

People of Color in Shambhala - Remarks by Shambhala President Richard Reoch

Sixty people of African, Asian/Pacific, Caribbean, Hispanic/Latina, Middle Eastern, or Native American ancestry, from many Shambhala Centres in our diverse, global mandala, participated in a recent survey, working group, and/or conference call initiative of the Diversity Working Group. The participants are developing plans for supporting people of color on the Shambhala Buddhist path.

Many of them gathered via conference call on January 27 to present and hear reports on the status of their efforts. The conference call notes are posted on the Diversity Resources webpage.

The conference call was addressed by Shambhala President Richard Reoch who presented the efforts being made throughout the mandala. Extracts from his remarks follow:

People of Color Conference Call

January 27, 2008, 2 p.m. Eastern time

Remarks by

Shambhala President Richard Reoch

Very warm greetings to everyone who has called in today. Not only do I want to thank each of you, but I particularly want to pay tribute to the work of the Diversity Working Group.

The Diversity Working Group is the largest and most active of all the working groups in our mandala, established after the historic first Shambhala Congress. It has a tremendous number of link people and representatives in Shambhala Centres right across the mandala, and the extensive annual reports it publishes are truly impressive.

Much of this is due to tireless, often unsung, work by people all over our mandala, but I want to pay particular tribute, if I may, to the sustained, inspiring and dignified leadership of Cortez Rainey who has really devoted himself to raising this issue. Cortez has been an example of Shambhala warriorship to all of us -- not fearing the complexity of the challenge, holding his seat with great nobility, and being willing to open up dialogue in a way that has really secured the ground for moving the whole mandala forward to the next stage of deep inquiry and change.

I think you all know how strongly I feel about this myself, and I want to assure you of the strong support we have from the Sakyong. I sometimes find it helpful to remember that we are a community headed by a person of colour. Our lineage is a lineage of colour. And I know that Rinpoche has personally experienced what its like to be part of a minority racially, culturally, linguistically and politically.

Just the other day he was talking to Carolyn Mandelker, the Director of our Shambhala Office of Practice and Education and Acharya Adam Lobel, about how we can address the question of diversity in the development of our new core curriculum for example, in bodhichitta practice around diversity, and how we need to move forward with diversity training for our meditation instructors, teachers and other leaders in Shambhala. This has to be more than lip service to a general notion of inclusiveness: we have to be willing to look at the unspoken, unacknowledged barriers that need to be addressed so that we can fulfil the aspiration to be a genuinely diverse and truly multicultural community.

One of the great things that our Diversity Working Group has done has been to identify this issue and put it on the table, in a way that links this challenge unmistakably to the heart of our Shambhala Aspirations. If you walk into any Shambhala Centre these days, you are supposed to see posted prominently, a one-page statement: The Shambhala aspirations on diversity, accessibility and compassionate conduct.

It opens with these words:

"The teachings held by the Shambhala mandala challenge us as individuals to recognize and dissolve barriers that separate us from others. As a community of practitioners, we strongly encourage understanding of and respect for the basic goodness inherent in all individuals, social groups and cultures.

"We strive to foster a welcoming atmosphere free of prejudice... and to develop an inclusive and enlightened society. Everyone is welcome at our centre regardless of religion, spiritual tradition or teachers, path of practice, opinions, class, nationality, culture, ethnicity, race, language, age, gender, sexual orientation, or physical, perceptual or mental abilities."

The task ahead of us now is how to implement this in a way that really makes a noticeable difference and that changes everyone's experience so that we all have a lived experience of being part of a genuinely diverse and truly multicultural Shambhala.

A lot of people are thinking about how to work on this now. We have had a excellent, heartfelt programs at a number of centers: People of Colour Weekends, some led by Acharya Gaylon Ferguson who is with us on this call, and Diversity weekends. I'm delighted that some of the wonderful images from those programs feature in the opening slide show of our new Shambhala website. The Sakyong's Council itself undertook a diversity training program, led by a team headed by Sangyum Agness Au, titled ³Going Beyond Bias². Another very important development is programs that help Caucasians look more deeply at what it means to be a white person in society.

We need to build on these initiatives and make all this more systematic. I hope you all know about the creation of the North American People of Colour Scholarship Fund. The purpose of the fund is to support Shambhala's aspirations related to diversity by making financial assistance available to people of colour who aspire to attend programs that will enable them to contribute more fully to Shambhala society and to be of benefit to people who share their backgrounds. The Sakyong's Council was very much involved in

supporting this, and I am hopeful that we can make a good contribution towards the endowment fund that will sustain this.

The Diversity Working Group has made a wide-ranging set of recommendations that would dramatically increase the support we give to new groups and members who are establishing themselves in regions throughout the world into which Shambhala is expanding. That includes radically increasing the volume of material that is available in languages other than English. This is imperative, not only for the global development of Shambhala, but also in order to make the Shambhala dharma available and accessible to people in countries, like the United States and Canada, with diverse ethnic communities speaking a wide range of languages. Again, I am hopeful that we can begin providing some level of funding for this now.

The Diversity Working Group has also pointed out the importance of training leaders, meditation instructors, teachers and others who come from a wide range of backgrounds. That would really start to transform the experience of people from those backgrounds who come to our centres. We are going to work on integrating this into our training programs, and thinking about this internationally.

I've also been thinking about other steps we might take to raise the profile of this issue and thereby deepening our collective understanding. One could be to have an issue of the Dot devoted to the theme of Diversity, which I have suggested, and the other would be to have a Shambhala Diversity Conference that would bring people together from all over the mandala, just as we had the extremely productive children and families conference two years ago and really magnetized a lot of energy around that and helped people really move forward.

So, again, with warmest wishes from the Sakyong, I want to thank you all for being on the call today and to thank Cortez and his team for really laying the ground so brilliantly for us.