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TEACHER TRANSITION IN THE INSIGHT MEDITATION MOVEMENT

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Introduction

In the next ten years, nearly all of the founding and senior teachers in the Insight movement will reduce or stop their teaching, and possibly some will die. We have just begun an important time of transition, worthy of reflection and considered action.

Buddhism in the West is very young. We are still learning what it is by our very acts of practicing and teaching it. We still have much to learn from the particular sufferings and challenges of our modern life, from the ancient texts, and from each other. The seed has sprouted, and it needs nourishment.

In some ways, there is nothing new happening here. Spiritual movements have been evolving beyond their founders for millennia, with a wide range of results. Buddhism itself has moved into new regions many times, as well as adapted to sweeping changes in a given region over time. We are fortunate to live in a time when there is access to such historical knowledge, as well as frameworks and tools from more modern disciplines.

Nonetheless, this is the present place and time. We must act within our particular circumstances, with the people who are present, and with the resources at hand. Although our case is not special, it is, like all cases, unique.

The Insight Meditation Movement in the West does not have a sharp definition, but neither is it vague or undefined. It was started by Westerners who trained at Theravada monasteries in Southeast Asia – these founding teachers include Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Christina Feldman, Christopher Titmuss, and Ruth Denison. Insight sanghas – local groups that arose after these teachers began teaching – feel a spiritual connection to them and the meditation centers they founded: Insight Meditation Society, Spirit Rock, Gaia House, and Dharma Dena.

Over the years, many other retreat teachers, community teachers, and other Dharma leaders have been recognized and/or trained – some 170 retreat teachers and hundreds of community and Dharma leaders. Now, there is a rich mix of teachers, some who mainly serve their own community or center, others who mainly teach retreats and are affiliated with the major retreat institutions, and some who do both. In addition, there are trained teachers who are more independent, and some whose organizations have multiple locations or are virtual.

There are more than 200 Insight sanghas ranging from small sitting groups to major institutions. Well over half could be called organizations, beyond a sitting group, and many are in fact legal organizations – religious nonprofits or even “churches” by definition.

Over the past dozen years, I have been fortunate to meet leaders and teachers from Insight sanghas all over the West – mostly the United States, but also Canada, Mexico, and Europe. This occurred through my work with the Buddhist Insight Network (BIN, since 2009) and the Insight Meditation Center (Gil Fronsdal’s group), as well as through years of attending retreats and Dharma events. BIN has run seven annual “InterSangha” conferences for leaders and teachers of Insight groups in the West that have been attended by 250 unique people from 80 groups.

In August 2015, I was asked by the board of the Seattle Insight Meditation Society (SIMS) to help with the transition when Rodney Smith retired. What followed was an interesting and fruitful engagement that included a daylong workshop for the board and interim teachers. A few months prior to that, I had been asked by Napa Valley Insight Meditation to assist in structuring their organization after it became a 501(c)3. It happens that my prior education and work include facilitating change within organizations, and I realized that all of this experience could come together into a written offering. This is the result.

In the course of this project, I spoke with board members, teachers, paid staff, and other leaders from diverse sanghas about their views and plans about teacher transition¹. I also drew from material learned at InterSangha meetings, and from the wider body of knowledge on spiritual teacher transition and organizational change.

Written for both teachers and organizational leaders, such as board members, key volunteers, and staff, this document offers a summary of the current state of the Insight movement along with some analysis and recommendations. It aspires to be a “guidebook” for use “in the field” as real organizations undergo real changes in the coming decade, but it will serve well if it finds use in any beneficial capacity.

It begins with an honest look at the mixed blessings of spiritual organizations and of the task of planning. Moving forward under the positive aspects of these, it then summarizes the current teacher transitions that have already occurred or are underway. We then move into top-level guidelines that are relevant for nearly all cases, although each group will need to tailor them for its situation. Next, there is a deeper look at a few particular issues that characterize the Insight movement’s situation; here, I am freer with offering my own views. Finally, some emerging trends in the Insight movement are identified, suggesting a cultural shift. There are no “conclusions” – this process simply rolls on.

It is worth noting that the transmission of the *Dharma* is a different matter than the evolution of *Dharma organizations*. The Dharma continues to flow from heart to heart, as it has for millennia, while the organizations, structures, and bodies that shape and contain the teachings arise, change, and pass. The unfolding of the Dharma is a larger process than our individual consciousness. It is possible that this document is part of the “the Dharma’s” participation in its own continuation: It seemed to write itself. Any errors are, of course, my own.

