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The State of the IMCW Sangha 2009

The Insight Meditation Community of Washington (IMCW) is a spiritual community teaching and practicing Vipassana meditation. Its mission is:

- *To promote the instruction and practice of Buddhist Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and related Buddhist teachings that awaken our natural wisdom and compassion.*
- *To cultivate the growth of spiritual community (sangha) with the intent of serving the larger sangha, the community of all beings.*

Introduction:

In February of 2008, the IMCW board committed itself to an ambitious five-year agenda to achieve this mission. The goals outlined in the Strategic Plan have been to:

- Spread the dharma through expanded numbers of classes, retreats, and KM (Kalyana Mitta/Spiritual Friends) groups; develop a more diverse community; and develop a strong audio dharma program on the website;
- Expand the programs providing support to different stages of spiritual development, including introductory and advanced classes, mentor training, the dana of service, and residential and non-residential retreats;
- Strengthen our community through such programs as a Care Committee, expanded numbers of KM groups, social activities, and a volunteer program;
- Developing a cadre of trained teachers through a carefully designed teacher-training track as well as advanced dharma training for current teachers;
- Offering mindfulness programs to people with special needs by researching current needs and then developing a pilot program in at least one area of addiction, homelessness, chronic or terminal illness, and incarceration;
- Establishing mindfulness training in educational, governmental and health organizations such as schools, and developing books and audio materials which support these efforts;
- Developing the infrastructure to support these expanded offerings by hiring staff, developing a volunteer program, increasing our fundraising efforts and leasing space for meetings, classes and administration.

This report will outline the progress we have made throughout 2009 towards these goals, and briefly discuss the annual plan for 2009/2010.

Dharma

Classes

IMCW currently has thirteen classes held weekly in D.C., Montgomery County, Northern Virginia and Baltimore. There are also two weekly introductory meditation sessions, one advanced, monthly Satsang class, as well as an advanced Dharma Study and Practice Program being offered in spring and fall. There is a Family Meditation class that is held in downtown D.C., and the POC and LGBTQ affinity sanghas have monthly classes.

Some examples of the average class attendance figures for the metro area can be seen in the following table:

Class location or name	2009 Av.	High-Low
All Soul's, Sunday P.M.	25	25
Arlington	47	35-60
Bethesda	246	161-313
Capitol Hill	65	35-70
Cleveland Park/St. Alban's	22	20-30
DSPP	40	45
LGBTQ	25	20-30
POC	28	25-32
Takoma Park	20	5-30
Woodley Park A.M.	38	35-40

A new class offered this spring was "Meditación De La Conciencia Plena," offered by Alicia Jimenez Bazan, IMCW's first class offered in Spanish. There is also a current project in the works to translate the Wednesday night class dharma talks into Spanish.

Tara Brach's Wednesday night class in Bethesda this year offered classes by five nationally-known guest teachers including Bhante Rahula, Anh Huong Nyugen, Jack Kornfield and Cheri Maples from outside IMCW. This class usually has about 250 attendees, but at a special "Three Refuges" class recently totaled 320 attendees.

Over 12,000 participants attended the fifty classes offered by Tara in 2009. There were an average of:

252 attendees per class
\$ 5.72 dana per attendee

Diversity

IMCW continues to sponsor a variety of programs in the metro D.C. area. The Family Meditation class, led by Carl Skooglund with the help of Stig Regli and Ofosu Jones-Quartey, moved in the fall from RRUUC/Bethesda to All Soul's in D.C. and continues to draw families from around the area.

The LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning) sangha, with a listserve of over 300 members, and POC (People of Color) sangha, with a listserve of over 200 continue to be ably led by teacher La Sarmiento, with the help of co-leader Renee Ater for the POC group. These sanghas held some exciting workshops this year:

