

Questions and Answers of the report “A Good Place to Build”

I promise nothing complete; because any human thing supposed to be complete, must for that very reason infallibly be faulty . . . This whole book is but a draught----nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!

Herman Melville, Moby Dick

“BIG PICTURE” QUESTIONS

1. **Q:** What are the main arguments for creating a shared Dharma Center?

A: *Briefly, we believe the Dharma Center will offer the following benefits:*

- *A more readily identifiable and visible presence for Buddhist meditation practice in Sacramento.*
- *The possibility of offering multi-day retreats.*
- *The possibility of a full-time calendar delivering new programs and opportunities to practice.*
- *The possibility of reaching out to a diversity of communities not currently being served by the three sanghas.*
- *A library of dharma books, tapes, cd’s and videos.*
- *Shared publicity for each group’s retreats and classes.*

2. **Q:** Please provide more data about the three sanghas’ current membership, volunteer base, and financial capacity.

a. Approximate numbers now of committed members (e.g. attending frequently for more than a year) unique to each sangha (i.e. not double-counting):

<i>Sangha</i>	<i>Committed Members</i>	<i>E-Mail List</i>
Valley Streams	25-30	125
SIM	35-40	500
SBMG	50	600

b. Average attendance at each group’s sittings:

<i>Sangha</i>	<i>Average attendance at sittings</i>
Valley Streams	20
SIM	40
SBMG	60-70

c. Volunteers already active:

<i>Sangha</i>	<i>Committed volunteers in sangha positions or on Board</i>
Valley Streams	10 (on board or Zendo jobs)
SIM	20 (on board or volunteer positions)
SBMG	36 (on board or volunteer positions)

d. Income and expenses we each are sustaining comfortably, average expenses (rent, retreats, other) and income (dana, retreats, other) of each individual group:

<i>Sangha</i>	<i>Income</i>	<i>Expenses</i>	<i>Rent</i>	<i>Dana</i>	<i>Bank Balance</i>
Valley Streams ¹	\$6,000	\$5,000	\$2000	\$5,200	\$8,447. (2/28/11)
SIM ²	\$45,182	\$40,312	\$5,000	\$20,000	\$15,962 (2/28/11)
SBMG ³	\$22,668	\$19,260	\$6,348	\$11,724	\$20,000 (2/28/11)

¹ VSZ: approx. 2010

² SIM: approx. 2010

³ SBMG: projected 2011

3. **Q:** Using current operations as a base line for comparison, how much extra energy, volunteerism, and financial support will be needed for the proposed center to thrive. Is it possible to list the ways in which individual sanghas will be saving operating costs? How do those savings relate to predicted operating costs? Also, is there any way to estimate if such savings may partly offset the start-up and improvement costs?

A: The development of a Dharma Center will call for more commitment of energy, volunteerism, and financial support than currently. For instance, it is likely that some individuals will serve both on their Sangha board and on the Dharma Center board, with attendant responsibilities to each. In addition, there may need to be volunteer days to clean and or perform needed maintenance/improvements. On the other hand, there would be considerable savings of time and energy around the organizing of retreats, as the sanghas would no longer have to secure various retreat venues. Set-up for weekly meetings should be easier, with equipment either already out or stored more conveniently than currently.

Potential savings in operating costs – the Sanghas could base their initial pledge to the Dharma Center on the amount they currently pay in rent. This would insure that the sangha’s operating costs would not be more than they are currently absorbing. The fundraising assumption is that individual pledges will cover the lion’s share of increased operating costs associated with the Center.

Offsetting start-up and improvements costs – Sangha expenditures on building improvements are currently negligible. Such costs would be an entirely new dimension of starting a Dharma Center, so it must be assumed that these new costs would have to be covered by new fundraising.

4. **Q:** The need for the 3 groups to agree on a mission statement to guide the feasibility process is acknowledged. It is appreciated how carefully crafted and inclusive that statement needed to be. We hope that the proposed Dharma center board will adopt a mission statement that reflects the underlying heartfelt passion of its commitment, and includes the jewel of Sangha as well as meditation and teachings.

A: The ISCC welcomes the idea that the jewel of Sangha be recognized in a final mission statement. We note that the draft mission statement includes the statement “with the

intention of benefiting the Sacramento community,” which embraces sangha in its largest sense.

