

GUIDELINES FOR KALYANA MITTA GROUPS

The dharma provides a path for awakening compassion and wisdom. The journey along this path may be substantially enriched with support of other spiritually inclined people. From this source the Kalyana Mitta (KM) groups take their origin. Kalyana Mitta is a Pali term which means "spiritual friend." Often used to describe someone in the teacher role, this term can refer to anyone on the path of dharma whether a guide, support person, or co-traveler.

The guidelines presented here evolved from the "Guidelines for KM Group Facilitators" developed by the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in California, and reflect the experience of existing KM groups within the Insight Meditation Community of Washington (IMCW).

Unlike teacher-led sitting groups that mainly focus on sharing silent meditation and dharma talks, KM groups provide an opportunity for students to personally share issues they are working on in their own practice. Because these groups are small and meet regularly over an extended period of time, they allow for intimacy and sharing, discussion of how to keep the practice alive in daily life, and an experience of the heart of the dharma.

Using these guidelines as a foundation, your KM group will develop its own identity and style based on the unique contributions of its members and their expectations and needs.

Group Focus

Our MTTI KM groups are designed to:

- Investigate specific MTTI themes
- Provide support for your participation in MTTI and
- Provide support in your daily life and practice.

Meeting Intervals and Commitment

We ask that your KM Group meet at least once a month for a minimum of two hours. Some groups may opt to meet more often. Commitment to attend the meetings is a significant factor in the group's success. Please make your attendance a priority.

Group Format

Each meeting starts with silent meditation.

The check in

The meditation is often followed by a personal check-in by each member. Participants might share about current life challenges, discoveries or insights. The check-in is a skillful way for each person to feel a connection to the group. The time spent on check-in may vary; the group can decide how much time it wants to spend on this part and how in-depth the sharing is. Often groups have some method to allow individuals to identify the start and end of their check-in, such as bowing or using a talking piece.

Mindful Discussion

Mindful discussion follows the check-in for a minimum of one hour. This will sometimes be focused on an assigned theme. At other times the group will decide whether to have an open discussion based on the sharings from the check-in or instead focus on a particular theme of collective interest.

Process Time

After the discussion, groups may include some "process time" for members to express how the meeting was for them. Process time, which may be brief (5 -15 minutes}, may be particularly useful in the beginning. It gives a chance for participants to give feedback about what is or isn't working for them in the group. Everyone can benefit from individual observations and see if anything would be useful to keep in mind to make the group stronger. 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.

Group Member Responsibilities

Each member is responsible for maintaining the optimum space for rich dharma discussion to take place. Some agreements and intentions are needed to foster a sense of safety for all and encourage participation.

- **Avoid judging or giving gratuitous advice.** KM Groups are dedicated to creating a safe space where each member can share freely about what is most important.
- **Honor Confidentiality.** What arises in personal sharing should be held in the utmost confidence and should not be repeated or shared outside the group.
- **Be aware of the energy of the group and flow of discussion.** People vary greatly in their ease of speaking in a group. Making sure that everyone has a chance to be heard and that a few people do not dominate is essential to healthy group dynamics. If there is a sense that the vitality and commitment of the group members is waning, then that needs to be addressed. This might be done by someone simply articulating, without blame, how they are personally experiencing this issue (e.g., what emotions are arising and how these emotions are being related to). Often, the articulation by one of the members of a perceived issue can inspire others to also relate to the issue, ultimately leading to an improved group dynamic.
- **Be aware of the balance between personal and thematic discussions and approach personal issues from the perspective of the dharma.** Some groups may emphasize personal sharing more than others. Personal sharing requires and fosters a sense of trust and intimacy among the participants.
- **Avoid the sense that some right answer is necessary.** From a dharmic perspective, it is often most wise to listen deeply, offering respect for each speaker's point of view and compassion for whatever suffering may be expressed in the moment rather than to explain, deny, or advise.
- **Ensure that group members feel deeply respected and heard at all levels, emotionally as well as intellectually.** Often the simple sharing of actual concrete experiences of many of the participants can lead to deep understanding and compassion with little need for further interpretation or abstraction. When those who are listening intend to suspend judgements and analysis and open up to the mystery of what is being shared, deeper insights can often occur.
- **Cultivate silence and a slower pace of conversation.** While long periods of silence are not typically part of conversation in our culture, they allow for reflection and can foster mindfulness, minimizing reactivity and judgement. It is skillful to practice listening to understand rather than to respond, and opening to the quality of "beginner's mind." Deeper, less obvious insights often emerge when a silence is welcome. Group members can encourage this gentle pace by pausing to reflect after someone has shared, and before they speak.
- **Notice how you react to events in the group that trigger you personally.** For example, if someone notices that his/her tendency, when triggered, is to become more

aggressive (or withdraw), they might share this perception with the group. Sharing this perception in the group may help the individual more deeply honor what is going on without judgment; it may also help others in the group become more aware of their own reactive tendencies. Similarly, if someone observes that through awareness they are able to shift away from a reactive tendency, sharing this with the group may be both informative and inspiring. This work of discernment of group behavior can be among the most valuable aspects of participating in a KM group.

Responsibilities of Facilitators

As your group begins to form, it is recommended that one or two people take responsibility for communications. This will help ensure everyone is aware of meetings and agendas. Your group will rotate facilitation duties. Your turn as a facilitator is an opportunity to practice mindful leadership.

The facilitator will guide the group into silent meditation and may choose to bring a reading to share based on the theme if there is one. The responsibility of the facilitator is to foster the optimum space for rich dharma discussion, insights, and healing to take place. While ultimately it is the responsibility of all group members to "hold the space", it is particularly important for the facilitator to help create the space by practicing mindfulness, right speech, and right intention.

The facilitator may occasionally need to take a somewhat directive role in reminding the group of its intention, either directly or by example, when the group is deviating from its agreements and intentions (e.g. when someone is dominating the discussion or the group is getting sidetracked).

Eventually, as the group matures and facilitation is more fully shared by all the group members, the facilitator role tends to become more administrative. These responsibilities include communicating time, location and theme of the KM group meeting.