

Summary of Views from Shambhala Governance Community Conversations

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Introduction

The community conversations were widely published and every member could attend. Actual attendance was only by a small fraction of the sangha; presumably those who are really interested in the subject. For the greater part, they are very long term members with long experience in the Shambhala mandala. Some people attended more than once – a sign of real interest.

This summary is about the topic of governance. In the PT, this was the topic for the Governance Models Group. Part of what this group has done is providing:

- A list of background material from various sources about governance organisation and administration from inside as well as outside of Shambhala
- Four examples of possible governance models, variously worked out in more or less detail
- A 'timeline' of remarkable events since the crisis broke out.

By request of the Governance Models Group in the PT (see attachment for some information about the group), two consecutive series of conversations were held: a general one, for which no background was required, and a follow up series: '*Governance Going Deeper*' for which part of the background was provided as study material for those who wanted more information.

All in all, a total of 11 conversations were held where governance and leadership were (sometimes part of) the topics; most in (sometimes 'slow') English, but also in French; German and Spanish. Summaries and raw material from the English conversations can be found [here](#). The average number of participants was around 10 and some people attended more than once, or even more than twice. As it happened, the 'follow up' sessions were partly also attended by 'first timers'. Nevertheless, many of the participants in the 'Going Deeper' series had read (some of) this material and the follow up conversations really went deeper and turned out to yield new insights. In this summary we present first the general results, common to both series. The newer insights resulting from the second series are presented at the end under the heading: 'The Dawning of Insight: Emergent Possibilities'.

This whole summary is about *content*. Numbers are irrelevant for this – they can be found in other material. Words like 'some' and 'many' used below apply to the times the various views are uttered *in the conversation*. They have nothing to do with 'representativeness' of the view uttered.

All topics in Shambhala are intimately interwoven. This summary is mainly about governance – more specifically, the 'macro' aspect of governance as it applies to the international mandala as a whole. Of course other subjects, like local leadership, come up too. However, they were not the main focus. For more background on the

views about teachings, we refer to the summaries of the conversations about teachings, and the 'Recommendations Drawn from Shambhala Community Conversations on Practice and Study.' [See this link.](#)

Shared Background and General Consensus

Nobody doubts the dharma or the Shambhala teachings

‘And I feel that we need to concentrate on what we share in common, you know, our, our trust in basic goodness and the path of meditation and as a way to awaken our wisdom and compassion’ [May 18th]

Shared grief and loss

‘When I think of Shambhala, I feel deep sadness and mourning, because Shambhala as we have known it no longer exists. I don’t think we can go back to that either...But I also notice, as I am saying this, how sad I am about what is going on.’ [November 2020]

‘I had this image come to me of a big glass jar that was broken, and all this honey was just oozing out. And the feeling was, well you can’t put that honey back in the jar. And there’s so much sweetness.’ [March 19th]

‘Humpty Dumpty had a great fall’ [April 27th]

Some changes or development are needed

Safeguards

‘I wouldn’t say that the Potrang should be banned, but that it’s the Sakyong’s organization, and there have to be connection points with Shambhala. And they need to be clear, so that there’s a maturity of what each group’s mission is, and how that’s expressed’ [March 19th]

‘I would like to have a governance structure that has organization that is clear, transparent. With the Sakyong at the center, I would like to have a congress that has fiduciary responsibility to the people who pay membership dues, and transparency about where that money is being spent’ [May 18th]

Communication

There is a universally shared desire for better communication between the ‘grass roots’ – members and local leadership - and ‘higher echelons’ in the mandala.

