



LIFE AT SMC

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SMC Update February 16, 2020

written by **Ryan Stagg**

Dear friends,

We're nearly two years into a process of reckoning in the Shambhala community. We've learned of patterns of abuse of power, sexual misconduct, and harassment that have been a thread in the fabric of Shambhala culture. It is as heartbreaking as it is necessary to acknowledge and learn from this. Shambhala Mountain Center will turn 50 in 2021. In order to honor and hold responsibility for the 50 years of profound teachers and dedicated practitioners who have worked, volunteered, practiced and studied at our retreat center, we need to be willing to recognize and address these challenges.

There is deep work for us to do.

So far, we've updated and improved our Code of Ethics with the help of ethicist and therapist Dr. Cedar Barstow, instituted a grievance procedure, and launched a cycle of staff trainings on power, harassment, abuse, and bystander intervention led by Dr. Barstow, SAVA (Sexual Assault Victim Advocate Center), and The Blue Bench.

While these initiatives are a necessary start, they need to be integrated with an ongoing inquiry into the structural and cultural factors that have contributed to this situation. As a staff community, we've continued to process and examine each new communication and piece of information. Carefully, we've been making adjustments to how we conduct our business and develop our community.

These are divisive times in the world at large, and the very notion of a middle way is turning into a fault line. The momentum seems to be pushing us into separate camps. Here at SMC you'll find a spectrum of experience and views, even in our staff of 50. This diversity of opinion means we cannot escape grappling with the very real issues we're facing, and it challenges us to keep our hearts open to one another, even when it's difficult. Within SMC, as long as people are willing to join in dialogue, follow our Code of Ethics and serve our guests with kindness and respect, they are welcome. Our intention is to be a safe place where those who wish can come to focus on engaging their minds, hearts and bodies in a powerful natural environment with profound teachers. We also seek to be a place where those who wish, can engage in reflection and dialogue.

In July of 2018 the staff and board of SMC made public a set of commitments: to not minimize or rationalize the behavior of any teacher, including the Sakyong, to stand with the women who came forward, to do what is right even if it jeopardizes our existing power structures or financial position, and to be transparent. We also said we would be: "... watching closely and with hope for the Sakyong to engage in a genuine process of accountability, purification, and reformative action." This has not yet happened.

In keeping with these commitments, we cannot invite the Sakyong to teach at SMC at this time. We believe we must ask the Sakyong to meet the same standards we would ask of any other teacher. These standards are embedded in our new Code of Ethics that will be signed by every teacher or participant who comes to SMC.

We intend to continue to be a welcoming home for our friends and family on the Shambhala path, as well as those who visit to teach and participate in the range of secular and nonsecular programs we offer. Whatever the need, we know that it is our responsibility to ensure that SMC is safe and dependable, and that our principles are clear.

We move forward as a Shambhala Center with a clear statement of our commitment to reformation and accountability. This is a fine line to navigate. Some of our thinking is manifest in the , the non-profit which holds the assets of the Sakyong lineage, of which the present Sakyong is the lineage holder. This revision places the responsibility for SMC, and thus the responsibility for a clear stance, in the hands of the SMC board. It is important to state that the board reflects the same diversity of opinion as is found in the staff of SMC.

We also want to share that the Larimer County Sheriff's Office has closed their investigation that was launched in response to allegations made in Buddhist Project Sunshine. No charges came out of the investigation. We know this doesn't mean misconduct hasn't happened at SMC, and we have acknowledged this in .

Finally, we are working on a page to be located on our website that will provide links that chronicle all reports, articles, letters and other documents that have come out over the past two years. We feel this to be a key element in fulfilling our commitment to transparency.

We engage in this work with humility, knowing that the clarity of our stance is critical to our guests and staff having the trust to teach, practice, study and work here. We recognize the need for voices beyond SMC and Shambhala such as The Blue Bench, SAVA, Dr. Barstow and An Olive Branch to support our work. It is our intention that by genuinely acknowledging mistakes, learning, and implementing change, we will be able to meet the divisiveness of our time and play a part in addressing the power imbalances and confusion that underlie these challenges.

As Executive Director of SMC, I am deeply grateful to all of you whose support for SMC allows and informs this essential work. I am committed to seeing this through.

With love and gratitude,

Michael Gayner
Executive Director
Shambhala Mountain Center

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May 2019
April 2019
March 2019
February 2019
January 2019
December 2018
November 2018
October 2018
September 2018
August 2018
July 2018
May 2018
April 2018
March 2018
February 2018
January 2018
December 2017
November 2017
October 2017
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May 2014
April 2014
March 2014
February 2014
January 2014
December 2013
November 2013
October 2013
September 2013
August 2013
July 2013
June 2013
May 2013
April 2013
March 2013
February 2013
January 2013

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