



the open
heart project

susanpiver.com

2014 annual report



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WELCOME

Dear wonderful members of the Open Heart Project,

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for being a part of the Open Heart Project. It is my delight to offer you a year-end report on the state of affairs around here. I will share what we have accomplished this year, how our work together is shifting, what I offered you that worked, some difficulties encountered, an assessment of our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and where it seems like it is all heading for you, me, and us.

As your teacher, I try to strike a healthy balance between putting myself into the instruction and keeping myself out of it—after all, this is about your practice, not my emotional state. That said, I'm right here alongside you, having joys, sorrows, doubts, good moods, bad moods, more energy, less energy, and so on. To be a teacher is to give all you have. But to give all you have, a deeply lived inner experience is required. It's an awesome dance between intimate strangers. So in this report, I will also share with you what it has been like for me to be your teacher this year.

Love, Susan

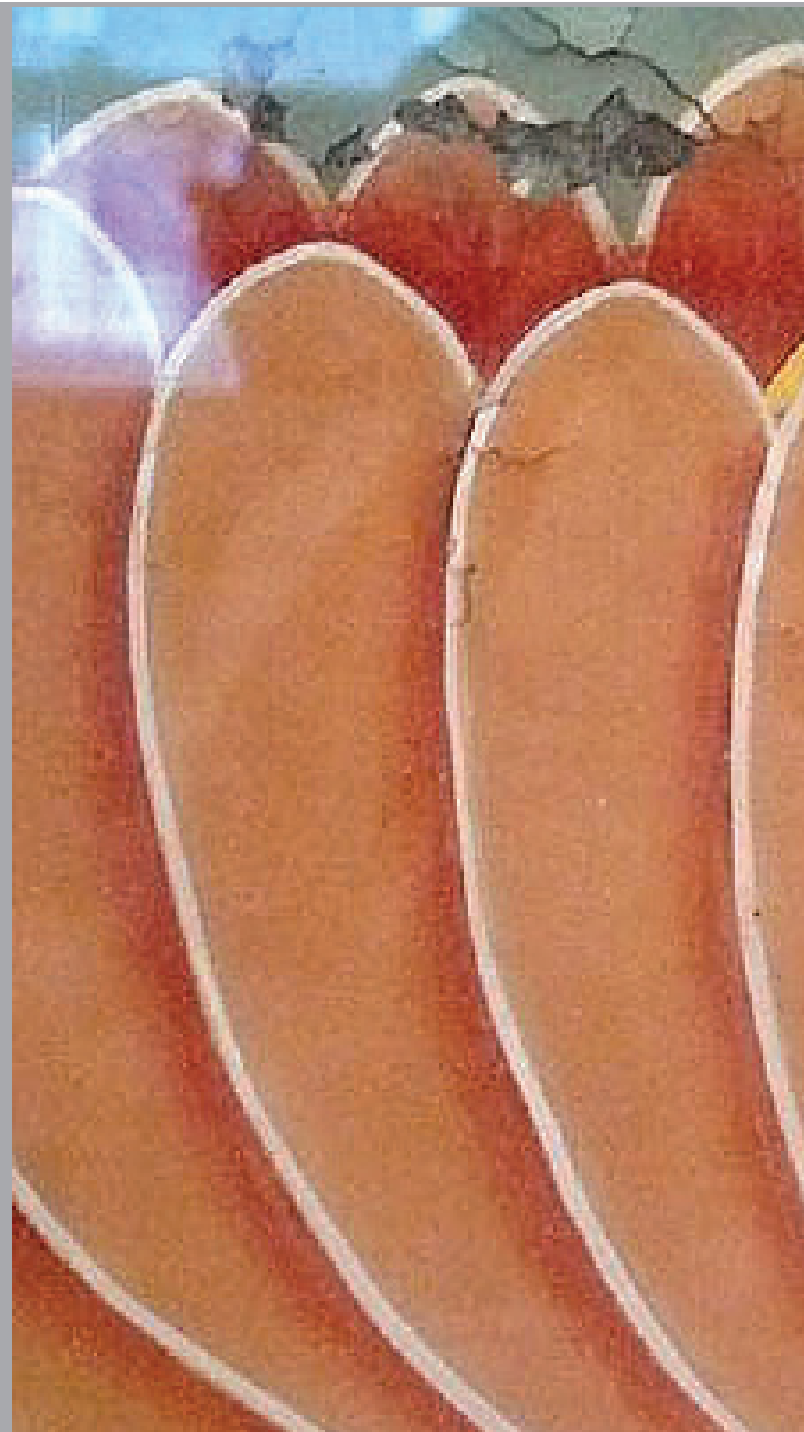
In my 2012 annual report, I wrote this about the newly minted Open Heart Project:

