

Summary of October 16th Conference Calls on the topic, “Community in Action”

As a preamble to these conversations, President Richard Reoch recalled the Sakyong’s koan to our community: “How do we turn this flower outward?” and invited us to consider the many possible implications of this idea. For some, it may be about making the Shambhala Buddhist teachings available to a much bigger audience. For others, it can mean establishing a more diverse, inclusive community. From yet another perspective, it can signify our becoming a more socially engaged community.

The 25 people who called to discuss the topic of Community in Action expressed a similarly broad range of ideas for how the Shambhala community—as individuals and as a collective—could have a greater impact in the world.

What emerged was a spectrum of options, a range of possibilities.

Build bridges, network, act

A number of callers expressed the view that our community could be doing more to impact our larger society. One caller—inspired by the example of Buddhist activist Joanna Macy—suggested we need to “build bridges, network with other leaders in this area, and take action.” As a community, we should focus on a particular area of interest and commit ourselves to working in that area of interest, over the long term.

Shambhala could be helpful in providing direction and support, such as leadership training, or inviting discussion papers on important topics. For example: A “Shambhala policy on the environment” could galvanize people and challenge their thinking.

A surprising number of sangha people and groups are already highly engaged in their communities, some in very visible ways. Marty Janowitz played a key role in advancing recycling and composting in Nova Scotia. Chuck Lief and others were cited for their work at Greyston in Yonkers, NY. In Austin, the Shambhala Center has created a wildlife sanctuary that has drawn public attention, and in Boulder recently, a number of sangha played key roles in a major conference on Sustainable Resources.

As practitioners, we can bring valuable skills to our work and our communities—listening, conflict resolution, facilitation, accommodation.

Shambhala Teachings as Social Action

A council member from Montreal expressed the common predicament of our smaller communities: “We would like to be more active with other groups and projects, but it’s about all we can do just to keep the center going.” The vision is there, but our energies and resources are limited. We simply can’t do it all.

To this a long-time student replied, “The Shambhala teachings as a whole should be viewed as social action. We are creating the seed for an ecosystem, for a way in which society as a whole could operate. If we understand this we can feel positive about our contribution, rather than poverty about what we’re not doing in society.”

In Shambhala we offer training—mind training, and training in being a warrior in the world. What’s more, we create environments that others want to be part of. People can come to our centers for spiritual inspiration and rejuvenation. This is an important (potentially the most important) aspect of what we have to offer. As President Reoch noted, spiritual sustenance can be of great benefit to people involved in difficult, contentious work in the world—since such work can lead them to feel poisoned with aggression, frustration and despair.

To sit or to act...

Discussions about our community goals and priorities can be difficult—even polarizing—since many of us feel there's a lot at stake. Some people want us to be more active in the world, while others feel we should concentrate on being good meditators and teachers of meditation.

“There should be room for both,” as one caller pointed out. One's spiritual path is very individual and personal. Ideally, we need people at our centers who are committed to maintaining our practices, curriculum, forms and decorum, and others who are working to turn the flower outward. If we emphasize one path over the other, we stand to jeopardize both.

Our centers should be places that can accommodate these different paths and types of activity. They are sacred spaces that we need to uphold and protect. The center and the sangha is where we come to for inspiration and support.

...taking a stand, or not?

Where this community should stand politically was also up for debate. Some callers felt that we should be clear and uncompromising on certain issues, such as opposing the US-led war in Iraq. We should proclaim the path of peace and compassion—as the president did on behalf of the Sakyong in his letter to the United Nations last year. If we do not, we lose heart and stand for nothing in particular.

Others felt that taking a political stand is dangerous and inappropriate, since we are not all in agreement politically, and doing so might alienate people who of all beliefs who want to explore our teachings. Better to accommodate all people, regardless of their politics.

Reaching beyond the boundaries of white, boomer, middle class

We are a predominantly white, boomer, middle-class community, and so it is this demographic we tend to attract to our centers.

To reach other age and ethnic groups we should consider:

- Location – Our centers tend to be at the fringes of cities, making it difficult for students to find us. (In Halifax, the center is centrally located and accessible, yet few students come.)
- Activity – To appeal to people of other ethnic and age groups, we need to make a difference in their lives. We can do this by becoming involved in activities that are central to their communities.
- Language – Why not offer teachings in Spanish in pockets of the US?
- Price – The cost of our programs may be prohibitive, in spite of discounts offered. We should review our pricing, as well as how we advertise programs and price.

Forms of Expression

Another discussion centered around the forms of our culture. There was a brief discussion on the importance of dance as a social form. Once called, a dance teacher, talked about how such forms as traditional waltzing, Celtic and Latin dance can serve to enrich our Shambhala community—even though some resist these forms, since they require mindfulness and precision.

The forms we enjoy are our cultural expression, and can be something we offer to the larger community. We can build bridges with other cultures by inviting their forms into our community as well.