

## Kalyana Mitta Guidelines

Dear Prospective Facilitator,

I am happy that you are interested in starting a Kalyana Mitta Group. Below are guidelines for facilitators. Some groups take a book such as A Path with Heart, Seeking the Heart of Wisdom, Thich Nhat Hanh's books, etc. as a way to explore Dharma topics together.

I hope your group is rich and nourishing for yourself and everyone who participates. Thank you for serving the Dharma in this way. Best of luck!

With metta,  
James Baraz  
Teacher Advisor-Kalyana Mitta Network

### Guidelines for Kalyana Mitta Group Facilitators

#### Purpose of the Network

The Kalyana Mitta (dharma friends) network was created to serve dharma students interested in having on-going support with their practice. For most sangha members, teacher contact is limited to retreat situations. Although there are a number of sitting groups throughout North America, these gatherings generally focus on sharing silent meditation. Sitting groups that are teacher-led usually don't provide the opportunity for students to personally share issues they are working on in their own practice. The Dharma Friends network addresses that need.

Kalyana Mitta is a Pali term which means "spiritual friend." Often used to describe someone in the teacher role, it can refer to anyone on the path of Dharma who is a guide, support or merely co-traveler. A study group usually consists of 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

One key guideline for the study groups is that they are run by pairs of facilitators. This 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. When two people who enjoy talking about the Dharma are co-facilitators their enthusiasm becomes contagious to the rest of the group.

## **Group Focus**

Some groups have a particular focus (such as right speech, relationships, classical study, or compassionate action to name a few), while others more generally address how to keep practice alive and fresh in one's daily life. Each group seems to develop its own identity and style. 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. A peer group is more comfortable for some leaders while others with extensive experience might find organizing a group for newer students is more appropriate, realistic, or practical. The discrepancy between experience of facilitators and participants will have a real effect on the feel of the group and the responsibilities of the leaders. The leaders can establish their own guidelines when forming the group. For instance, 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." Ideally this should be a nourishing activity for the leaders. In fact, the facilitators of the successful groups often say they get at least as much as, if not more than, the other members.

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**

The format will be influenced by how long each meeting will be. Groups generally meet for 2-3 hours. It is strongly encouraged that each meeting start with silent meditation. 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.

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. It's helpful for everyone to have a sense of how long the discussion will be.

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 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 some Dharma issue that has come out of the group discussion.

Right speech, working with anger, attachment or other emotions, looking at intentions--whatever the group is focusing on 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 is too controlling or the group is getting side-tracked). 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."

Some groups emphasize personal sharing in which there is a great sense of trust and intimacy that has developed between the participants. Other groups prefer to not get too personal as this can become the focus more 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. If you do not have a relationship with a teacher in the vipassana community, let us know and, perhaps, we can connect you with one. It would also be helpful for group facilitators to fill out the Kalyana Mitta Network Fact Sheet and send it to the contact address listed on the bottom of the sheet as soon as possible. Please keep us informed, at least once every six months, as a way of maintaining the contact and support as well as our knowing the status of your group. If your group ends please let us know that as well.

We encourage you to be listed on Spirit Rock's web page for Kalyana Mitta and to share stories and photos from your group. To contact us, email [KalyanaMitta@Spiritrock.org](mailto:KalyanaMitta@Spiritrock.org).