall and for those who participate from afar.

Stephen Wanh

## **2021 Annual Report from the VIMC Teachers Council**

### **A new teacher-leadership structure**

This was the first full year of VIMC's new leadership model for teachers. Teacher Cheryl Wilfong and Assistant Teachers Paul Rodrigue and Susan Dreyer Leon joined together to form what we are calling the "Tripod," which was tasked with coordinating weekly Sunday and day-long offerings, classes, and special events. Practice Leader Ann Fielder continued to coordinate our Sunday teaching schedule. Working with our Teacher Emeritus, Claire, Stanley, all four teachers met monthly to support one another's development in the Dharma, address "big picture" issues and confer about matters brought to the teachers from the Board, Practice Leaders and the Sangha. In addition to these functions, Cheryl Wilfong continued as the representative from the Teachers Council to the Vermont Insight Board. Paul Rodrigue became the TC representative to the Board in December.

A new Admin person, Catherine Rogers, was hired at the beginning of the year. Collaborative leadership of the sangha worked like a marvelous 7-wheeled vehicle—Tripod; the Admin team of Catherine, Paula Swenson, and Chris Arieta; and the President of the Board, Jeff Bower. This team worked pretty well, though, of course, some communications fell through the cracks and the teachers are committed to continuing to work on our communication structure.

Paula added an additional Teacher Dana button for "All Teachers" on the Donations page.

Teachers held an annual meeting with practice leaders in early 2021 to see how we can continue to understand and support their needs in this “in-between” time with Zoom and the new space. The Teacher Council met for a half-day retreat with each other in person at the new center on Saturday, September 11.

On Sunday May 30, a potluck at Cheryl’s house honored Jack Millett’s retirement from teaching and the title Teacher Emeritus was awarded to our former Guiding Teacher, Claire Stanley.

### **A New Space**

On July 1, Vermont Insight rented a dedicated space at VABEC. Thanks to Board member Steve Wanhg and Practice Leaders Rose O’Connor, Mary Mathias, and teachers Paul Rodrigue and Cheryl Wilfong, we converted to hybrid sessions (Zoom plus in-person) at the end of July.

With much discussion and regret, we canceled Ajahn Jayanto’s blessing of our new space on September 12 due to the rise of the COVID Delta variant. We hope to reschedule this for some time in 2022.

The teachers are continuing to work on the best way to present land and lineage acknowledgements during our programming. We all feel that these should be routinely incorporated into our Sangha activities, and are sensitive to the variety of views about the best way to do this. We are actively continuing to explore this important territory.

### **Covid 19-opportunities and challenges**

COVID-19 continued to play havoc with our lives. Sits, classes, and Dharma talks continued on Zoom, bringing in meditators from far and wide. Fran Lewis (Heidi Watts’s sister) was stuck in Thailand and attended Cheryl’s classes from there. As a result of the James Baraz weekend retreat in April, Arlene from Calgary and Donita Reis from Chicago began attending the 7 a.m. sits. Cheryl’s VISTA friend (from 1970), Donna Moore from Dayton, Ohio, joined sits and classes beginning in November. Students came from Virginia, Maine, Oregon, New York, New Hampshire. In the summer we were able to offer more activities in our new space, but in December, we returned to mostly Zoom due to the rise of the COVID Omicron variant.

Paul, Susan, Mary, and Ann Fielder worked on the possibility of offering some programming for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This was prompted by a request for programming from a visitor to the center. In the end, we were not able to make the connection due to distance and schedule conflicts, but this continues to be an area of interest and potential growth for the center.

### **Classes**

Claire continued to teach the Wednesday morning Seminar class that has been a stable ongoing group for a number of years. In the Winter of 2021, the course was entitled "Our Spiritual Journey Part One" and in the Spring, the group continued with the same text and the course was entitled, "Our

Spiritual Journey Part Two". For the Fall course, the course was entitled, "Opening to the Joy of Living." (Total of 3 courses - one in the winter, one in the spring, and one in the fall.)

The Tripod decided that Cheryl would teach on Sunday evenings, Paul on Mondays, and Susan on Wednesdays.

- Cheryl taught *Taking the High Road: The Eightfold Noble Path* using Bhikkhu Bodhi's book for 8 weeks in February-March. Cheryl taught Wise Speech for 4 weeks in April-May. Cheryl taught the *Metta Sutta* for 4 weeks in October. Cheryl taught *Moving through Change Loss and Disruption* for 6 weeks in November-December.
- Susan Dreyer-Leon taught *Introduction to Mindfulness Meditation* for 6 weeks in the Winter, *Awakening Joy* for 6 weeks in March-April and *Mindful of Race* in the Fall.
- Paul Rodrigue taught *Practicing with the Four Noble Truths*.
- Paul taught *4 Foundations of Mindfulness* using Analayo's book for 8 weeks in March-April. In September, Paul began teaching a monthly class on the *Gradual Path* as a drop-in class.
- The teachers took a break from classes for the summer since COVID seemed to be waning and people wanted to break out of jail and visit family and friends.