5. **Q:** We would like to understand more about how the issue of Parity is viewed. If one group was considerably larger than another, will that be reflected in the financial responsibility and decision-making process of the Dharma Center Board? If, say, SBMG can only book a teacher for a retreat on a SIM retreat Saturday, would there be flexibility, or does the ISCC recommend staying consistent with each sangha’s current programming?

A: The issue of parity is viewed as analogous to the U.S. Senate, where small and big states have equal representation. Similarly, the proposed organizational framework calls for equal representation of the three sanghas on the Dharma Center Board. The ISCC did not consider proportional representation based on the size of each group. In the same vein, the ISCC has not proposed that any group take more or less financial responsibility than the others. The financial plan does call for both one-time and annual contributions to the Center by the founding sanghas, but leaves the decision on amounts to the individual boards.

The ISCC’s recommendation is that each group should be able to deliver its current program, to the greatest extent feasible. However, we recognize some compromises will be required in co-locating. Reserving the last Saturday of the month for SIM would leave three or occasionally four Saturdays for SBMG (Valley Streams is content to schedule around SBMG). The ISCC believes this respects SBMG’s status as the largest group, with the longest history of scheduling weekend retreats.

6. **Q:** What if a group drops out before an agreement is made? 3 years later? 10 years later?

A: The ISCC’s assumption is that each group would stay committed for the initial term of the lease and would re-commit (or not) at lease renewal time. Setting the initial term of the lease and subsequent renewals for three years or less would help assure that the other two groups would not be left “holding the bag” if one group leaves. The downside of a shorter-term lease, however, is that the rate could be increased with more frequent renewals.

The ISCC acknowledges that there are unknowns in this process that cannot be fully described as to their consequences and full ramifications.

7. **Q:** If we try and fail, what is the impact? Is there a way to calculate this risk, so we know what we are undertaking more clearly before starting? E.g., pledges may shrink according to the economy’s shifts.

A: The proposed survey will be our primary means of assessing whether it is advisable to take the risk of establishing a Dharma Center. The survey results will be shared with each Board, so they can make an informed decision on whether to proceed with the effort.

If the Dharma Center is established, it is likely that fundraising will remain an ongoing challenge. Even very well established Buddhist sanghas, such as San Francisco Zen Center and Spirit Rock Meditation Center continue to face the challenge of raising sufficient funds to cover operations. The ISCC acknowledges the weightiness of taking on financial obligations involved in creating and maintaining the proposed Center.

ORGANIZATIONAL QUESTIONS

8. **Q:** How will the next Board be formed?

A: There will be three Board members appointed by each founding sangha, with initial terms of 1, 2 and 3 years. After these initial terms have run, all subsequent terms would be three years; staggering the initial term length will aid long-term Board continuity. One of each sanghas' initial appointments will be designated an "at-large member;" the Dharma Center Board would appoint subsequent at-large board members. Appointment of new Board members is part of each sangha Board's due diligence. The at-large members may be appointed because of specialized skills, e.g., architect, attorney. Again, the first Board could set it up differently in its By-Laws.

9. **Q:** How will the new Dharma Center nonprofit be organized and how will it manage the risk of signing a lease?

A: The non-profit formed to run the dharma center could be a membership organization, with the three sanghas as its only members. ISCC considered both membership and non-membership models for the new non-profit organization, but in any form it should be a non-profit tax-exempt organization so donations are tax-deductible. An "Association of Churches" is one option (like Sky Creek Dharma Center in Chico); note that the member organizations do not each need to be churches. The new organization could be incorporated before selecting its tax-exempt status.

As for managing the risk of signing a lease, the Dharma Center board would be expected to manage the fundraising campaign so as to instill confidence that sufficient resources will be available to cover the lease cost. The draft budget includes an allowance for operating reserves to cover short-term shortfalls in revenue. These reserves would be raised as part of the capital campaign.

10. **Q:** Could the non-profit form as a non-membership organization that evolves to membership?

A: The ISCC has not researched this question. The initial Dharma Center Board will have to take up the question of a membership vs. non-membership corporation.

11. **Q:** What are the benefits of membership?

A: Typically, members can vote for the Board and potentially receive other benefits of membership. If a membership corporation is the choice of the initial Board, it will also have to determine what the benefits of membership are to be.