Kim Allen
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¹ Thanks to the people I spoke with from the following groups: Against the Stream, Common Ground Meditation Center, East Bay Meditation Center, Insight Meditation Center, Insight Meditation Community of Colorado, Insight Meditation Community of Washington DC, InsightLA, Insight Meditation Society, Insight Meditation South Bay, Insight Santa Cruz, Marin Sangha, New York Insight, Portland Insight Meditation Community, San Francisco Insight, Seattle Insight Meditation Society, Show Me Dharma, and Spirit Rock Meditation Center.

Why Think about Teacher Transition and Dharma Organizations?

Contemplating topics such as the future of the Insight movement, teacher transition (or its more institutional term, “succession planning”), and the structure of Dharma organizations may bring up feelings of ambivalence, resistance, or amused detachment. They do at times for this author. I wish to address some of these concerns up front.

Many of the most senior Insight teachers come from a generation that is characteristically mistrustful of organizations, or of too much structure. This mistrust is not unfounded. It is a property of organizations that they grow into entities capable of protecting themselves through exclusion and restriction of people in various ways. A spiritual organization can be clarifying, nourishing, and protective for some practitioners in some stages of their practice, while the same structure may be limiting to others. As one Insight teacher said, the institution may overwhelm the soft voice in the heart that seeks freedom.

Nonetheless, for humans to cooperate on the scale that is now possible in the Insight world, structures are needed. Nor should communities without structure be romanticized: Without organizational integrity, the charisma of the teacher has freer reign, often with detrimental consequences if the teacher still has spiritual development to do. And in fact, practice in community, a valued dimension of the Buddhist path, includes the practice of running the community.

One way to mitigate the risks – of too much *or* too little structure – is to make the organization a conscious and self-reflective entity, and part of the whole field of Dharma practice. From this perspective, teacher transition is part of a natural and organic change in the Dharma group, to be met and engaged with like other life changes.

A more serious issue in teacher transition is denial. Both teachers and students can be lulled into childlike thinking that the teacher will be there forever. Or else the topic of teacher succession may be avoided through the excuse of busyness. This is not unlike the way we avoid thinking about our own death or that of people we love. Seen this way, acknowledging and considering a teacher’s retirement or death counters ignorance.

A more subtle issue is a vague fear that opening this topic could create conflict. There may be an intuitive sense that the power and authority issues, or ideas about the future of the sangha, are not completely agreed upon between teacher and board, or among board members. If indeed such a disparity exists, the conflict will emerge at some point anyway.

It is still worth asking whether planning is really worthwhile. Plans rarely work as expected. And when the time of transition arises, the necessary resources will be at hand to take some kind of next step. And anyway, it is natural that “things arise and pass,” so perhaps no special action is needed. Certainly there is wisdom in these statements.

This document is offered as one possible resource for those interested in thinking about teacher succession at this time. It picks up the current trend toward seeing the organization and the teacher as interdependent, and it assumes that Dharma organizations, despite their limitations, can be healthy vehicles of the Dharma.

A word on terminology: Some terms used here can have several meanings; readers are encouraged to adopt the meaning that works for them and their sangha. “Teacher” refers

generally to a person who teaches the Dharma. But some groups reserve this term for the guiding teacher or a person who is authorized to teach retreats, preferring “mentor” or some other term for senior students who can give talks and possibly mentor beginning students. Also, the term “founding teacher” is used to mean the first guiding teacher of a group, but some teachers emphasize that they were asked to teach and do not wish to imply that they proactively founded the group. The terms “organization” and “sangha” are meant to refer generally to a group engaged in Dharma practice and teaching. Rather than define them precisely, they are used roughly equivalently, with “organization” chosen when the context is more administrative, and “sangha” chosen when the Dharma aspect is more prominent. Because nearly all Dharma groups are administered by people who are also students in the group, there is no concept of an “organization” separate from the “students” it serves, as in a typical non-profit.

It Is Already Happening

A number of groups have already begun to blaze the trail of teacher transition. Please note that the following brief summaries do not properly convey the intensity and sometimes tumult of going through the experience. In all cases, ripples from the transition are still playing out.