‘[...] when I stayed a little longer in Shambhala, I began to notice certain things. At the center level, there was always a small ingroup, and there was always an outgroup. And that didn’t feel right. Not even from a dharmic point of view, but just being an ordinary Dutch guy. I don’t like the ingroup-outgroup stuff. [...] And then I

found it was the same on the national level, and on the international level. There's an ingroup of cronies of the Sakyong. And you were part of that. And then you were also plugged into some kind of communication system. But if you were not part of that ingroup, you didn't get to hear anything. So you were just guessing, who was doing what and why.' [March 26th]

A lot of people's input has to do with finding ways for more and better and broader communication. Two come up specifically for long term students:

Better communication by a Congress

The reinstitution of the 'Congress' from Richard Reoch's time:

'I'm on the Governance Models group in the Process Team. We came up with four different models, and the one thing that those four models have in common is something along the lines of a Congress.' [March 10th]

'I went to all of the congresses in the Richard Reoch era. And that was when I started to feel like the Shambala ideas started to land real in samsara, very, like earth, joining heaven and earth. And when they stopped, I remember being very upset.' [March 10th]

Better communication through 'Delegs'

The reinstitution of 'Delegs' is mostly mentioned by long-term students from bigger Centres – they worked for a while, especially in Boulder – but were never broadly instituted throughout the mandala and were abolished after a time. Some believe it might be a good idea to revive them:

'A deleg was an original neighbourhood. People would gather in each other's houses, and have fun, and food, and also discuss issues. And there were deputies who would represent all deleg desires and concerns, and bring that to governance. It was both that people have good relationships with each other, and also send in messages to the authorities. They feel more comfortable talking about the hard things because they know each other, and they care about each other' [March 10th]

Both a congress and delegs can be used in many ways – they are forms of communication, of action, of process, and take shape in 'doing it'. What comes out depends on the view, the mandate, and the inputs/outputs.

The above gave an overview of the views shared by all participants. In what follows we sketch the many differences in view as they were brought forward.

Range of Different Views – 4 Ways to React

Views on governance tend to cluster together with views on the role of the Sakyong; views on the range of teachings, teachers, and programmes to be presented, as well as views about a broader or more defined role for the sangha as community. However, particular issues are stressed more than others in the context of governance – e.g. finance.

The local situation in each Centre or group obviously influences feelings and views – and moreover, they are not static. As time goes by developments continue and feelings and views sometimes subtly change colour.

In almost all sessions, an emphasis on the structure, the ‘model’ of governance is taken for granted. People express their preferences from there, as will become clear below.

1. Primarily devoted to the Sakyong

Returning to full Sakyong leadership

A portion of participants remain totally loyal and devoted and want him to remain the Governing Head of the Shambhala mandala. They want the Sakyong to be the King and only teacher in Shambhala, and see membership reserved only for students who accept the Sakyong as their (main) teacher.

‘So the governance structure that I would like to see is where the Sakyong is the sole head of Shambhala. And the main qualities that I would like to see within that governance structure is loyalty and appreciation between students and the Sakyong, and provide your students, we call it samaya. So strong samaya connection’ [May 18th]

Possible split

Some of these devoted students feel uncomfortable and unwelcome in their Centres, surrounded by people who think differently, and think dividing the sangha might be the only solution.

‘I’ve related personally to the Sakyong as my Vajrayana teacher. But I can also feel that there are many people who do not want to have that experience of Shambhala. And I’m not entirely sure that we can keep those two things together. I don’t think that’s a governance issue—I think that’s central, even before governance, that’s a view issue.’ [March 19th]

'You can't practice when you're surrounded by people who hate your guru. It's very, very difficult when you don't feel safe in your practice environment, or in your meditation centre' [Febr 24th]

2. Wishing for significant changes in governance

Most participants acknowledge the role of the Sakyong as lineage holder and teacher. The main trend in the conversations was set by those who would like to see more change in the way the mandala is governed.

This issue in many forms has been the main issue in the conversations, so the greatest part of this summary is devoted to the issues around this change.

The shortest summary would be that there is a widespread desire for structural change, characterised by less hierarchy, more responsibility for the grass roots and an open attitude where different kinds of students (and teachers) are welcomed in the mandala: in other words, 'open umbrella'.

