

The Shambhala Office of Practice and Education

Practice and Education Update September 2006

To the Noble Sangha,

Warm greetings to all of you from Halifax!

Many of you have been suggesting ways in which you think we could be more helpful in presenting and delivering the precious teachings of our lineage. This includes making the teachings more accessible to newer people as well as offering deeper training for more advanced members.

Everything we have heard, as well as directions given to us by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, have led to a lot of reflection and hard work. This letter will offer a brief summary of the main initiatives that we are working on at the moment, and provide information for how and when these initiatives will affect our centers.

Some of these initiatives will be tested in the months ahead in a series of pilot projects. These will be followed by a number of regional conferences in the summer and fall of 2007. We hope that this work will be of benefit to many people.

We are currently working on the following projects:

- 1) revising the core curriculum for the first few years of a student's path.
- 2) re-articulating the post-Vajrayana Seminary path
- 3) creating a building block approach to the Primordial Rigden Shrine
- 4) developing the e-charya project
- 5) developing alternate formats for residential programs
- 6) re-designing the Practice and Education section of the Shambhala website

1) Revising the core curriculum for students in the first few years of their path:

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche initiated a process of revision to our core curriculum in January of 2005. He would like us to offer a clear framework for the stages of the Shambhala Buddhist path of study, practice and experience that reflects both the Shambhala and Buddhist dharma, as well as the teachings on Shambhala culture and art. This integrated

approach could help members of our community at all levels to see how all the stages of study, practice and experience work together, and help move us individually and collectively towards individual liberation and an enlightened society. We also hope to foster a more inclusive, supportive community environment at our centres.

This fresh articulation of what the Shambhala mandala offers gives us an opportunity to address a number of key issues that community members and leaders have been raising for some time. The goals are to:

- Offer a more cohesive presentation of the Shambhala and Buddhist teachings.
- Introduce people to a broader sense of the full richness of our mandala by offering earlier exposure to the teachings on Windhorse, the Four Dignities, Maitri Space Awareness practice, Shambhala Art, physical disciplines and societal teachings.
- Help develop a greater sense of and respect for community, as “the third jewel”.
- Provide a path with flexible formats that will meet the needs of people who have multiple demands in their lives.
- Help Shambhala Centres that are overloaded by current demands of intense programming.
- Ensure that people of other traditions will continue to have the opportunity to learn to meditate in the Shambhala Training program while being invited to studying Buddhist principles that could enrich their experience.

Individual and small group consultations have been carried out informally over the past year. Based on these initial consultations, we are going ahead with three pilot test sites beginning this fall, trying out some but not all of the proposed revisions. The test sites are 1) Halifax (large centre), 2) Boston (medium centre) and 3) Albany, N.Y. (small centre). Once we have some initial response from these three test centres, we will have practical information to bring to regional meetings in the summer and fall of 2007. These meetings will serve to further familiarize the community with the proposals, to gather additional feedback and to determine a feasible implementation plan.

The pilot study will be completed first in Halifax, in June of 2007. This will be followed by the regional conferences. It is therefore possible that the piloted sections of the revised curriculum could be rolled out more broadly by some centers as early as fall 2007 or January 2008.

While we have tried to give as clear a picture as possible about the proposed changes in this document, it should be noted that this is still very much a work in progress- these proposals are not completely solid or fleshed out. We look forward to the increasing clarity that will emerge as we continue to work on this articulation with students, teachers and community members.

The following questions and answers raise some of the issues about curriculum that have been identified by community members, and indicate how the proposed revisions to the curriculum seek to address them.

What is the view of the revised curriculum?

The view remains rooted in the inspiration of the living tradition of our lineage, which is to help beings awaken to their true nature, help them to manifest sacred outlook in their lives and empower them for future leadership. An uplifted, dignified society is the result. To accomplish this, we offer the full range of teachings held by the magical transmission lineage of the Shambhala mandala.

From the very beginning of the curriculum, community members will be presented with an inclusive approach to the richness of teachings and practices we have inherited from the lineages of our mandala. The aim is to present these so that we can taste and appreciate their distinct and skilful qualities, but at the same time understand how they work together to cultivate the full potential of human beings and human society.

Will Shambhala Training and the Shambhala School of Buddhist studies be eliminated?

No. Key elements of both will be retained in the curriculum, but organized in such a way that community members will be clearer about how these two streams of study, practice and experience relate to and reinforce each other. There is also greater clarity about our core curriculum, and the additional study and practices that can enhance that.