- *Insight Santa Cruz*: In 2011, founding teacher Mary Grace Orr retired and moved to another state. In the years beforehand, she created a teacher’s council and effected a deliberate transition process that was nonetheless challenging. The sangha is now guided by Bob Stahl and the teacher’s council.
- *Show Me Dharma*: Founding teacher Ginny Morgan died of cancer in 2013. The group continued on with a teacher’s council and has also undergone organizational changes and a grief process.
- *San Francisco Insight*: Founding teacher Eugene Cash sustained a serious head injury in 2013, and for several months it was unclear if he would ever return to teaching². He has now, but during the interim, the organization underwent some restructuring.
- *Marin Sangha*: In 2013, founding teacher Phillip Moffitt told his group of his need to pull back, and in 2014 stepped away from involvement in running the sangha. The informal advisory committee found itself stepping up to become the Board of Directors, and is now in the process of inviting in new guiding teachers.
- *Seattle Insight*: Founding teacher Rodney Smith announced in early 2015 that he would pull back and retire over a two-year period. Events changed more quickly, and the board found itself in full charge in mid-2015. The group currently has two interim guiding teachers.
- *Dhamma Dena*: Founding teacher Ruth Denison, who is also recognized as a founder of the Insight tradition in the West, died in February 2015. She is the first of the main founders to die. Her center continues to host retreats taught by senior students, and there is effort to maintain the physical site in the Mojave Desert.

In addition, some of the major retreat centers are going through a similar process on a larger organizational scale. *Spirit Rock*, finding itself in need of restructuring, created a “review panel” of people from all across the organization to understand how best to go forward. The result – through the help of a skilled facilitator – was a re-writing of the bylaws; a clear defining of teacher, board, and executive duties; and the creation of the Guiding Teacher role, which was then co-filled by Phillip Moffitt

² This case highlights the relevance of forethought about the sudden disability of the teacher.

and Sally Armstrong. This has helped significantly as Jack Kornfield has broadened his activities beyond Spirit Rock.

IMS is very much in the middle of its succession planning process. The details are being handled by the Guiding Teachers (including two founders, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg) and the Executive Director; the work involves creating guidelines for future teachers who will come to the center, such that *IMS* can fulfill its mission and continue to move toward its organizational vision.

This document is written more for sanghas. But the formality of the processes taking place at the retreat centers is worth noting. Indeed, some sanghas, such as Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, are also undertaking formal succession planning³. It is hoped that each group might find in these pages some useful ideas for its own teacher transition process.

Broad Guidelines for the Process

These guidelines have been distilled from the interviews about Insight groups' experiences. Some details were filled in from the broader body of knowledge:

Start early

A time horizon of five years or even longer may be appropriate for a longtime teacher. The founding or guiding teacher could begin gentle conversations with senior student leaders or board members. He or she could also start bringing in younger teachers, giving them chances to teach and be seen by the sangha, and mentoring them. Communication with the wider sangha can be done consciously.

Have a good cash reserve

This is to assure that the organization is not trying to go through the transition from a financially strapped position. If possible, it may be worthwhile to deliberately create a fund a few years in advance.

Involve the appropriate people

Each organization has a different structure and a different culture. Each must discern which people are most appropriate to involve in discussions and actions around the teacher transition. For instance, some organizations are most comfortable keeping the task only among the teacher(s) and board.

For those intending to have broader community involvement, there are various options. A large organization may create a review committee from people across different aspects of the organization. The committee should consciously conform to the group's intentions around diversity and inclusivity in all their dimensions. A smaller group may choose to have full-community meetings that bring together sangha members, the board, newer teachers, and the founder. In either of these cases, it is important to set clear expectations about people's roles: Are they offering opinions; do they have a vote; will they actually be making the decisions? If this is not well-conveyed, misunderstanding and disharmony can result.

³ CIMC has already seen the retirement of one of its three guiding teachers, Michael Grady. The impact of retirement may be lessened when other established teachers remain at a center.

It is also good for the conversation to be ongoing. Meetings can continue after the main teacher change happens, because the full extent of a transition spreads across either side of the actual change.

Finally, be sure to *thank* everyone who was involved. Follow up with clear messages about what has been decided, why certain things were done and not others, and other items that “close the loop.”

Fashion a harmonious overlap

The overlap between the departing and the newer teacher(s) should be the right length, if circumstances allow. “Overlap” refers to the time when everyone is aware that the elder teacher is departing and that these particular teachers are the successors. The optimal length varies, and is perhaps two years. If the founder departs too abruptly, he or she cannot adequately transmit the important cultural elements to the arriving teacher(s) or get the board ready to take more responsibility. But if the overlap is too long, then the transfer of power is not happening in a timely fashion, and the development of the newer teachers can be hindered.

Consider restructuring

There are many possible structures for a spiritual organization. A foundation known to be fairly stable consists of three legs: A person in the teacher role providing spiritual presence and guidance; a strong board consisting of people with diverse skills in governance, finance, communication, and other areas; and a strong administrative leader (such as an Executive Director) who can head up the management of the organization.

