

January 24, 2008.

Dear center directors, teachers and meditation instructors,

For some time, the Sakyong has been thinking about the structure of our path of practice and study, and, in particular, how he can strengthen the vajrayana path and provide on-going support to vajrayana students.

I am writing to share some upcoming changes in the way we offer vajrayana training in our mandala. As leaders of the mandala, it is important for us to understand the basis for these changes so that we can communicate them to students and begin to create the infrastructure for them in our centers.

These changes can be expressed in terms of three phases of practice and study: 1) preparation for entering the vajrayana, 2) entering the vajrayana, and 3) deepening one's vajrayana understanding.

1) Preparation for entering the vajrayana

The Sakyong would like to offer more opportunities for students to meet and receive teachings from him before they apply for Vajrayana Seminary. In particular, he wants to start introducing the vajrayana view to newer students. He will begin by offering short retreats at our practice centers this summer and fall, entitled "Enlightened World: The Three Yanas of Shambhala Buddhistdharma." This will also offer students an opportunity to meet the Sakyong.

2) Entering the vajrayana

In recent years, the Sakyong has been working to develop the culture of our vajrayana community to emphasize group practice and study, and to schedule more regular meetings between him and our vajrayana students. He would like to create a structure wherein vajrayana students attend a one- to two-week retreat with him each year as a way to deepen their understanding of the vajrayana.

Acknowledging that one-month programs are becoming increasingly difficult for many people to attend, Vajrayana Seminary will be three weeks long this year. During these three weeks, students will be introduced to the vajrayana and will begin the practice of the Primordial Rigden Ngöndro. Students would then return to study with the Sakyong for one- or two-week annual retreats. They will also receive guidance from acharyas, other senior teachers, and the vajra sangha when they attend group practice intensives at local centers and land centers. So, in this model, the Sakyong and his teaching mandala will continue to teach and support vajrayana practitioners at regularly scheduled, shorter gatherings throughout the vajrayana path. Shambhala Vajrayana Seminary is scheduled to take place at Shambhala Mountain Center from July 6-27, 2008.

3) Deepening one's vajrayana understanding

Last summer, we held the first Shambhala Dzogchen retreat at Shambhala Mountain Center. This was a gathering of vajrayana students doing ngondros, Werma, Vajrayogini and Chakrasamvara practice. Students engaged in their respective practices each day in groups that were led by acharyas. This retreat “counted” towards the group practice requirement of ngöndro or Werma Sadhana, allowed groups of practitioners to meet with the Sakyong, and provided an opportunity for him to give trekchö teachings to the entire assembly— teachings directly related to everyone's vajrayana practice. Most people found this retreat to be an extraordinarily powerful support for their path. This will likely be a format for ongoing vajrayana study and practice with the Sakyong that students may return to year after year.

How does this affect students applying to Vajrayana Seminary in 2008?

This year, the Shambhala Vajrayana Seminary will be held at Shambhala Mountain Center over three weeks in July. Those seminarians who can take more than two weeks from their jobs and families can then stay on for the Shambhala Dzogchen retreat scheduled immediately after seminary. (The Shambhala Dzogchen retreat will also include Werma, Vajrayogini, Chakrasamvara and mahamudra practice tracks led by acharyas. The entire assembly will receive teachings from the Sakyong, and individual practice groups will have audiences with him).

How will these changes be communicated to students?

We ask that you help convey this information to the leadership of your center (including MI's), to newer students who would like to meet the Sakyong or receive information about our seminaries, and to tantrikas who would be interested in the Shambhala Dzogchen retreats. This could happen in several ways: individually from MI to student, as presentations during an SSBS class or a tantra class, at a community meeting, or by forwarding this letter to the appropriate email lists. We are planning to send flyers conveying this information to each center within the next two weeks, so that students can have some written material to take home with them.

The new Vajrayana Path document, available now on the website, describes in detail changes to the rest of the vajrayana path. This document is password protected – write to jscott@shambhala.org for the password.
Many thanks for all that you do.

In the dharma,

Carolyn Mandelker
Shambhala Office of Practice and Education