

Community Care Working Group

Caring Community in Action

**Revised with input from the Mandala Governing Council
December 7, 2004**

“We need to move in a direction where members feel supported. Individuals need to know that in terms of whatever may be occurring in their life, there are others who care and (there are) aspects of the society that will help them traverse their particular dilemma.”

-Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche
Treatise on Society and Organization

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Introduction

The Community Care Working Group has focused on how our community might better care for its members, how we might establish a “culture of caring” within our sangha. The Shambhala Buddhist teachings acknowledge the ground of all human experience as basic goodness, an indestructible source of compassion and wakefulness that is available to us at every moment. The desire to create a culture of caring is a natural expression of this goodness, a willingness to care for ourselves and others without prejudice or hesitation. Engaging in compassionate activity is part of our personal path, and also the basis for creating an enlightened society.

Obviously, we face many difficulties in life as individuals and as a society. As a spiritual community, we need to inspire, encourage and support each other as we each come to terms with these realities. Ours is a path of personal and societal transformation. By working through our own confusion and chaos, we find the strength and knowledge to help each other.

Our inspiration is to look beyond personal happiness, comfort and security, to the needs of all beings. Everyone is our relative, part of our family. Those are the teachings and the basis for creating a culture of caring. It is a question of actually identifying with others – of feeling others’ pain, bewilderment and confusion and skillfully helping in any way that we can. This is not merely an altruistic ideal. It is the living example of what we see in our lineage teachers and in many of our community members. We are a Mahayana community, warrior-bodhisattvas interested in overcoming personal and societal aggression, and creating enlightened society wherever we live.

In this document, we first identify some of the positive characteristics of a caring person. This is followed by a description of how caring people might manifest in our community. These characteristics are offered as a starting point. Our individual sangha members represent a wealth of resources; people who have insights and practices in this area. The Community Care Working Group is currently developing a community exploration process as one way to help each Shambhala community identify the needs of their sangha. The goal of the process will be that each practice community can develop a plan to genuinely address community needs in a meaningful way. Some communities may already have processes to explore this issue or may choose to use a less formal process. This community exploration process will be available by the Shambhala Congress 2005. A webpage of community care resources will also be available at that time.

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Our working group developed the following list of characteristics of a caring person in order to help us define what we mean by “caring”. This list is not meant to be exhaustive. Nor is it meant to be any sort of proclamation or teaching. We simply used it to help us begin our conversation about Community care. Another good resource that was suggested for this purpose is “The Shambhala edict on wholesome human conduct”.

A Caring Person

A caring person is willing:

- 1 to be willing to feel and fully acknowledge one’s own pain
- 2 to work with one’s own pain as the basis for being able to help others
- 3 to experience another person's suffering
- 4 to listen without judgment
- 5 to be spacious (respect the other person's experience and not rush in to fix the problem or give advice)
- 6 to "hold one's seat" - not become overwhelmed by the other person's experience
- 7 to be warm, friendly, ordinary and genuinely interested in the other person
- 8 to be uncompromisingly honest
- 9 to cultivate a sense of humour, playfulness and lack of self-consciousness
- 10 to be inconvenienced, slowed down, and able to put the other person's interests or priorities first
- 11 to ask for help of others
- 12 to trust oneself and discriminate between idiot and genuine compassion
- 13 to risk making mistakes and to continue to learn in one’s willingness to help others

These are the same as the qualities of a friend and are present in our approach to meditation practice, in how we "make friends with ourselves." A caring person is able to care for others because she cares for herself in exactly the same way. Mindfulness awareness practice *is* caring for our body, speech and mind.

A Community That Cares

Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around." Leo Buscaglia

The qualities of a caring person listed above already suggest activities such as taking time, listening, giving and asking for help. But many of us have grown up without living in an active, caring community or else we have lived on the edges of a community. That’s why we wanted to describe ordinary activities within a caring dharmic community. In seeking examples of caring in action, we looked to actual things people do or have done. We gathered these real-life activities from many sources—our sangha, urban and suburban neighborhoods, small rural towns, traditional societies, church

groups, and from personal experiences. We're hoping this sparks many other suggestions and ideas.