A founding teacher often plays multiple roles in this triangle, obscuring the need for each one to be present. As the teacher pulls back, it can be helpful to carefully consider who will fill each of these roles. Significant change may be needed, and this takes time.

Other structures are also possible for a sangha. This vast topic is discussed a bit more fully in the sections below on “Who/What Is the Successor?” and “Who Will Do the Work.”

Act for diversity

A teacher transition is also an important time to revisit both the near- and long-term intentions for the group. Many groups are finding this to be an important time to act positively toward increasing cultural diversity and awareness. This could include placing more people of color in leadership and teaching positions and educating white sangha members in cultural awareness. Some groups are explicitly focusing on age diversity, working to welcome more young people.

Expect strong emotions

Without exception, this research indicated that strong emotions occur during teacher transitions. There are two factors at work here. First, there will be sadness, fear, anger, and anxiety by people in the sangha as the teacher pulls back. In many ways, it is a grief process, and thus it is natural for such feelings to emerge. As in grief, it is best for these emotions to be acknowledged and accepted in order that they move through.

Also, if the group has grown up around the teacher, it is likely that the teacher invisibly contains and manages certain conflicts and strong personalities among the leaders and senior students. As the teacher begins to pull back and transfer power, these forces erupt.

Handling emotions is an area where Dharma practice is particularly supportive, and where sanghas may fare better than other types of organization during a transition. Perhaps the most important quality of character during transitions is patient endurance, the willingness to just keep showing up.

Expect a drop in attendance

Many people attending a sangha are attracted to the energy and teachings of the founder, and some will not keep coming when that energy shifts. Another factor is that any major change tends to prompt departure. Even groups that have undergone “positive” changes like getting their own building have seen a decrease just after the change.

In the case of teacher transition, the drop in attendance may become “the new normal,” or attendance may increase again after a new teacher steps forward, and people attracted to that teacher’s energy begin to come. This relates to the above point about creating a harmonious overlap.

Expect the unexpected

Even with a careful, intentional process, unexpected turns of events can and will happen. The best preparation is developing a sangha with good channels of communication, transparency, and some confidence in its ability to see things through.

In some cases, it may be appropriate to seek guidance or resources outside the sangha. At least one sangha benefited greatly from bringing in nonprofit consultants (in this case from Executive Service Corps) to train the board and executive director. There are also resources within the Dharma community.

While the above points offer general guidance for a (possibly) smoother transition, a number of more specific issues also emerged from this research. The following sections expand upon these.

Who/What Is the Successor?

When a founding or guiding teacher is leaving, it is a given that one or more teachers will continue with the process of offering the Dharma and holding the spiritual function of the group. But it is not clear that this person or group of people is the only “successor.” The organization itself is also continuing on, and is an integral part of the process.

Much of this is a matter of perception. While there are many different perspectives on the teacher-organization relationship and dynamic, the three described here capture much of the current range in the Insight movement.

First is the idea that the teacher carries the essence of the sangha, and the organization is there chiefly as administrative support. Such groups feel comfortable aiming to “replace” their guiding teacher with another guiding teacher, who will again carry most of the responsibility to the sangha members. The

current teacher is often given the authority and responsibility to choose the successor (see the section below on “Who Will Choose the Succeeding Teacher” for more discussion of this). Although the way things operate will be different with a new person, it is understood that the sangha will adapt and will continue on with the same structure.

A second way of thinking says that it is best to replace a strong (and beloved) founding / guiding teacher with a Teacher Council. These teachers are generally younger and may be senior students of the departing teacher, but not always – it can be good practice to bring in new people. In some cases, they have already been participating in sangha governance for a while, in parallel with teaching at the sangha. One teacher on the council may be chosen as “lead teacher” or “guiding teacher,” but it is a very different role than the original teacher had in that it is much more collaborative.

These groups find themselves planted squarely in the arena of teacher-organization interdependence. Typically the board or other leaders have some say in how the Teacher Council fits into the whole dynamic, and may even influence who can be on the council. This second way is probably the most common one in groups that are considering how to continue after a well-known, senior teacher retires.

A third perspective is that the organization has the chief responsibility to the sangha – specifically, the responsibility to find one or more teachers to continue offering Buddhist teachings in line with its mission. The departing teacher may assist by helping to create written guidelines or standards for teachers, and perhaps by training a number of younger teachers to these standards. (In the first two cases above, it is more likely that the departing teacher simply chooses successor(s) without stated guidelines). The executive leaders may explicitly consider whether the organization is a viable support or “umbrella” for teachers in the area, such that they would choose to affiliate with that sangha rather than be independent teachers.

