



Asheville Insight Meditation

AIM MEMBER SURVEY RESULTS

September, 2016



September 13, 2016

Dear Sangha Members,

What follows is a report prepared by the AIM Board of Directors on the results of our annual survey of AIM members. This report gives not only an overall picture of the demographics of the AIM community, but also addresses suggestions, proposals, and criticisms by sangha members regarding a wide range of sangha policies, issues, and programs.

As a Board, we are committed to providing all AIM members with the opportunity of having their voices heard, and we welcome your input and feedback on how to create a more vibrant, loving, and healthy spiritual community. We take your concerns seriously and hope that this is evident from this write-up. Although it is impossible to satisfy everyone's requests, in this report, you will see that we have attempted to address each suggestion and criticism made, and indicate our responses and any subsequent actions taken.

There has been tremendous growth this year in the range of sangha activities. Among the new initiatives are: the revitalization of the AIM Care Team in support of members in need; transition into a new completely renovated facility with more than twice the previous space; introduction of a Family Meditation session; new classes offered in T'ai Chi and Yoga Nidra; and the creation of five new KM "Sangha Circle" groups for small, heartfelt sharing and discussion. This, in addition to a packed schedule of 10 meditation sessions per week, and other already existing activities such as the Book Club, the Hiking Club, the Singing Bowls meditation, the monthly potluck, the community service project, Introduction to Buddhism classes . . . the list goes on and on. We have a lot of balls in the air. We are, *truly*, building a cohesive and diverse spiritual community.

But all of this comes with a cost. Our loyal Core Members and team of Volunteers have been instrumental in enabling us to meet the challenge of sustaining this high level of activity. But to continue this level of intensity, as well as to be able to introduce even more vital activities, such as nationally known guest speakers, we need increased funding and more volunteer help. The heart of our funding as a sangha is the Core Membership program, and the implementation of our programs is dependent on volunteers. We hope that when you read in this report of the success we have already had, you will be motivated to lend your support, both financially and in terms of increased volunteer efforts.

Everything that happens at AIM happens because of your generosity and volunteer efforts. We encourage you to consider what the value is, TO YOU, of being a part of a vibrant spiritual community like this, and ask yourself "Am I able and willing to do more?"

For our part, all of us continue to be available to you to offer your suggestions for how we may create a more vibrant, healthy community. The more we all take responsibility of ownership for the sangha, the more it will be a thriving community.

Respectfully submitted,

AIM Board of Directors:

Ronya Banks ~ David Schweizer ~ Sherry Schweizer
Giorgio Cave ~ Scot Walker ~ Suzanne Hahn

Brief Summary of AIM Survey Results

Gender: 56.84% female

Age: 84.21% over 45 years old

How I Learned About AIM: 44.21% from Internet

Where Most AIM Members Live: 29.47% North Asheville

Meditation Experience: 90.52% more than 1 yr; 45.26% more than 10 yrs.

Member Retention: 52.63% attending more than 1 yr; 30.52% attending more than 2 yrs.

New Member Recruitment: 26.32% joined in last 6 months

Volunteerism: 23.53% volunteer regularly

Attendance: 35.37% attend Sunday meditation regularly; 29.11% attend Thursday meditation regularly

Facility: 86.91% rate facility as “excellent” or “good”; only 1.19% rate it as below average

Teachers: 83.34% rate teachers as “excellent” or “good”; only 1.19% rate them as below average

Atmosphere: 88.23% feel “warmly welcomed”; 82.14% feel “strongly supported”