This was a year where the new direction I had identified for myself as a writer and teacher in 2012 appeared to be plausible. Meaning, my dream of becoming a self-sustaining writer through developing community with my readers developed legs. Though not yet probable, in this year, I saw that what I want to accomplish is possible.

Now, two years later, has the probable become the possible? Has the possible become the actual? With cautious optimism, I say, yes, it has. Membership in the Open Heart Project has doubled since I wrote the paragraph above and we are now more than 12000 strong. I remain delighted to offer meditation instruction for free and will absolutely continue to do so. And in 2014, I also began to realize some income from this work. Phew. (See “What Worked” for more details.)

Interestingly, it remains enormously complex to request payment for one’s work when that work is in the spiritual realm. People become suspicious and even outraged—to them, you are either a saintly monastic who has no worldly concerns or a mad shyster running some kind of dharma scam. I am neither. What is a person to do? (See “Difficulties.”)

It remains a conundrum. I want to help as many people as humanly possible through the sheer joy, for me, of teaching. I want to support them as they wrestle with their own minds. I want to be there when things become powerful, catastrophic, or boring to help them figure out where to go. I want to teach as a way to deepen my own practice, certainly. I do not want to feel like a beggar or one who has to justify why I need to earn an income by explaining that I have debts, a family, old age to prepare for, and so on. It’s just humiliating. But when it comes to being a dharma teacher in the West, these obstacles must be encountered. When it comes to being a female dharma teacher, I observe, the obstacles have an additional layer of complexity. I don’t know why this is so, but I see it every day. (Someone, please write a book about this.)



Numbers are not my strong suit and I tend to ignore them, which is basically insane. However, money takes me on a crazy ride. When some comes in, I am elated. When it doesn't, I despair. Each is a distraction. My self-worth is tied up with it and till now I've tried to skirt the issue. NO MORE, I SAY!! No more.

I've spent the last few weeks walking on numbers as one would on hot coals. Hop, leap, ouch, skip, jump off, jump on, hey, it doesn't actually hurt anymore. Someone hipped me to mint.com and I am all over that. I'm forcing myself to look at how much money comes in and goes out every day and at how many members there are in the Open Heart Project, the OHP Sangha, my online classes, my offline classes, and so on. I have promised myself to try not to feel heartbroken when someone unsubscribes from, well, anything. (Hey, I unsubscribe from stuff every day! It's not meant as a slight.) Numbers are simply points of information., they are not designations of my humanity. So, don't be afraid, okay? Okay! I declare it: 2015 is about numbers. Watching them, understanding them, not fearing them, relating to them. It might even be fun.

So, here we go!





open heart project



WHAT WORKED

THE OPEN HEART PROJECT TURNED A CORNER

I knew that this was the year that I had to make the Open Heart Project work as a business. Year One was about figuring out which end was up and being surprised by fast growth. Year Two was about trying to stabilize the situation as it became my primary creative and professional focus, not to mention of my time. It was during this year that I began to experiment with ways to make money, none of which really worked. Year Three had to be about getting it to finally work. As we enter Year Four, I feel confident saying that it is and it will.

Here is how it happened.

Late in 2013, I realized I was spending 80% of my time doing things that someone else could do (edit videos, establish e-commerce channels, etc) and 20% of my time doing what only I could do (write, teach, and so on).

I vowed to flip those percentages in 2014. To do so, I needed help. It was simply not possible to do all of this alone, and not only because there weren't enough hours in the day; that was actually the lesser reason. The more impactful one was that the mind of creativity does not easily dance with the mind of administration and management. One may think that one will spend mornings doing creative work and afternoons on project planning, but unless you are one of those [singularly gifted individuals](#) who can do everything with boundless energy, it doesn't seem to work that way. The creative mind begins to believe that it serves the administrative mind rather than the other way around.

