

## **DIVERSITY WORKING GROUP**

### **Diversity Contact Persons – Conference Call**

January 13, 2007

#### **Meeting Notes**

**1. Background:** On Saturday, January 13<sup>th</sup>, at 12 Noon, Eastern Time, a conference call was held with the Shambhala diversity contact persons. The purpose of the call was to allow diversity contact persons to talk with each other about their center/group diversity initiatives and for Cortez and Hamish, on behalf of the Sakyong's Council, to find out what support they need.

The following persons called in.

Leal Abbott, Davis  
Connie Anderson, Madison  
Suzanne Côté, Ottawa  
María Dolores Díaz, Tucson  
Olivia Fite, Baltimore  
Nancy Grant, San Francisco  
Ivette Guillermo, Philadelphia  
Maria Kennedy, Houston  
Isabella Kool, Tucson  
Joe Litven, Halifax  
Hamish Maclaren, Boulder  
Joy Mickle, Durham  
Kaushik Nag, St. Johns  
Gretchen Neve, Chicago  
Andy Noel, Toronto  
Patience Paradox, Seattle  
Cortez Rainey, Baltimore  
Anne Richmond, Boston  
Kathleen Roberts, Brunswick Portland  
Miguel Sawaya, Los Angeles  
Maurizio Smith, Los Angeles  
Karen Starr, Albany

In addition, the Conference Call Summary indicates that four additional people apparently joined the call, but were not identified.

**2. Follow up from previous conference call:** DiversityTalk, an email group list, has been created. A few individuals who were selected as diversity contact persons within the last couple of weeks have not been added to the list. A request will be submitted for them to be added to the list next week. French and Spanish translations of *Shambhala*

*Aspirations on Diversity, Accessibility and Compassionate Conduct* have been completed, courtesy of Suzanne Côté and Luz Rodriguez and can be found on the Diversity webpage linked to: <http://www.shambhala.org/congress/>.

**3. Summation of introductory comments by contact persons:** The number of people on the call and their introductory comments indicate there is genuine aspiration throughout Shambhala to cultivate centers and groups that are open, inclusive and welcoming of diversity. Following is an account of happenings, issues and concerns described by the diversity point persons on the call.

### **Diversity & Multicultural Awareness**

In **Brunswick-Portland**, there is an ongoing conversation about how to cultivate racial and ethnic diversity, as well as an interest in talking with other Shambhala centers and groups that have a relationship with local Buddhist groups. In **Chicago**, a “listening committee” exists to consider diversity-related issues. Gretchen Neve, this center’s diversity contact person, wants to talk with other group members about how she can link her work as a diversity trainer with Shambhala principles.

**Boston** and **Tucson** are interested in increasing cultural sensitivity and awareness. In **Boston** this interest is more general, while **Tucson**’s aspiration is to provide cultural sensitivity training to council members with the hope it will have a positive affect on the rest of the membership (there are issues around class, culture, theistic religions and identity that need to be addressed with skillful means and sensitivity). The diversity point persons for these centers are interested in hearing from anyone who has suggestions. The **Halifax** diversity point person is discovering through relationships with friends from other cultures that when we move beyond our own cultural conditioning and habits we can open up to a whole new world; he is available to talk with others about this.

The **Davis** and **Los Angeles** centers have recently displayed *Shambhala Aspirations* in their meeting places; it is being read by visitors and members. (President Reoch has asked that all centers display the document. It can be downloaded from the Diversity webpage in three languages.)

### **Families, Children & Youth**

**Los Angeles** is also making a push to attract families and children. **Seattle** wants to develop programs for youth, and the diversity point person there would be happy to talk to any one who has suggestions. **St. John’s** is publicizing its group to students at a nearby university.

### **Gender & Sexual Orientation**

The **Chicago** center is also involved in organizing a national conference on Buddhism and Women, and hosts Queer Dharma group meetings once a week, as does **Toronto** and **Ottawa**.