AIM Survey Results

A. Demographics of AIM Membership

- **Gender** – In contrast to traditional religious groups with a patriarchal structure, at AIM women predominate – **56.84%** of the respondents are women, with **5.26%** declining to indicate their gender. AIM appreciates its many male leaders, supporters, and volunteers. But, with a female founder and Lead Teacher, and half the leadership team being women, AIM tends to also have somewhat of a matriarchal structure. In addition, many of the volunteer committees and projects are headed by women.
- **Age** – We are, for the most part, an older group of practitioners with **84.21%** of respondents over the age of **45**. Recently, however, we are attracting more younger members, and age diversity is a conscious concern that we are addressing. The recent addition of a family meditation session for children is also increasing our age diversity.
- **Source of Information about AIM** – The survey indicates that the majority of AIM members learned of AIM through the Internet. While this indicates success in creating an effective and appealing website, it also suggests that in addition to our Mountain Xpress ad, we need to put increased effort into other forms of community outreach to attract new members who may not be actively looking for a spiritual group on the Internet. It is also worth mentioning that several of you have also come at the invitation of someone you respect. As a result, you may want to invite people you care about to attend one of AIM's meditation sessions.
- **Location** – It is noteworthy that almost a third of our respondents live in North Asheville with only **7%** living downtown. This is significant in view of a few of your complaints that the new North Asheville location is not as convenient. In fact, the largest percent by far of sangha members live in North Asheville, and access to the new facility via Rt. 19/23/26 north is actually quicker for many who live in other locations than was the old location, due to ever-increasing downtown traffic congestion.
- **Experience** – It would appear that AIM has attracted a fairly experienced and committed group of meditators. This may be because AIM is headed by a very experienced Leadership Team. AIM's Founder and Lead Teacher, Ronya Banks, has been a practitioner herself for 31 years and a Buddhist teacher for nearly a decade, and all the other leaders average 20-30 years of experience. As for the general membership, fully **90.52%** of you have been practicing meditation for longer than a year, while close to half have been practicing for more than **10** years! The seriousness of our members' commitment is also indicated by the fact that **88.42%** of us practice meditation at least several times a week and two thirds of us have attended "many" dharma talks.
- **Member Retention** – The survey indicates a high level of member retention. More than half of the respondents have been attending the sangha for longer than 1 year and about 1/3 have been attending for longer than 2 years.

- **New Member Recruitment** – The survey also indicates that we having considerable success in attracting new members since more than 1/4 of the respondents have joined the sangha in the last 6 months. Efforts to enhance new member recruitment and retention are continually being explored.
- **Most Popular Sessions** – Not surprisingly, the Thursday evening and Sunday morning meditation sessions, and special event sessions with guest speakers, are drawing the highest percentage of participants.
- **Volunteerism** – As a Non-Profit entity, we rely on the generosity of our members' volunteer efforts. Although we have a committed core of wonderful volunteers, many of them are performing multiple tasks for the sangha, and it is unfair to ask them to take on even more. The survey indicates that less than 1 in 4 current sangha members are currently participating in volunteer activity. AIM's 5 year Strategic Plan set up five principal committees along with several subcommittees and special projects to implement AIM's long-term objectives as a spiritual community. Therefore, an increase in volunteer support is one of the most important improvements we can make for the effective functioning of the sangha.
- **Sangha Programs & Activities** – Question #9 in the survey asked about member satisfaction with a wide range of sangha activities. The response to this question indicated a high level of appreciation of a wide range of AIM programs. While it confirmed the fact that the most popular programs were the Thursday evening and Sunday morning meditations, close to 2/3 or more of sangha members also rate the half day retreats, the classes, the monthly potlucks, the hiking club, the library, the community service projects, the family meditation, the newsletter, and the website as "most important" or "somewhat important". This indicates a high level of success in creating a diverse program of activities as part of the effort to build a holistic and self-sustaining spiritual community. The wealth of these offerings is the direct result of the generosity of many of our most engaged volunteers, and the continued success of these offerings is dependent on a sufficient number of consistently engaged volunteers stepping forward to keep them going.
- **Our New Facility** – Question #10 inquired about satisfaction with our new recently-renovated facility and whether members attending felt welcomed into a supportive community. The survey results indicate a very high degree of satisfaction with our new sangha home and the way the sangha is being run. In spite of the stress inherent in moving to a new facility, an amazing **86.91%** of respondents now rate it as "excellent" or "good". Only one person views it as worse than average. Similarly, an even higher **88.23%** feel "warmly welcomed" into the community, **82.14%** feel "strongly supported" by the community, and about **9 out of 10** people are happy or content with the new location. AIM teachers and programs also receive a greater than **80%** strong approval rating with only **1%** feeling that they rate below average.
- **Core Membership** – The survival of our community depends on the generosity and reliable support of our Core Members. The survey results indicated that **less than half** the respondents are Core Members. Since our financial donation model is dependent on a certain level of current Core Member donations, it would benefit our organization to increase the percentage of Core Members. Also, the minimum monthly donation of \$25 for Core Membership appears to be inadequate to sustain the wide range of sangha activities that the respondents say they value. Thankfully, several Core Members have recently increased their monthly Core Member donation amounts! Continued additional generosity from our members will help us meet our present need for an increase in Core Member donations, as well as an increase in the number of Core Members.