- Japanese-American dharma teacher Mushim Ikeda-Nash from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship & the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland led a joint meeting of the POC & LGBTQ sanghas last January, and African-American lesbian Toni Lester led a “Wise Speech & Social Justice” workshop for the POC & LGBTQ sanghas last May.
- Lesbian dharma teacher Cheri Maples led a workshop last August for the POC and LGBTQ sanghas. She also led some members of the ICMW Teachers Council and Board of Directors in an interactive daylong entitled “Transforming Barriers With an Open Heart” to explore issues of privilege and power as we explore how to create healthy, ethical climates in which our energies flow toward rather than against one another. Of the 38 participants, 48% were People of Color, 53% were LGBTQ, and 29% were both.
- African-American teacher Ruth King led a workshop for women in November entitled “Intense Luminosity: Embracing the Nature of Rage.” Of the 47 participants, 23% were POC, 19% were LGBTQ, and 15% were both.
- The 2010 women’s retreat will be led by Tara Brach and co-taught by teachers of color Luisa Montero-Diaz and La Sarmiento. The retreat filled in 2 weeks and of the 72 participants, 13% are POC, 24% are LGBTQ, and 6% are both.
- Also in 2010, diverse dharma teachers Cheri Maples, Larry Yang, Anushka Fernandopulle, Arinna Weisman, Mushim Ikeda-Nash, and Eric Kolvig will be teaching daylongs and retreats for IMCW.
- The “Refuge 3” sangha, whose vision is to be a socially engaged, multicultural, urban sangha that together deepens in the dharma teachings and mindfulness practices to unlearn our conditioning with wisdom and compassion for both personal and social transformation, continues to meet on a bi-weekly basis in D.C. The current sangha has nine active and committed members, half of whom are POC, LGBTQ, or both.

Retreats: Non-Residential and Residential

Twenty-nine daylong retreats were held in the D.C. area in 2009 up from sixteen in 2008. They were offered by IMCW teachers, but also included workshops by nationally known teachers such as Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein and Ruth King. Tara Brach’s daylongs average about 100-130 attendees, but were as high as 160. Tara’s other daylong retreats generally include between 100-130 people. Hugh’s weekend retreat drew in forty people. The weekend retreats with multiple teachers have averaged about 70-80 people, and the weeklong retreats, normally led by three or four teachers, range from 50-160 people.

Eight weekend and weeklong retreats were held in Maryland and Virginia, compared to eleven offered in 2008. IMCW teachers Tara Brach, Hugh Byrne, Jonathan Foust, Luisa Montero-Diaz, John Waterman, and La Sarmiento offered the retreats. Guest teachers Richard Shankman, James Baraz and Pat Coffey also participated.

Audio Dharma

Due to heroic efforts by IMCW volunteers, over 160 hours of meditation and dharma talks from the Wednesday night class in Bethesda, MD have been recorded, edited and uploaded onto the IMCW website. Audio dharma has also been available as podcasts since September 2007. Topics have ranged from “Awakening Through Conflict,” to a series on “Intention and Spiritual Freedom,” to a discussion of the “Four Nutriments.” A brief description of each talk is included so that listeners can choose a topic pertinent to their current needs.

Most of the audio dharma has been divided into meditations and dharma talks so that people who download it can listen to whichever piece they prefer. IMCW has heard from many people around the world how valuable the audio dharma has been to their practice, especially in many places from rural Montana to South Africa, where individuals are not near a teacher or sangha.

Mentor training

The mentoring program has a new coordinator, Gary Hillesland. The program is being evaluated and the application process is being revamped. There are currently twenty-two people involved in this program as mentors or mentees.

Special Needs

Tara Brach held an “Addictions” daylong in March 2009. The Good Works program has had volunteers involved in Montgomery Hospice and is developing a Prison Dharma program. The Prison Dharma group hopes to provide new and used meditation and dharma books to prisoners and prison libraries, and to teach meditation in correctional facilities.

Organizations: Schools, Health and/or Governmental Organizations

Tara Brach has been offering yearly weekend retreats to psychotherapists:

This weekend training introduces the core teachings in Buddhist psychology, the basic components of meditation, and ways of applying these practices in working with emotional healing. Through lecture, discussion, guided meditations and experiential exercises, workshop participants will explore how Buddhist meditation can serve their own awakening of awareness, as well as the healing and freedom of their clients.

Community/Sangha:

Blessing Circle and Care Committee

Dedicated volunteers continue to run the Blessing Circle, which offers a thirty-minute service of metta monthly after the Wednesday class in Bethesda, and the Care Committee, which helps people in need of assistance.

Kalyana Mitta Groups

The KM (Kalyana Mitta) Groups now have twenty-five groups in D.C., Maryland and Virginia, with about twenty-five people on the waiting list. Most of them are waiting for someone to volunteer to host a group in their area. There are between 200-250 active KM members. Current initiatives include looking into putting KM group locations on the website so that interested people will see what's available, and also an effort to outline further ways for IMCW and the KM groups to work together.

Off the Cushion

Volunteer George Williams created a weekly newsletter, “Off the Cushion”. It includes notices of social activities, lectures, meditation groups, dharma book clubs, service opportunities, and more, all submitted by the greater IMCW sangha in an effort to connect with each other and share the dharma. Off the Cushion recently underwent a redesign using the email marketing software, Constant Contact. We have also been working to increase it's readership. OTC is now being mailed to over 800 readers weekly. Efforts are underway to increase the scope of OTC by continuing to develop the subscription list and by encouraging people from more communities in the D.C. area to submit activities.