12. **Q:** Regarding membership vs. non-membership organization: How would it feel if members and non-members had to decide on a difficult question? A perception of inequality doesn't seem consistent with the practice.

A: The new Board will have to decide at this level of detail.

13. **Q:** Membership non-profit gives a solid structure and sense of greater sangha.

A: There are arguments on both sides of the membership vs. non-membership nonprofit corporation. We feel this is an issue the Dharma Center board will have to resolve, with legal consultation. The survey may also provide some guidance.

14. **Q:** Do members need to report their contributions to the IRS?

A: No; IRS reporting requirements refers to the non-profit corporation. There are rules about Board members receiving benefits from the organization.

15. **Q:** However the non-profit status is set-up, the classification for the tax-deductible purposes for members should be straight forward and simple and geared to ease for members and donors rather than for convenience of the new board.

A: Agreed.

16. **Q:** There needs to be Board term limits.

A: The ISCC is not wedded to its recommendation that there be no Board term limits and acknowledges that some non-profits do have term limits, while others do not. Further guidance on this question can be sought if and when Dharma Center bylaws are being adopted.

17. **Q:** Will the Board have subcommittees?

A: Yes there can be subcommittees and the subcommittees could have members who are not on the Board.

18. **Q:** What do we know about the liability of each sangha for the Dharma Center?

A: Sanghas would not have any obligation if the Dharma Center were incorporated as a non-member organization. A membership organization with the sanghas as members might be different, but this has not been discussed with a non-profit attorney.

19. **Q:** The Report says the recommendations will be decided by the new non-profit Dharma Center Board. Why was it set up this way instead of having the three sanghas decide?

A: The creation of a new nonprofit to undertake the Dharma Center project has been thought to be the optimal choice from the beginning of this process. The rationale has been to create an organization whose mission is to organize and run the Center as opposed to delivering teaching and building sangha. The sanghas would be represented on the Center board, but could continue to devote their main energies to offering teachings and classes,

20. **Q:** At what point do the sanghas make a Go- No Go decision?

A: Any sangha can step out of the planning up to the signing of a lease. At that point a commitment for the term of the lease is needed. Prior to that, there are several decision points: form the non-profit, look at financing, look for space, etc.

FINANCING AND BUDGET QUESTIONS

21. **Q:** It is not readily apparent in the report how much all this costs.

A: At Abayagiri Monastery in Mendocino County, they say, “We won’t start building until we have the money.” Applying this maxim locally, we can say that what the Dharma Center project costs will be what the Dharma Center can afford. What it can afford will be a function of the success of the anticipated fundraising campaign (securing pledges, etc.) The ISCC report does describe and quantify costs across a number of variables, with the most important variable being rent.

22. **Q:** How will the partitioning of costs be accomplished? Will it be an even three-way split between the sanghas, a set amount based on current sangha size, or another model?

A: An underlying financial assumption is that the main support for the Dharma Center will come from individuals. Sanghas will not be billed based on dana received. Sanghas will make a voluntary pledge, as will individuals. Support of the center and of the individual sanghas will depend on generosity/Dana.

Another underlying financial assumption is that individuals will shift some of their generosity toward the Dharma Center. Many current Sangha expenses (room rental for retreats, classes, and weekday sangha meetings) will shift to the Dharma Center, so the Sanghas themselves may not need as much funding,

Sky Creek Dharma Center in Chico launched on blind faith, but found that it is adequately supported by allowing each sangha to determine its contribution and by a small number of pledging individuals known as the “sustaining sangha.”

23. **Q:** The investment options were confusing and need clarification?

A: The investment option was explained at two public forums. Basically, it entails sangha members and supporters loaning money to the Dharma Center in exchange for a modest annual interest payment to the investor. Details of term, interest rate, and security would have to be worked out.

24. **Q:** This report involves a higher degree of financial commitment than the sanghas have now, e.g., construction. It appears the cost estimates could be low, such as the retreat center manager at \$500/month, cleaning services. It would be better to estimate high so we have a better idea of what might be needed when we issue the survey.