What about people who want to study and practice in our community, but do not want to take Buddhist or other vows?

Shambhala will always include people from different traditions who share a common view of basic human goodness and the inspiration to create a sane society. The Sakyong recognizes that there are many people who, for a variety of reasons, will choose to study and engage in the practices of our mandala without being bound by vows of any type. The refuge and bodhisattva vows will still only be required for those who want to attend Shambhala Vajrayana Seminary. Shambhala Training levels I through V will continue to be accessible without requiring any commitment. Other oaths, such as the year long and lifetime oaths of the Dorje Kasung, will continue to be for members of the community who wish to make deeper levels of commitment.

Are all of the elements of the path changing?

No. In fact, the feedback so far is that all of the elements are recognizable, though put together differently. The Shambhala Training Level I-V weekends are still taught in the same way, and still available as an independent package for those who seek the levels exclusively. Many of the SSBS weekends are still the same. What is different is that students who choose to take Shambhala Training as part of the broader program will also encounter introductory Buddhist teachings on shamatha practice, mindfulness, compassion, etc. A second key difference is that some of the material previously covered in the SSBS courses will instead be studied using the hinayana and mahayana transcripts of the Vidyadhara and the Sakyong. Thirdly, some of our

riches are being brought forward. People will be introduced to the dignities and teachings on windhorse earlier in their path. The basic curriculum would include exposure to Maitri Space Awareness, Shambhala Art, physical disciplines and societal teachings. The entry way will provide a broad introduction and overview. Then people can choose to go deeper based on that experience.

What are some of the new elements that are proposed?

We will pilot four new courses. The first will relate Tiger with the hinayana teachings. The second will relate Lion with the mahayana teachings, particularly the relative bodhicitta aspects. The third will relate Garuda with Mahayana, specifically working with absolute bodhicitta and emptiness. The fourth will connect Dragon with the vajrayana, including the transformation of emotions into wisdom as taught in the Maitri Space Awareness practice. A three yana introduction to Shambhala Art will be incorporated into these classes. These courses will be taken sequentially and offer students a glimpse of the entire path of practice offered in Shambhala, and will be linked with Shambhala Training Levels I through V.

We are also bringing back some old favorites such as *the Wisdom of Emotions* course, and full semester hinayana and mahayana transcript study courses based on the seminary teachings of the Vidyadhara and the Sakyong. We would like to introduce an annual city weekthun that will give newer students a taste of a longer practice experience and bring the community together in practice. We will pilot a *Science and Mind* introductory workshop and *The Sanity We Are Born With* class, based on the psychology teachings of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. These are some of the newer public programs that we will pilot this year.

Will more introductory programs and workshops be offered to take into account the growing number of people being attracted to our mandala?

Yes. The Sakyong would like us to offer more half-day and one-day introductory workshops. We need to offer this broader spectrum of possibilities since people are seeking out Shambhala for a wide range of reasons. All such introductory programs and workshops would continue to offer teachings and fundamental practices presented by the Vidyadhara and the Sakyong.

Will the curriculum ensure that people are trained in the essential practices of Shambhala, but provide the flexibility people need to fit this training into the multiple demands of their lives, families and work?

Yes. This was one of the considerations in re-thinking our curriculum. There will be multiple formats available for most weekend and weekly classes, suitable for distance learning, centres with few teachers, and so on.

Does the curriculum aim to support people going through its stages so that attrition rates are reduced?

Yes. It is based in part on our experience of the *Good Morning Shambhala* programs, which through the approach of integrating practice and study on a regular basis with one's daily life, typically have much lower attrition rates than the weekend series.

How will the curriculum help Shambhala Centres who are overloaded by current demands of intense programming?

We are projecting that a single, annual stream will reduce the workload for Shambhala Centres, while providing enough flexibility for people who wish to attend introductory and enrichment programs at any point in the year.

How will the curriculum help develop a greater sense of community and continuity, both of which are needed to strengthen the social dimension of the Shambhala mandala?

The proposed new structure will likely offer a core program that starts once a year with the result that people will “travel” together through the beginning stages of their journey. (People will still be able to enter at any point and take part in the foundation and enrichment programs that support the core programs).

A further community-building aspect is the increased emphasis on group practice that the Sakyong has given to the post-seminary path in the years leading up to the Scorpion Seal retreat. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that the curriculum alone can build community. For this we have to look to the increasing attention being paid to “the third jewel” through the community care and Shambhala governance work now underway throughout the mandala.