It makes sense. After all, the administrative mind gets all sorts of attention from the world. Apps are built to serve it. Blog posts explain how to improve it. Awards are given to honor it. Entire industries are built around making you believe that your administrative mind is your creative mind and that if only you could assign it a purpose, write good copy, and price it accurately, you will be making art. Au contraire, mes amis. I'm not saying that there isn't an art to creating, launching, and delivering content (there is!!), but the content itself is not an incidental cog in the great marketing wheel. It is a whole 'nother conveyance. Trying to drive both at the same time will confuse a person.

I decided to hire a 20-hour a week Virtual Assistant and in a stroke of great good luck, found Michele. We just celebrated our one-year anniversary of working together! She handles many things, including customer service, audio and video production, and manages the OHP community. She needs a new title! All I can think of is Excellent Goddess but that might not play well on her tax returns.

Michele crushed my expectations and exceeded them at every turn. Okay, I wasn't sure how I was going to pay her after the first few months, but then it worked out the way I hoped and my income started to slowly, slowly increase. She took over the 80% workload and did it better than I had. I was able to spend more time writing, teaching, dreaming up stuff to do, and then launching it. It was a big leap of faith and if I had worked with someone other than her, it might not have paid off.

THANK YOU, MICHELE "GAME CHANGER" GARE.

I SLOWED DOWN

Throughout 2013 and well into 2014, I was apt to try anything that sounded like a good idea. Although I didn't launch most of these ideas, I spent countless hours designing programs, building them out, and then, in most cases, not launching them because I just didn't feel them anymore. When you work virtually, it is very hard to get accurate cues about the people you serve. One delighted email and you think everyone's happy. One grumpy email and you think everyone hates you. If, like me, you work intuitively, you need some kind of communication with the world to spark your intuition. When it is absent, you end up having to work in a more conceptual way, which, for people like us, feels inauthentic. (It isn't. It just doesn't work for us.) A lot of wheel-spinning.

One afternoon in May, I sat at my desk sketching out the gazillionth plan for the Open Heart Project that would enable me to continue to offer meditation instruction for free but also provide a gateway for those who wanted to take the next step and were willing to pay something to do so. Like the other plans, it was beautiful, replete with color-coded labels and reasonably estimated delivery dates. However, it had no cojones. It was just a bunch of made up stuff.

I gave up. I vowed to STOP. DOING. ANYTHING. This was very frightening. No money was coming in. But instead of jumping at the next "good idea," I somehow convinced myself to just stop. Think. Consider what I really wanted to do. Develop a curriculum that would offer a truly useful next step for those who wanted to take it. I decided that when I arrived at the idea that really seemed right, I would not just announce it and hope for the best. I would test it. Refine it. Launch it in stages. Set goals. And then hope for the best. ;-)

Enter, the Open Heart Project Sangha.

