

“In the modern world, diversity awareness has become a fundamental and basic skill that is necessary for all leaders, in particular leaders who have been entrusted with the vision of enlightened society, within a growing multicultural community that has become more and more diverse. It’s an ongoing discipline. Each layer of bias we uncover will point to another layer and another layer.”

--Sangyum Agness Au, *"Going Beyond Bias"*

Shambhala Leadership: Going Beyond Bias

In yet another indication that a new chapter is opening in our sangha's history, the Mandala leadership recently completed a diversity training course. Members of the Sakyong's Council and Mandala Governing Council participated in the training at Shambhala Mountain Center during their August 17-19 meetings.

A continuation of the energy released during the second Shambhala Congress, the training was held in response to a Diversity and Accessibility Working Group recommendation that Shambhala governing board members and Center directors participate in diversity training.

Acting on that recommendation, President Richard Reoch appointed four members of the Sakyong's Council---Agness Au, Hamish Maclaren, Cortez Rainey and Mary Whetsell---to a planning group, and charged it with developing a diversity training course based on the Shambhala view.

The planning group decided to develop a course in which participants could safely explore their biases and assumptions about themselves and others. For help with this task, the planning group turned to Chuck Whetsell, who generously shared his experience as a diversity trainer. After numerous thoughtful meetings, several diversity training modules were completed.

The diversity course started on the first day of Mandala Governing Council meeting, with meeting attendees being invited to pair up and spend half a day in one of the 10 wheelchairs that had been rented exclusively for the occasion. Even though participation in the exercise was completely voluntary, many attendees gave the exercise a try.

The sight of a squad of wheelchair-bound leaders snaking its way across the grounds of Shambhala Mountain Center, maneuvering to access its meeting, dining and restroom facilities was quite a spectacle. Shambhala Mountain Center staff and visitors were startled and curious, and all received an important education as Mandala Governing Council members sighed and gasped at the challenges faced by wheelchair-bound persons, such as getting stuck in the gravel between the downtown buildings or balancing a meal tray and drink on our laps

while steering through the chairs and tables in the dining tent. The exercise continued in half-day shifts until the final day of the Mandala Governing Council meeting.

The morning of the last day of the Mandala Governing Council meeting was devoted entirely to diversity training. The training occurred within a practice container: opening chants, meditation, and stroke practice.

The program began with an illuminating dharma talk by Agness Au entitled "Going Beyond Bias." In her talk, she presented a Shambhala Buddhist view on diversity, in which she made the point that our challenge as practitioners training ourselves to open to the world is to extend that openness to all people and situations---even including our own discomfort---without bias.

Following the talk, everyone was led through "diversity aerobics," an exercise designed to show the breadth of diversity in the group as well as the similarities. The exercise revealed the group to be composed of individuals with varied demographic characteristics, personal histories, and experiences in the Shambhala community---many of which contradicted and challenged the preconceptions of some participants. Afterwards, breakout and plenary sessions were held for everyone to discuss their perceptions and reactions to the exercise.

Then each person was asked to pair up with another person and to talk with them about their "personality" questionnaire (each person had completed a questionnaire on the first day of the governing council meeting without knowing about its intended use). The questionnaire exercise allowed each person to explore their thoughts and feelings about their various strengths and weaknesses, and to contemplate their thoughts and feelings about people whom they see as not possessing their strengths and/or weaknesses. Moreover, the exercise allowed each person to reflect on situations in their own experience where they held feelings of superiority or inferiority that served to separate them from others.

The next exercise was a meditation technique called "fearlessness practice." The practice was introduced as a way to go beyond barriers that separate us from others. In this guided practice, participants were encouraged to fully experience their own prejudice---and its underlying fear---and to soften toward themselves and others toward whom they feel prejudice. After this exercise, there was quite a bit of discussion.

In addition to the discussions about the exercises, the leaders were also reminded that persons with perceptual, mental and learning challenges also experience difficulties and need full access to Shambhala facilities, programs and community life.

At the conclusion of the program, the leaders of Shambhala were thanked for their willingness to participate and invited to contemplate ways in which they could

bring insights from the training into their daily lives and into the life of their centers. After all, relating to the diversity of our world without bias isn't something "separate" or "in addition" to the dharma. Rather it simply is what we do as Shambhala and Buddhist practitioners.

This "Going Beyond Bias" diversity training course is a work in progress. The planning group is continuing to evaluate and adjust the course and considering whether to present it in other venues. If you want to know more, or if you'd like to help, please contact Cortez Rainey, Chair of the Diversity Working Group: crainey52@aol.com.