B. Member Complaints

- **Facility** – lack of window coverings on the front window – too bright and too much heat from sun

Response: **DONE!** Through the generosity of some of our Core Members, new high quality mini-blinds have been installed on the front windows of the meditation room.

- **Location** – further away / less convenient than the previous location

Response: Unfortunately, there is no one location available that will be equally convenient for all our attendees. The facility search committee spent over a year searching for a new facility. It was simply not possible to find a location in the downtown area that would meet our minimum needs and which we could afford. The new location is easily accessible from 19/23/26 north and more than doubled our previous space size. Because the new location is right off of a major highway, for many it is now quicker to get to the sangha than before. **87.95%** of respondents are satisfied with the present location, with over **60%** rating it as “good” or “excellent”. Less than 1 person in 10 considered it to be below average, and only 1 person out of 84 rated it as “unacceptable.”

- **Transparency** – more transparency needed about the Board, its members, decisions it makes, and role of Board members

Response: This is a legitimate and serious concern that the Board is attempting to address. In addition to creating the member survey to provide members with the opportunity for feedback and input, and having a suggestion box in the facility, members of the Board are available to sangha members to hear and hopefully address their concerns. Minutes of Board meetings will be posted on the sangha bulletin board and annual Core Member meetings will be held to allow the opportunity for more detailed feedback and discussion of AIM policies and decisions. Moreover, Core Member representatives are welcome at the Board meetings to address the concerns of the membership at large.

- **Funding** – A few respondents feel that there is too much emphasis on donations and/or Core Members are being asked to do too much and that money should be raised in other ways. Meanwhile, others feel that **not enough** emphasis has been placed on the critical need for increased funding.

Response: Bottom Line - We are a spiritual community that requires funds to operate. Although we need continued funding to thrive, it's also not all about the money. At present, AIM has completely paid off its debts arising from the move into a new, renovated facility and most months is meeting its expenses. This is very good news. And yet we are also aware that there is currently not sufficient funding coming in to cover emergencies, other unexpected expenses, or to institute new costly programs such as being able to pay transportation expenses to have prominent nationally-recognized guest speakers. Our goal is for Core Membership donations to cover the regular, bare-bones operating expenses so that additional non-Core Member donations can provide the financial safety margin needed, as well as allow for enhancing AIM programs and offerings. What this requires is an increase in the average donation level of current Core Members as well as the recruitment of new Core Members at an enhanced giving level.

- **Diversity** – need more age and ethnic diversity

Response: Although AIM has some diversity of age and sexual orientation, we would like to further enhance our diversity – particularly ethnic diversity. There is a conscious effort underway to attract more people of color, and other minorities to our sangha, as well as continuing to broaden our age and sexual orientation diversity. Some of the dharma talks and guest speakers are being selected with a view toward addressing this need for diversity and for honoring our commitment to “engaged Buddhism,” with attention paid to the differing views and needs of various age groups, as well as issues of human rights, social justice, and environmental responsibility.

- **Hearing Issues** – sometimes difficult to hear the leader of the meditation session, a guest speaker, or other sangha members participating in the sharing and discussion.

