

October 5th Conference Calls on the topic, “Community Building as Practice”

About 60 people in total joined today’s two conference calls on the topic of “Community Building as Practice.” The following is a brief outline of the themes discussed, and a summary of the discussion. Although there was a range of topics that were open for discussion, each call seemed to “self-select” a topic that became the focus of remarks. The first call ended up being about spiritual and community identities and the second one became a conversation entirely about the Vajra Regent. Since both calls lasted 90 minutes, this summary could not include every point of view expressed. Apologies to anyone who feels their point of view has been omitted or inadequately expressed. Everyone is free to post a contribution on the Congress pages of the Shambhala website.

Spiritual and Community Identities

We are a **diverse community**--perhaps more than at any time in our 25-year history. The diversity of individual perspectives and spiritual paths—including our expectations for a vibrant community--makes it a challenge to discover what may be our common spiritual or community “identity.”

One caller suggested that now, given the diversity of who we are, that we may actually be a more open, inclusive community than we had been in the past.

Callers made the point that since the Vidyadhara Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s death in 1987, our community has evolved through several eras and changes—from the Vidyadhara, to the Regent, to the current Sakyong and leadership structure. In the days of the Vidyadhara, people appeared more or less united as a community around a central figure who served both as the root guru and Sakyong for all. Now, the character of the mandala is different – much larger, more culturally diverse. Many students have developed strong connections with other spiritual teachers, while still maintaining a deep connection to Shambhala. For some, it has taken time to come to understand this relationship with the Sakyong--since he is not everyone’s root guru, and because his manifestation and actions have not been identical to those of the Vidyadhara.

One caller urged us to reflect on the question “What’s the spiritual glue that keeps Shambhala together now? He pointed out that it was no longer just one single teacher. “It feels to me that we’re more complex, also more open ended. Shambhalians can have other Buddhist teachers, so it is more inclusive.”

Several points were discussed in relation to these themes:

- How to hold these two, potentially contradictory principles at once: “unified mandala” and “diversity.”
- To what extent are we Buddhists, Shambhalians, or Shambhala-Buddhists? We do not all feel the same inclinations here, or share the same understanding of these terms and paths. There is some fear that by blending these traditions we will forfeit the power of Shambhala Training, which some regard as wholly distinct path for creating enlightened society.
- Some feel the loss of the Vidyadhara acutely and with that some aspects of our religious and secular distinctions—and we need to acknowledge this sense of loss. We also need to preserve the heritage that the Vidyadhara gave us, especially in places like Karne-Choling where his mark is deeply felt. Why, for example, has his photo been removed from the post meditation area there, asked one caller
- Another caller pointed out that clearly there are many students for whom Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche is the root guru. These students’ input also needs to be heard and considered.
- It may be important to get beyond confusion and discover our common identity, if we are to be successful in reaching out to newcomers.

One caller summarized the discussion in this way: “Trust is the key; we need to feel we can trust the Sakyong to preserve and extend the Vidyadhara’s heritage—at least its essence--into the future.” Also, we need to know that the Sakyong can and will clarify those issues that are important to this community.

President Reoch noted that discussion of what we mean by “trust” is important. He asked us to look at the whole question of “trust in the leader” within the context of considering Shambhala as a nation. In societies with parliaments, including the United Kingdom with its constitutional monarchy, there are multiple parties represented, including both a government and a “loyal opposition”. Good governance accommodates a spectrum of views. There is a clear leader, but the system of governance does not require everyone to have an identical relationship to the leader.

The discussion included reflection on a recent weekend event in Lexington – a gathering on the theme Community as Practice. Those on the line from Lexington talked very positively about the process they had gone through, which was a deliberate response to feeling stuck, needing to address the importance of communication and to be together in community. They had worked to create space to listen to each other’s doubts and to hold intense disagreements within a container of openness. One of the callers said they had been reminded of a line of poem that said if there are 20 people crossing a bridge, there will be 20 people crossing 20 bridges. Everybody has a different image of what they think a community could be.

The importance of seeing community building as practice was pointed out. Most centres already have a diversity of experience. We need to find a way that enables us to hold this diversity. We tend to want to hold around uniformity; but we are actually being invited to hold together around inclusiveness rather than uniformity.

Another person said our practices give us the ability to create the space, hold the space and hold the tension. This would also be important for the Congress, she said. We need to slow the process down and relate to situations with mindfulness and remain open in our hearts. There is a lot of passion around these topics, making it all the more important to open up the space and remain open to each other.

The Vajra Regent Osel Tendzin

The death of the Vajra Regent has, for many, been a great loss. Coupled with that loss has been the experience of having no clear and safe avenue for expressing this sadness, or celebrating his life and legacy.

For others, it is easier or preferable to avoid discussing the Regent’s life and conduct, unless asked a direct question by a newer student.

For everyone who called in, it seemed that the issue is an awkward and difficult one to discuss. Newer students pointed out that not everyone knows the facts concerning the Regent’s illness and death. Given how divided this community became over the issue, many said they would feel marginalized if they brought up the topic in a community gathering. There were expressions of feeling unresolved about controversial aspects of the Regent’s life and conduct and difficulty in explaining these things in a way that was compatible with their understanding of dharma.

When asked whether Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche had been willing to engage on this topic, President Reoch reminded us that it was Rinpoche who had given his blessing for the Regent’s stupa to be built at Shambhala Mountain Center. He has also been fully in agreement with the President’s efforts to arrange that the consecration of the stupa would take place through the combined energies of the two organization, Shambhala and Satdharma. The Sakyong has also sustained his long-standing personal relationships with the Regent’s dharma heir, Patrick Sweeney, and with Lady Lila Rich.

It became clear that there was no “party line” for talking about the conduct of the Regent—or the Vidyadhara, for that matter. One caller suggested that a guidelines for doing so might be helpful, while others suggested it’s better to speak from the heart about these things, based on one’s own understanding and experience.

The intention of the call was not to resolve these matters, but to open up discussion on topics like this in advance of the Congress, since they were surfacing as people started to contemplate issues of concern

within the community. The discussion about our community's understanding and handling of communications around the Vajra Regent pointed to the idea that, as a community, we could develop better ways of communicating with one another, during and after such difficult times. We need safe, open venues and vehicles for such communications.

Trust and Expectations of Our Leaders

President Reoch took the discussion of conduct and accountability further with this provocative question: "Would we expect or allow one kind of behaviour from our teachers, and a different kind of behaviour from a secular leader, such as the president?" Answers to this question included:

- "Any leader would have to earn my trust, regardless of whether they were in a spiritual or secular role."
- "Because I trust the dharma and my teacher, I therefore trust his selection of key leaders."
- "When it comes to finances, you had better err on the side of accountability, Mr. Reoch!"

President Reoch noted that in Shambhala as well as other spiritual communities, there is great sensitivity around the issue of the abuse of power. He said that members of the community had told him that they were reluctant to speak openly for fear they might be somehow marginalized. He asked us to consider the importance of dealing with the abuse of power in an intelligent way

One caller noted that issues of power and misconduct, or the whole issue of trust in a teacher or leader are easier to discuss once a leader has died. It is much harder to raise such issues while the teacher is living.

Several callers noted that from a relative standpoint, we do need to encourage openness and critical intelligence with respect to power and abuse of power. However, trust is not just a relative concept we project onto others; it actually begins with oneself: Can we allow *ourselves* to be imperfect, let alone our teachers? Ideally, we might be able to trust our teachers while also recognizing when something about them feels "off." We could hold both of these attitudes, knowing that the people we're talking about are very human.