Broadly shared

Less hierarchy, more grass roots

Most participants in the conversations have fulfilled various roles in the running of Centres and/or other 'leadership' roles in the Shambhala mandala; many are still involved. Almost invariably they express the view that the hierarchy was too rigid and felt sometimes oppressive.

'I've seen a lot of confusion about who what empowerment individuals have. I think we lost the bottom-up quality, and that felt oppressive'. [March 10th]

'With the Sakyong as only leader there was a strong pressure for conformity. That has to change. No hierarchy.' [May 11th]

'The Director model is problematic: the Director has all the authority and has mandate from the Centre of the mandala. The Council has none. I was part of a Centre where the director dissolved the council. Although Council members complained to SGS staff, they talked to us but in the end nothing was done.' [March 10th]

However, there are also other voices about hierarchy, mostly from the group of loyal Sakyong students described above under 1:

I really think that what we need is a very clear hierarchy. And I know the word hierarchy is not popular. But I think the clearer the hierarchy is, the safer everyone feels, and the more the communication can flow up and down and all around. And so

I want to destigmatize the word hierarchy, and ask that we have good hierarchy, that hierarchy is okay. And that the clearer it is, the better people actually feel. [March 10th]

Laying down responsibility to the lowest level

‘Never let a good crisis go to waste. This is the opportunity we have now, to change stuff. Whatever we can, we do locally, the basis is local power., Only what of necessity, needs to be done on a higher level is what we do on a higher level.’ [March 26th]

Broad Umbrella

The expression ‘Broad Umbrella’ is used many times during the conversations. It covers various wishes: the wish for teachings from other great (Kagyü, Nyingma) teachers, as well as the wish to prevent divorce within the Shambhala mandala.

‘Our governance should quantify an Open Gate policy of inclusivity and accountability. An umbrella that serves both Sakyong devotees and those who cannot go there’ [April 27th]

‘Yes, an umbrella for all to practice and follow the broad range of practices and teachers; having a mutual respect for one another’s choice and connection.’ [April 27th]

‘Multiple teaching streams in a time of global challenges’ [May 30th]

Ideas for Structural Change

Separation of ‘Church and State’

Specifying the role of the Sakyong more clearly, quite a few mention the role of the Sakyong as teacher should be separate from his role in governance: separation of secular and religious power.

‘The separation of powers is so basic that it belongs in the foundations of an enlightened society’ [From the Dutch report: November 2020]

Role of the Sakyong

The separation of Church and State seems to clash with the Shambhala teachings of enlightened society, where these two aspects are indivisible. From where would come the sacredness/enlightenment if we deny the Sakyong’s role as king?

‘Can we organise ourselves into that sacredness? We need the concentration of an embodied reference point’ [May 11th]

'We need the Sakyong in Shambhala to have a certain role, otherwise, there's no Shambhala.' [May 18th]

Voices differ about the influence of the Sakyong on governance - from complete dissociation to an advisory role. The possible solutions that are brought forward could be applicable in various combinations.

A constitutional kingdom

'I thought, when everything first started grinding to a halt, that we had reached sort of a Magna Carta moment in Shambhala' [April 27th]

Democracy

A 'Western democracy model' is not really popular, although the word is mentioned:

'Again, coming from a democracy, we're used to be able to ask questions to people. I would like to ask the question to the Sakyong: How come this culture has also spawned abuse of power and mismanagement? And do you think you personally have played a role in that? There is no communication possible on that level, and it's very disruptive for me.' [March 26th]

'The teachings cannot be determined by democracy, but some dance and engagement is needed. Teachings need to respond to community as a whole.' [April 27th]

Concentric circles - Sociocratic Models

Influence from the community on higher echelons in the mandala by way of 'a horizontal mandala,' not a pyramid hierarchy.