A: We verified virtually all costs with third party sources, in order to provide a degree of confidence in the proposed budget. While our estimates may not be accurate for every line item, we feel reasonably confident in the overall budget. The janitorial service estimate

came from a building owner and assumed volunteer help for temple days, etc. The manager estimate came from a non-profit manager - we assumed it would be part-time, not a primary job, and possibly be partially Dana on the part of the manager.

25. **Q:** What kind of threshold funding will be needed to start? What is the shortfall between that level and the current giving at the three founding sanghas?

A: Collectively, the sanghas currently pay about \$12,000 per year in rent. As shown in the report, the smallest total annual Dharma Center budget is \$56,000 per year, of which more than half is rent. We are not asking the sanghas to change their approach to Dana. The current rent and giving of each group is shown in question #2 in this addendum. Keep in mind that a lease will not be signed until we can afford it.

26. **Q:** I'm optimistic that this can happen but more support is needed for where the numbers come from. Rental costs are low now, but the economy is also weak. So time is critical.

A: Sky Creek Dharma Center has 13 sustaining members who pledge \$2000/month; we have at least five times as many active participants, so it does seem feasible. We did not name our budget sources in the report because we did not ask permission of all sources to do so and it did not seem a critical necessity.

27. **Q:** Is Sky Creek Dharma Center renting or buying?

A: They are renting now but plan to buy. The Center itself has no credit rating so an individual may buy it and sell to Sky Creek Dharma Center.

28. **Q:** Interest rates and property values are at historic lows. This suggests that a site should be purchased rather than leased.

A: The buy option is in the Report and included on the survey, but would require significant investment and organization (e.g., a Limited Liability Corporation). It could require \$1 million up front. There are other options – individuals could purchase a property then lease it back to the Dharma Center with an option to buy, as is being done at Sky Creek. Agents have told us that “church-like” organizations like ours are considered desirable tenants.

29. **Q:** Why is rental income (received from renting out the Center) shown as being so low?

A: Rental income is an unknown. Our first priority was to give the three founding sanghas an opportunity to grow new programs.

30. **Q:** In the movie industry, moviemakers set a threshold for initial funding, e.g., \$12,500 by a certain date. Then they use an Internet appeal at a site like *kickstarter.com* to raise the money. If the money is not raised in time, all pledges received are returned. We recommend using the Internet for the fundraising.

A: Agreed!

31. **Q:** Have you considered the minimum facility you would settle for?

A: This was not specifically discussed, but the idea of starting with a shorter-term lease and moving up was discussed. This is much like buying a house – one may have a dream house in mind, but would ultimately commit to something else and make it work.

32. **Q:** Fundraising shouldn't be that hard, though the sanghas may be uncomfortable with it. There are other examples of non-profits that people donate to like Public Radio and the American River Parkway. Sangha members will get a lot of value from this new Dharma Center. Brainstorm the economies of scale before releasing the survey. One benefit is visibility, enabling community outreach.

A: Fundraising methods, aside from focusing on individual and sangha pledges, were not discussed in the report. We leave to the new board the specifics of fundraising and the various models.

33. **Q:** After the organization forms, how long is fundraising going to take before the vision becomes real? Two years?

A: This question has been discussed but not answered. This past year has involved a lot of hard work by ISCC members, and is a template for the new Dharma Center Board, but we still didn't get to all the answers. The new Board will have to maintain a high level of functioning to address all the requirements.

34. **Q:** This is going to work. What is the timeline? There are bargains to be had now.

A: The non-profit could be formed in 6 months; articles of incorporation have been done before without difficulty. Activities could begin under an umbrella non-profit group. Non-profit status is retroactive so tax-deductible donations can be received while an IRS approval is pending. ISCC has been working hard but finding time for more than one meeting a month has been difficult. The sangha communities will have to step forward with individuals who have the time to devote to the next phase of this project.

35. **Q:** Sangha appointees to the Board may need to devote 10 hours per week, but specialized skills such as fundraising may be needed.

A: Fundraising is one specialty area; architecture, organizational development, and venue search would all need attention.

36. **Q:** The manager may need to go to full time if facility rental becomes a large part of the duties. The amount budgeted seems low?

A: The manager's role may evolve with time. The proposed budget for the manager can be thought of as the initial level that may be needed. We agree that the budget may be adjusted.