Volunteers – The Dana of Service

In May of 2008 the board approved the development of a new, more formalized volunteer program. The Volunteer Development Committee, consisting of volunteers, staff and two board liaisons, created a program that now includes over 120 volunteers working to support IMCW's classes and programs. These volunteers do fundraising, act as board members, work on committees such as Finance and Administration and Good Works, and support the teachers by setting up and running the many classes in the D.C. area. At the Bethesda class each week, seventeen volunteers set up and take down 250-300 chairs, run a refreshment table and a book sale table, greet and orient newcomers, and run the audio. The Volunteer Program has been working to improve and expand volunteer recruitment, training, support and retention.

In April 2009 about forty of the 165 past and present IMCW volunteers enjoyed their first volunteer recognition party, held at St. Alban's Church in D.C. Tara Brach talked about the history of IMCW and thanked the volunteers for their generosity in helping to spread the dharma. Kurt Maurer, past president of the board, talked about how volunteers have helped IMCW grow and reminded them that they are the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. These remarks were followed by an icebreaker led by Tara, a beautiful song in Spanish by April Powers and a bingo game designed by George Williams that helped everyone start talking about what IMCW has meant to them. We will be sponsoring another recognition party in the spring of 2010.

In the spring of 2009 the Board of Directors sponsored a sangha meeting dedicated to Good Works, the mission of which is to promote volunteer work by IMCW sangha members in organizations outside of IMCW. To date groups have volunteered for: Habitat for Humanity; the African Villages Project which works with villages in Zambia; Cease Fire D.C., which is dedicated to reducing violence, particularly gun violence, in D.C; Mindful Hospice, which is part of Montgomery Hospice; On Our Own of Fairfax County, a drop-in center for the mentally ill; the Prison Dharma Group; RAINN (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network); Reading for the Blind and Dyslexic; and the Washington Buddhist Peace Fellowship.

Infrastructure:

Teachers, Board of Directors, Staff

IMCW has eighteen teachers and seven teachers-in-training. Three of the teachers, La Sarmiento, Trudy mitchell-gilkey and John McIlwain finished their training in October of 2008. One of our teachers, John Stevens, moved out of the country in October of this year.

The IMCW Board of Directors currently consists of nine members, with a four-member executive board including Melissa Banks as President, Hugh Byrne as Vice President, Bob Dymond as Treasurer, and Janice Mostow as Secretary. Three members, Janice Mostow, Cindy Stevens, and Trisha Stotler, joined the board this summer.

IMCW was disappointed to lose Rose Monsell as Wednesday Night Coordinator and Assistant Administrator in June. Bonnie Riley has very capably stepped into Rose's shoes on Wednesday nights and other staff have temporarily taken over Rose's other duties. We have also gained a new KM Coordinator this year, Steve Zappalla. Janet Merrick, one of our primary audio dharma volunteers, designed and now operates a new on-line registration for daylong retreats. She also has taken on temporary duties maintaining the website. La Sarmiento, Steve and Janet are also IMCW's key retreat managers.

Caroline Stevens, who rejoined IMCW as temporary Executive Director in September 2008, completed her work in December 2009. Anne Adams Green has been hired as Office Administrator, with Bob Dymond, the new Board Member of Operations.

Leasing Space

Several staff and volunteers work year-round to locate appropriate spaces for the many classes, retreats and workshops being offered by IMCW. It takes many hours on the web and on the road to find workable, inviting spaces that meet the various needs of these events, and IMCW is very grateful to these staff and volunteers for their hard work.

Communications

Newsletters

Since the Strategic Plan was initially developed, IMCW has grown exponentially. With a sangha scattered throughout D.C., Maryland and northern Virginia, improving channels of communications have become increasingly important. IMCW now has several newsletters that are sent out weekly or monthly to various mailing lists.

The ENews includes upcoming classes and retreats, as well as dharma articles by IMCW teachers and profiles of teachers, volunteers and board members written by volunteers. It is emailed monthly. During 2009 the ENews included seven dharma articles offered by IMCW teachers, and a total of seven teacher and volunteer profiles researched and written by IMCW volunteers.

In January of 2009 we sent out 1,861 copies of the ENews, with a 40.8% open rate (743). In December we sent out 2,068 copies, an 11% increase, or an average of seventeen new contacts each month. The monthly average open rate was 38.57%, compared to industry averages of 20% (non-profits) and 22.4% (religious organizations).

