

The following treatise, "Notes on Diversity and Accessibility," is being written by Dan Hessey at the request of the Diversity and Accessibility Working Group, and with input from both the Working and Review groups.

The Working Group is formulating recommendations on diversity and accessibility for submission to the Mandala Governing Council this Fall. As part of its consultation with the larger Shambhala community, and with the objective of generating discussion on this topic, the Working Group is encouraging Shambhala Center/Group members to read and discuss "Notes" and to send feedback to the Working Group so that the treatise can be revised. Thus, the Working Group wants your involvement in developing a Shambhala Buddhist view on diversity and accessibility.

To obtain copies of "Notes" and to send feedback, contact the Diversity and Accessibility Working Group at d&a-working@shambhala.org.

Notes on Diversity and Accessibility

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"When we talk about enlightened society . . . We're talking about a culture of human beings who know the awakened nature of basic goodness and invoke its energy in order to courageously extend themselves to others."

--Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, Turning the Mind Into An Ally

When we examine issues of diversity and accessibility in the context of Shambhala Buddhism, we must look at different kinds of boundaries that limit access to people of different backgrounds and of different situations. These differences can include race, gender, sexual orientation, age, income, physical/perceptual ability, language, geographical location, culture and social strata and so forth. To what are we trying to gain access?

Simply stated, in a Shambhala society each person is trying to gain access to a situation that will allow his or her life to be a genuine expression of warriorship. This may mean different things to different people. For instance, for one person, the path might lead to three year retreat, and to another to a degree in leadership from Naropa, and for another to raising a family while doing shamatha daily. But in all cases, the motivation is for genuine life, one which benefits oneself and others in fundamental ways.

At the same time, as a sangha practicing the Mayahana path, we are committed to constantly extend our generosity and hospitality to others, putting their benefit before our own. We do so without bias as to whether we perceive them as being similar to ourselves or different, expressing equanimity, the last of the four immeasurables. Equanimity is the view that allows enlightened society to come into being.

Shambhala Buddhism

It could be said that the Shambhala Buddhist lineage has come into being altogether as a response to the need for diversity and accessibility. As it existed in Tibet, Buddhist practice, especially advanced Buddhist practice, was the precinct of the elite. Many people did not have the opportunity to integrate deep practice into their everyday lives. Trungpa Rinpoche criticized this aspect of Tibetan society in the *Sadhana of Mahamudra* talks he gave in 1974 and elsewhere.

In 1957 Tibetan Buddhism as an expatriate religion had the potential of becoming the plaything of scholars, esotericists and a few brilliant practitioners. Trungpa Rinpoche paved the way to make his traditions available to ordinary westerners of no particular brilliance by presenting skilful means and teachings that were highly accessible to a diverse group of people of varying backgrounds.

Thus, in examining issues of accessibility and diversity in our mandala, it is helpful to understand that the commitment to these issues is central to our Shambhala Buddhist lineage, and that we are today the beneficiaries of Trungpa Rinpoche's great commitment and skill in making the path available to us. Just thirty years ago all of us were outsiders to our tradition. The Shambhala vision of Enlightened Society is by its nature a model of inclusivity and accessibility: it is a society where every aspect of human activity is integrated into the path, and where each person can practice genuinely according to their aspiration and capability. To paraphrase a passage from a Shambhala text, "The power of supreme humanness exists in everyone. The vision of the Shambhala lineage is to connect powerfully to everyone, not just the elite person alone."

Ways of understanding Accessibility and Diversity

Thus today it is our task to extend the program of "accessibility and diversity" begun by Trungpa Rinpoche when he came to the west. This project can be considered in three categories:

1. **Physical/perceptual.** Physical access to the teachings includes the very existence of dharma centers, as well as such things access ramps, elevators, and FM systems for the hearing impaired. Other examples include appropriate seating for people who are obese, and childcare for parents. People who are deaf or blind require special technologies and assistance to participate fully in our centers.

Tools for accessibility also now extend to online study, such as Phil Karl's online Ngedong School and Naropa's online meditations course. Physical accessibility can also mean physically bringing dharma to those who are isolated in prison or hospital, or sending an acharya to a place that previously had no senior teachers.

Issues of physical/perceptual accessibility are often intensely practical, and require concrete solutions. However, to access the energy, attention and money needed to achieve these solutions requires a willingness to identify with people whose challenges are different than our own, and an understanding of their importance to our world. Even when we do not have aids such as ramps or FM systems in place, awareness and extending ourselves to others in this way makes a tremendous difference to people with disabilities.

2. **Cultural/Psychological.** Humans are intensely social animals, and we have a tendency to consciously or unconsciously co-opt the dharma and its space as cultural territory. For this reason we need to ask how we as a community can ensure that the teachings, which are at their root meta-cultural, are not insulated from people whose backgrounds are different than ours. An aspect of this

understanding is examining how we prejudge who is “free and well favored” based on cultural, linguistic, gender and racial biases. These issues arise in many contexts; for instance Trungpa Rinpoche discussed how Tibetan cultural bias hindered some Tibetan teachers from teaching effectively in the West. Looking at how the European (and now South American) sanghas have successfully weaned themselves from dependence on American cultural ways of practicing dharma may be very useful to us in understanding how to open our doors to more diverse aspects of society within the United States and elsewhere.

