

Effective Meetings – The Artful Circle **President Richard Reoch**

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Early one morning I tried to bring together mundane prajna for the organization of meetings and mix that with the tradition of insight arising from space. This includes being clear about the purpose of meetings, how to get organized, how to get people to work together, how to be clear about the outcome, and how to start on time and to finish on time (which is the essence of a good meeting!). This is embodied in the principles of reaching broad agreement, which is what we work with in the Sakyong's Council.

The detailed guidance adopted by the Sakyong's Council for reaching broad agreement is on the website. If you type in "Decision-making procedures" in the search box on the Shambhala.org home page you will find it on the website).

The fusion of mundane "best practices" and Shambhala principles is contained in the chart I have drawn, with the title: *Effective Meetings – the artful circle*. This chart embraces the conventional meaning of effective meetings, drawn from trainings on "making meetings effective," and you have the subtle reference to the Six Ways of Ruling: the "artful circle." In *The Six Ways of Ruling*, artfulness is really about working with people. It's icon is a teacup: if you put the teacup down, it leaves a little mark, which is a circle [Laughter]. So this is an invitation to you to see that the insight of Shambhala and the insight of ordinary folks can be brought together.

At the top of the chart is this fantastic quotation from *Ruling Your World*: "We are ruling a dream, and we all share the same dream." It contains both an understanding of the problem, and the solution. Interestingly, you can't divide the problem and the solution into one half of the sentence and the other – it's all beautifully contained. It deserves to be put in gold letters and hung over the desk of every leader in Shambhala. I just can't tell you how lucky we are that this popped out of that book.

So, then, knowing that you would feel more comfortable if there was a ground, path, and fruition [Laughter], I divided things up into ground, path, and fruition. You've already heard Sangyum Agness Au explain that the openness aspects of the chart can be understood as the feminine principle and the precision aspects can be understood as the masculine principle...

The Ground

The Ground is laid before the meeting begins. The knee-jerk reaction of people saying, "We have a problem, let's have a meeting." is usually a road to disaster if the ground for the meeting is not properly laid.

On the Openness side of the chart, there are three points. The first point is: ***contemplate the agenda***. Contemplate here, means you have to think about it . What actually needs to be discussed? Who needs to discuss it? Openness is inviting the mind to be less claustrophobic and inviting others' suggestions. Some people have formal processes for inviting people's suggestions, such as sending an email around to the council, saying what needs to be discussed, etc. But sometimes you might just want to invite other suggestions, and that could include suggestions that occur to you from beings that are not immediately present or contained on your email lists! That's one way of inviting insight from space.

Point two: ***complex legal or technical issues often need advance preparation***. I think everybody knows that. In the Sakyong's Council we have a finance committee, we have a corporate affairs committee, and we insist that nothing in those areas come to the full body unless it has been thoroughly discussed and there is a precise recommendation from those who really understand the complexity of these issues. That respects the collective dignity of the group.

Point three: ***Don't overload the agenda*** – that's so helpful. A lot of overloaded agendas contain a lot of items that don't actually need to be discussed by a big group. Our experience with the Sakyong's Council is that we usually have quite a small number of items on the agenda, and we almost always get through our agenda. That is a far better thing for group's lungta – far better than having a fantastic smorgasbord of issues of which we can only cover one-third! Not being able to get through everything saps everyone's energy...

On the Precision side of the chart, it is important ***to be clear what the agenda is in advance, with a clear start and finish time***. That's important because everybody has another life! They have to be able to know what's going to go on in the meeting, when it's going to start, and when it's going to end, so they can arrange babysitters and all that sort of thing.

The next point under Precision is: ***circulate documents in advance***. This enables everyone to read the material before they arrive at the meeting. That's another offering to their dignity – a lot of meetings are ruined by people arriving in the meeting and asking, "Now, what's this about?" A huge amount of time is taken up with explaining the subject to them, and then they are expected to express a view right away. That doesn't make the best use of people.

The next point under Precision is : ***normally, don't add any other business***. In some places meetings traditionally have a last item: "Any other business." This can sabotage a meeting: it enables anyone to suddenly propose at the very end of the evening: "I think we should invite the Sakyong." If a subject is worth raising, it's worth raising in advance. It's worth thinking through in advance, and it's worth discussing within the time frame. That's what precision means and it's how you lay the ground with dignity and respect.

The Path

The openness in the path is first to *invite spacious mind*. We open with shamatha practice. Some people have a token three minutes. Personally I recommend expanding that. It's pretty rare for anyone's mind to become spacious at the end of a day with only three minutes of shamatha. Spending time like this, is the basis of our community.

