

Website Post

In the early morning of a cool fall day in Northampton, MA, members of the Pioneer Valley Shambhala Center (PVSC) wake up and prepare themselves to head to the center's meditation service. Instead of getting in their cars and driving to the PVSC, however, they power on their computers and launch Zoom, an online audio and video communication software. This has been the experience of members of the PVSC for the past nine months as a result of stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many other religious organizations, the PVSC has needed to adapt to statewide quarantine and social distancing mandates while also facing some unique challenges of their own during this time.

One of the primary challenges that the PVSC has faced is the inability to meet in person. This is because their center does not have space for the community to follow general social distancing guidelines and because the majority of their community is made up of older individuals. Mark Seibold, director of the PVSC, also mentioned in an interview that the center has received little to no direct guidance from the state government about how religious communities should conduct themselves during this time. Because the center has been unable to conduct in-person services, all events have been moved online to Zoom. Unfortunately, the move to online services has resulted in a decrease in community engagement, down to about a third of the typical amount. Seibold also mentioned in his interview that this decline in participation may be because of a perceived lack of social interaction online. He said that many folks come to events primarily for the five to ten minutes of social engagement that typically occur before and after services but have been neglecting to join Zoom services because this is not as much of a part of the functions.

The PVSC has also not been able to host their seasonal equinox/solstice celebrations since the start of the pandemic because of a lack of community interest and costs. For the same reasons, Seibold says that the center will not be hosting its annual celebration of *Losar* or Tibetan New Year. The pandemic has also put a strain on the center's typical influx of new members. Because of the center's move to be completely online, there has not been nearly as much walk-by/drop-in interest at the center's physical location. Between this issue and the decrease in community participation, Seibold says that the services have been relatively small and intimate throughout the pandemic and that the center will need to garner the attention of new members after social distancing guidelines are lifted.

Like many other religious communities and institutions, the PVSC has been finding ways to adapt to both the new challenges caused by the pandemic and ongoing issues that have continuously impacted the community. Although the transition to online practices has had its limitations, it has also opened up new opportunities to the community. Conducting sessions online has encouraged more participation from people who live in other parts of the country and

even globally to practice with the PVSC. Because of this, the pandemic has offered the community a new perspective on how to better connect their members around the world. The benefits of having an online component to the center have led the community to think about how they can continue making their practices more accessible online beyond the pandemic.

The pandemic has not only brought up new issues but it has also highlighted ongoing issues that may threaten the future of the community. With the majority of the community's members being older in age, Shambhala International continues to struggle with attracting younger members. Since the transition to online gathering, casual drop-ins can't happen causing newer interest in Shambhala Buddhism to decrease significantly. In addition, poor advertising has made it difficult for the community to attract new members. This issue alongside the decrease in member participation due to the online transition will continue to challenge Shambhala International in maintaining their community in the years to come.

April 9, 2020

Dear Sangha, Community, Friends, and Visitors:

Due to the ongoing threat and continuing spread of the coronavirus, covid-19, within our local towns and communities, the Pioneer Valley Shambhala Center will remain closed until further notice. Please join us online. Please check our offerings and program listings below under "Where to Begin?"

*On Behalf of the PVSC,
Mark Seibold, Director*

A letter from the director of the PVSC, Mark Seibold, to the community near the start of the COVID-19 pandemic