

**The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha:
Establishing Homes for each
for the
Insight Meditation Center (IMC) Community**

A Three-part Vision

For

A Balanced

Buddhist Culture

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Introduction

This document describes a vision for a vibrant, full, and balanced offering of Buddhist practice for the Insight Meditation Center (IMC) community, which, though based in Redwood City, CA extends to participants from the Greater Bay area, Santa Cruz County and the worldwide listeners of Audio Dharma.

Over the last twenty-five years a firm foundation has been established which gives us the unprecedented opportunity to envision and create the combination of programs and institutions needed for a full flowering of Buddhist practice and life. It is a vision that equally supports the maturation of Buddhist insight practitioners, Theravada Buddhist teachers, and a broad community where people's lives can be rooted in Buddhist values.

If our first twenty-five years saw the birth, childhood, and adolescence of our community, we are now ready for adulthood. This involves having the developed institutions that allow us to 1) nurture the next generation of practitioners and teachers, 2) become a spiritual community that is a contributing member of our society and civic life, and 3) create a Buddhist support system available at all phases of our lives from childhood to dying.

The challenge of any growing Buddhist community is how to balance the opportunities for inner meditation and transformation, the study of Buddhist teachings and their application in modern life, and all the needs of community and personal life. How do we ensure that each of these areas attain their full potential while also supporting the other two areas?

The heart of this proposal is for us to have three dynamic institutions that operate independently while mutually benefiting each other. Our Insight Retreat Center (IRC) would focus on providing Buddhist retreats emphasizing inner transformation and Awakening. The Sati Center for Buddhist Studies would be devoted to a rich offering of classes and training programs. And our current Insight Meditation Center would form the nucleus for programs supporting Buddhist practice and life within our everyday lives.

Just as the Three Treasures are distinct while mutually supportive, each of these institutions will be distinct yet collaborative. Representing the Buddha, the Retreat Center is based on silent meditation, simplicity, renunciation, and realization. Representing the Dharma, the Sati Center is based on the values of inquiry, the study of the Dharma, reflection, and Dharma trainings in all varied aspects of life and society. Representing the Sangha, the Insight Meditation Center (IMC) is based on the value of community, service, and the importance of bringing Buddhist practice into both the ordinary activities and relationships of our lives, as well as during life transitions.

During various phases of their lives and practices, people would be able to shift their level of participation in each of these institutions in a way that would provide the best opportunities for growth. These three centers would allow people periods of time to focus on retreat practice, study, or practicing in everyday life by engaging in the programs offered at the appropriate center. And by having the three institutions in active relationship with each other, the wisdom and strengths of each would benefit the others.

Proposal

This proposal aims at creating a dynamic, nurturing, and supportive structure to best discover the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha in our lives. The mission and programs of each center will allow each to clearly express different important messages and values. One of these is the mutually supportive way the three centers work together.

The three centers would be organized around different values, as some of the values fit naturally in a particular area. While many of the values can easily fit into any of the three areas, they have been assigned to the center where they are most emphasized.

For example, practicing *dana* (freely offered donations), charging fees, and having memberships can each convey different teachings and practices. By utilizing all three of these financial systems we have the opportunity of demonstrating the wisdom found in each of them. In Buddhist circles these financial models sometimes exist in tension with

each other. Having them in different centers demonstrates that they don't have to be in opposition to each other but rather can be mutually supportive.

In the next pages, the proposal describes basic aspects of each of the three centers. Following this, the document will explain how these three areas might interact with each other.

Buddha: The Insight Retreat Center (IRC)

Opportunity: To give individuals the opportunity to experience the full depth and range of the possibilities of meditation, as well as to cultivate future generations of well-trained meditation teachers.

Programs:

Core Programs: Vipassana retreats, metta retreats, concentration retreats, monastic retreats.

Periodic Programs: Meditation and Study retreats, retreats serving particular communities such as families, teens, young adults, LGBTQ, Spanish speaking practitioners, people of color, Buddhist chaplains and spiritual caregivers.