In this model, teachers may be less involved in administration and governance than in the second case, and due to the strength of the organization, may actually need to adapt to the policies and procedures being used. An administrative leader at a group moving in this direction stated that they were evolving toward being less “teacher-centric,” and more of a self-sustaining Buddhist organization that would attract a number of new teachers.

As noted, the main difference here is in perception – there is a spectrum from more “teacher-centric” to more “organization-centric.” The trend uncovered in this research is a shift toward the organization-centric end of the spectrum. It is typical for spiritual movements to go in this direction as they evolve beyond their founders.

Many teachers and organizational leaders will resonate with one of these three stances. Challenges arise in a group when there are significant differences between which perspective people favor. It can be helpful to begin talking about this topic early in the succession planning process.

New teachers: There is yet another voice in this matter: That of the younger, incoming teachers. For the first time, Insight teachers are in the position to “inherit” an existing sangha, obviating the need to build a new organizational structure. This is in many ways a great blessing, enabled by the dedication and care of the earlier teachers. However, it is also true that the sangha will carry some patterns and challenges from the prior teacher, and the new teacher may wish to make some changes. It is important to include the voice of the succeeding teacher(s) in the transition process.

Interim teachers: A model worth investigating is the deliberate appointment of an interim teacher who is expressly *not* allowed to become the successor. Some Christian churches – who have much more experience with spiritual leader transition than we have in the Dharma world – have created a largely successful process of bringing in an interim minister whose job is to help the community let go of the prior leader, rearticulate its values and vision for moving forward, and find and welcome a new leader. There are some useful resources about this in the “Further Reading” section at the end.

Somehow, sanghas will have to address these issues, finding a way for the new teacher(s) and the organization (often represented by a board, or some kind of leadership council) to collaborate in continuing the group. This is best done in the context of specific people and a specific sangha with a particular history – it cannot be done well by abstractly deciding what model to follow.

One specific piece of this process is worth highlighting:

Who Will Choose the Succeeding Teacher(s)?

This is the point where transmission of the Dharma intersects with continuance of the container for the Dharma. It is understood that Dharma teachers are responsible for transmission of the Dharma, including the recognition and support of people who will continue to teach it. Dharma teachers are in the position to judge the depth and embodiment of wisdom in a person, as well as his or her ability to teach others how to awaken.

However, which particular teacher(s) lead a certain group may not only be the guiding teacher’s decision. Similar to the way teacher and student are co-dependent – one not existing without the other – teacher and organization are interdependent in the current Insight world. Each one grows to match the other. Hence, bringing in a new teacher is less like filling a blank slot and more like grafting a new plant onto an existing one. Only certain ones will “take.” (See also the guideline above called “Fashion a harmonious overlap”).

Some teachers and groups are beginning to articulate these issues of authority. The whole range exists: From the guiding teacher having full power to choose other teachers, to the board having final say in who will be the guiding teacher, along with the ability to remove a teacher. Many groups fall in between, or have more nuanced ways that board and teacher collaborate on who will be the successor(s).

Who Will Do the Work?

When there is a strong guiding teacher and the whole group has built up around this person, the teacher plays a critical role in keeping everything running. When he or she steps away, it can feel like no one else can handle what the teacher used to do. The board or other key volunteers realize they will be responsible for many things now – without the special presence of that teacher.

Many boards feel overwhelmed at this point. Rather than reacting to the overwhelm and making hasty decisions, it is worth taking time to proceed with care. In some cases, a small number of people are struggling to do too much of the work of the sangha. This can come about when the group has grown significantly while still habitually relying on a handful of dedicated volunteers. In other cases, the

teacher has come to rely on a small group of trusted senior students to handle the main work. In either case, with the linchpin of the guiding teacher going away, the system is not sustainable.

Another factor is that many of the most capable volunteers in today's sanghas have been practicing and serving for many years, and may be of similar age to the retiring teacher. Some are ready to let go of their responsibilities simply due to life changes, and the departure of the teacher will prompt them to do so. Hence, it is important to cultivate younger volunteers. Some groups do manage to have a large, vibrant set of volunteers well before the teacher is departing, especially if they had the foresight to create and fill a volunteer director position.

