

Notes on Conference calls 19 October 2003

Topic: Structures and Finances

The first call began with a few statements of appreciation for the pre-Congress resource papers that had been prepared on the finances of the mandala and possibilities for a unified mandala structure.

Much of the call was then devoted to possibilities for developing regional structures. One caller pointed out that just the effort to maintain the day-to-day activities of our local centers involves so much work that there is no bandwidth for people to think about larger structures. If we are to develop a regional approach it is going to require work from both the fringes and the center of the mandala. Experience in one possible region had shown that some functions could be shared or streamlined. For example some things were being done four times by four centers when they could be done more effectively once on behalf of all of them.

Several callers stressed the value of regionalization, pointing out that it would elevate both our resources and our view. One person said that there used to be a stronger sense of relating to a center of the mandala. There needs to be a larger view of Shambhala than simply concentrating on one's own center. This broader view may be easier to develop at a regional level first. There could be a regional director or coordinator acting as a link between local centers in the region, helping to schedule acharya visits and relating to the center of the mandala as a whole. Those regional directors/coordinators could then form the basis of an international board.

A caller from the Netherlands said that they had experience with regionalization. They had a spacious approach in which the local center directors themselves formed the regional board, with the chair rotating among them. This avoided creating a new level of structure.

The call then focused for a time on the European model, which is described in an article by Chris Tamdjidi in the most recent issue of the Dot. One caller asked how Europe had achieved the current level of organization, and was told that it had taken 13 years to achieve, but had been based on a few people working very hard to develop good communication and understanding. There is now standard pricing of programs, with discounts for different categories of people. Each member belonged to their center as well as Shambhala Europe, with roughly 30% of each person's membership fee going from their center to Shambhala Europe. Similarly each center gave 25% of its income from Shambhala Training programs to Shambhala Europe which was used for its operations, including the development of Shambhala in Eastern Europe. Shambhala Training levels 1-4 were held at local level and then largely on a regional level to expand people's understanding of a broader mandala.

A former director of Dharmadhatu pointed out that the European model was now very similar to what had existed in North America many years ago when the Vidyadhara was alive. The path, said a caller from Europe, consisted of investing time in discussion and

work with people to develop communication. In response, it was pointed out that there used to be regional dharmadhatu conferences two or three times a year. Since 9/11, a caller pointed out, there was a lot of more value to regionalization as people were more willing to drive to regional programs (rather than fly longer distances) and that there was a lot more cross-over and coordination going on between the local and regional practice centers. There are now regions or increasing regional cooperation in the Atlantic region, the Bay area, Texas and the Front Range.

“Do we need an international board of directors?” asked one caller. President Reoch clarified that the current legal structure requires a board. He asked board member Susan Skjei to talk about how the board functioned. She outlined how the board had been put together by the Sakyong and had worked, often behind the scenes to manage the organization, and integrate the mandala. Many board members were active in their local centers, often acting in an advisory capacity. What might be needed now would be a more visible board with a different structure that would develop more two-way communication throughout the community and foster trust. It is clear that the Sakyong wants a more participative style of governance and is encouraging community members to relate much more directly with each other.

Resolving the financial and structural issues seemed to be obstructed, said a caller, by underlying fears and unresolved karmic concerns in the community, such as who had power in the mandala and who could be trusted. “If this issue is not about money and structure,” said a caller, “then we need to hold our view and be prepared to go deeply into these underlying issues.” That, said President Reoch, was what he was hoping the conference calls and the coming together at the Congress, would help us achieve.

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The second conference call started with a statement that we need to develop a long-term stable financial structure. The caller proposed that there be a constant flow of resources to the centre of the mandala (similar to the flow of funds for Shambhala Training) and that the centre of the mandala should have the power to control the mandala, if necessary by owning the local centres. In response, some callers pointed out the financial strain that a number of local centres currently experience, with some owing more than they can afford.

One caller thought we were limiting ourselves by having a membership policy. In other religious organizations, there is an annual pledge campaign that generates significant funding. On top of that the central body takes a percentage of revenue from each local congregation.

One centre recently brainstormed on financial issues and proposed having a program on overcoming poverty mentality, both on the part of the rich and the poor, and having a senior teacher present to relate these issues to the dharma. It was suggested that more reference be made to the view that making offerings in response to the good fortune of hearing the dharma was karmically beneficial for people.

In some centres, many individuals are unaware of the larger mandala. To counter this, one centre recently held a program “Welcome to the World of Shambhala” that was highly successful in introducing members to the splendour of our mandala. In response it was suggested that the centre of the mandala produce a short video on how Shambhala is organized, presenting the diversity and power of the mandala as a whole.

In trying to deal with the many questions connected to generating income from programs a number of centres reported that they were successfully experimenting with offering programs at their real value, but explicitly advertising that people could “pay what they can afford” or offering scholarships and discounts even if it meant that some people were paying very little. This does not reduce income. Costs remain the same, but participation goes up and people appreciate paying what they can afford.

One centre reported that they derive one-third of their income from renting space in their basement to other groups: karate, gym classes and a school and their shrine room to yoga and chi gung classes. They promised to post their rental agreements on the web for others to consider.

There was also a brief discussion of the value of regionalization, and the possibility of such structures providing a basis for representation and accountability between local centres, regions and the centre of the mandala.

The final subject was the importance of starting a proper bequests program.

People expressed their appreciation for the series of conference calls and President Reoch stressed the importance of these calls and the forthcoming congress in shaping the future of Shambhala.