

Secular Sacred Governance

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The Vidyadhara gave the complete Oxford English Dictionary as a gift to our community in Europe, at the time when the seat of Shambhala Europe was in Marburg. When Shambhala Europe moved from Marburg to Koln, the dictionary went along too. It has been a great help in thinking about the deep meaning of “Secular Sacred Governance” – a term used recently by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche to describe what leadership means in the world of Shambhala.

There are several meanings related to “secular” in the OED (as the Oxford English Dictionary is affectionately known). Secular can mean “belonging to the present, visible world”, as opposed to an afterlife or an invisible world. It can mean “belonging to ordinary people, not those who are learned”, thereby distinguishing secular approach from that used by scholarly ecclesiastics. It can refer to “members of the clergy who live in the world” rather than in monastic settings – for example, these individuals wore “secular robes”. There is also a meaning of secular that derives from the French word, siècle: “belonging to an age or epoch”.

So with the help of this gift from the Vidyadhara we can see that secular is not the opposite of spiritual. Instead we could say that the secular is the way in which the spiritual manifests in worldly affairs – in a way that is appropriate for the age.

Nor is secular the opposite of sacred. The OED is also helpful here. It points out that if we say something is sacred, we mean that it is something that we regard as being “entitled to respect, reverence and protection”. This is completely in line with the phrases we use in Shambhala: Sacred Outlook and Sacred World.

The opposite of sacred is profane. The profane arises, says the OED, when we treat “that which is sacred with irreverence, contempt or disregard.” No wonder the Vidyadhara left us this gift. The OED, in this respect, offers us sacred outlook and pure vision: all is sacred, it is only our ability to see it as such that creates the difference between the sacred and the profane.

Moving from the world of the Oxford English Dictionary to our Himalayan roots, we can see the vision of sacred world perfectly embodied in the tradition of mandalas. A mandala personifies or embodies the basic sanity of Buddha nature. Its imagery has a deity at the centre, normally within a palace, and the world of that deity manifesting all around it. The thangka paintings of the Kingdom of Shambhala are arranged exactly like a mandala, with a palace at the centre surrounded by unfolding concentric rings. In those visions of Shambhala, the rings are ranges of snow-capped mountains.

One of the most impressive mandalas within the Shambhala world is the Kalachakra mandala. In The Great Stupa of Dharmakaya, this mandala is directly above

the huge Buddha which holds the principal funeral relics of the Vidyadhara. The mandala consists of a tiered palace arranged as a sequence of mandalas with mandalas. It is the abode of 722 deities. There are the mandalas of Great Bliss, Enlightened Wisdom, Enlightened Mind, Enlightened Speech and Enlightened Body. They themselves are surrounded by the rings of the six elements all protected within mountains of flames in the colours of the Five Wisdoms.

What do all these details signify? The most current translation of the Tibetan for mandala is “centre and fringe”. Some people find that translation odd, as the term “fringe” can make everything except the centre seem insignificant and remote. We could talk poetically of the “palace and its gardens” or the “inner palace and the outer palaces” or the “palace and realms”. That might be somewhat in keeping with what the Sakyong told me this year in a conversation about mandala principle. The way in which a mandala is laid out in a painting, he said, is just for the purpose of display. The truth of a mandala, he said, is that there is no separation of any kind whatsoever between the deity and the rest of the mandala, any more than there is any separation of any kind whatsoever between the mind of the teacher and the minds of the students.

This sense of inseparability is also what the Vidyadhara talked about when he gave teachings on mandala principle. He spoke about the simultaneity of the outer, inner and secret mandalas. “The outer mandala is connected with the external world: how to relate to society, politics, organizations, domestic relationships, and so forth,” said. “The inner mandala is connected with our body, and how to handle it. The secret mandala is connected with how to deal with our emotions. We have to incorporate all three mandala principles simultaneously in our experience. We can’t separate them; we can’t practice each of them separately, at different times. We have to do it all at once. In that way things become much more real.”

This gives us such a powerful way of understanding the principles of Secular Sacred Governance. What is a mandala? It is a community. It may be the community of one deity and everything in that particular realm. It may be a community of 722 deities! It is always net of relationships. Because everything within the mandala is, in reality simultaneous and inseparable, all the relationships within the mandala are transparent and intimate. Nothing could be more transparent or intimate than seeing through our illusions and seeing each other as Buddhas. So a mandala is an emblem of what life could be like within a genuine community.