### **Groups**

Susan Dreyer Leon and Doug Wessel hold the space for Group Awareness Exercise every Friday morning at 7:00 for one hour. Attendance includes a core group of 5-6 folks with others joining to explore from time to time.

The Wednesday evening Dharma Friends continued as two groups--one meeting on the porch in the summer and fall and at Tina Olson's and Schuyler Gould's during the winter; the other group met on Zoom.

### **Other offerings**

The May Month of Practice focus was "Kindness is What Matters." An additional Wednesday evening sit was offered during May.

Cheryl led Thanksgiving morning sits & Dharma discussions from 7-10 a.m.

Paul, Drew, and Kevin co-led the New Year's Eve sit on Zoom from 6:00 to 10:00, when 108 bells were rung.

Due to low or no attendance, the Young Adult sits, led by Practice Leader Maria Tevolini, were canceled in August.

Paul began offering a full moon sit each month.

### **The Family Program**

Paul continues to hold the Family Program. Long delayed due to Covid, we are taking steps to again be able to offer something to our families. Paul met with Mikaela Marmion, and in October, she offered a program for children and families.

### **Retreats & Guest Teachers**

VIMC continues to be very lucky that we are able to engage guest teachers to offer ½ day retreats for our Sangha and outside guests. Paul and Cheryl shouldered the lion's share of responsibility for contacting and arranging for these events, which are absolutely made easier with the use of Zoom.

On Zoom, retreats continued to be 3-4 hours on Saturdays. The move from Sunday to Saturday for our daylong retreats seems to have gone smoothly.

With four teachers in rotation, we felt that we had the ability to continue to offer Sunday sits and Retreats on Saturday. Removing the logistics of travel, lodging, and food has simplified the process and given our community greater access to a wider variety of teachers. At the same time, we do look forward to a time when we might again safely meet in person in our new space to welcome guest teachers and engage in fuller daylong practice. Some of the highlights of the year are below:

**January** – Cheryl interviewed Chris Germer on *Self Compassion* one Sunday after he led a guided meditation. Claire Stanley offered her annual Women’s Retreat: *Boundless Gratitude*.

**February** – Venerable Pannavati on *Faith & Intuition*.

**March** – Leigh Brasington on *Emptiness*.

**April** – James Baraz taught a weekend retreat on *Centeredness: A Gift to Ourselves and to the World*.

**May** – Lee Steppacher’s outdoor retreat Mindfulness in the Wilderness for 4 people had a hard time gaining traction.

**July** – Matthew Immergut taught *The Mind Illuminated: A Stage-Based Approach to Meditation Practice*. Joslyn Hitter was a guest Sunday Morning Dharma teacher .

**August** – Molly Grover & Ariel Burgess taught a workshop on *Climate Grief: Holding the Climate Crisis with Heart*.

**October** – Rae Houseman

**November’s** retreat with Sheila Garrick was canceled due to low registration.

Maybe Thanksgiving weekend doesn’t work?

**December** – Oren Sofer–hosted by Paul.

## **Dinners for the Seasonal Overflow Shelter (2021)**

Volunteers from Vermont Insight have continued to contribute generously to the community effort to provide dinners for the Seasonal Overflow Shelter every winter season since 2008.

At the start of 2021, Groundworks was still housing around 200 guests at the Quality Inn on Putney Road and in other area motels as part of the emergency pandemic program for homeless Vermonters. Funding through the CARES Act had been made available to pay for five local restaurants to prepare and package food for distribution to these guests, so the community meal program had been suspended, except for special holiday dinners. Several Vermont Insight volunteers contributed to the New Year’s Day Dinner on January 1, 2021.

The motel housing program closed in late spring, while work was still progressing on a new purpose-built Emergency Shelter at 54 South Main Street in Brattleboro. The new shelter opened in the late summer and is now housing 34 guests every night of the week and once again the meal teams were asked to provide monthly dinners for the hungry guests beginning in September.

Vermont Insight volunteers were quick to respond when the request was sent out and a total of 26 sangha members signed up to contribute to our four dinners in September, October, November and December.

A special bow of gratitude to Paula Swenson who set up an online sign-up sheet – something I was completely incapable at organizing and which greatly facilitated the process of people finding out what was needed and signing up!

Respectfully submitted by Fiona Cook, Shelter Dinners Coordinator

## **Ethics & Reconciliation Council**

As a community and as an organization, we are committed to freedom for all beings. In accordance with this, it is the intention of VIMC to provide a respectful and sheltering environment in which all sangha members and visitors may be at ease in their practice and in their exploration of the Buddha's teachings. We endeavor to create and provide a space free from the causes of physical and emotional pressures.