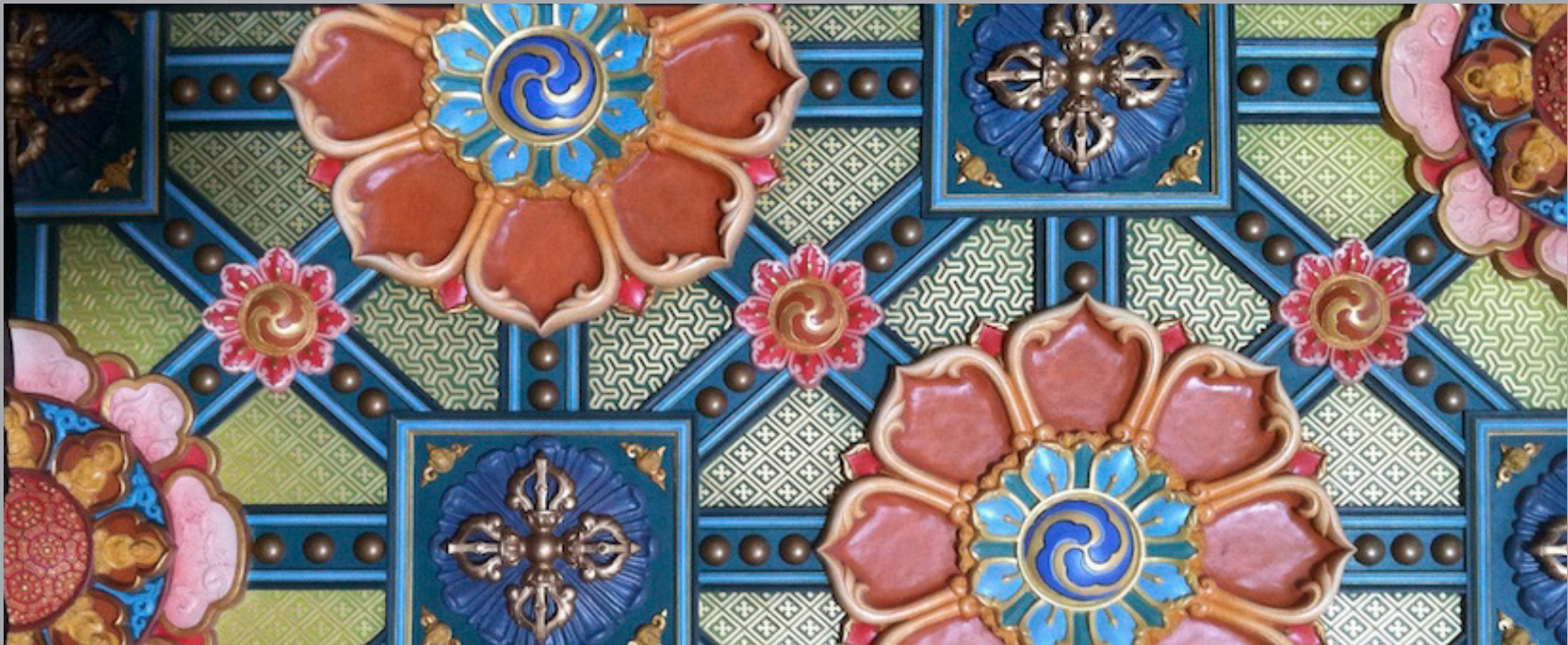
THE OPEN HEART PROJECT SANGHA LAUNCHED

My first effort (in 2012) to monetize my work was called the OHP Practitioner program. It did not work out. Why?

That offering was predicated on the assumption that people wanted to practice meditation more when actually what they wanted was to practice meditation more *together*. Instead of offering more practice opportunities, I realized, this next version should offer more community. So I decided to call it the [Open Heart Project Sangha](#) (which is the Sanskrit word for community).

Actually, I did not decide on this name, the Sangha itself did. In June, I invited 50 people to work with me for three months on the Sangha project as a beta group. This lovely group of helpful and devoted meditators did the program with me, offered feedback, and helped craft the final program. I asked them what they thought we should be called (“Beta Group” was not it...) They made suggestions and voted for...Sangha! I announced the Sangha to the entire community on September 24. My goal was to have 200 members by the end of 2014 and 1000 members in 2015.

More than 200 people signed up in the first few weeks and I’m completely gratified to announce that the 2014 goal has been met!! I am so excited about this and I thank you, thank you for this excellent initial response. I’m not exactly sure how to get to the 1000 mark, but I believe that together we will figure it out.



ONLINE PROGRAMS WORKED

In mid-2014, my friend, fellow writer, and Buddhist teacher [Lodro Rinzler](#) suggested we co-teach an online class, “Meditating on Love.” It was a blast. It sold out. We loved teaching together. He taught me how to use Adobe Connect, an online platform for presentations, classes, and workshops. I felt so heartened by our experience that I began to offer other classes, some taught alone and some co-taught. This actually brought in some income while I was planning the Sangha offering and generally made me feel good. I taught classes on heartbreak and depression and co-taught on mindful use of technology and mindful nutrition. Each class sold out and furthered my commitment to present such material to people who could never, ever physically get to a meditation center.

VISION CRYSTALLIZED

From the success of these classes and the good opening reception to the Sangha, I finally saw what we are actually creating here: A completely virtual, spiritually robust dharma center that is open to everyone. The future is here and we are creating it.

DIFFICULTIES

PEOPLE GOT MAD AT ME

When I sent out the initial email about the Sangha, most people either said nothing or chose to sign up. Both are cool! However, some very small percentage decided I was an asshole, intimating that I was disingenuous, greedy, and pathetic.