37. **Q:** Sky Creek Dharma Center in Chico was not a closed system – donations came in from outside the sangha. We should also consider grants.

A: Yes, for instance, Spirit Rock donated to East Bay Dharma Center. The ISCC discussed, "What would success look like?" Part of the answer is that increased visibility could engender support from people or organizations not currently connected to our sanghas.

QUESTIONS ABOUT DANA AND PLEDGING

38. **Q:** Concern was expressed that asking for “pledges” from the Sanghas will really change the atmosphere of the groups. Dana has been an essential aspect of each sanghas welcome to whoever wants to come. Is there any feasible way to continue this tradition?

A: No one would be asked to pledge to the Dharma Center as a condition of participation programs offered there. Each founding sangha could continue their current Dana practices, scholarship practices, etc. However, the ISCC does not deem it feasible to enter a long-term building lease based on the combined groups' current income streams and fundraising approaches. Entering a building lease carries significant legal and financial obligations and may include financial penalties for breaking lease conditions. A more stable and secure source of income is deemed critical to moving forward with Dharma Center concept.

An underlying assumption is that 20 years of meditation-based Buddhist practice in Sacramento has developed a significant number of individuals and families who would like to turn the Dharma Wheel for others as well as themselves. The survey proposed in the ISCC plan will test this assumption with direct questions about pledging and pledge amounts. If the response does not prove the assumption, then the fundraising concept will be re-evaluated.

39. **Q:** The report states different pledging levels but the same benefits. This is not common for non-profits. Why are benefit levels not higher to encourage larger donors?

A: This is open for discussion. The tangible benefits have not been determined. The new board will handle these details.

40. **Q:** It is a practice in some sanghas to have two Dana bowls: one for the sangha and one for the teacher. Would we need to move to three bowls in the new dharma center so there could be additional Dana for the dharma center?

A: ISCC would prefer not to dictate the details of donations to the center, but leaves this for the new Board to decide. As proposed, the primary means of support for the Dharma Center will be monthly or annual pledges.

41. **Q:** Would the pledges be a membership?

A: This depends on the structure of the non-profit, which could be a membership or non-membership organization. A membership organization could have the three sanghas as its members or individuals as its members. We recommend further consultation with non-profit specialists on this subject. The San Francisco Zen Center is a membership non-profit; Spirit Rock Meditation Center is not. A membership organization has more

burdensome reporting requirements. A non-membership organization could still confer benefits to people who pledge.

42. **Q:** If the funding is through pledges, it seems that the sangha members could still retain their current commitment to the culture of Dana.

A: Yes, a pledge will still come from the practice of generosity. While the dharma center will start out stronger if sufficient pledges are made in advance, the individual sanghas will still have their own bills to pay. So there will be a need to support both, and the survey questions will reflect this.

43. **Q:** How will pledges to the Center affect giving to the sanghas? 3/5 of SBMG's income comes from retreat registration. Would we still charge?

A: The Dharma Center would exist to serve the Sanghas and would not be directing the individual Sangha's business operations. Sanghas could continue to charge for retreats as they have in the past, though they might want to consider charging a lower registration fee to Dharma Center supporters/sustainers

Those individuals who pledge to the Dharma Center might decrease their giving to their Sangha. However, the Sanghas might understand a pledge to the Dharma Center as an indirect pledge to supporting the Sangha's operations.

At the Inter-Sangha meeting at Insight Meditation Center (IMC) in Redwood City, several groups moving to new facilities reported an initial decrease in people/support, followed by momentum and increased growth, presumably as a result of moving to a better designed and more identifiable location.

44. **Q:** The three sanghas are responsible for the initial funding of the new Dharma Center, so they will be self-regulating. But how are they obligated? This proposal could erode individual giving to the home sanghas. Why can't we test the fundraising before making the commitment?

A: The survey will be used to gauge commitment.

45. **Q:** The results of the survey regarding potential financial support and pledges may not reflect actual fund raising results and pledges. How will you control for this possibility?

A: Even if the survey results are encouraging, the new organization will need to run an actual pledge campaign, and it would be on the results of that campaign that a lease would be signed.

46. **Q:** My initial skepticism was followed by a willingness to pledge. Our Diversity Group is concerned with the need to account for families. Consider a breakout space for child care.