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Being a Dharmic Person • Appreciating our own basic goodness, overcoming morning depression • Caring for our body by getting sufficient rest, exercise and good nutrition • Knowing and respecting one's limits • Supporting and practicing disciplines that involve body and movement such as Tai Chi, Chi Qong, Lujong, Shambhala yoga • Caring for our speech by practicing right speech, genuine communication, both with ourselves and with others (avoiding listening to or spreading gossip) • Caring for our mind by practicing mindfulness awareness meditation daily • Caring for others by remembering our commitment to the Mahayana and our Bodhisattva Vows (always putting others first), being willing to explore all the ways that we might help, giving up privacy, be willing to extend ourselves beyond our comfort zones • Caring for our heritage by appreciating our lineages and teachers for their generosity and wisdom • Cultivating fearlessness, gentleness and intelligence by being willing to open to every situation no matter how challenging

Day-to-Day Caring • Helping people move—packing up or unpacking and putting away • Calling someone to carpool whenever possible • Organizing work parties to get a big or community job done • Foregoing the temptation to fuel conflicts • Introducing yourself to someone new to the center • Giving clear signals that one is accessible and friendly • Learning and practicing conflict resolution and reconciliation • Acknowledging efforts, successes, contributions, beauty, kindness, whenever possible • Passing up opportunities to talk about others • Practicing civility in dealings with others • Announcing and celebrating birthdays • Welcoming of new members with acknowledgement in newsletter and a welcome packet of introductory information

Disability, Illness and Old Age • Developing an appreciation for illness and old age as part of the cycle of life and as path • Joining “Karuna Talk” and helping to educate ourselves and others about taking illness as the path • Creating a policy for making Shambhala centers fully accessible to people with disabilities and developing a timeline for its implementation • Taking people to appointments • Asking for help ourselves • Bringing meals • Shopping for food • Picking up prescriptions • For serious and on-going illness, setting up a caring rota or circle • Calling to check in • Bringing gifts • Asking someone to run an errand for you • Helping the person to attend social events • Giving a back, hand or foot rub • Changing linens • Washing clothes • Letting others know what the situation is and what the person needs • Creating a meal sign-up to bring homemade meals to those in need

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Mental and Emotional Difficulty • Developing an understanding that some people experience extreme mental and emotional states (including anxiety, depression, addiction, mania and psychosis) that may persist over time and can make it difficult for the person to function • Recognizing the diversity of views in relation to the cause and treatment of these conditions • Assisting the persons to develop an understanding of their own condition and the available treatment options, consistent with their own views and beliefs • Recognizing that in extreme cases the person may not be able to make decisions regarding their own care • Identifying people in our communities who have expertise in working in the field of mental health care • Creating a list of local mental health resources, hotlines, and support groups so that sangha members could have easy access to these resources when in need

Death and Dying • Developing an appreciation for the cycle of life, including death as path • Creating sane environments in which practitioners can experience death • Supporting community development of end-of-life resources such as hospice • Tracking sangha members' sukhavati wishes in a file at the Center • Helping sangha members plan to their death and dying • Establishing support for spiritual practice from diagnosis through end of life • Developing a palliative care hospice manual for sangha (in process) • Identifying local resources, agencies, venues, medicare info, visiting nurses associations

Parenting and Raising Young People • Starting a baby group • Exchanging services like child-minding • Becoming an honorary aunt or uncle • Setting up child care at sangha events • Sharing equipment and strategies for sanity • Creating a Children's Day celebration and tradition • Helping put on a big birthday party • Caring for someone else's sick child so the parents can take a break • Setting up a carpool to school • Being a Big Brother or Big Sister to a child who needs one • Talking to teenagers as if they were human beings too • Saying hello to children and teens when passing them on the street • Welcoming others' children into one's home • Giving thoughtful gifts to young people • Conversing with young people about what they are involved in and care about • Establishing a relationship with the neighborhood children • Establishing a meal sign-up to bring meals to new parents