Values: Highlights the importance of the core values, practices and realizations of our Theravada Tradition. Retreat practice experientially teaches letting go, trust, generosity, simplicity, not-self, deep contemplative silence and gratitude. It allows for a direct and radical pointing to liberation without relying on a formal curriculum of training and study.

Benefits for Practitioners: Gives a clear message of the importance of retreats in our practice and highlights important values for our tradition *e.g.* renunciation and generosity. During particular phases of a person's practice it also gives them a clear "home" around which to focus their attention both in sitting retreats and in supporting retreats as a volunteer.

Financial model: *Dana* (freely given donations) and volunteer labor. Just as the Buddha and monastics rely on *dana*, so will the retreat center. Intensive retreat practice works best when done in a field of generosity and gratitude. The *dana* system is a powerful message and a significant way to practice the Buddhadharma. It is very inspiring and meaningful for many people and gives those who value the *dana* system a place to focus their attention, love, and support.

Friends of the Insight Retreat Center: a group will be formed to support the finances of the center by those inspired to provide regular, ongoing *dana*.

Dharma: Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Opportunity: In addition to developing rich offerings of trainings and teaching programs, this “seminary” is the place for visionary planning for new and creative ways to teach the Dharma both for our own community of practitioners and for our wider society. It is also a center where people can be trained as Buddhist teachers, meditation instructors, Buddhist chaplains, and in various forms of Engaged Buddhism. It would also create the opportunity to study and discover ways that Buddhist teachings can be applied to the social issues of our times.

The Sati center provides the opportunity to explore original Buddhist texts and appreciate the richness of the tradition and lineage. It aims to facilitate ongoing dialog and exchange among meditators, teachers, students and scholars.

In addition to providing study opportunities to all who are interested in Buddhism, the Sati Center also aims to become a graduate level institution. Much like a seminary, it would be a place for the training needed for careers in Buddhism: such as Buddhist teachers, ministers, chaplains, and scholars.

Programs: The Sati Center would offer a variety of daylong classes as well as longer programs for in depth study and training, including year-long trainings in such areas as Buddhist chaplaincy, Buddhist pastoral counseling, teaching meditation, *sutta* study, etc.

It would continue to publish a journal of thoughtful and informative essays on various aspects of Buddhist teachings and practice (the first edition which is about to appear in print).

For those interested, the Sati Center would have a two-year curriculum of courses for obtaining a masters degree in Buddhism. Having such a degree is becoming a growing need for many people who want professional Buddhist careers. This includes hospital, hospice, and prison chaplains. It also includes people who want to become scholars and teachers of Buddhist studies.

Values: The Sati Center teaches the value of study, questioning, reflection and critical thinking. It shows a wider scope of Dharma practice beyond meditation and retreats.

Benefits for Practitioners: They can receive a systematic and thorough study of Buddhism. It would provide well-developed trainings in which mindfulness and Dharma applied to areas of modern life, e.g., education, health, yoga, social activism, etc. Interested, experienced practitioners will be able to receive training on how to bring the Dharma to others. This Dharma Training center will also help practitioners be part of a learning community with others with similar interests.

Financial model: Fees. While daylong and evening classes would be financed on *dana*, yearlong training programs would be offered for a fee. Charging for training programs teaches a mature relationship to money and a respect for learning. Rather than, or in addition to offering some scholarships, work scholarships would be made available. It has been established that people take learning programs more seriously when they have to pay for them. In addition, teachers often prepare better when they are being paid professional salaries for their work than when they teach without any expectation of financial support. Also, the important value of becoming financially responsible is better conveyed by charging fees for programs.

Sangha: The Insight Meditation Center

Opportunity: Creates a strong sense of community and friendships among Insight practitioners. It supports Buddhist practice in one's daily life. It provides an introduction to Buddhism and to meditation practice to many people.

