

Why We Need People of Color Programs at Shambhala (revised 10/25/09)

Recently, a long time sangha member, a person of color, attending a vajrayana program, shared with me her experience of being greeted at a Shambhala land center entrance and asked if she was lost and needed directions. This has happened many times to her and, unfortunately, I've heard the same story from new comers at urban Shambhala Centers. Despite good intentions, a sense of not being welcomed or not belonging is conveyed. As Acharya Gaylon Ferguson writes, "People of color in the West grow up in societies saturated with ideas and values that invalidate their very existence."

Contemplate for a moment what it feels like to be the "only one" in a group. If you are European-American, imagine you are in a group of all African-Americans, Latinos or Asians. How do you feel? What adjectives come to mind?

As a Chinese American female, growing up in white neighborhoods in the 60's, I experienced being the only one almost every day of my life. It was scary. When my family was looking for a house in California, there were neighborhoods we were told we would not be welcomed. I have traumatic memories of my older brothers being called "chink" and getting beat up. Less than 100 years ago, over 40,000 of my people were deported or killed in California. We became the only nationality to be legally banned from immigrating to the United States. This continued for a period of 60 years and ended when the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1945. So I grew up unconsciously feeling guarded, vulnerable, unsure of why I felt like I didn't belong. I did not want to be recognized as being different, so I tried either to make myself invisible or I tried to excel, so if noticed, it was for being good.

Now imagine what it feels like to be with "your people," however you define that. What adjectives come to mind? For me: safe, open, seen.

Now imagine sitting in meditation and opening to basic goodness, which is always available.

Historically, there has been under-representation of people of color in the Shambhala mandala. At the first Shambhala Congress in 2003, the sangha identified diversity as one of the top pressing community issues. The Diversity Working Group was formed and the Shambhala aspiration for diversity was developed. As stated on the Shambhala website diversity page: "What we share as a community is a desire to lead sane, dignified, and confident lives. Through the practice of meditation we cultivate the capacity to be fully open to our experience, and the ability to respond to everyday life situations with greater clarity and respect—respect not only for our life situations and ourselves, but for all individuals, social groups and cultures as well."

We all benefit from opening to the richness of diversity and to our interconnectedness. To begin to dissolve the boundaries some people of color experience in Shambhala, Acharya Pema Chodron encouraged the Northern California Shambhala sangha to offer meditation programs specifically for people of color. Rev. Ryumon Gutierrez Baldoquin (a Soto Zen priest with much experience leading these programs) and Acharya Gaylon Ferguson led the first of two such programs in 2006 & 2007 at the Berkeley Shambhala Center. A common sentiment among participants was how reassuring it was to know they would not be in the minority at a Shambhala Center, and how important it was to feel both safe and seen, acknowledged for their uniqueness and vulnerability as people of color in a predominantly white organization.

The first Shambhala Training Level I for people of color was held in Berkeley in October, 2008, with Acharya Arawana Hayashi directing. The Philadelphia Shambhala Center held a Level I for people of color directed by Elaine Yuen. People of color dharma programs have also been held at Shambhala Centers in Chicago and New York.

We cannot ignore the history of oppression in the United States. By acknowledging that oppression, we begin to dissolve the barriers it has created for so many people of all colors, including whites. At some point it may be important for white people to meet to discuss diversity and how it affects them and their vision of Shambhala. Sharing candidly with people who share common experience can be quite powerful. For example the “Commission on the Status of Women and the Feminine Principle” has been in existence for some time to address feminine principle in Buddhism as well as sexism in Shambhala. Programs to look at racism and bias have been held in Shambhala Centers in Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia and at Shambhala Mountain Center.

Of course diversity work in Shambhala is much bigger than ethnicity or skin color. It is about the inclusion of all people so that the teachings reach a wider audience. People of color is a sub-group of diversity and its programs are a temporary tool. The aspiration is that some day Shambhala is so diverse that all people feel welcome. That includes people with disabilities, people with children, people who speak other languages, who come from different socio economic backgrounds, who have different sexual orientations and/or who have different racial and ethnic heritages.

We can start by creating a sense of safety. As Acharya Pema Chodron titled her book, Start Where You Are, we must start where we are. Shambhala is about creating enlightened society. If someone is having a problem, we meet them where they are. They are our guests. If a guest feels unwelcome we do what we can to make them feel more welcome.

At a recent Shambhala Training Level V Completion ceremony, a gentleman of color expressed heartfelt gratitude for the special people of color programs. He faulted himself for not coming to Shambhala earlier as he felt discomfort as a person of color, but it was having the special program that made the difference and helped him step

beyond hesitation and begin Shambhala Training.

-Charlene Leung

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