### **Language**

**Ottawa** and **Tucson** are working on access for populations that do not speak English. In **Ottawa** this issue is more around inviting French-only speakers into its Anglo center and holding programs that are accessible to them. Much like the person of color who sees no one of his or her kind and does not feel welcome, many lukewarm francophones do not come back because almost everything is in English. Ottawa does offer meditation instruction in French and has held a couple of courses in French. **Tucson** also offers meditation instruction in Spanish but it wants to do more to attract the Latino community.

### **Physical, Perceptual and Mental Abilities**

**Albany, Los Angeles, Ottawa, Seattle and Toronto** are relating to physical accessibility issues—**Davis** is working on this issue extensively. **Ottawa**, in particular, is also relating to environmental health issues that affect the ability of people with allergies to access the dharma. Similarly, the **Davis** and **Houston** centers are relating to issues affecting the accessibility of the dharma to people with mental illnesses.

### **Race and Ethnicity**

In **Durham**, where there is one African-American member, there is recognition that the numbers of people of color in the sangha affect the center's ability to attract more people of color. **Tucson** recognizes this too and wishes there were more people of color retreats and dathun opportunities for people of color.

**Baltimore** is holding an acharya-led program, *Going Beyond Bias*, March 9-11, to explore bias, racism and diversity. To encourage the participation of people of color in this contemplative program, a People of Color Scholarship Fund was created. (The fund will pay program costs for 25 people of color to attend the program. For more information contact Oliva Fite at [activecompassion@gmail.com](mailto:activecompassion@gmail.com) or 443-956-8743. To register, please go to [www.activecompassion.org](http://www.activecompassion.org).)

In **Philadelphia**, a senior teacher is leading a group that meets weekly to discuss the book *Dharma, Color and Culture*, edited by Hilda Gutierrez Baldoquin. The **Chicago** center, in collaboration with leaders in **New York City, Toronto** and **Baltimore**, has created the soon-to-be-announced, *North American People of Color Scholarship Fund*. (The fund seeks to develop a greater number of people of color as Shambhala guides, meditation instructors and teachers in Canada, Mexico and the United States, is supported by President Reoch and the Sakyong's Council.)

**San Francisco's** diversity contact person is interested in organizing a white allies retreat to coincide with the people of color retreat that will be led by Acharya Gaylon Ferguson and Hilda Gutierrez Baldoquin in **Berkeley** in June 2007. She wishes to communicate with people about this and she would feel supported if she could consult with an acharya or senior teacher. (Spirit Rock and the Zen Center are interested in collaborating on a retreat for white people to examine white culture and how to ally with people of color.)

### **Intention**

There is intention in the area of diversity in **Houston** and **Albany**. Although both centers are in a governance transition, they are committed to finding a new point person to help with diversity issues. In **Boulder**, although there is not much diversity in the sangha, there is sangha involvement in the diversity initiatives of Naropa University.

**4. Concluding the first hour of the conference call:** By the time the introductions ended, the time that had been allotted for the conference call had expired. The question was raised about how the group should handle issues that had come up for which there was no time to discuss: accessibility, translation, relating to other Buddhist groups, people of color, white allies retreat, linking employment as a diversity trainer with Shambhala principles.

It was suggested that since there were 10 people of color on the conference call, and there is longstanding interest in how to attract people of color, we could simply find out from the people of color on the call. An issue arose, however, about how we define diversity, and whether by focusing on people of color, we are excluding the other issues from consideration.

Our definition of diversity includes many areas where there is difference: religion, spiritual tradition or teachers, path of practice, opinions, class, nationality, culture, ethnicity, race, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, or physical, perceptual or mental abilities. People of color is one of several areas for inquiry, and it would be interesting to find out whether there is something Shambhala is doing that keeps them away. [There is a diversity of diversity issues, and a challenge is to be open to hearing other diversity concerns other than our own. For example, if one's diversity concern is only people of color, accessibility or language, will we be able to relate to a Muslim, Queer person, or a person who holds political views that are different from our own?]

