

# A History of Seattle Insight Meditation Society

Compiled by Rosie Schwartz and Sooz Appel, with input from  
the SIMS founding Board of Directors / August 2011

It's a dark and rainy Tuesday night on Capitol Hill in Seattle. The parking lot at St. Mark's Bloedel Hall is filling up with members of Seattle Insight Meditation Society. People arrive and remove their shoes, find a place on the floor or in one of the chairs, visit the announcement boards and back table to see the many activities available, and quietly chat with friends. Soon the 45-minute meditation begins, followed by a dharma talk or discussion led by SIMS guiding teacher Rodney Smith. More than two hundred people are in this big room and it's quiet, save for an occasional cough and the sound of the outside door closing as a latecomer arrives. How did all of this get started?

About twenty years ago there was a small group of dharma practitioners living in Seattle. Individually they had attended retreats all over the country, including the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts as well Cloud Mountain Retreat Center in southwestern Washington. Each came to the dharma through his or her own circumstances, but they had a common desire: all wished for a local dharma teacher and dharma community in Seattle.

Several things happened simultaneously. Through different retreat experiences and dharma teachers, this small group heard of a new teacher—Rodney Smith—who had recently moved to Seattle from Texas to start a full-time job as director of Hospice of Seattle. Several Seattle students attended one of Steve Armstrong's Cloud Mountain retreats where he encouraged them to approach Rodney about expanding his teaching. Afterward, eight or ten from the group hosted a potluck dinner and invited Rodney. He gave a talk on the three jewels—the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. This teaching touched their hearts and strengthened their yearning for a local dharma community.

For the next five years or so nothing was officially organized. Rodney occasionally taught dharma classes sponsored by the Northwest Dharma Association. He taught beginning classes, led various sitting groups, travelled to other sanghas around the country, and worked full-time as the Hospice of Seattle director. Rodney's wife and life-partner, Ellen McCown, a longtime meditator, worked at the Northwest Dharma Association where among other duties she helped coordinate the registration for some of Rodney's early classes and retreats. Meeting in various locations over the years, the Seattle group's numbers grew and dwindled, practitioners came and went; sometimes practice was the focus and sometimes refreshments took the forefront. While there were a number of incarnations of sitting groups, "Blue Spruce" was the first name to be chosen for the group. The name refers to the beautiful blue spruce tree at Cloud Mountain. In Blue Spruce, some people wanted a guiding teacher—and Rodney would occasionally attend to give a dharma talk or lead a Q&A session—and some preferred a lay-led group. Those who wanted a local group with a guiding teacher went on to form the Seattle Insight Meditation Society, or SIMS.

These individuals had a vision and a hope: for Rodney to give more of his time to a local dharma organization, travel less, and eventually become a full-time guiding teacher. One sunny afternoon, over some goodies at Alki Bakery, three of these dharma students—Evan and Chris Prenovitz and Rosie Schwartz—decided to approach Rodney about this plan for him and a local sangha. Fortunately he was interested in the idea, but not in giving up his livelihood (that part would come later).

A board of directors was formed to include Chris Prenovitz, Evan Prenovitz (president), Rosie Schwartz (secretary), Ellen Sugarman (treasurer), Roy Tribelhorn, Eunice Nakao, Rodney Smith, and Ellen McCown.

After a great deal of planning, hard work, and dedication this group gave birth to SIMS. Choosing the name was interesting, as some didn't want our name to sound so much like IMS in Massachusetts. In the end, though, "SIMS" was an acronym everyone liked. SIMS was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) in August of 1998 with a full set of bylaws and a lofty mission statement. Its first newsletter was distributed in the summer of 1999, listing beginning classes, continuing classes, and nonresidential retreats at the Dominican Renewal Center in Edmonds with Rodney and visiting teachers. A brochure, website (created by Rosie's son, Loren), and t-shirt soon followed. Ellen McCown designed a SIMS logo depicting the Buddha's hand holding a flower. What was to be the first annual summer picnic was held. One of the board members was extremely generous with initial funds and the first board shared the huge list of tasks necessary to get an organization off the ground. These efforts were met with an immediate enthusiastic response from the larger community.

SIMS's first home was in the basement of Keystone Congregational Church in Wallingford. As the numbers grew, we moved to Congregation Beth Shalom in Wedgewood. When we outgrew that space, we settled in at St Mark's on Capitol Hill in Bloedel Hall.

The original board felt like a family—agreeing, disagreeing, laughing, crying, and letting their dedication to the dharma lead them. Creating SIMS was like a birth. It was very difficult for the original board members to pass on their responsibilities to other people because they realized they were "attached." As "parents" of SIMS, they wanted dearly for things to work out, and to work out as they had hoped. But, of course, they learned to let go and embrace change. Eventually Rodney gave up his Hospice job as his work situation changed and as SIMS became a viable organization.

The board evolved over the years. Evan Prenovitz, the first president, was followed by Ellen Sugarman, Sooz Appel, Barbara Chilcote, Craig Rowley, Phil Crean, and now Linda Taggart. Many sangha members have participated as board members and their roles and responsibilities have changed as SIMS has grown and evolved. Each president and the various board members put their heart and soul into their tenure, always bringing unique talents and perspectives to the work.

None of us could have imagined how SIMS would grow through the volunteer efforts of so many people—people who are grateful for sangha and the guidance that Rodney has provided. Today SIMS is a large and vibrant organization, filling Bloedel Hall weekly with more than two hundred people for our sit and dharma lesson. Six times a year, we bring visiting teachers for nonresidential retreats that attract hundreds of dharma seekers. Beginning classes are offered throughout the year (some classes attracting 150 to 200 students). Based on a model from Spirit Rock, we formed a *kalyana mitta* (“spiritual friend”) group network within SIMS. The KM groups provide a more intimate venue for people in the sangha, allowing members to further explore their own practices and meet others. Some KM groups meet for six months or a year; others have continued for over a decade. All KM facilitators are trained and supported throughout their tenure. A number of experienced students, called local dharma leaders, are now leading classes on various subjects and are helping to share some of Rodney’s teaching responsibilities. Dharma talks by Rodney and the visiting teachers are available for download on the SIMS website, a resource that is visited by thousands of people throughout the world each year.

We all extend our deepest appreciation for those early yogis and their vision and hope. By creating Seattle Insight, they and Rodney have given a lasting gift to our community.