2) Re-articulating the Post-Vajrayana Seminary Path

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche initiated the process of re-articulating the post Vajrayana Seminary path during the historic summer of 2004. He went further in describing his vision for a path leading to the Scorpion Seal retreat in the summer of 2005. Since then, The Sakyong, several acharyas and the Office of Practice and Education, have discussed various issues and questions that practitioners at different stages along the path will have about the practice options being presented. A thorough presentation of the path will come out sometime this fall. This publication is considered to be high priority for our office, as we know that many students are waiting to hear how they might go forward.

3) A Building Block Approach to the Primordial Rigden Shrine

Since the Primordial Rigden thangka became available last summer, many centres have begun the process of transforming their central shrine into a Primordial Rigden Shrine. The materials and information to create a basic Rigden shrine are available now. The shrine will continue to be embellished and enriched over the next few years as planned items are designed and made available to add to the existing shrine. For information on current and planned stages of the Rigden shrine, please go to the Practice and Education Resource section of the Member’s Resource page of the shambhala web site.

4. The “e-charya” project

Acharya Eve Rosenthal and the Office of Practice and Education have been exploring the use of video streaming to provide dharma teachings to individuals and groups regardless of location. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this technology, it will allow teachers to give talks that are viewed (and heard) by people in real time in other locations, using a computer, a web cam (camera), a microphone, and a chat function. The audience can ask questions and be seen (and heard) by the teacher and the other participants. This technology has many applications for Shambhala: 1) it would allow people who live in remote locations or communities who have few teachers to receive teachings and be part of a larger “sangha”, 2) it would encourage continuity in relationships with visiting teachers between visits, 3) and it would allow for simultaneous (written) translation into foreign languages and captioning for the hard of hearing using the chat function. The Sakyong has expressed an interest in using this technology himself.

We have already run one pilot project, with Acharya Eve Rosenthal teaching a group of students in Philadelphia, while simultaneously transmitting to two other groups of students in Yellowknife (North West Territories) and in Newfoundland. While there were a few technological bugs to sort out, the pilot demonstrated that dharma can be taught in this way. The participants and observers felt that the teaching came across in a personal way, and that they were able to interact with each other and with the teacher. It was very touching for the students in Philadelphia to see the Shambhala banner hanging in the Yellowknife shrine room. The fear about this way of presenting the dharma is that it will isolate people from one another. In our limited experience so far, when used to teach groups of people, it served to bring people together. Another pilot is in the works, attempting to solve some of the technological issues and provide cost effective and user- friendly software.

5. Alternate Formats for Residential Programs

We hear from a significant portion of our community that there is a need to provide alternate formats for some of the long residential programs that are required for people to tread the Shambhala Buddhist path. For a variety of reasons, and particularly in North America, many people are unable to attend all of these programs and feel obstructed on their paths. Our office, along with a group of acharyas and other leaders, have begun to explore ideas for alternate formats that won't compromise the depth of a student's practice and education path. We plan to try some of these ideas on a small scale this year, before making these options more widely available.

6. Re-designing the Practice and Education section of the Shambhala web site.

The Shambhala web site is in the process of under-going major renovation. The Office of Practice and Education has been working closely with the design team to improve the ease with which students, teachers, meditation instructors and community leaders can access

practice and education resources. There are many aspects of this re-design that we think will be helpful to our community. Of prime importance is an intention to make many more talks available online (both recorded and real-time), providing teachings and improving communication between the Sakyong and the community.

Another exciting feature of the re-design, something that has been sorely missed since the lay-off of most of the Shambhala staff, is the development of an international calendar of programs and events. A program database is being created that will make it possible for each centre to upload their programs, listing dates and teachers. Users will be able to search for particular types of programs, a particular teacher's schedule, locations, and so on. The programs will also miraculously disappear from the list on the day they begin so that the list will stay up to date. How amazing!

We are also delighted about the new members database that is coming to life across the mandala. This will allow us to communicate directly with groups of people such as meditation instructors, teachers, specialist teachers and so on, for whom we could not maintain up to date lists in the past.

Conclusion

The work on all of these projects takes place along with the regular daily activities of responding to requests for materials and guidance, providing program management and support, and attending to a myriad of other administrative details. We hope that this snapshot or "a day in the life of the Shambhala Office of Practice and Education" was informative. We welcome your comments, suggestions, and attempts to redirect our efforts!

With tremendous appreciation for all of your contributions to practice and education throughout the world,

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