Response: This is a concern which the Board wishes to, and intends to, address. We have future plans of installing an enhanced sound equipment and PA system so that speakers can more easily be heard from all parts of the room. But increased funding is needed to make this a reality. Members concerned about this issue are encouraged to consider instituting a fundraising campaign or making a special donation, either individually, or jointly, to cover the costs of installation of new sound equipment.

- **Dharma talks** – too many talks on psychotherapy and neuro-plasticity – should be more Buddhist and meditation-focused; want more female teachers for taped talks Sunday and live talks Thursday

Response: It is, of course, difficult to please everyone in the choice of videotaped dharma talks. The members of the leadership team have been granted the right to select the talks which they present when they are leading a meditation session. Although we hear this complaint, we have also had many members say that they loved the talks from a psychotherapeutic or brain science perspective. Respect for the opinions of all require that we sincerely try to find a compromise solution and accordingly this is being shared with all the teachers so that they may be sensitive to this concern. Regarding the request for more female teachers, the leadership team is nearly half female, and they are also attempting to present a reasonable balance of males and females among the videotaped talks that are being shown on Sundays.

- **Sharing and discussion period** – teachers sometimes talk too much, should limit themselves to allow more people to talk; core group of a few tends to dominate discussions – creates feeling of an “in group” and “out group”

Response: Some of our Sangha leaders are brand new to teaching the dharma and still figuring out how to lead a spiritual community. They are also doing their best to strike a very challenging balance between creating a safe space for attendees, offering the dharma, and being authentic. During sharing periods, our AIM leaders usually request that people be brief and share only once to permit as many people as possible to participate. The concern to create a safe and nurturing space for people who may be unused to speaking in public or feel shy is definitely a paramount concern to the leadership. But ultimately, it is up to the individual to take the initiative to speak up and participate in the sharing.

- **Abrupt transition** from socializing to beginning of meditation – there was concern expressed by a number of people about the rapid transition from a high noise level of conversations in the meditation hall prior to the beginning of the meditation session itself.

Response: **DONE!** This concern was taken seriously and we have now implemented a brief “settling down” period before beginning the session. A bell is rung, everyone lapses into silence and the leader of the session waits for a minute or two before speaking and beginning the session. This seems to be working and eliminating the problem of too abrupt a transition.

- **Latecomers** – Many people have complained of disruption when latecomers enter the meditation hall after the meditation has started (except for the drop-in sessions in the morning and Monday and Wednesday evenings where this is permitted).

Response: **DONE!** This is a concern that has been addressed. There is now a sign hung on the door of the meditation room once the meditation starts, requesting that anyone arriving more than 5 minutes late not enter the room but sit in meditation in the foyer until the break, when they may enter and join the group. Since some folks are still walking in after these initial 5 minutes, we are considering putting a lock on the doorknob of the door leading from the meditation hall to the foyer, which would lock from the inside. In this case, we would simply lock the door 5 minutes into the meditation session and latecomers can meditate in the foyer until the door is unlocked at break time.

C. Member Proposals and Suggestions

- **Additional Meditation** – another evening meditation; outside sits, more drop-in sit times; shorter sits (30 minutes or less); special session for teenagers similar to the family meditation; silent walking meditation at Beaver Lake; have a session at which stricter silence policy enforced; daytime guided meditations

Response: All these suggestions are being considered. However, we already have a rather full slate of meditation sessions: drop-in morning meditations 6 days a week; 2 evening drop-in meditations; plus the Thursday evening guided meditation and Sunday silent meditation. Noise disruptions are a problem for many. Therefore, when someone is consistently noisy and disruptive, one of the AIM leadership team compassionately communicates to the disruptor and requests that they quiet down.