Another important issue is how to work appropriately with people with mental illness. In the 1970’s Trungpa Rinpoche and Suzuki Roshi discussed how to help people who were disturbed in ways that made meditation unbeneficial to them. The Maitri project arose out of these concerns. However, developing skilful means to help mentally disturbed people is an ongoing concern in local centers.

3. **Spiritual.** As we say in the *Request for Teachings* “According to the diverse aspirations of sentient beings, please turn the wheel of dharma of the greater, middle and lesser vehicles.” While all sentient beings have basic goodness and bodhicitta, their needs, aspirations, and paths vary tremendously. Accommodating this spectrum of aspiration is a core issue in thinking about diversity and accessibility. Providing many ways of engaging the dharma and respecting the paths of others even as they differ from ours is essential to creating a culture of diversity and accessibility. This approach was demonstrated by Trungpa Rinpoche who provided many doorways to the path for different people, including the traditional Buddhist path (Meditation instruction, dathun, refuge, Bodhisattva vow, seminary, transmission, ngondro, Vajrayogini, Chakrasamvara, 6 yogas etc.); the Shambhala path (family, career, society integrated with practice); Naropa (a context for broad-based exploration and exposure to many traditions in a contemplative context), Dharma Art; the Dorje Kasung; and many others. Likewise, the present Sakyong has emphasized that many people may quite validly spend their lives practicing at one level or another without ‘completing’ the curriculum of the complete Buddhist path.

The tendency to expect others to aspire to practice in the same way we do tends to create an exclusive culture that limits access to the dharma. For instance, in the 1970’s and 1980’s it was assumed by many people that any serious practitioner would plan on doing a dathun, attend seminary, complete the ngondro and receive abhisheka as soon as possible. If a person did not feel inspired to do this, or was not able to, he or she often were regarded as a second-class practitioner. This kind of elitism was harshly criticized by Trungpa Rinpoche as missing the point of practicing for the benefit of others.

Appreciating people for who they are also demands that we appreciate their genuine connection to practice throughout the three yanas and the Shambhala

paths. This wider view of genuine practice makes it possible for us to include many more people in Shambhala society.

Economy

Not everyone is 'free and well favored' to the same degree. Some of us have more physical, financial, and other resources to support our practice than do others. In today's world, people who have physical challenges have much greater ability access the teachings than in medieval societies. At the same time, in today's world many people with the greatest financial resources are not able to practice because of being distracted by material culture.

However, many of our greatest practitioners (Milarepa foremost) have been without financial resources. When Marpa, a successful businessman, offered Naropa gold in order to receive teachings, Naropa threw the gold dust in the air and said "to me the whole world is gold." When Milarepa asked Marpa for the teachings, he offered an empty pot. Marpa told Milarepa that he would not both support him and give him the teachings, and Milarepa's famous trials began. Thus Marpa's path was furthered by offering money to his teacher, while Milarepa's was furthered by being rejected from the teaching circle for lack of money. The path does not manifest in the same way for everybody; the crux is to bring our individual karmic situation, no matter what it is, to the path.

We cannot divorce our aspirations for accessibility and diversity from the economic realities faced by local centers and the community at large. The issue of finding resources to make the teachings accessible to others ties these concerns to all the other aspects of our world: economics, governance, prioritizing projects and inspiring others to help. Acknowledging the aspiration to bring the teachings to others puts each of us on the spot with our own economy as well, as each of us "puts our money where our mouth is."

When we engage the issue of economy, we will need to examine issues of entitlement and personal responsibility. One pole holds that the teachings should by definition always be made available to whomever wants them, and that nobody should ever be excluded on the basis of cost. A contrasting view is that each person has his or her personal karma, and that they cannot expect others to pay their way. While each of these views has merit in its own right, we as an organization need to take responsibility to open the teachings to as many people as possible, and as individuals we need to accept the challenge of our personal karma as genuinely as possible.

The Dynamics of Diversity

1. Diversity and Specialness

One way of understanding the path is as a process of deconstructing the assumption that we exist as a solid thing, an ego. According to the Buddha, clinging to the illusion that we exist as a solid, ongoing, unchanging entity is the root of unnecessary suffering. As

we know, all of us as confused sentient beings use our individual characteristics—ranging from our cultural identity, to our intelligence, to our personal history, to our suffering, to the color of our hair—as credentials to reinforce our individual identity. We do this both consciously and unconsciously. From the perspective of the path, the credential of being an “insider” is just like that of being an “outsider”—both must be dissolved if we are to open to our inherent wisdom. Interestingly, as our clinging to our individual characteristics as credentials relaxes, these qualities do not go away, but become more vivid and available to others as resources. Freed of their credential-ness they then can integrate into and enrich the mandala and society as a whole.