Whatever the situation, when a group reaches the point of teacher transition, there may suddenly be many questions about who will do what. As noted in one of the guidelines above ("Consider restructuring"), it may be a good time to re-examine people's roles and responsibilities – or maybe to examine them for the first time.

A generally successful leadership model for a spiritual organization is to have three functions: A teacher (or teacher's council) in the role of spiritual guide, a board of people with diverse skills and knowledge in the role of steward and strategist, and a competent administrator in the role of executive director. However, these functions may overlap or play out in different ways depending on the specific people involved.

Turning just to the board and administrative functions, here are some representative models seen in current Insight groups, all of which can work well under appropriate conditions:

1. The board does all the key work, and there are perhaps a few other volunteers for non-critical tasks.
2. Each board member is a committee chair for a certain area of responsibility. The chair can choose to do the work alone, or if it's too much, can recruit other (non-board) volunteers and create a team. Board meetings include "reports" from each chair.
3. The board is more of a governing board, and the responsibility for key areas of work is taken by "directors" or "managers" who are typically not on the board (but could be). Each of these directors handles a crew of volunteers.
4. The board is mainly involved in governance (and perhaps fundraising), and the most important administrative work is done by paid staff, who are usually overseen by the guiding teacher. In addition, there are volunteers for less critical work. There is more information on paid staff in Appendix A.

It is helpful for the leaders of a group to take time to discern what the actual current structure is, and then to consider if changes are needed.

This is also a point in the process when the whole idea of an organizational structure can seem burdensome, conflict-ridden, and distant from the Dharma. Hence, it is also important to reconnect with the wider aims and aspirations of the sangha – the spiritual impetus that helped bring the group together and grow it to this point. Much more than mere administrative work, a sangha is a container and home in which people can practice liberating teachings, and experience and share their fruit.

Reflecting on the benefits of creating a spiritual home helps counter burnout. But it would be remiss not to warn of an associated danger: Getting too wrapped up in the organization itself, such that the liberative aim is lost.

In MN 48.12, the Buddha is quoted saying: “Although a [practitioner] may be active in various matters for his companions in the holy life, yet he has a keen regard for training in the higher virtue, training in the higher mind, and training in the higher wisdom.” In the sutta, this attitude is taught as a component of Right View and – significantly – as a factor that leads to community harmony.

The passage does not counsel avoidance or denigration of organizational support work, but does acknowledge that community affairs are a potential distraction from Dharma practice. When serious practice is kept in the forefront, the group can function well together. Sangha leaders may ask themselves if they maintain this “keen regard” for training. Once the group has re-centered in its purpose, it can consider the longer-term sustainability of offering the Dharma.

Financial Support for the Teacher

It is good for the sangha to be conscious of how the current teacher sustains her or his livelihood. One dimension is whether the teacher is engaged only in Dharma teaching, or if there is some other work activity also. Teachers who only teach may be supported in one or more of these ways: A partner who works, a benefactor, inherited wealth, personal wealth earned before becoming a teacher, fees from courses, royalties from books or other works, donations from students, or a (donated) stipend from a sangha. Only a handful rely solely on the last two.

For teachers who also engage in other work, there is still the question of what fraction of income comes from Dharma teaching. Some teachers rely on teaching income as a crucial portion of the whole, while others are essentially sustained by the other work and teach in addition.

If a sangha has grown up around a guiding teacher who did not need to rely on Dharma teaching for livelihood, then it is a new idea to think about supporting a teacher financially. This may be an issue if an established founding teacher with a working partner or personal wealth is being succeeded by one or more younger teachers without this kind of support.

In most cases, teaching in a community is not a viable livelihood by itself within the model of relying on donations from sangha participants. Monthly teacher dana in the basket (and online) could range from \$500 perhaps up to \$1,500 – this means a maximum of \$18,000 per year, or perhaps as little as \$6,000. The dana is increased if there is a year-end fundraising drive that includes an appeal for the teachers. Nonetheless, the total may not be livable for people, especially if they have children or are located in an expensive area⁴.

⁴ Some fraction of community teachers also have income from teaching residential retreats. And some sanghas assure a certain level of dana to the teacher for a given event (a “minimum dana”), but these schemes do not set the minimum at a level that would sustain livelihood; they are simply means of assuring that a teacher receives a respectable amount of money for coming to teach.

Other groups are taking more proactive and interactive measures to intentionally support a guiding teacher's livelihood⁵. With conscious fundraising for this purpose, some sanghas have been able to offer a guiding teacher a regular, ongoing donation (i.e., a stipend, but sanghas still use the language of offering dana). The range discovered in this research spanned \$25,000 to \$60,000, with more near the low end. Some sanghas have also found the means to reimburse the teacher for certain expenses such as health insurance.

