

Expanding our View of Membership

By Wendy Layton-Munro

The Sakyong's direction to "turn the flower outwards" can be understood and implemented in many ways. But at a minimum it can express a wish to dismantle the organizational structures that separate those with a genuine interest in Shambhala Buddhism from being included in our mandala. It can be held to be a command to reform those structures so that they invite rather than exclude participation in Shambhala vision.

Working closely with individuals, small groups and larger centers throughout North America has convinced me that our current membership policy is at odds with the Sakyong's directive and is in need of reform.

Over four years of emails and telephone calls with administrators, program directors, old students, new students, the enthusiastic, the cynical and the merely curious has led me to the following generalization: more and more people are interested in the Shambhala Buddhist teachings; more and more people believe that the many and varied forms in which Shambhala Buddhism expresses itself have something to offer them. Although I cannot put forward numbers here, it is my belief that this increasing level of interest is reflected in increasing numbers of participants in local programs.

But this growth in the general public's interest in the Shambhala Buddhist teachings is not mirrored by a similar growth in the numbers of those whom we officially recognize as members under our current policy. This could suggest our membership structure functions to exclude or discount many persons who otherwise are drawn to the teachings of Shambhala Buddhism.

Briefly stated, a person becomes recognized as a "member" of Shambhala only through that person's on-going official membership in an officially recognized Shambhala group or center. Membership in a center or group generally involves a significant financial commitment (perhaps an average of \$30/month) as well as volunteer responsibilities and practice requirements.

A group becomes officially recognized if it contains a meditation instructor, or has access to an instructor. A center, which generally contains a larger number of people, becomes officially recognized as a center if it has 3 active "gates." The way in which this structure works to exclude people from becoming a part of our organization can be shown in the following examples:

Dick was a member of the Shambhala Center for 4 years before going to the 1999 Seminary. He now lives in Michigan, over 10 hours from the nearest officially recognized group. He started a group through the University, which brings people together to study Trungpa Rinpoche's books, but does not feel it appropriate to introduce a membership policy in this informal context. And he is not interested in administrating. He keeps up with his ngondro practice. From time to time, he talks over the Shambhala dharma with Mary who has been very inspired by Trungpa Rinpoche's book, Shambhala, Sacred Path of the Warrior, and has been given meditation instruction by Dick (who is

not a certified instructor.) Mary is considering travel to attend Shambhala Training Levels in other cities but finds this difficult given her small child and limited financial means.

Jane lives in Victoria, she has attended Shambhala Training through Level III and considers the teachings she received a precious part of her life. But at this time she is not ready to undertake the financial, volunteer and practice commitments required for membership at the local center. She finds the Center to be a bit clubby and intense and feels that membership is too much an “all or nothing” question.

Harry recently moved from Boulder, Colorado where he had lived many years, to care for her mother near Providence, Rhode Island where there is a relatively small group. He attended the 1979 seminary, is a Chakrasamvara practitioner. He has personal difficulties with the director of the Providence group and so has not kept in contact. He uses sadhaka talk and sangha talk to stay in touch. He practices and occasionally attends programs at Karme Choling.

Tom was the director of the Shambhala Center in Toronto, but recently moved to the Bahamas for employment opportunities, where he hopes to start a group. He applied for a membership password to access our website but was told that he needed to be a member of a center.

In Utah somewhere a shifting group of up to 8 meditators has come together. Their principal influence has been Pema Chodron and they meet weekly in the living room of one of their members to study the Vidyadhara's texts and Pema's books and to meditate together. None of them has qualified as a meditation instructor. Some have received mediation instruction at a program of Pema's or Shambhala Training. A few have been advised how to meditate by more experienced though unsanctioned meditators.

Rachel lives in New Hampshire. She attended 1978 seminary, but now considers Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamato her principal teacher. She is interested in kyudo and practices at the Boston Shambhala Center with the kyudo group every month or so. And she comes to the center on Shambhala Day to see her friends and celebrate the new year.

Sue studies tea ceremony at the Halifax Shambhala Center. She is not interested in other practices offered at the center, but appreciates the center for providing her the opportunity to study.

Mary lives in Australia and would like to become a member of Shambhala, as she is inspired by the Shambhala teachings, and contacted us through our website. , But she has no means of making that connection, as we do not have official members living there.

All of these people have different life situations. All have some degree of connection, new or established, tentative or deep-rooted with the Shambhala Buddhist teachings. All share one other thing in common; under our current membership policy they are not members. As they do not pay membership dues to a center or group, they are not considered to be an official “part” of our organization. Our existing membership

policies exclude these people from being counted as members, and sometimes stand in the way of their greater sense of connection with our mandala. No count of our membership will disclose them or take account of their interest in or connection to Shambhala Buddhism. We do not yet appreciate the extent of our reach.

We need to give people--like these examples--the opportunity to form and maintain an intimate connection with Shambhala through a far more inclusive membership policy—probably one that emanates from the center of the mandala.

Proposal for Membership to Shambhala

Anyone should be able to become a “member” of Shambhala through a simple registration process and the making of a small (say \$40 annually) donation. Membership would carry with it the following benefits:

1. That person would have made a tangible gesture to ally themselves with the values expressed by Shambhala Buddhism. Rather than having to choose between being a by-stander or a “die-hard” believer; this person could choose the middle way of a simple declaration of support for the Sakyong and his vision;
2. The person would be assigned a member’s password and given access to the member’s section of the Shambhala website;
3. The person would be sent “The Dot” – the community newsletter;
4. The person would be given a discount on programs, practice materials, retreat space.

Such an inclusive membership policy would bring explicitly into our mandala those who should already be recognized as being part of it; it will gently encourage others to join in. Those who become members on this basis may take such further steps as becomes appropriate for them. But by joining they have made a basic connection, which brings them within our family.

A more inclusive vision of membership has great potential to expand the organization’s own view of Shambhala and to dismantle the exclusivity and “us and them” ways of thinking that have outlived their times.

If our sense of who was a part of our organization were more expansive then our understanding of how to benefit and nurture that organization would also naturally expand. Our website is a good example of this. Although we are one of the largest, most mature sanghas with substantial expertise in design and web development, our website is quite inferior to those of any number of newer, smaller organizations.

Our view of what a website can accomplish has been limited by our inability to see beyond the interests of our “official” members. Since official members attend centers where they can attend programs and receive teaching and meditation instruction face-to-face, it is natural to think that the Shambhala website is not really all that important to the real work of propagating the Shambhala dharma. We see other factors as critical to the

maturing of committed practitioners - so the website gets short shrift. We fail to see that there is a larger community out there that would very much benefit from an attractive, comprehensive on-line presentation of the Shambhala teachings and mandala.

Were membership made more inclusive, development of our on-line presence would not just be the smart thing to do, it would be the natural thing. So also would it be natural for meditation instruction and teaching resources to be available far more widely – through video, DVDs and on line presentation. So too would the development of many types of resources, including regional centers, to nurture our members in ways we haven't yet thought of.

I would be happy to discuss further the ideas expressed above and to provide additional examples from my experience as to why this proposed change could be beneficial. Please feel free to contact me.