

Calling a Talking Circle in Shambhala: Some Suggestions for How to Begin

The talking circle itself is like water or the air we breathe—it can be mixed with anything that matters to the heart. The talking circle is most importantly about speaking and listening from the heart. It is about speaking and hearing the truth. The following excerpt from *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* provides a context for speaking the truth, *being without deception*, in the words of the Druk Sakyong: “If you tell the truth to others, then they can also be open with you—maybe not immediately, but you are giving them the opportunity to express themselves honestly as well. When you do not say what you feel, you generate confusion for yourself and confusion for others. Avoiding the truth defeats the purpose of speech as communication. Telling the truth is also connected with gentleness...If you are telling the truth, then you can speak gently, and your words will have power.” (pages 82-83)

The Druk Sakyong also introduced the process of *spontaneous insight* as a way to make group decisions, like choosing a dekyong. The talking circle shares that same spirit of spontaneously arising wisdom. To begin, I am going to offer four intentions that express the heart of this practice. These are reprinted from the Center for Council Training—www.counciltraining.org. The terms “council” and “talking circle”, while not synonymous, describe essentially the same process. Here are these four intentions as expressed by the Center for Council Training. An “intention” is a direction that we want to move in to the best of our ability, despite any difficulties we might encounter.

FOUR INTENTIONS OF COUNCIL

Speak from the heart Listen from the heart Speak spontaneously Be lean of expression

1. The first intention is to “speak from the heart”. This means to speak not only with your head and your ideas, but with your feelings as well. It means to tell your own story as honestly as you can trust in the moment. We have countless important and meaningful experiences. When we speak about them truthfully, we are speaking from the heart.
2. The second intention is to “listen from the heart” when another person has the talking piece. This means to listen without judgment, to listen with an open mind, even if you disagree with what the person is saying. Listen not just with your mind, but with your heart as well. The success of a circle is largely determined by the quality of listening.
3. The third intention is to “speak spontaneously.” This means that we wait until it is our turn to speak before we decide what we want to say. If you are thinking about what you are going to say, then you are not listening completely to the person who is speaking. When you don’t preplan what you are going to say, you will often be surprised what comes to you when it is your turn.
4. The last intention is to “speak leanly.” Something that is “lean” doesn’t have anything extra on it. When you speak, keep in mind that many others would like a chance to speak, and that there is only so much time. Use only those words necessary to get your point or story across. Please remember that no one is required to speak.

Some Suggested Guidelines for the First Meeting of a Talking Circle

The following guidelines are inspired by Christina Baldwin’s book: *Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture* and by my own experience in working with talking circles. Many of us have worked with 3-fold logic and it comes as no surprise that working with a talking circle can be looked at in terms of a 3-fold process.

The person calling the circle can be thought of as a host and as protector or guardian of the intention of the circle. They are not so much a facilitator as they are someone who is carrying the intention and spirit of basic goodness of the circle. They are protectors of the process of speaking and listening from the heart. They do the groundwork so the circle can happen and they hold the space of the process. But their role is a transparent one—not a hierarchical one. They act as a *convener* and a *leader* in the sense of taking the lead to get the process going and holding the best intention of everyone in the circle. Host may be the best word to use. I feel that it may be best to have the circle hosted or lead by two people—a woman and a man.

First: Calling the Circle

Set the intention. Write a simple statement of intent so that people can decide if it would be helpful for them to attend the circle. Gather feedback. Talk to others about your thoughts and listen to what they say. This helps to clarify the intention. Offer an invitation. Clearly set the time and place and announce it in time for people to decide if they want to attend.

Second: The First Gathering of a New Circle

Prepare the space. Arrange the seating in a circle. Gomdens and zabutons can be arranged in a circle; chairs can be used as needed. Bring drala into the space by taking great care in setting it up. While some circle traditions place something sacred in the center of the circle, I would suggest just letting the open and intangible space be the center and the binding element of the circle.

Open the circle. Some form of ritual is used to open talking circles. Here is a suggestion:

Begin with a gong and 15-20 minutes of sitting.
Chant the *Heart Sutra* as a way to invoke the lineage of awakened heart
(Feel free to choose another chant—or no chant—to begin.)
Offer a Shambhala bow and begin

Following the bow, the host tells the story of the idea and intention for the circle. Where did this idea come from? How did it come up? Next, introduce the object to be used as the “**talking piece**.” A stone or something that connects us with the earth is a good idea. As we know, Sakyong literally means “earth protector.” The talking piece connects us directly to the present moment and to the earth. The talking piece is a “great equalizer” so that everyone has an equal voice in the circle.

Set the boundaries of the circle. The main boundary is **confidentiality**—what is said in the circle stays in the circle. People need to know that they won’t be gossiped about. Also, it is important that people stay for the whole duration of the circle. To begin: Whoever is moved to, speaks first; then the talking piece is passed to the left. (Or alternatively, the leader could speak first, and then pass the talking piece to the left.) Each person speaks (in turn) from the heart and each listens from the heart. Speaking from the heart means that each person speaks from their **own** experience. Each person tells their own story and doesn’t speak on behalf of other people’s experience. Speak in the first person: “I feel this way; this happened to me; this is what I think, etc.” Silence is fine. If someone does not wish to speak, they can pass the talking piece to the person to their left. At the end, anyone who has not yet spoken can be asked if they would like to speak at that time. When everyone has spoken (or had the chance to speak if they wish) offer a Shambhala bow to close this part of the circle. Following the bow, the host can then ask if people wish to continue with a dialogue or discussion. If you are going to continue, the same guidelines help: no cross-talk, attentive listening, etc. The talking piece can be passed to a person when they want to speak. The leader should set a boundary for how long the discussion will go on. The leader needs to read the situation and energy of the group so that it doesn’t go on too long. It isn’t good for the group length if people start to leave.

Third: Closing with respect and dedicating the merit

Find out if the group wants to meet again and schedule the next meeting if appropriate.
Close with both Buddhist and Shambhala dedications of merit

If you have questions, please contact Alice Haspray at haspray@ns.sympatico.ca

Homage and gratitude for the wisdom of the aboriginal peoples of this earth who first spoke the truth in circle.