In 2021 the ERC completed the very important work of creating an updated Code of Ethical Behavior for Teachers, Board Members, and Practice Leaders. The Board adopted the updated document in March, and it can be found on the VIMC website under About/Governance/Ethics.

Thank you to every member of our sangha who helps keep our community free from harm.

The Ethics & Reconciliation Council

Judy Coven, Ann Fielder, Petey Mitchell, Muriel Wolf, and Jeff Bower

## **VIMC Financial Report for 2021**

VIMC again ended in a strong financial position, enabling support for our programming and the transition to a new meditation space at the Vermont Agricultural Business Education Center (VABEC).

The two fundraising activities in 2021—the spring and annual appeals--were successful in raising money to support the Teacher Development Fund and to support increased operating expenses, in particular the cost of renting, outfitting, and maintaining the new space at the Agricultural Center. As we anticipate continuing hybrid programs, we also improved our technology infrastructure. If you have attended an in-person sit in the meditation hall, you likely observed a large and a small screen, a laptop, and speakers. In addition, VIMC teachers are working with a local IT support—Fearless Computing-- to help ensure that the systems work as well as they can so that people participating from home and from the center can hear and see each other.

**Income:** VIMC enjoys income from a variety of sources including sitting dana, the spring appeal, the annual appeal, registration fees, sustaining supporters, and endowment fund income.

Sitting dana increased to \$10,821 from \$7559 in 2020.

The Spring Appeal generated \$1,447 for the Teacher Development Fund. There was no Spring Appeal in 2020; the Spring Appeal in 2019 generated \$1,993.

The 2021 Annual Appeal generated \$6,440 compared to \$5,146 in 2020.

Income from course registration fees was \$3,425 and from retreat registration fees, \$6,668, bringing the total from registration fees for 2021 to \$10,093. The total income from registration fees is up significantly from \$5,639 in 2020. Interest in VIMC programs remains strong, and the hybrid offerings mean that VIMC has extended its reach.

Sustaining donations for 2021 totaled \$3,285, slightly decreased from 2020 (\$3,782).

Total Income for 2021: \$31,480

**Expenses:** Bookkeeper, charitable gifts, liability insurance, rent, office expenses, administrator stipend, PayPal fees, postage and PO box, website development and maintenance, IT support, internet and phone, zoom account, core teacher retreat assistance, and visiting teacher support.

The new space has added significant expenses to the budget. Rent of \$900 per month started on July 1, 2021. In addition to rent, the cost of liability insurance, WIFI, and IT support all increased. However, these increased expenses were incurred in only the second half of the fiscal year.

VIMC engaged a new part-time admin support person in April 2021. Admin expenses for 2021 were \$4075. The annual expense of the administrative support person is anticipated to be \$8000/year.

Total expenses for 2021: \$18,514. Net surplus for 2021: \$12,966.

VIMC ended 2021 with a reserve fund (in CDs) of \$30,289 and \$37,092 in bank and PayPal accounts. Total assets at the end of 2021: \$67,381.

Looking ahead, VIMC has engaged the services of a consultant to guide strategic planning. The cost of the consultant, \$3,000, will be applied to the 2022 budget.

Because the cost of our new part-time administrator and the cost of the VABEC space and associated costs of operating “in person” started midyear, we can anticipate that 2022 will be a more typical year and that operating expenses will more closely track income. We do not anticipate a surplus in 2022. The 2021 surplus can be thought of as a COVID bonus because operating online allowed VIMC to build up assets for over a year. Now we have a lovely new space to support.

Respectively submitted by Lisa Schmitt, Treasurer

### **Administrative Committee**

Catherine Rogers began joining VIMC from Virginia in 2020 and was hired in April 2021 to fill the eight-hour per week administrative assistant position. A long-time meditator, Catherine had studied with Claire in the Center's early days at Solar Hill when she lived in the Brattleboro Area. Her job is to manage email and phone communication, including communicating with Sangha members, visiting teachers, VIMC committees and the board. She coordinates registrations and event publicity, sends out the weekly newsletter, May Month of Practice, fundraising emails and other Sangha communications. She meets weekly with Paula Swenson to coordinate the administrative needs of the Sangha.

Web page management continues to be done by Paula with editing help from Catherine and technical support from Anne McKinsey at AMCK Web & Print Design. Page updates this year have included changing the format for retreat posts and visiting teachers, in a way that increases their visibility in web searches and simplifies the registration process.

The administrative team's mission is to provide assistance to the Tripod, facilitate Sangha connections and to bring warmth and friendliness to all our communications.

Christine Arieta, Board Representative

Paula Swenson, Volunteer Coordinator

Catherine Rogers, Administrative Assistant