This hurt me so much.

Every one of my peers says the same thing: IGNORE. However, I can't. In most cases, I responded by saying something like,

This hurts me so much.

You may be surprised, as I was, at the ways people responded. Most people got back to me with something more genuine such as being disappointed because they couldn't afford it or upset to feel that a valued connection was changing, which made for much more fruitful dialogues. In pretty much each case, we worked something out to continue working together and I treasure these particular relationships. My lesson was that if I responded with something more human, I got a human response back.

This is because Basic Goodness is real.

DEPRESSION REMAINS MY COMPANION

As you may have heard me say in meditations or dharma talks, I am a person who struggles with depression. At this point, I have to assume I was just born that way. I feel like I manage it pretty well and I'm not trying to hide it or anything.

The way depression shows up for me is not as moroseness or bitterness particularly, but as a kind of extreme self-doubt. Every day, and I'm sure I'm not alone in this, is an encounter with this particular roller coaster. There are heart-stopping moments where I witness myself careening downhill on a particularly sharp slant that came out of nowhere. There are days when I feel that I am somehow climbing back up, rung by rung by rung, praying not to slip back, uncertain if the summit is moments or months away. And then it begins again. I don't necessarily expect this to change, but as a practitioner, I learn deeper and subtler ways to relax with the ride and even take some delight in it. It is my (strange) friend.

2014 had many, many tests and they all came in March. (March is my cosmic month, I have no idea why.) A close family member committed suicide. My husband was diagnosed with cancer (early, treatable, treated, done). Another family member had a stroke. The second anniversary of my father's death happened. March... At such times I realize that depression has its gifts. When things get dark, very dark, my eyes adjust quickly. So there is that.



SWOT

Have you ever heard of a SWOT? It is a method for thinking about, well, any undertaking. Though it is used in businesses and projects, it is also a way to think about your life. It involves contemplating the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats of your situation.

- Strengths: characteristics of the business or project (or person)* that give it an advantage over others.
 - Weaknesses: characteristics that place the business or project (or person) at a disadvantage relative to others
 - Opportunities: elements that the project (or person) could exploit to its advantage
 - Threats: elements in the environment that could cause trouble for the business or project (or person)
- *my addition

I would like to share with you my SWOT for the Open Heart Project at this moment in time. Because the OHP is such a personal business and because I tend to be a personal type of person, this particular SWOT also contains my own personal s, w, o, and t.

Strengths

The Open Heart Project has so many strengths but the primary one, beyond doubt, is the intelligence, goodness, tenderness, power, and openness of its members. I am especially moved and inspired by the Open Heart Project Sangha which is now about 250 good souls. But whether you are a Sangha member or not, I am impressed over and over by the people who choose to join the OHP in any capacity. To me, you are the best of the best.

Next, I would cite the practice of meditation as the source of that strength. In creating a community, we are greatly abetted by sharing a single practice. This binds and synergizes our efforts. If we were all doing different practices, this would not be so. While each person's experience of the practice is unique, we are applying the same technique. This is very meaningful.

Finally, I count Michele as one of the biggest strengths we possess. For the past year, she has set up our programs, established sales channels, answered your questions, and generally supported us all. Things would be a lot different if she was not around!

For myself, I would say my greatest strength is that I have no doubt whatsoever in the dharma or that what we are doing together is real, beneficial, powerful, and useful. My inspiration is unflagging and this helps me navigate the natural ups and downs inherent in building something new.

Weaknesses

Our website is our biggest weakness, currently. It does not provide space for our activities to occur and creates confusion for people taking various programs. It actually makes it difficult for people to find and sign up for the OHP.

Marketing is not something I currently do. The OHP has grown almost entirely by word of mouth, which is awesome. That is a trustworthy way to grow. While I remain committed to organic growth, I believe there are ways to grow our community in a non-cheesy fashion but I'm a little scared to try them. I don't want to confuse anyone. I don't want to be the PT Barnum of the dharma. I don't want to get into draining arguments about whether or not I'm an asshole. But I KNOW we have the chance to build something humongous, ambitious, beautiful, and insanely helpful to our fellow humans. Some kind of more direct engagement with the marketplace is called for. I mean, I'm never going to make stupid promises or pretend I know all the answers about attaining bliss or whatever. But our work and creation should be amplified. Just not sure how.