A: Concurrent activities are assumed in the way the Center is envisioned. Rev. Bob Oshita has emphasized the importance of families to build a sense of legacy.

QUESTIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATION AND THE SURVEY

47. **Q:** Will suggestions be incorporated into the report “A Good Place to Build”?

A: ISCC sees this Question and Answers page as a supplement to the report – we do not plan to revise the report itself. The report and this FAQ will be submitted to the boards of the three sanghas for their decision on moving forward the Dharma Center project. ISCC has learned that we will not be able to answer all questions. There will be an element of faith as the sangha boards appoint their Dharma Center Board members.

48. **Q:** How will you insure that sangha members are heard and informed?

A: Each Sangha has offered multiple meetings with interested sangha members. The ISCC has held two community forums and will conduct a survey.

49. **Q:** What is the process going forward? Report, survey, and appoint new Dharma Center Board?

A: The survey will be the next step, followed by compiling its results and presentations to the three-sangha boards. The boards are expected to deliberate and make a decision to proceed with the Dharma Center project (including appointing a new Board) by July 2011.

50. **Q:** Could you say more about the rationale for the survey?

A: The rationale for the survey is to assess enthusiasm and potential financial support for the establishment of a meditation center in Sacramento. It includes questions about what sangha(s) the respondents participate in, assesses interest in a new center, and assesses the potential for financial support.

51. **Q:** How will the survey of the Sangha be conducted and is a month to compile the results realistic? We would suggest each person filling out the survey identify the one Sangha they most identify with in order to help us know where the comments are coming from and avoid overlapping responses.

A: The survey will be done using the online tool called Survey Monkey. The tool is powerful, including automatic compilation of results. The Survey link can be posted on each Sangha’s website, as well as e-mailed to Sangha members. Hard copy responses will have to be compiled “by hand,” and integrated into the final data. The survey will be released on April 18, 2011 and closed on May 2, 2011. Depending on the number of hard copy responses, survey results should be available within two weeks. A draft of the survey has been extensively reviewed and includes the suggested question about which Sangha the respondent most identifies with, as well as asking if there is a second Sangha they attend.

52. **Q:** The survey should map locations of where respondents live.

A: This request is beyond the capacity of the survey tool. The ISCC report describes the recommended areas for establishing a new center. The survey will ask a question related to preferences for location of a new center.

SPACE PLANNING AND OPERATIONAL QUESTIONS

53. **Q:** Board members were concerned that 4200 sq feet was not enough space to include potential growth of the center. Limiting the space to accommodate 125 people seemed restraining (attachment 2). SBMG is already holding events that draw 100 people. We all hope to draw in more people through becoming a visible community presence. We may want to bring the sanghas together for special events.

A: Square footage will be a function of rent and overall operating budget. If the fund raising prospects appear to justify more than 4200 sq. ft., then it might make sense to get such a space. However, the way we use space (no fixed seating) creates elasticity for receiving larger crowds. It would probably be better to be crowded 10 percent of the time, while 90 percent of the time we are comfortably accommodating our average crowd. For instance, our architect adviser said that it is not the usual practice to design for the largest crowd, which is why we wait in line for the bathroom at concert venues, etc. The space described in the report is similar to the United Church of Christ Sierra Arden. Having an outdoor space will help.

54. **Q:** How many hours total do the sanghas now use in their rented facilities? It seems like a small number of hours compared to the potential.

A: Each Sangha uses only a few hours per month in their rented facilities. The opportunity to utilize a location all hours of each day is a good reason for this venture. The possibilities are many and varied. SBMG already has a number of activities with potential if they had the time during the day.

55. **Q:** Does the space have to be zoned commercial?

A: We assume the Center it will have to meet zoning and building code requirements for a large "assembly" space. It will probably have to meet city requirements similar to locating a church. The center in Chico is a house but it is located in an industrial park. Mountain Stream Meditation Center's new place in Grass Valley is a house but is the location is commercially zoned.

56. **Q:** Members were also concerned about security measures not only for the building but also for members coming and going. Would a need for a security guard need to be considered depending on the location for the building?

A: We believe our goal should be to find a location that would minimize security concerns. One of the functions of sangha might be to care for one another's security. The presence of a security guard might be off-putting to some, so other alternatives, such as escorting each other to our cars, could be considered.