



S H A M B H A L A

Intimate Relationships with Participants

From Six Class Sourcebook for Shambhala Instructors
for Directors and students in Part II of Assistant Directors and Meditation Instructors training

It is the responsibility of directors, assistant directors, meditation instructors and staff to establish and maintain the formality of the teaching relationship. Given the experiences of genuine open heart that take place along the path, feelings of tenderness, or even sexual attraction might arise in either the instructor or the participant. It is common and natural to be struck by the brilliance and beauty of people, to feel affection and love for them. Both instructor and student may feel emotionally and physically open, vulnerable and alive, or alternatively fearful and needy.

Such feelings must not be acted upon, however, if the integrity of the teaching relationship is to be preserved. The essence of decorum in such a situation is to provide a dignified and decent environment in which powerful emotions can be present without triggering the reflexes of our habitual patterns. Without denying the sexual dimensions of our being, the instructor should keep present in his or her mind the purpose of the instructor-participant relationship, which is to guide, encourage, and protect the participant's engagement with meditation practice and the teachings.

The responsibilities and expectations that accompany the instructor role are not compatible with those that accompany a casual friend. Thus, the instructor must refrain from any sexualizing gestures, inappropriate touching, verbal innuendo, invasive personal questioning, scheduling of dates or intimate self-disclosures.

This directive is no different from the professional code of conduct for a doctor, therapist, teacher, manager or anyone else who can be seen to be in a position of authority or power relative to a participant. No matter how equal two people may feel, no matter how much the participant or student may want or even initiate the sexual nature of the contact, the decision to sexualize the relationship almost invariably means the loss of any ability to properly fulfill the situation's original purpose, and it can cause deep harm to the participant.

Some practical suggestions to preserve a helpful formality in relation to students:

1. Do not invite students to personal social gatherings or outings, and hold instruction meetings at the local centre, rather than in a home, café, or empty office.
2. Be clear about the time frame of a given meeting before you begin.
3. Within the context of a program, if you feel that a relationship to a participant is becoming sexualized or casual, consult with the director of the program. (When role boundaries become blurred, sharing the awareness helps prevent boundary violations that could be harmful to the student.) In such a case, the student should be reassigned to a new instructor.
4. After a program has concluded and conditions are less highly charged, if feelings of sexual attraction continue to arise and are mutual, it would not be unreasonable if one wished to explore these, but at such a time it would be important to make sure that the teacher/student relationship was concluded and that the student has a new instructor. It is obviously inappropriate for a formal teaching relationship to be mixed with a personal one.