My greatest personal weakness is lack of self-confidence and feeling small. It has been very interesting and compelling (for me) to take my seat as a teacher over these past 3 years. I just wish I wasn't so knotted up by my own dark moods. But that is just how it is in this lifetime (thus far) and it is actually thoroughly workable.

Opportunities

Our opportunity is clear. We are building the world's first completely virtual, thoroughly robust, honestly dharmic meditation center created for anyone who wants to explore the Buddhist path independently—with support and love. While I hope that everyone will find their own Guru and declare devotion to that teacher, there is no Guru here but you and nothing to believe in but your own wisdom mind. We are not pretending that meditation is a non-spiritual technique for becoming a better leader or losing weight, not that there is anything wrong with those things. Rather, we see it (and practice it) unashamedly as a path to wisdom, compassion, and power, the three qualities of the awakened mind. We are not pretending to be monks or nuns, but nor are we trying to strip the practice of the Buddhadharma which is what makes it potent and transformative. So, this is a huge, huge opportunity.

Personally, my opportunity is to become a better teacher, a more giving and generous guide. You may not suspect this about me, but I am actually extremely shy. (She said, as she spoke to you from within your computer screen.) As our relationship and the OHP grows, my hesitation about connecting with others diminishes. This is a great opportunity for me, so, thank you.

Threats

It may sound like I'm really getting down on myself in this document, but honestly, I would say that the biggest threat is myself, but not because I'm incompetent. I'm just one person and a lot of what I am attempting, I don't actually know how to do. While I feel very supported by you, Michele, my husband, and the dharma, the only expertise I have to draw on is my own and it is limited. More is needed. As we grow, this will become more evident.



WHAT IS IN THE WORKS?

A new book

“Start Here Now: An Open-Hearted Guide to the Path and Practice of Meditation” will be published by Shambhala Publications in September, 2015. I’m creating a lot of programming to go along with it, good for complete beginners and those ready to take the next step

Website Redux

Our website really needs a do-over. The home page is in flash, y’all! It is simply not mobile friendly. But the worst part is that it is REALLY CONFUSING for people to navigate. I apologize!! It took me months, but I found a great team to work with and the project begins in two weeks. Our estimated date for site relaunch is April, 2015.

The new site will include:

- A real online home for the OHP
- Community forums
- Easier registration for programs
- Less password confusion
- Basic and Sangha Open Heart Project communities more clearly defined
- Most important: I want it to feel like a beautiful destination rather than a menu of transactions.

Three-Month Daily Dharma Gathering

Lodro Rinzler and I had so much fun creating the [Building a Mindful New Year](#) program this past Dec 26-31. We want to continue it! In an extremely ambitious move, we’ve decided to offer a live streaming meditation with a different teacher EVERY SINGLE DAY. Well, Mondays will still be a video from me, but on Tuesday-Sunday, you will have the opportunity to tune in at an soon-to-be-determined time and practice live with a great teacher. Sessions will be 30 minutes long and include a short talk, practice, and q & a.

And, don't worry, each session will be recorded and made available for 24 hours so if you can't log on for the live session, you can still participate in the practice. The cost for this will be \$20 per month, although, as with all of my on-line programs, Sangha members may participate for free. For every 50 people that sign up, we will offer three scholarships. Our launch date is January 20.