'In our local situation we could not wait for Boards to figure things out – we had to design our own model based on sociocracy – circles of decision making. SMT does not appear to be in a place to be open, cannot imagine him being part of a council that determines teachings – he would not likely participate' [April 27th]

Federation

'So I really see much more like a federation approach, where the Sakyong and his students as well as profound Treasury and Chronicles and Wisdom Seat and anything else that feels as if it is part of the larger Shambhala lineage can all be members, and that the governance is to provide the services that those individual members request, but probably isn't that much: access to texts and curriculum and

access to shared promotional activities and communications and maybe some financial support.’ [April 27th]

Finance and property

A wish is expressed for total separation of finances between the Sakyong Potrang and Shambhala (SGS).

‘In terms of the practical approach to governance, I see that the arrows of control by the Potrang need to be cut, and that the Potrang is there to serve the succession of the Sakyong lineage, which is really important. But it doesn’t need land centres or anything else to do that.’ [April 27th]

‘... the administration of Shambhala regarding Financial and legal matters should be primarily responsible to (the needs. sic) of the community and not foremost those of the current lineage holder.’ [May 1st]

3. ‘Amicable divorce’: Separation between the Sakyong and the Shambhala organization

The mirror image of the unconditionally devoted students who just want the Sakyong and think a split is unavoidable is the other minority. Some want nothing to do with the Sakyong anymore and are preparing to go their own way or have already done so:

‘Amicable divorce is probably the next step. Lady Diana has taken us there. One is either a member of Shambhala or Open Tori. Each group has to figure out their individual governance and finances. Shambhala International (as an organization) splits into 2 groups’ [May 18th]

‘We do not in our community does not have to be all things to all people. And I don’t I don’t really get why so many of my fellow older students are so concerned about keeping everybody who has ever been part of Shambhala together and keeping it all intact and holding on to everything, change is inevitable, whatever comes together, falls apart.’ [May 18th]

4. Hesitation, doubt

The continual waiting for developments from ‘higher up’ or answers from the Sakyong often led to discouragement, uncertainty and a feeling of loss of identity, thus paralysing people and preventing outreach for new members. Many feel powerless to act, hesitant and passively waiting for a solution to be provided – ‘a bardo.’

'I think having to sit with this Bardo has been very good for us.' [March 19th]

'The non responsiveness of the Sakyong results in uncertainty and problems in effecting the communication changes needed.' [May 30th]

The questions go on, starting with, "Who are we?" [March 19th]

'It seems kind of clear that until this issue is in one way or another, resolved, young people are not going to touch it. People who are attracted to Shambhala a bit are not going to touch it with a 10-foot pole, until we can all sit in the same room together and do shamatha.' [April 27th]

'We will lose people if there is no clarity about the path or paths we offer.' [April 27th]

The Role of the Community: Centres and People Empowering Themselves

As time goes by, the emphasis changes more towards taking their own decisions and feeling their own responsibility. Some Centres have already formally announced their continued allegiance to the Sakyong, or formally dissociated.

The most important issue and desire, however, seems to stem from Centres seeing their own responsibility for action and change.

'And what I wish for to change is that people are empowered themselves. For many years, nobody was really empowered, everything was such a hierarchy. Such stiff positions, and everybody was competing with each other.' [March 26th]

'Each Shambhala group needs to manage itself, and join other groups nationally and perhaps continentally, but opposed to any central monarchy structure. Bottom up, only what is needed in center, meetings of representatives of local groups' [April 27th]

Even adverse circumstances are sometimes seen in a favorable light, and yield favorable results when people work with them:

'And now people keep asking me, when are we going to rent a new space? And I'm like, I don't care. I like being homeless. I like not spending money on rent.' [March 26th]

The Dawning of Insight: Emerging Possibilities

As the second series of Governance conversations – ‘Going Deeper’ –went on, the focus seemed to shift in two ways. As we saw in the paragraph before:

- Not passively waiting, but actively engaging – taking responsibility. Instead of describing problems, dealing more with finding possible solutions – with the responsibility of decision making resting on our own shoulders – not the Sakyong’s.
- From Structure to Process: a shifting from a structural approach with focus on models etc. to an approach emphasizing process – a process in which the sangha itself is creating enlightened society in its own interactions.