This understanding of mandala also helps us understand, therefore, an extremely important aspect of what it means to govern a mandala. Secular Sacred Governance includes devotion and care not only for the teacher and the teachings, but also the community. In other words, not only the Buddha and the Dharma, but also the third jewel, the Sangha. Indeed, my own experience of being on the path of president is continually teaching me the deep importance of devotion to the third jewel and what that means as a core element of the path of governance.

In his Treatise on Society and Organization, the Sakyong asks us not to rely on “the organization” for our human needs. “Death, sickness, trauma, and other critical junctures in people’s lives are events that can be supported and nurtured through advice and care by a community that is sensitive to its own members,” he wrote. We only need to reflect for a moment on the fact that each of will die. For many of us, there will be a process of decay. We will become far less attractive and far more smelly. It’s thoroughly unpleasant. We become lonely and afraid. And what the Sakyong is pointing to is that we should take on the great intimacy of caring for each other as we go through this great transformation. Rather than relying on institutions, it is to each other that we should be able to turn, to our own brothers and sisters in the dharma, all of whom have trained in the reality of death for as long as we have been together on the path.

If we look at leadership in this light, there are few ways we might think of the practice of Secular Sacred Governance. Here are five aspects we could consider, beginning with View.

View. “In Shambhala vision,” the Vidyadhara said, “we don’t separate the secular from the sacred at all.” Holding this view is extremely important so that we don’t fall into the mistaken idea that splits off “administration” from practice, study, teaching and path. Understanding Shambhala as a mandala is immensely helpful in holding this view, and providing the appropriate view of governance. Our mandala is the Kingdom of Shambhala. It is arranged like a sacred kingdom, based on deep principles of community. Whatever role we play within the mandala is a manifestation of the qualities of such a kingdom. I think of it as a mandala of crystal architecture. It is a living manifestation of the Three Jewels. You can view Shambhala as self-existing – the view set out in the teachings. In that case, all that is necessary is to allow it to manifest in all its brilliance on the spot. Or you may view Shambhala as something we are building. In that case, all that is necessary is to ensure that each brick you put into position takes its proper place in the architecture of Enlightened Society.

Practice. The basis of Enlightened Society is the practice of working with our own minds. That is the basis of profound, brilliant sanity. Those who are in governance in a mandala like ours are on the Bodhisattva Path. Many of those in leadership positions will have taken the Bodhisattva vow. But even if someone hasn’t taken that vow, the demands of leadership are the demands of that path. The path of governance involves all the paramitas. In our community we are first introduced to the paramita of meditation, and this remains the indispensable ground of all that we do. From that ground arises the Bodhisattva aspiration and the practice of the other paramitas – generosity, discipline, patience, exertion, and prajna,. It’s important to remember this, because sometimes it’s easy to become detached from the ground of all our practice – meditation – and also to fall into the trap of separating practice from work. The practice of governance is full-time, It takes place on the gomden and it takes place off the gomden. As leaders we need to do both and we need to be seen to do both. It’s important to be present in the shrine room when others are meditating, but also to remember that you are practicing when others may think you are just working!

Study. There are differing degrees of scholarship in a mandala such as ours. Not everyone is expected to be a brilliant academic. But anyone in a leadership position does need to have a basic level of familiarity with the core teachings of the Shambhala and Buddhist paths. Not only that, community leaders need to be aware of the latest developments and debates in the way we present the teachings. For example, each of us should be able to answer the question: “What is a Shambhala Buddhist?” We can’t leave that to visiting teachers. Whether we are a Warrior of the Centre, the Rusung or the head of publicity at our centre, we are all fortunate to be thrust into the leadership of a dynamic, vital community. We all need to be up to speed with the latest efforts to bring meditation to the public, to young people. And we need to understand how today’s teachings relate to the unbroken mind transmission of our lineage.

Teaching. In a mandala such as ours, the teachings are present in all situations. The position of a leader naturally embodies certain aspects of those teachings. Our role offer us the opportunity to manifest the teachings as fully as we are able, bearing in mind that all of us are at different stages on the path. Thus, a leader such as a centre director or accountant may not teach in the sense of giving formal talks and vows, but anyone in those positions automatically teaches by example. People learn from our deportment, our open heart, and the way we handle serious problems or difficulties with people. People want to see the ways in which we manifest karuna and prajna in action. And they also learn a valuable lesson when they see us experiencing real trouble in these difficult roles! At the same time as we are on that path ourselves, one of the important aspects we need to remember – and this is definitely an area where our leadership can make an instant difference – is that creating an uplifted and caring environment in our centre is as much a part of teaching as the words of the teachers.