Joy Mickle offered reasons she feels Shambhala has a difficult time attracting people of color. After the call she was asked to repeat her comments: "I shared my experience as I saw it, stated that I believed that much of the reason it was hard to attract and keep African-Americans (specifically) was because of their strong background in Christianity... The black church being more than a religious institution but a very strong cultural one as well... It being very difficult for many blacks to feel "ok" to venture into other religions. That by "rejecting" the black church as a black person you feel that you are rejecting your heritage, your family, your traditions, etc. For me I felt that Buddhism was itself so important to me that it almost didn't matter what form it came in. But for

many blacks it was difficult for them to place themselves in an environment that was so similar to the environment that we have to deal with everyday in the larger world, at work, at school where we have to find ways of dealing with the majority, that it is not always comfortable for us to take ourselves out of the familial and warm environment of the black church for a strange and different environment of a Buddhist center. I also stated that although the people at the Shambhala Center were warm and generous and I didn't feel any open resistance to my being there but that just like in the larger world they seemed oblivious to how difficult it can be for someone like me at times. I also stated that I do not speak for all black people and that it was solely my perspective.”

After Joy’s comments, due to the time, it was decided that it was okay for callers who had to leave to do so and that those who wished to remain on the call could hear more from the people of color on the call about this topic. There were, however, several comments:

- Much of the information shared today could be share via DiversityTalk and everyone is encouraged to do that with concerns that we did not discuss.
- Everyone is urged to make greater use of DiversityTalk., especially for sharing information, such additional information about the *Going Beyond Bias* program in Baltimore, and the book *That All May Worship* concerning faith group initiatives to welcome people with disabilities.
- Everyone has a directory of Diversity Contact Person with their email addresses. It can be used to contact others individually for help.
- These conference calls could be held more frequently; instead of twice a year, every 6 weeks.
- In the future, it is important for there to be an agenda for conference calls so that issues that need to be address can be in the time allotted.
- Diversity is a broad subject. In addition to an agenda, it would be helpful to allow a limited amount of time for discussion of each diversity topic: race, age, etc.

##### **5. Key observations made by people of color during the remainder of the conference call:**

- We need to look at our use of the terms “minority” and “people of color”; anyone can be a minority in relation to a larger group. “People of color” is a more specific term, and it is better suited to our purposes.
- We need to recognize that all people of color are not the same, and no one person can be speak for all people of color. There is a lot of racial and cultural difference among people of color.

- Many people of color of varying cultural backgrounds who want to connect to meditation and dharma are initially turned off by what they encounter in our centers.
- For many people of color, there is a limit on emotional expression in our centers. It is difficult to find openness for other ways of being, room for difference, for connecting with others who have a different way of being.
- People of color are no different than anyone else. If you come to a place, and don't see anyone you know, you leave.
- It is necessary to do outreach to communities where people of color reside. This is the reason Shambhala needs to find out what has worked in the area of outreach and do more of it.
- Shambhala centers where there are friendly white people, and people of color, can encourage visiting people of color to stay—if the persons of color are visible and welcoming.
- People of color entering our centers should be encouraged to be a little assertive about enrolling in classes, taking on rota assignments, and becoming actively involved in the life of the center—and make themselves visible.
- It is helpful for people of color to know who is on the center council. This will help to remove the perception of Shambhala as a closed society.
- It is helpful for new people of color to know that the center has a Diversity Committee or Diversity Contact Person to whom they can share their experience and offer input about how to attract people of color.
- It is also helpful to have center leaders that demonstrate a genuine commitment to fostering a society that is welcoming of people of color as has been exemplified by President Reoch and others.
- Although everyone can contribute to fostering diversity in Shambhala, people of color must assume personal responsibility for making the Shambhala teachings available to people of color; and responsibility for outreach and supporting other people of color throughout their involvement in our community.
- Since Shambhala is a community, it is not necessary for people of color to do things by themselves. But with the support of sangha, people of color must connect with their bodhisattva vow, and extend themselves for the benefit of others, becoming guides, meditation instructors, and teachers, and in these roles build bridges that enable people of color to have greater access to Shambhala.

Nancy Grant said she was inspired by the conversation that had just transpired, and looks forward to developing a structure where white people are willing to engage in such candid dialogue.

**6. Conclusion:** At approximately 2:00 p.m., the conference call concluded with the Dedication of Merit. The date for the next conference call will be announced.