Then *invite the dralas* – raise windhorse.

Then open a *circle of communication* with a brief touch-in – how are we? This morning someone said that “touching in” was “group shamatha”. It is. It's a way of saying, “Here I am – frazzled at the end of the day.” “Here I am, worried about the babysitter”. “Here I am, having done all kinds of things since we last met.” Then we know who's in the room, and it helps all of be present for each other.

The work we are doing together is magical work. If we're going to invite insight from space, we have to open our minds, we have to invite the dralas, and we have to be present.

The chart also advises: *“Start on time with practice.”* I generally find that it's important for the person who's chairing the meeting to be the first person in the room. If the meeting's supposed to begin at eight, the person's who's chairing the meeting should begin at eight, even if there's only one other person in the room. After two meetings like that, everybody will be there on time! So at eight o'clock, invite spacious mind, raise windhorse, and carry on. It might be a little odd at the beginning, but two meetings later, I promise you – the place will be packed at eight o'clock, ready to raise spacious mind together. I can see some of this is novel to you [Laughter]!

After having done that, briefly *review the agenda to set the scene*. It's helpful for people to know what the meeting will be about.

The next suggestion is to *establish a time reminder* for the meeting. Ask someone to keep track of how the time is going, and let you know a quarter of the way through, half-way through, and three-quarters of the way through the meeting. It's much easier than expecting the person who's chairing the meeting to do that as well. One of the objectives is to close the meeting on time. So particularly when we're working with a spacious approach to insight, we need to be reminded of the time! Usually someone is always willing to volunteer.

Then, if we look on the Precision side of the chart, it's really helpful for the chair or the person who knows most about the subject to present the background to each subject, provide any helpful information, highlight the key points for discussion, and, if possible, present a recommended way forward. It's not so helpful simply to say: “I want to discuss the kitchen at our centre because I really feel we have a problem with it.” What would be helpful would be to say, “For the last three weeks, we have had a rat infestation in our kitchen. We have consulted the rat exterminators and they can exterminate the rats for the following sum of money. However, there are a number of people in our

community who object to having exterminators because they feel that is not in accordance with our vows. We have done some consultation, and we have found Buddhist exterminators who are prepared to do this, but they cost more. I would like the council to decide if it is better to pay more for Buddhist exterminators, or less for non-Buddhist exterminators. After a lot of consultation, our recommendation is that we should pay the higher sum and use the Buddhist exterminators.” Then people understand what the point is, and what they are being asked to take a decision about.

A key point in presenting something like that is highlighted on the left: ***benevolent and fearless***. This means ***we trust the power of our own windhorse***. Don't be shy about presenting your agenda item -- it's not elitist, aggressive or authoritarian to be clear with your colleagues about what the issue is. You are helping them understand what they're discussing.

It's helpful to be precise, because what we're going to do after each presentation of the issue is to ***invite space***. You open up the space for discussion. ***You invite clarifications, questions, proposals*** – it's really important to ***seek multiple points of view*** and ***to invite the unspoken***. Someone may be sitting there saying to themselves: “I don't know whether it's better to spend less money on getting rid of rats or to spend more money on enabling those rats to live so that they can go and infest someone else's place. I just don't know!” You need to allow people to rest in that unspoken space. As they contemplate the question, who knows what will come up – and that is the point of what we're doing here!

Allowing for the unspoken and ***allowing for silence*** is incredibly important in our tradition. One of the things that I have experienced myself over the years is that I have become more tolerant of silence. I've found that the discomfort that other people experience in the silence is a great compressor that invites insight. So it helps if the chair person is just a little bit more comfortable with silence than perhaps everybody else. There is a claustrophobic quality that happens sometimes. In the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, he describes how heightened everybody gets just before the monsoon rains break – it's like that.

The next thing is to ***trust our karmic connection with the lineage and each other***. This is also extremely important, especially when we're dealing with multiple points of view. Please don't assume that the truth is held by some and not by all. I remember when Rabbi Kula and Queen Noor and the Sakyong were at the Compassionate Leadership Dialogues in New York and Boston that Rabbi Kula leaned forward and said, “Talk to somebody that you really despise, and find out the truth that is missing from your world view that is contained in theirs -- because there's nobody so stupid that they're one-hundred percent wrong.” To think that we hold the whole view is arrogant. In all our centres, we're blessed with people who don't seem to fit in, people who ask awkward questions, people who behave in ways that seem strange to us – these people aren't there by accident. These people are part of the mandala. When they speak we may be hearing a distant song from another part of the mandala that's not perhaps immediately obvious in

the room. Otherwise, do you think we're running a fascist kingdom, where everybody has to think the same thing?