- **“Dyadic Interactions”** – break into dyads after dharma talks to enhance spiritual relationships

Response: **DONE! Kind of....** Small group sharing is now being implemented at occasional meditation sessions. But due to the strong feelings communicated by some members that they do NOT want the pressure of engaging with others, a compromise solution of offering this option only occasionally has been adopted. One way to resolve this conflict is to give folks the option to either engage or not engage in this type of activity.

- **Retreats** – local meditation with nationally recognized teacher; 5 or 7 day retreat

Response: Our guiding teacher – Ronya Banks and other additional AIM leaders actually began leading our AIM retreats at the explicit request of AIM members. We have increased our Fall retreat this year to 4 nights (our longest yet). We are also considering further increasing the length of our retreats if member interest warrants it. We will be paying to fly in Heather Sundberg to co-lead an AIM sponsored retreat in July, 2017. As our Non-Profit funds increase, we will have the funds needed to satisfy this request. In the meantime, our members also have the opportunity to experience nationally recognized teachers from around the world at the Southern Dharma Retreat Center here in WNC.

- **Classes** – more classes & more often but shorter length – 1 year too long; Engaged Buddhism class; workshops and classes for intermediate meditators; workshops on applying practice to other areas of life

Response: **DONE!** Additional classes are going to be added in the near future. Different classes with differing class lengths are being offered. However, class durations vary depending on the amount of material covered and the practice time needed to integrate these teachings into daily life.

- **Spiritual Friends Groups** – small groups to discuss challenges to practice

Response: **DONE!** Coordinated by Roger Byrd, 5 KM “sangha circles” have already been formed and are functioning with the opportunity for more groups to be formed.

- **Advocacy /Activism** on social – economic issues as in Unitarian community; service projects that require more activism

Response: **DONE!** Both dharma talks and guest speakers with a focus on these concerns have been introduced recently as a part of the effort to actively involve the sangha in “engaged Buddhism”. Additional public service projects will happen after more people consistently step forward to support our present volunteer needs.

- **Collaborations** – joint events with other Buddhist groups in Asheville area

Response: While a commendable objective, the challenge of satisfying our own financial and volunteer needs must come first. As indicated above, we are seriously short of a sufficient number of volunteers to fully implement our own goals as a sangha, as spelled out in the 5 year Strategic Plan, and we are still implementing creative strategies for achieving present and future financial stability.

- **Member support** – for grieving members by leader. Give priority to own members before outreach; more emphasis on members supporting members

Response: **DONE!** The AIM Care Team (ACT) has been resuscitated under the leadership of sangha volunteer Dennis Scholar and has a healthy contingent of 7 members to assist other sangha members in need. Our founding teacher – Ronya Banks is available for dharma guidance and support to those in need upon request.

- **CORE Member directory** – online, secure; photo directory

Response: This project is in the works and will be implemented shortly.

- **Newsletter** – need separate newsletter with news about sangha members

Response: We are very sensitive to not wanting to flood people’s inboxes with too many emails, as well as to maintaining respect for our members’ desires for support, anonymity, and/or space. If one of you have helpful suggestions for how all of these individual needs can be met, please step forward.

- **Dance / Dance Party**

Response: **DONE!** Sangha member Barbara Nerenz-Kelly will be teaching a meditative dance class at the sangha beginning in October of this year.

- **Music and Kirtan**

Response: Sangha leader Kate Freeman is already doing a monthly singing bowls sound meditation. We are also looking to add a monthly Kirtan session (with a talented and reputable local Kirtan group) to our class offerings. If you know of such a group, please bring this to our attention.

- **Yoga**

Response: **DONE!** Although there has been some question about the feasibility of doing yoga on our carpeted floor, sangha member Lia Curtis-Fine is currently teaching a monthly Yoga Nidra class. And sangha member Margaret Kirschner is going to be teaching yoga to children in our next Family Meditation session.

- **Tai Chi**

Response: **DONE!** Sangha member Roger Byrd is beginning a 14-week series of T'ai Chi classes.

- **Qigong**

Response: Once again, all activities at the sangha are headed by certified and trained AIM members who generously donate their time and energy. We are open to such an offering in the future.