Five special newsletters were also mailed out, including one notice of a memorial for a sangha member, one workshop cancellation, one staff position opening, and two fundraising newsletters. These newsletters had an open rate average of 37.86%. The fundraising newsletter that was mailed to repeat donors and the position description had very low opt-out rates of one person each (.6% and 0%, respectively). The memorial announcement, workshop cancellation and second, broader fundraising letter averaged seven opt-outs each (.3%, .4% and .4%, respectively).

At the end of the year the IMCW website was upgraded, necessitating the transfer of other newsletter lists, including Off the Cushion, and the POC and LGBTQ newsletter lists, to our main email marketing service, Constant Contact. As of the end of December 2009, IMCW's email contacts for all the newsletters totaled 3,988 separate addresses.

Newsletters are also mailed to the LGBTQ and POC sanghas with announcements of upcoming classes and events, and to the Off the Cushion mailing list with social activities as described previously.

Evergreen Brochure

With so many classes and programs to advertise, the number of fliers being produced for advertising was getting overwhelming and creating confusion. IMCW's staff decided to create a more reader-friendly and higher-quality printed piece, and so designed and produced IMCW's first

color “evergreen” brochure and calendar insert. The evergreen brochure is produced annually and includes a summary of information on all of IMCW’s programs and activities. The calendar insert is updated quarterly and provides detailed information of upcoming classes and retreats.

2009/10 Annual Plan

The annual plan approved by the board of directors late in 2009 for the 2009/10 fiscal year includes a number of goals, some of which have already been accomplished:

Diversity

Goal: Continuing to develop sensitivity to diversity issues within the sangha by continuing diversity training for the board and Teachers' Council and supporting the efforts of the Diversity Committee

The board has held yearly diversity trainings for the past several years. The next one is being held in the spring of 2010.

Website

Goal: Redesigning the IMCW website to make it more attractive and user-friendly to the sangha and staff

A consultant has been hired to supervise the redesign of the website. It is hoped that the new website will be up and running by the fall of 2010.

Fundraising

Goal: Develop an annual fundraising plan and implement it

Two experienced fundraisers, one a current and one a former board member, are developing a fundraising plan and will be directing its implementation.

Email Database

Goal: Develop our email database in order to continue to improve our communications with the broader sangha and to improve our fundraising potential

In January of 2010 our email database included almost 4,000 separate addresses, including persons signed up for newsletters, affinity sanghas, and retreats.

Finance and Administration

Goal: Increase the sophistication and reliability of our financial reporting

Bob Dymond and Anne Green have been working steadily on improving IMCW's financial reporting.

Goal: Ensure appropriate staffing for IMCW

A new office administrator, Anne Green, was hired effective January 1, 2010, and Bob Dymond has been working as the board member of operations since the fall. This completes the new team of board member of operations (Bob Dymond), office administrator (Anne Green), publications editor and volunteer manager (Neile Whitney), KM coordinator and retreat manager (Steve Zappalla), and online registrar and temporary website administrator (Janet Merrick).

Retreat Management

Goal: Continuing to improve the management of IMCW retreats by completing and distributing the new Retreat Manager's Manual, recruiting and training new retreat managers, and carefully establishing 2010's retreat venues and prices

The manual is almost finished and we have been actively recruiting new retreat managers. 2010 retreat venues and pricing is complete.

Sangha Support

Goal: Develop the Sangha Support Committee

There is a committee, but thus far it lacks a committee chair. Nevertheless, the committee is forging ahead with plans for a spring picnic and hopes to recruit a new chair soon. The committee is also evaluating current efforts to interconnect members of the IMCW sangha.

Teachers' Council

Goal: Continue to support the Teachers' Council in their efforts to diversify the classes' content and locations.

Numbers and varieties of IMCW classes have been increasing steadily each year, and at a pace which the Teachers' Council, staff and volunteers can support. IMCW will continue to be mindful of areas where we can increase the diversity of our class content, locations and participants.

Outreach

Goal: Support Good Works Program

February has been designated by the board as "Good Works Month." An article about the program will be in the monthly ENews and efforts are being made to recruit a new volunteer coordinator to support the program.

Goal: Reach out to underserved communities.

Hugh Byrne, board member and head of the Teachers' Council, has volunteered to work with the Good Works Prison Dharma program to train teachers for the program.

Conclusion

The IMCW board, teachers, staff and volunteers are proud of IMCW's continued progress in promoting the instruction and practice of Buddhist Insight Meditation and in cultivating the growth of a spiritual community which now includes over 4,000 individuals. We look forward to continuing our work together in the coming years.

*May all beings be held in the heart of lovingkindness
May all beings be free from inner and outer harm
May all beings be well
May all beings have ease of well-being
May our life be of service to all beings
May all beings come to know great and natural peace
May all beings awaken and be free.*