Building Community • Setting up a neighborhood association or Delek, which brings many benefits • Getting to know neighbors by name • Holding neighborhood clean-ups and social events • Volunteering for the community • Participating in civic organizations • Making connections • Offering know-how • Providing resources or information about resources • Welcoming newcomers • Making referrals to good service providers (doctors, dentists, mechanics) • Encouraging a Meditation Instructors network to support center members and build community • Introducing newcomers to others in the community • Holding a monthly supper club • Organizing weekend campouts each summer • Organizing weekend trips • Putting on formal balls • Coordinating

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group movie nights • Starting a Dharma book club • Using group processes like spontaneous insight” to make decisions • Creating an uplifted home environment, inviting people to our homes, having casual get-togethers where ‘business’ isn’t discussed • Helping to clean and keep local centre uplifted • Having a Desung or someone equivalent at each Dharma center who looks after the health and well-being, the general harmony of the center • Drawing older back through relevant practice and study • Originating a Shambhala Café—one is open 3 hours Saturday mornings with a little sitting and discussion, possibly tapes or books

“The one thing we still can do that people did a long time ago is take time to appreciate. And that doesn’t mean you go around buying big bouquets of roses. Just say hello when you’re walking down the street! I know things are more complicated and challenging these days, but we have to take a deep breath and get back to the basic values.”
4th Generation Dairy Farmer

Business, Finances and Housing • Encouraging experienced sangha business people to form resource groups to assist new sangha ventures by: reviewing business plans, suggesting sources of investment capital, discussing potential market demand, looking at management capabilities • Encouraging co-housing • Sharing housing • Renting extra space to sangha members • Sharing large purchases (cars, some tools) • Exchanging goods and services without cash (bartering) • Loaning money directly • Exchanging or lending books and other things • Putting out the word someone needs work or housing • Giving money to support the community • Giving money to individuals in need • Sharing helpful information, resources, strategies • Since poverty and depression are often linked, helping people to develop the necessary financial conditions to practice and lead good lives

Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation • Developing and supporting community mechanisms, such as upaya councils, for bringing conflicts to the path (mediation and reconciliation)

A Native American man from Washington State was talking to a panel at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association some years ago. The subject was the traditional fishing rights of his people. He explained how his tribe depended on these rights to survive. He described another survival strategy: He and others in his community took care of members who were too young or old to care for themselves. Then when he was old, others would care for him. “It’s what we call Indian insurance.”

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The following questions were raised during the meetings of the Community care working group, review group, and the Mandala Governing Council meeting. These are just a few of many questions that we as a community can further explore:

- 1 What has worked and not worked with the Delek system which was created by the Druk Sakyong to address community care issues?
- 2 What might need to happen in order to revivify the Delek system?
- 3 How can we elevate the importance of community building activities to the same level of importance that we give to producing programs at our Centers?
- 4 How can we begin to prepare for the inevitable needs of our aging sangha, many of whom will not have savings or healthcare after retirement?
- 5 How can we create more ways to encourage one another to discuss difficult issues that help build community and resolve past conflicts? (for example, talking circles, community meetings and other community forums)

What would change after the Shambhala Congress based on the work of the Community Care working group?

Caring for people in our community would become a high priority, reflecting the aspiration expressed in the Sakyong's *Treatise on Society and Organization*. All Shambhala Centers will be provided with free resource materials compiled over the past year and a suggested process for how they might engage their community in an exploration and discussion about community care.

Recommendation 1: Shambhala center leadership would identify a local community care leader(s) who could arrange for local members to discuss the ways in which caring for one another is part of our collective practice.

Recommendation 2: The local community care leader(s) would work with Shambhala leadership and members to determine the highest community care priority and what practical action they could take as a first step.

Closing: Broadly speaking, caring communities create a strong web of relationships that connect people, meet a variety of needs, and perpetuate the basic human values of the community. Community members act in caring ways as part of the underlying principle of reciprocity—mutual aid and support is what sustains us as individuals, families and a community. So, it is understood that it is in everyone's enlightened self-interest to help, strengthen and sustain one another. And this means taking action, being willing to make the first move, extending ourselves to make caring manifest.