

## Guidelines for the Dharma Study Group

Please read about six conditions that are conducive to amiability, that engender feelings of endearment, engender feelings of respect, leading to a sense of fellowship, a lack of disputes, harmony and a state of unity: from the [Saraniya Sutta](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.012.than.html) (AN 6.12) [<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an06/an06.012.than.html>].

These are some guidelines taken from Spirit Rock's Kalyana Mitta program - with some modifications to make them applicable to this group (as noted in italics):

At the first meeting it is important for everyone to say why they joined and what they hope to get out of participating. *Please go around the circle and listen patiently to each speaker. It might be helpful to set a time limit (2-3 min. max) so that everyone will have time to speak, but there will still be plenty of time for the group to then move to the topic for discussion.*

### Practice Experience

This will be a peer group *with no leader. It might be helpful to assign a facilitator for each meeting (could change from meeting to meeting, allowing each participant to take the role). The role for the facilitator is to call the group to order, to be time keeper for the meditation period, and keep the meeting moving making sure everyone has a chance to speak and be heard (see more below). The facilitator is not a teacher and this role does not imply any specific level of experience or knowledge.*

### 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." Ideally this should be a nourishing activity for the participants.

Commitment to attend the meetings is a significant factor in the group's success, *however, this may not be practical for everyone. The recommendation is that if you cannot meet with the group, to have at least one other person in the group as your "study buddy" that you can meet with personally, at least once a month to discuss the topic.*

### Suggested Group Format

The format will be influenced by how long each meeting will be. Groups generally meet for 2-3 hours [*but is something for the group to negotiate and establish*]. It is strongly encouraged that each meeting start with silent meditation. [*The group should decide how long the meditation should be - the facilitator will keep time and ring the bell - there should be no guided meditation - this is just silent meditation with no instruction. There is no leader.*] That should be followed with a personal check-in by each member. The check-in is a skillful way for each person to feel a connection to the group. The time spent on check-in varies greatly. The group can decide how much time it wants to spend on this part and how in depth the sharing is. Facilitators remind members of how long each person takes for their sharing, particularly if the check-ins are becoming too drawn out. [*This should be brief - suggest no more than 1 min. each and use this as a practice of how to briefly summarize what is truly necessary to say or not. You might even explore from time to time, saying one or no more than two words to check in.*]

After the check-in, the discussion topic or body of the meeting can take place. This *topic will be the month's study topic. If the group meets weekly, the topic could be the weekly reflection. If the group meets monthly, the topic could be to share either one of the reflections or whatever was meaningful in the study of that particular topic. In particular, it might be helpful to share how each person is implementing their understanding of that element of the Eight-fold path in their daily life or their meditation practice. It might be helpful to decide if there should be separate sub-topic sharing - for example, the first sharing might be on what was meaningful and a second sharing once that is complete might be to go around the circle again and then share how one is manifesting the element of the path in their life/practice.* It's helpful for everyone to have a sense of how long the discussion will be. *The facilitator should keep time and participants should use this as practice - if you're cut off, to be with that and allow the next person to speak. After each sharing, the group might wish to have open discussion time (5-10 min. or more) to wrap up the sub-topic - perhaps to say briefly what they learned from this sharing.*

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 (*perhaps what they want to take away from the meeting*). Often this will just be for five or ten minutes, sometimes longer. It *also* 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 Meetings

One of the most important aspects of the group is to nurture our Dharma practice in an on-going way. If the members are only looking at their practice during the group meetings, that becomes a very limited source of enrichment. It would reinforce the sense of separation between formal practice and daily life rather than moving toward the integration of the two. What happens between meetings is as significant as at the meetings. That is why it's important for members to be looking at/working with *the monthly topic through listening to the associated talks, reading the recommended texts, and engaging in the weekly reflections.*

*The monthly topic (or weekly reflection) comes alive through a commitment to explore patterns in our daily life. 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. People vary greatly in their ease of speaking to a group. Some are shy, others extroverted. 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 (e.g. someone's time is up or bringing the group back on topic).

The facilitators will find that *reviewing how the meeting went*, right after or soon after the meeting will be very useful in helping *to* develop their skills and learning what will be most valuable to strengthen the process. *If there is a problem or question that arises with regards to facilitating or something that was difficult in the meeting, this should be brought to Lori immediately for guidance.*

#### 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. Toward that end it would be good if the *facilitators* establish contact with *Lori* to check-in from time to time.