The leader *probes for hidden differences*. This is a piece of good management. It's the responsibility of the leader to probe. There may be a really important point of view that's a little hidden under the surface. Also, we don't want someone pretending to be in agreement and then going outside the door and calling their friends and saying, "A ridiculous decision has just been adopted by the group!" That does happen. One way to protect against that is to be so welcoming and open and tolerant of different viewpoints -- and probe for them -- that you bring everything into the mix. This is related to that point in The Six Ways of Ruling, where the Sakyong says that if everyone agrees with us, our consciousness will become cloudy like a faded mirror. I've combined those two points into the chart which says "clear the cloudy mirror."

In this way, invoking space, different points of view, multiple facets, and silence, we invite insight. This does not have to be a long process, any more than the bardo has to be a long process. You can get through your business far better this way than by ignoring the left-hand (Openness) side of this chart.

A very helpful thing that the leader does then is to summarize the key points that have arisen, and propose a way forward. A key point is that *we are not seeking unanimity*. We are not trying to have everybody agree. This is a key point of this strategy. It is a key point of the Sakyong's Council decision-making, and it's a key point of the Tenets of Shambhala Governance. What we want to do is enable multiple points of view to come forward and see where the discussion is leading.

The Fruition

In your summing up at this point, you might say: "I have the feeling that this is the direction we're going. I know, Sally, that you disagree with this. The way I'm taking your point of view into account is such-and such. Taking all that into account, and the many other points of view expressed, this is what I propose as the way forward." Sally has the right to have her point of view. We are not asking her to abandon that, nor do we have to embrace it. So the question to ask at this point in the meeting is not, "Do we all agree on this?" because we are not seeking unanimity -- that would give the veto to just one person! Instead, the chair listens carefully to the whole discussion and then takes the lead. He or she says, "I propose the following way forward", and is clear about who will do what, when, and how.

This is really important in a group that's trying to work with the destruction of ego. This creates an interesting balance between having one's own point of view, and a willingness to go with others so that things can move forward to the next stage. It's not a utopian approach of deciding on a comprehensive end result, but about getting enough momentum going to be able to take the next step forward.

The fruition is what we call “**broad agreement.**” This process balances consulting and deciding; deliberating and moving forward; holding individual views and working together.

Then out of that, the openness is to dedicate the merit and rejoice, and the precision is closing the meeting on time. In my experience, I have generally found that people would prefer to have business deferred to a further meeting or to a phone call. I have noticed that if a meeting ends ten minutes early you don’t have to remind people to rejoice! [Laughter]

Now suppose someone comes up with something that everybody thinks is incredibly important and it completely destroys the agenda! Well then you need to acknowledge that something has arisen. You can tell whether the energy behind it is really demanding attention, or whether it’s just a little itch. You can test that very easily by saying, “Is this something you really feel we need to discuss now, or are you just bringing it up so we discuss it in the future?” You look at the person and you can instantly see this. If it’s the energy of a volcano, it’s better to deal with it -- there’s no point in pretending it isn’t there. It may turn out that although it doesn’t look like it fits the agenda, it is the energetic focal point at that moment. That’s where openness and trust come in.

Question: Is the assumption behind this that the director or chair of the meeting is neutral in relation to what is coming up? Is it important that they are perceived as neutral by the other people they’re working with so they won’t be perceived as manipulating the process or giving more time to one position or another? My experience is that when things are going well, that’s true, but if there’s a hot issue that may very well not be true, regardless of who’s up there in front of the group. How do you work with that?

PRR: I understand the point you’re making about neutrality but I don’t think that’s the best term. The person who is running the meeting has to have a strong allegiance to this process. We’re not neutral – we’re passionate about this way of working with openness and precision. In my experience, it’s even more important to work in this way when things are difficult. That’s what it says in the first of The Six Ways of Ruling, “benevolent” – “when you’re overcome in the hallway, you being to panic. The mind becomes a little box because you have no room for maneuvering, and you’re likely to react aggressively. At that point, it’s important to be not less gentle, but more gentle.” So the point here is that the leader of the community has to trust the totality of the process. If we follow this ground and path, we will come to a fruition. We do our best not to panic and short-circuit this process.

