

Kalyana Mitta Groups

Guideline for Facilitators

Taken from Kalyana Mitta Network at Spirit Rock

Established by Teacher Advisor-James Baraz

Purpose of sitting groups - Recommended group size is 5-12 members, making it possible for sangha bonds to grow strong as well as providing an intimate enough setting for true exploration of Dharma topics. This deepens the development of daily life as practice.

Facilitating in Pairs - Running groups by pairs of facilitators minimizes the projections, both positive and negative, by the other group members, as well as the positive and negative identifications of the persons leading the group. It also takes the pressure off one person to solely create a safe and rich space for discussion and prevents confusion of facilitator role with teaching role.

Group Focus - When the two leaders first decide to form a group, the clearer they are on the areas they would like to explore, the more potential participants will know if they share those same Dharma interests. If the leaders prefer to let the group develop in a more organic way, at the first meeting it will be important for everyone to say why they joined, what they hope the group focuses on, and what they hope to get out of participating.

Practice Experience - The facilitators should decide what level of participants' experience they feel comfortable with. Participants in some experienced groups are required to have sat two retreats or have a regular sitting practice for at least two years. Other groups have formed to meet the needs of people who have recently discovered the practice

Meeting Intervals and Commitment - Groups vary greatly in how often they meet. Some meet weekly, some every two weeks, some monthly. See what works for you in a way that will best provide continuity while not feeling like a burden of "one more thing to do."

Commitment to attend the meetings is a significant factor in the group's success. After the initial meeting, if a member decides to participate, it is recommended that for an agreed upon time frame, such as three or six months, they commit to attend every meeting unless business, travel or unforeseen circumstances make

attending impossible. At the end of that time, the members can reevaluate their commitment and assess whether the group itself should continue.

Suggested Group Format - Groups generally meet for 2-3 hours. It is strongly encouraged that each meeting start with silent meditation, followed with a personal check-in by each member. Facilitators remind members of how long each person takes for their sharing, particularly if the check-ins are becoming too drawn out.

After the check-in, the discussion topic or body of the meeting can take place. This might be sharing reflections on an article or book chapter everyone has read or some issue that the members have been consciously looking at since the last meeting.

After the main discussion a very important part of the gathering will be taking some "process time" for members to express how the meeting was for them. Often this will just be for five or ten minutes, sometimes longer. It gives a chance for each person to give feedback about what is or isn't working for them in the group. That way everyone can benefit from individual observations and see if anything would be useful to keep in mind to make the group stronger, rather than leaving the meeting feeling disconnected from the group. The process time can be a particularly rich practice exercise in using right speech. Saying what's truthful and useful, without blame, can make for a deeper sense of honesty and mutual commitment to waking up. Finally, a short sitting or chanting or loving-kindness meditation can bring a sense of closure to the meeting.

Practice Between Meeting - What happens between meetings is as significant as what happens at the meetings. Otherwise, group sittings can reinforce the sense of separation between formal practice and daily life rather than moving toward the integration of the two. That is why it's important for members to be looking at working with some Dharma issue that has come out of the group discussion.

This then becomes a starting off point for discussion at the next meeting. Having some "accountability" to the group makes the investigation more a conscious part of one's day. Also, in the sharing each participant benefits from the discoveries of all the members.

Responsibilities of the Facilitators - The primary responsibility of the facilitators is to create the optimum space for rich Dharma discussion to take place. A major factor toward that end is a feeling of safety for all. Rules about confidentiality, when the sharing is personal, should be agreed on.

Another aspect of safety is monitoring the energy of the group and flow of discussion. Making sure that everyone has a chance to be heard and that a few people do not dominate is essential to healthy group dynamics. The facilitators must be willing to take a more directive role when that is called for. Some groups have even used a "talking stick" which is held by the current speaker.

If there is a sense that the vitality and commitment of the group members is waning then that needs to be addressed. Perhaps all members can take responsibility as "vibes watchers."

Personal issues can get to be a bigger focus than Dharma discussions. The clearer the leaders and members are on the right balance between personal and general discussion, the better the group will be.

The facilitators will find that getting together, in person or by phone, right after or soon after the meeting will be very useful in helping each other develop their skills and learning what will be most valuable to strengthen the process.

Checking-in for Support or Guidance - Finally, the facilitators should consider themselves and the group part of a larger network of Dharma friends. It can be helpful to have support or guidance from a Dharma teacher they trust while their group is developing. Toward that end it would be good if the leaders establish contact with a teacher to check-in from time to time.