Programs: Ongoing sittings and talks (e.g., Monday and Thursday evenings; Sunday, Tuesday and Wednesday mornings); practice programs such as the yearlong Dharma Practice Program, Daily Life Practice Programs; Family and parent programs; yoga classes; Online Courses; support groups; community chaplaincy services and programs; introductory classes in mindfulness and daylong vipassana retreats; volunteer programs; local community Dharma discussion groups; community outreach programs (e.g., caring for sangha members who are sick, working in local soup kitchens, putting on benefits for organizations we want to support such as Insight World Aid); responding to local school and church requests for introductions to Buddhism, social events such as organized by Dharma Friends, End-of-Life services (including perhaps an eventual Buddhist hospice).

Values: Importance of community, service and practicing in the ordinariness of daily life as lay people. Teaches the value of sharing in the responsibility and support for one's Dharma home.

Benefits for practitioners: It offers a clear path for entering the community and creates a sense of belonging. It helps ensure that members are cared for in times of need. It allows a person to cultivate long-term relationships with teachers. It supports a daily meditation practice as well as mindfulness in daily life.

Financial model: Dana and, possibly, membership. All of the programs are available for free and will continue to be so. It might be useful to consider also having a volunteer membership system (skillfully integrated into our dana culture) that would allow people to feel more a part of our community, as well as provide IMC a steady and known source of income. It also supports the idea that it is a healthy practice for people to be responsible for supporting their spiritual home.

Mutual Support of the Three Centers

While the three programs are distinct there will be a dynamic and supportive relationship between them. Both teachers and practitioners will flow freely between the three depending on their practice, preferences and needs. Teachers who may specialize in leading silent retreats may sometimes teach a training program. Teachers whose emphasis is with practice in daily life will have opportunities to teach silent retreats. One of the exciting aspects of this overall vision is how it gives us the opportunity to invite many teachers into our community. While they may come to teach mostly at a particular center, they may make guest appearances at the others.

In addition, one of the connections between the three program areas is financial. A possible activity of the IMC community could be helping to raise funds to support the retreat center (probably we would want to stop using IMC operating funds to support retreats as is done now). This is similar to the monastic/lay system of Theravada Buddhism: the monks are supported to practice and teach by the donations that come from the laity. In order for this to work, there needs to be a clearly understood and valued relationship between the members of the community center and the retreat program. This relationship is nurtured at the leadership level by the interactions between the IMC Board and the IRC leaders, both of whom can work to encourage the mutual support for the two institutions. Those practicing in the retreat center will thus feel their practice is being actively supported by the efforts of the community and the community has the privilege of supporting those who engage in deep contemplative work. All this should reinforce the teaching that no one practices alone or only for oneself; we practice for each other.

Robust communications between the three centers will facilitate the human and financial connections. Specific volunteer positions will be designated as “liaisons” between the centers; leaders from each center will meet regularly in a joint council; and community guidelines will be created about sharing information and documents.

Conclusion

The proposed structure of three distinct and mutually supportive practice arenas would allow our Insight community to be uniquely poised to help develop future generations of meditation teachers, to teach the Dharma in a meaningful and effective way and to create a strong sense of community among practitioners, while firmly embodying the values of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

The building blocks needed to actualize this vision are already in place. IMC is well established as a community meditation center, offering a wide range of programs, teachings and activities to support the practice of people in their everyday lives. The Sati Center for Buddhist Studies is 14 years old and has offered a rich assortment of classes, study programs and trainings. It has initiated a plan for developing into a Buddhist seminary with a well-developed curriculum of courses. The creation of the Insight Retreat Center is in process. We are currently in contract to buy a nursing home in Scotts Valley in which we plan to hold retreats for up to 40 people. Starting this Spring we will begin a fundraising campaign to raise funds to convert the building into a retreat center. If we raise enough money to do all the remodeling at once, we hope to be able to offer our first retreats by the Spring of 2012.

This is a creative and exciting time for our IMC community. We have the potential to create new institutions, programs, and a dynamic community of practitioners that will be inspiring to many people. It is our aspiration that we build something that conveys the central values and realization of Buddhism. It is our intention to have generosity, integrity, wisdom, and spiritual freedom be the hallmarks of our extended community.