Path. Another wonderful thing about a mandala is that everyone within in is on the path. We need to do more than remember that; we need to appreciate it. Everyone, including ourselves, is treading the path, working with their unfolding karma and doing their best to understand and follow the teachings. It’s also important to remember that the very nature of the practices we do tends to heighten neurotic behaviour. So neurotic displays are also part of the path – both for the individual concerned and for everyone else on the path with them. Understanding this helps to cut through fixed, harsh judgments about people and to create an atmosphere of understanding and compassion, while freeing up the wisdom to deal straightforwardly with people. It also helps those of us in leadership positions understand our own predicament as path. If we really come to see that the path is the goal our approach to everything – and everyone – changes.

This understanding of mandala as the deep principle of community reinforces the importance of having an open, intelligent approach to conflicts in our midst. We don’t need to be afraid of these or to hush them up. We need to work with them sanely. Similarly, as many people have said, let’s not have one meeting at which decisions are supposed to be taken formally, while another secret meeting takes place in a bar for the real decision making.

So in that context, what do we do with the person that everyone hates at our centre, who seems to take up all the psychic space and who even turns newcomers away? This is often where all our study and practice hit the hard rubber wall. This is where you really have to go completely out of your normal track of preconceptions and preconditions. You find yourself challenged to step totally into someone else's world of pain and confusion and also into their uniquely tender heart and distinctive insight. At such times I find it helpful to remember meditation master Ato Rinpoche quoting the words of the Buddha; "My greatest enemy is my greatest friend." You no longer regard that person or their interruption or their distress as a nuisance. You allow yourself to be put completely on the spot, working with whatever comes up and having complete confidence to speak and listen from your heart.

Those words are a tremendous challenge to us all. They are especially challenging to anyone in a leadership position. The words of the Buddha are a call to trust our sangha and to rely totally on the power of our karmic situation. Gradually, as both the trust deepens, we start to get glimpses of what it would mean for it to become unconditional.

I once saw this kind of unconditional trust when I was on a worldwide tour with Peter Gabriel and other rock stars in support of human rights. There was always a point in each concert where Peter Gabriel would come to the front of the stage, turn his back to the crowd, stretch out his arms and leap backward off the stage into the arms of his fans. Somehow, he always landed safely on the outstretched hands of his fans. He did this in country after country, not knowing the people in the crowd, yet having that much faith in their willingness to catch him.

I think to myself, well if Peter Gabriel could place complete trust like that in people he had never met and who were there only for a concert, how much more can we trust the basic goodness of our dharma brothers and sisters to whom we are inextricably linked by our karmic destiny.

In the Secular Sacred Mandala of Shambhala, we are perpetually invited to express unconditional love for the third jewel, for the third jewel, for each other. It is of this that the Sakyong writes in his commentary on *Arousing the Motivation for True Freedom from Samsara, the Practice of Taking Refuge*:

THE OUTER MEANING The sangha consists of our brothers and sisters on the path of dharma. The sangha helps us to understand the words of the Buddha and to keep alive the Buddhist lineage. The sangha embodies the true meaning of the dharma and provides the path. Because of the sangha, we are not alone on the path. The sangha provides a real basis for practicing the path of virtue. The sangha cries over the suffering of sentient beings and celebrates their victories. The sangha sees the goodness of sentient beings, the basis of future buddhas, and provides hope for future sentient beings to eclipse the setting sun. It helps us to realise that we are not perfect, but that we have buddha nature. Taking refuge in the sangha means that we have companions with whom to eat the meal of dharma and drink the water of truth. With the sword of wisdom, beneath the moon of

compassion, the sangha creates the environment in which we face our desire, anger and bewilderment.

If we abandon the sangha, we abandon the Buddha and fall into the extreme view of nihilism. We fall back into samsara. If we abandon the sangha, we abandon selflessness and solidify our sense of self; we drink from the river of dualism and come under the influence of aggression. If we abandon the sangha, we develop pride. If we embrace the sangha, we embrace bodhicitta. If we accept and work with our fellow sangha members, we establish the basis for arousing love, kindness, and compassion for all sentient beings. When we cherish the sangha as our own loved ones, our minds develop equality and true joy emerges as the nectar of life.

THE INNER MEANING The sangha is luminosity-emptiness. Because of this, we cannot accept or reject it. The inner meaning of taking refuge in the sangha is to realize that all beings are buddha. All beings that we encounter are selfless and nonexistent. Our companions on this journey do not and never have existed; they are simply dreamlike. Each member of the sangha is, in essence, a buddha.