

October 26, 2003

Dear Maddy (& the rest of the CIMC staff),

I had an absolutely wonderful day at the Sit-a-thon yesterday. I am writing this letter to thank you for putting it together and to share my thoughts about making it even more successful next year. I'll start with what I thought I'd find, then contrast that to what the day was really like.

I signed up to come because I wanted an introductory retreat. I had come to a number of Sunday afternoons, and was starting to think about two-day retreats, but wasn't sure I could handle it mentally or physically. So a one-day 10-hour retreat sounded perfect. I did have a lot of trepidation about the day. Sit-a-thon sounds like "marathon." Plus I'd read about retreats with no talking, no eye contact, etc. I psyched myself up mentally for days in advance, made sure to get a lot of sleep the night before, dressed carefully in layers.

All sorts of things about the days surprised me.

- It was a highly social day. I especially appreciated the chance to get to know CIMC staff, residents and teachers informally.
- The sittings were only 30 minutes, not 45. There were always people downstairs socializing, at least during the walking periods, so it was comfortable to duck out for a while. I think anyone who has come to a Sunday afternoon and done two sittings with a walking meditation in between would have zero trouble either mentally or physically with staying for the entire Sit-a-thon.
- There was an introduction to chanting, a bell meditation, a friendly tea ceremony, a delightful story. These are aspects of Vipassana practice and the CIMC sangha that I vaguely knew existed but had not encountered. I really enjoyed all of them! Plus they were spread through the day in a way that broke up the periods of formal meditation and made the day even easier.
- It was not "food provided." That sounds like miso soup and rice. It was "a smorgasbord of yummy food and treats from a variety of local restaurants!" That includes breakfast. I ate at home before coming.
- 9:00 was the arrival time for breakfast, not first bell for the first sitting which is what I expected. The flyer said to come early to turn in your donations so I tacked on an extra 20 minutes to my normal 20-minute advance arrival. I showed up at 8:15 and was almost the first one in the building.

One more thing to say about my experience this year: a note on sponsorship. One of the women at the Sit-a-thon put it well. She said, "I had to come out at work to get sponsors." That's exactly how I felt and I wasn't ready to do that. My

Vipassana practice is only about six months old and still feels intensively private. I haven't even told my family that this has become important to me. I just don't feel like talking about the practice to people outside the sangha when I haven't really understood it for myself yet. So I wrote a donation check and thought of it as my tuition for the day.

Here are some ideas for next year:

- Change your advertising to highlight some of the information I listed above. Especially the fact that it is a fun day, not a marathon.
- Do a targeted mailing with that advertising to CIMC members who haven't previously come to a Sit-a-thon.
- Do a slightly different targeted mailing to members who have joined since summer 2003. If you'd like, I will be happy to write a "dear friends" letter as a peer to this group.
- Recognize that external sponsorship may not be comfortable for some people. Encourage a self-sponsorship donation of an amount less than \$100 (perhaps the same as a one-day workshop) for members who haven't previously come to a Sit-a-thon.
- Give out name tags at the start of lunch to support the social side of the day.

You might consider changing the way you think about the event. This is not only a fundraiser, it's an opportunity to introduce newcomers or peripheral community members more deeply to the sangha and to the joy of some of the less frequently encountered forms of practice.

Lastly, there's one thing that was missing from the Sit-a-thon. At the end, there was no formal opportunity for us all to say thanks to you and the others who worked hard to make it happen. I was feeling a lot of gratitude and I suspect many others were too. That's why the clean-up was so energetic, joyful and fast. So let me say: Thank you! I loved the day.

Metta,

John Chapin
Arlington