Some communities are creating arrangements that expand the notion of what "teaching on a dana basis" means. They regard teacher and *organization* as interdependent, not just teacher and student. In current Insight culture, "the dana system" means that students receive teachings free of charge and respond by making an offering to that teacher. Donations to the organization are usually separate. This may seem natural when teaching is considered separate from the community, organization, or other container in which it happens, but in a modern sangha this division may be artificial.

One way that the interrelation of teacher and sangha can manifest is in having a single donation basket and a clean, explicit way for the teacher and organization to mutually support each other. Here is one example: A longstanding organization that is still under the guidance of its founding teacher has a single dana basket. When a guest teacher teaches, two-thirds goes to the teacher and one-third to the organization. When the founding teacher teaches, all the funds go to the organization (and this is true even for teaching outside the community – it is all brought back and given to the organization). Periodically, the board reviews the finances and makes an offering to the founding teacher.

There may be other creative options also. One sangha is aiming to help its teacher by serving as a network to find housing, or even by offering a room or backyard studio from a sangha member at reduced rent. Going forward, more groups may begin to think creatively about how to supply requisites to a teacher.

However, a clear necessity in teacher support is the conscious creation of a culture of generosity, in which sangha members are able to talk openly and think maturely about money. A notable fraction of sanghas are not yet able to work on this level.

Emerging Trends

It is possible to identify some emerging trends in the Insight Movement at this time. The following items are not exhaustive, but were selected as the most potent for fueling significant cultural changes in the Insight movement. As these play out, large changes could be seen.

Virtual teaching

The Internet is allowing teachers and students to connect much more easily. Audio recordings from hundreds of teachers are readily available, and organizations such as Worldwide Insight offer "live" Dharma talks across the globe. Online courses, some of them including real-time small-group or even individual instruction with a teacher, are blossoming. Sanghas are starting to experiment with streaming

⁵ In discussing conscious support of livelihood in this section, the word "teacher" means a clear guiding teacher, or possibly co-guiding teachers, rather than the full spectrum of people called "teachers."

a teacher for their weekly meetings, rather than having someone “live,” giving them access to a much broader base of teachers than those who could come physically.

And yet, virtual interaction differs substantially from personal contact. “Transmission” is an energetic exchange that flows best in physical proximity. Virtual teaching offers only a facsimile of the deep relationships that nourish both student and teacher. While essential to the ongoing development of the Dharma, online teaching can never be its essence. It is important to find ways to grow and deepen the in-person portion of Dharma teaching alongside the growth of the virtual portion.

Broadening of the locus of Dharma teaching

Of the approximately 170 recognized retreat teachers, only about 35% sit on the teacher councils of Spirit Rock, IMS, or Gaia House. Dharma teaching is becoming broader, more diversified, and less localized around the retreat centers.

A 2014 survey by the Buddhist Insight Network indicated that 46% of retreat teachers feel that the capacity of retreat centers has constrained participation in their retreats over the past three years, and two-thirds of retreat teachers feel that cost has been a limitation. These constraints may drive innovations in where and how teachings are offered. It is too soon to know how the changes will manifest, but such a broadening is potentially healthy.

Also, a handful of individual sanghas have been able to purchase their own retreat center, and others aspire to do so. This may continue to occur as sanghas grow and gain wealth.

Explicit, “objective” qualifications

Teacher “qualifications” are being systematized, at both sanghas and retreat centers. Many groups are starting to write down (and state publically) how many years of practice, how much retreat time, what personal characteristics, and what kind of training and education are required to become a teacher at that group, and the same is happening at the retreat centers regarding who can come to teach. This accords with Western values of fairness and achievement. It has both advantages and disadvantages compared to other ways of qualifying teachers.

A larger-scale community

Accompanying the teacher transition process is a growing awareness of a larger level of community in the Insight Movement. Evidence for this is the success of the InterSangha meetings and online resources of the Buddhist Insight Network. BIN aims to bring together teachers and sangha leaders from across the Western Insight world in order to share wisdom and create a stronger sense of (healthy) identity. There were a few earlier attempts at this same idea, but BIN seems to have gained the first foothold.

BIN has taken a sound first step in becoming a vibrant network of people sharing information. But there is even greater potential for a network or community of this nature: As an Ethics and Reconciliation (EAR) Council for conflicts in sanghas, or as a financial support organization for teachers with medical challenges, young children, or who teach in low-income communities – and there are numerous other possibilities too. The Insight community is at a choice point about how it supports this larger level of community as we move into a new era of the Insight Movement.