Monthly Special Event

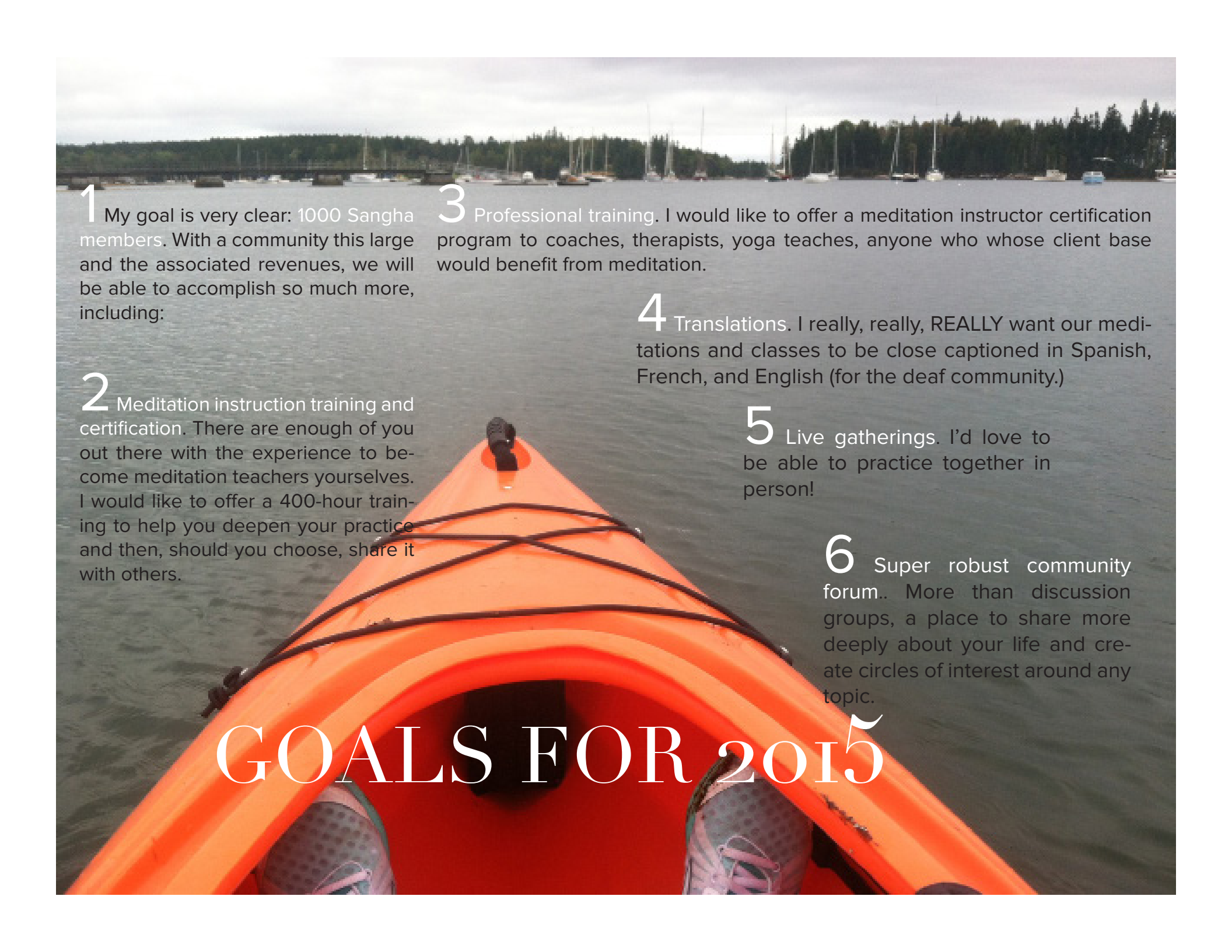
Every month beginning in February, we will have a guest speaker guide us in meditation and give a talk followed by discussion. I'm super excited about this. It will be free for all and give the entire OHP community a chance to practice together. Begins in February.

Practice together in person?

I'm talking to Shambhala Mountain Center about maybe holding an Open Heart Project retreat in October, 2015. Stay tuned.







1 My goal is very clear: 1000 Sangha members. With a community this large and the associated revenues, we will be able to accomplish so much more, including:

2 Meditation instruction training and certification. There are enough of you out there with the experience to become meditation teachers yourselves. I would like to offer a 400-hour training to help you deepen your practice and then, should you choose, share it with others.

3 Professional training. I would like to offer a meditation instructor certification program to coaches, therapists, yoga teaches, anyone who whose client base would benefit from meditation.

4 Translations. I really, really, REALLY want our meditations and classes to be close captioned in Spanish, French, and English (for the deaf community.)

5 Live gatherings. I'd love to be able to practice together in person!

6 Super robust community forum.. More than discussion groups, a place to share more deeply about your life and create circles of interest around any topic.

GOALS FOR 2015

Thank you
for your practice.
Thank you
for practicing together.

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