So it is essential to distinguish between diversity and clinging to individuality based on our characteristics. From this point of view, it is not helpful to make a big deal of the “specialness” of diverse groups and characteristics as we work to become accessible to diverse people. Each of us is ordinary in our diversity, despite the neurosis we may have about being in a wheelchair or having gone to Yale. Trungpa Rinpoche recounted how his root guru, Jamgon Kongtrul of Sechen, criticized him in his youth for his pride in his brilliance in understanding the teachings—for his “specialness”. There is nothing that cannot be made into a credential by ego. This even-handed attitude can help us avoid confusing the very real need to expand our view of our world and make it available to people who are different with reifying ourselves and others based on individual and group characteristics.

While all sentient beings are equal in having basic goodness, people are not the same as each other, and are not the same in what they have to contribute. However, in Shambhala we do not regard the fact that some people may have greater capacity, intelligence or ability as making them “better” than others. Ideally, Shambhala society is one in which each person can find a situation in which they can contribute to society in a way that fits who they are, and where they can evolve on the path according to their ability and aspiration.

Shambhala, as a society and as a path, is about knowing the world beyond ego and its credential. This is the ultimate view of inclusivity and diversity.

2. Insiders and Outsiders

There is a tendency to assume that in an organization that there is an inside group that is in charge and could magically right wrongs and whose shortsightedness is at the root of the shortcomings and inequities that we see. Taking a balanced view in this regard is one of the most powerful ways we can empower ourselves to make a genuine contribution.

In the same way that our individual neurosis is not that solid when seen with the eyes of dharma, the group neurosis of those who are administrators is generally neither non-existent nor all that solid. When we look carefully, the “they” who are making decisions is none other than a bunch of “us’s” taking their turn at the helm. However, when in a position of leadership, one’s strengths and limitations are bared for all to appreciate.

When we solidify the “us and them” dynamic, we let both ourselves and “them” off the hook of learning how to collaborate. This is not to say that we do not challenge each other, but it is to suggest that we do so with appreciation, insight and humor, not blame and resentment.

All of us in our lives will take turns being insiders and outsiders, of being included and feeling excluded, and even of being hurt and hurting others. To the extent that we are tender, brave and intelligent, we can use all those roles and experiences to benefit others.

3. Accepting and Rejecting

Finally, in a discussion of accessibility and diversity, we must examine what validly must be rejected, and what we do not wish to provide access to. In any society or mandala, there must be boundaries that protect the integrity of the mandala and prevent people who are not ripe or properly motivated from harming themselves or the teachings. For instance, in the Shambhala path the Kalapa Court (the seat of the Sakyong, and the exemplar of Shambhala Society) is defined as a space that cannot be entered based on arrogance, ambition or aggression. Likewise, in any Vajrayana mandala, there are always boundaries and protectors. In our society this principle is exemplified by the function of Kasung.

In general, the use of ego and power to gain power over others is rejected; the attempt to co-opt the teachings as a personal credential is rejected; and activities that cause harm to self and others are rejected. At the same time, confusion itself is seen as fertile manure, not to be rejected, and chaos is seen as “extremely good news.” Finally, confusion is regarded as that which has the potential to “dawn as wisdom.”

The Commitment to Diversity and Accessibility in Shambhala

Skillful Means and Practice

When we take the Bodhisattva vow to save all sentient beings, no matter how numberless, we are making an inconceivable commitment to diversity and accessibility. No one is left out of this aspiration. Thus the commitment to finding ways to make the Shambhala Buddhist path and society available to others is at the heart of Shambhala Buddhism itself.

In general, we never give up on anybody in the Shambhala path, no matter how inconvenient that may be. However, the process of inviting more people and people with different needs and aspirations into our still young and relatively unformed world cannot be a naïve one. We cannot simply invite everyone into Shambhala and leave it at that. Opening our world to others involves vision, planning, marshalling resources and an extended commitment to the process of making our vision of a diverse and accessible society real.

To realize the vision of diversity and accessibility we must rely on skillful means, the step by step process of implementing our vast vision. If we do not join our vision to the day to day practicalities of our world, we will have failed to realize the potential of our lineage to benefit others.

Deepening our ability to genuinely and effectively join our vision to effective skillful means depends on our practice. By bringing together Mahayana view, our practice and engagement with others we connect our tenderness, fearlessness and intelligence with our actions. From this perspective, then, committing to diversity and accessibility is a decision to actualize our practice, emerge from our cocoon, and be warriors in the world.

Many times the financial and practical challenges to making our centers accessible seem unsurpassable. Typically, we then turn away from the issue, not realizing that when we do so we are at the same time turning away from real people who need our help. When we put these concerns and issues on the back burner because they are so inconvenient, we are also deferring our aspiration, creativity and openness to these people as well. If we find these challenges to inclusion daunting, how much more so do they! Whether or not we have the resources to remove such barriers today, we must openly care for and identify with those who find barriers to entering into the path.

Conclusion

Warriors of Shambhala are not trying to create a dharmic nest for themselves and people just like them, which would result in the corruption of the tradition. Rather we must invite as much diversity, confusion and wisdom as we can handle into the Shambhala Buddhist world. By doing so we not only make it accessible to others but also ensure it will be a genuine world for us as well.