Onward

The founders of the Insight Meditation Movement are moving on. The organizations created around the founders and other senior teachers will remain and continue to play a role even as newer teachers step up. The Dharma world now includes this more complex set of players.

The Dharma continues to flow along in the West, from heart to heart, teacher to student. Supportive of this, we have some choice about how to create the vehicle for its ongoing flow. This document has offered a summary of how various Insight groups are approaching teacher transition, and some suggestions for how to navigate the change. To move forward with sincerity and integrity, we will need each other's help. And in the end, of course, all will be fine. It already is fine.

Gratitude

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Further Reading

Here are some suggestions to probe more deeply into these topics. They go in five very different directions.

1. Interim ministry in churches: The Unitarian Universalist Association supports its member congregations with a well-developed [Interim Ministry](#) program; the link gives practical resources. In addition, the resources of the [Alban Institute](#) may be of interest. Although this organization focuses mostly on Christian, Jewish, and UU congregations, it is possible to glean insights on the social and psychological dynamics of leadership change. See especially [Making Transitions](#), [Whither Interim Ministry](#), and [Congregational Leadership and Pastoral Transitions](#).
2. [The Nonprofit Leadership Transition and Development Guide](#) by Tom Adams (Jossey-Bass, 2010). This manual distills the wisdom of a longtime nonprofit consultant who has worked with hundreds of organizations. He presents practical and easily digestible advice, some of which could work for sanghas also.
3. "The Challenge of Community" by Ajahn Tiradhammo, Chapter 16 in [Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia](#), edited by Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Univ. of California Press, 2002). Ajahn Tiradhammo analyzes and comments upon the situation of Western Forest monasteries attempting to adapt Asian models of monastery structures. Some of his keen insights apply well to lay sanghas also. Monastic groups have more experience with changing leaders, as abbots move around.

4. On Charisma and Institution Building by Max Weber, edited by S.N. Eisenstadt (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968). This is very theoretical, but does directly address the situation of a religious founder moving out of the picture, and uses the Buddha as one example. Weber describes some common processes that groups undergo around “the routinization of charisma.”
5. The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook, by Peter Senge (Crown Business, 1994). This is a business book, and contains business language. But Senge’s aim is to bring *systems thinking* into organizations, and many sanghas could benefit from adopting this interconnected and creative approach. With an open mind, it is possible to adapt some of the exercises to a sangha board. (The Fieldbook is the later and more practical counterpart to Senge’s theoretical book, The Fifth Discipline).

Appendix A: Paid Staff

Some sanghas choose to support some of the core administrative work that keeps them functioning smoothly – that is, they have paid staff. Generally, two to five full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff positions are adequate, based on these current examples from Insight sanghas (excluding the retreat centers):

Sangha	FTE	People	Positions
InsightLA	4.75	5	Full-time Executive Director and four part-time
Cambridge Insight Meditation Center	~4	6	Full-time Executive Director and five others from 8 to 30 hrs/wk
East Bay Meditation Center	2.9	5	Full-time Executive Director; three half-time (Asst Dir, Development Coord, Event Coord); and Community Coord
Common Ground Meditation Center	2.3 (soon)	3	Three part-time people (Bookkeeper and two other administrators); in the process of increasing their time
Against the Stream	2.25	4	Full-time Executive Director and three part-time (San Fran manager and two admin in LA)
Insight Meditation Community of Washington DC	2	3	Three part-time (Administrative Director and two others)
New York Insight	2	2	Full-time Executive Director and Deputy Director

In addition, several groups have a paid part-time assistant for the guiding teacher. It is perhaps worth noting that one group, Metta Programs, used to have paid staff, and has recently moved to an all-volunteer model. Not surprisingly, it is typically larger groups who employ people, but not all the large groups do so. Seattle Insight, Insight Meditation Community of Berkeley, San Francisco Insight, and Insight Meditation Center are all-volunteer organizations, and the last even runs a residential retreat center through volunteers.

There are a number of ways that having paid staff or having all volunteers may be held in the sangha's awareness. Groups that rely solely on volunteers cite the benefits of practicing in a field of generosity or the value of offering an alternative to mainstream capitalist thinking. Those with staff note the benefits of offering people a way to make a livelihood in the Dharma. The particular circumstances of each sangha influence the choice of having staff or not.

Addendum after publication: Mountain Stream Meditation Center also has a paid staff position for the Volunteer Director.