It doesn’t mean that the leader is a blank cipher who doesn’t have any intelligence! In order to be able to summarize the key points and propose the way forward, you have to be more on the ball about the issue than anybody else in the room. Most people are mentally present when they’re talking about their own point of view, and then their attention wanders. But you have to be there, listening to the spoken and the unspoken for

the entire time so that you can discern, with your intelligence, what you think might be the best way forward. And if it is a genuine meeting of minds, that best way forward will probably not be exactly the same as what you were thinking when you started the meeting! So the leader has to be intelligent and genuine. You are leading a group of people. Your allegiance is to the journey, not to the preconceived idea with which anyone entered the room. Does that make any sense to you?

Questioner: That's brilliant.

PRR: Sometimes I think about the nineteen-year-old Vidyadhara leading his people across the Himalayas. He obviously knew where he wanted to get to, and he wanted to get as many of them as possible out with him. In *Born in Tibet* he goes through the mistakes he made – he selected a guide at one point, and then that guide didn't come back. He tried another pass; that didn't work out. He meditated for a period of time, did divinations, looking and seeking – how was he to keep moving forward? As opposed to just saying, "we're going to go down this road no matter what happens and if some of you are with me at the end, that'll be fine." That's not the attitude.

Question: I have two questions. One is about timeliness at the beginning of a meeting and shamatha practice. Would you feel that, if you had set a time for shamatha of, say, fifteen minutes, and then somebody shows up two minutes before you're done, that you should still stop on time?

PRR: Yes. I can't overemphasize the importance of starting on time and stopping on time. And once it's clear that that's what you're going to do, and the leader does it, then it will happen. You make it happen. If you're there three meetings in a row on time and people see that you are there, they will be there too. If you do what you say you're going to do, the iron filings will naturally line up around the magnet.

Question: The other question is about broad agreement. I'm not sure if I understand that compared to consensus. We've been operating under that system for awhile, and I'm not even sure I understand what consensus is.

PRR: Well, generally speaking, "consensus" means that everyone is in agreement, in other words that we have unanimity. If we ask "Do we have consensus on this?" and somebody says no, then we don't have consensus. What this means is that the view of one person alone is sufficient to determine whether you're going to move forward or not. That one person who isn't in agreement is the one person who determines what happens. That's just the nature of it.

This is not the method that we're using here. In the case of the Sakyong's Council we are deliberately composed of people with a lot of diverse backgrounds, different points of view, different teachers – people who had the Vidyadhara as their teacher, the Regent as their teacher, the Sakyong as their teacher – people who have different experiences. We only get to meet each other in person maybe once or twice a year, and we rely heavily on conference calls. We can't expect to work on the basis that absolutely

everyone will be in 100% agreement. To reach genuine consensus you have to have people face-to-face and you have to devote a lot of time to it. I would say it's probably the most powerful form of group you can get. But we don't have the conditions, at least on the Sakyong's Council and probably in most centres, to enable us to do that.

So instead, we decided to work with this notion of broad agreement. This is where the intuition of the group and the intuition of the leader come in. It's like feeling the weight of energy in the room. Where is this energy going? You might find that the energy might be going in a certain direction in order to take the first step forward on an issue, when it comes to the next step, but it might not necessarily be going in the same direction. But you can still move forward, even if everybody isn't completely agreed on the final outcome – that's really important.

Let's go back to the exterminators. You might find that this has turned out to be a really divisive issue, and you may see that some people are determined that no rats will be killed in your centre at all. Other people think this is taking "Thou shalt not kill" too far. You're not going to get any agreement on that. But you do see that there is a willingness to find out what other groups have done who have been confronted with the same dilemma. So you say, okay, we don't have to sort the final answer out right now but we are willing to continue to explore this. Then somebody will insist that this be done quickly, because they are allergic to rats! That tells you to speed up the timetable on the consultations: "If we do this within a week, would that be okay? So-and-so will report back within a week. That means we have to have a conference call in week's time and we're fix the date right now." That's the next step. Is that helpful?

Questioner: Yeah, I think that "next step" thing is helpful, because otherwise it sounded like some kind of compassionate majority rule or something.

PRR: It's true we're taking on gigantic tasks in Shambhala. But the question is "What is the next thing that will help us move in that direction, even though none of us know what the final picture is?" I think you can count on the underlying willingness of everyone to take a next step, which I think has to do with our deep karmic connection. Fortunately, we are not in the kind of situation where people filibuster, try to block us, and so on. The only thing that comes together, as Agness Au said, is that our devotion takes different forms as people work with their common passion. As the quotation from the Sakyong says: "we all share the same dream." There's a tremendous willingness that the leader and everyone else can tap into. It just may not take quite the same form that we thought it would when we arrived at the meeting with our fixed ideas.