From Structure to Process

Signs of this shift in understanding were already present in earlier conversations, and it became more clear and explicit in the last one, from which most of the quotes below are excerpted.

‘Governance should not be reified as a thing that only some people do, it is one way of talking about some aspects of the everyday doing of sacred world. [...] It’s not about hierarchy vs democracy – it is a process. We should dissolve the dualism and apply the Mahayana’ [May 11th]

‘The future buddha will be sangha/community... so it’s a community that develops e.g. as enlightened society..so getting out of person-centredness is the key...we need a community - not Individuals - to develop’ [May 30th]

‘What I’ve heard in this group is that this process of communicating and acting in Shambhala (i.e., what we are doing here and now)[A1] [A2] is the best possibility for forward movement. Do not give up....’[May 30th]

‘So, the challenge is to create an organisational structure that fosters individual and collective awakening...creating spaces like this’ll have many dimensions, local, global etc’ [May 30th]

‘The secret transmission of this is...we are doing it right now... what we are now doing is what we should be doing in our governance practices... space for all views...compassionate dialogue must be possible’ [May 30th]

It’s time to encourage and support our local communities and help them to explore (governance) possibilities... it will vary by (local) community [May 30th]

Reactions of the Participants to the Conversations

The two insights described above can be summarised as 'creating enlightened society in interaction by doing it yourself.'

Exactly this view was expressed most in the reactions to the conversations. With very few exceptions, the reactions were entirely positive and very warm. Many were thankful for the opportunity and felt strengthened by it.

And the most important point that emerged was that people often and in various ways remarked that these exchanges themselves for them exemplified the essence of Shambhala:

'It seems like the most valuable thing we are able to do is to actually do Shambhala together, and then a lot arises out of that.' [March 26th]

The goodness in this gathering is so palpable. I am more confident that it will prevail, in spite of the broken Humpty Dumpties and the paradoxes that will eventually untangle (and then likely tangle again). [April 27th]

'I think what we are doing now, that we keep on holding space for each other, is the most important thing in the moment. And that also needs the governance to listen, letting things arise, that ideas and wisdom can arise and emerge.' [March 19th]

Conclusion

We are on our way to a new kind of Shambhala. Nobody knows how it will turn out - and the views vary in many ways, some of which have been described here. The results as laid down in this report can be checked for validity because everyone has access to the raw material. Just Google 'Shambhala Community Conversations.'

Moreover, the views brought forward are clearly in line with the many other sources available at present: from the exchanges in the various possibilities the Shambhala network offers, to the results of the first broad member survey and the later survey of sangha leadership.

What is Shambhala? How can it be governed? Do we belong there? It's up to us to shape the answers in our own actions.

Some Background about the Governance Models Group

This group has been active in the PT as a subgroup of the 'Governance' group to come up with possible 'models' to address the difficulties that partly lay at the root of the crisis.

The group turned out to be a 'mini-version' of the sangha itself, holding all the different points of view described in this summary. This did not make for easy progress - but it had the great virtue of making it necessary to find common ground and learn how to get work done, respecting differences of opinion.

The background material for the 'governance going deeper' series was part of the result. During the past years of work, the group thinned out considerably, but kept going. Recently two new people have joined the group, which as a whole will merge back into the broader governance group.

Below (in alphabetical order) a list of the Governance Models Group members who have in some way contributed to the work so far - all according to their karmic inclination, possibilities and capabilities.

Bob Salskow

Kristine McCutcheon

Debbie Coats

Laurie Mallory

Dia Ballou

Mary Fahrenfort

Diane Whitcomb

Mathias Hoffmann

Diederik Prakke

Shel Sampa Fisher

Ivan Troescher

Sherab Manoukian

Jan Lamac

Susie Vincent

John Barbieri