Question: I noticed in your outline that you used term that I don't hear very often in meetings now, which is "chair." I've noticed that that term now often gets translated into "facilitator," and I've often wondered what that was about.

PRR: Let's be clear – this is about leadership, not about group therapy. I do not facilitate the Sakyong's Council – I am the President, and I chair it on behalf of the Sakyong. You are the directors of your centres – you should be leading. What does leading mean in this

context? It means following this kind of process, which is far better than most facilitators can deliver, no matter how much you pay them, if I may say so. [Laughter]

Question: Thank you.

PRR: Can you see the fine line here? The Sakyong has talked about the vertical axis of hierarchy and the horizontal axis of participation. Our teachings come to us through a vertical axis of hierarchy. If you make a three-dimensional mandala, it's a pyramid. But when you look at the mandala from above, it's a radiating series of circles. There's a horizontal axis that runs across it, which is participation, which is why the Sakyong called the first Congress. He was always talking about participation in the mandala. But that's not to be confused with democracy. Democracy is a political system, which is based on the ballot. You can have highly non-participatory democratic systems.

The question here is how to find the balance between this horizontal gradient of participation, and the verticality of authority and hierarchy. These work beautifully together, because the arrogance of verticality can be cut by non-participation of the horizontal. If you don't have that participation, or that coherence with the command, nothing will happen, which is why the Vidyadhara said, "Never give a command that won't be followed." So how does a skillful leader give a command? By being a skillful leader. There are some people who think that chairing, or leading, is about imposing a point of view. That is exactly what the Sakyong says not to do in his commentary on the Six Ways of Ruling. He says, don't confuse this with imposing your point of view on others. Right?

At the same time the arrogance of the horizontal is cut by the wisdom of the vertical. These two forces work beautifully together. As leaders we exist right where the two hairlines cross. Sometimes one is moving up, or down,; it's like navigating at sea, and we're riding right at that point of intersection.

That was fun! We have one minute to go. Any other question? It'll be a very short answer.

Question: So the mandala includes both?

PRR: Definitely! That is why we have the sovereign, or the court, at the centre, and we have the whole kingdom radiating outwards. In the famous story when the Sakyong called to teach me about mandala, he said that a drawing of the mandala is just for the purposes of display; in reality every point on the mandala is inseparable in time and space. It is all simultaneous. It is completely unified.

Question: I'm wondering what you think about having more than one chair, like if two people are chairing. Does that just create more complications? In my experience I've found it works better because you feel like you have more support, and other times it doesn't work, and I'd just like your opinion on that.

PRR: I think it depends on the situation. If the reason there are multiple chairs is because people are afraid of leadership then I wouldn't do it. We need to bite the bullet and have someone who's willing to chair the meeting, as opposed to having such a lack of confidence in each other that we will not tolerate one person leading a meeting for more than one meeting at a time. We're not going to get very far on that basis. On the other hand, if there is more than one person who can do this skilfully, that's wonderful. In fact, it would be great.

Question: I was just wondering if you could give any advice on conference call meetings. I haven't actually tried to sit shamatha in a conference call before, it doesn't seem like that would work...

PRR: There's nothing wrong with saying, let us take a minute to do shamatha together in cyberspace. That's perfectly fine. There's a real value in that. We don't always do that on the Sakyong's Council, but there's a real value in that. A lot of people have just grabbed the phone and dialed, you know, so they're still preoccupied. So there's a certain quality, even though it's a conference call, of needing to remind ourselves that we're entering a space. Particularly if you have obstreperous people in your group it's good to settle. We have no such people on the Sakyong's Council so we just move straight in! [Laughter]

Questioner: And is there any other advice for a conference call that you feel would be different from when you're meeting in person?

PRR: I think the points about precision are even more important in a conference call because there's a lot of spaciousness or even spacing out. A number of people on the call are doing it simultaneously with catching up on their email or any number of things at home. Sometimes if they don't put the mute button on, you can hear stuff going on in the kitchen or whatever. So sometimes there's a certain distracted quality and therefore being more precise can be helpful, especially being precise with starting on time and ending on time. That is one of the most merciful things you can do: be clear that there's a boundary, because these meetings are difficult, they're mentally demanding, and people have a lot going on in their lives.

Questioner: Thank you.

PRR: So I think in the interest of time, we should stop. I guess you noticed I enjoyed that! Thank you all very much.