

INSIGHT MEDITATION COMMUNITY OF WASHINGTON

SPIRITUAL FRIENDS (SF) “KALYANA MITTA” GROUP GUIDELINES

Thank you for your interest in our Spiritual Friends Groups program. Below are guidelines and suggestions for participants that have been developed over time from SF groups around the country. We hope your group is rich and nourishing for yourself, and for everyone who participates. Let us know how it is going. We thank you for sharing the dharma in this way.

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GUIDELINES FOR SF 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 SF 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.

SFgroups within IMCW are part of a larger network of SF/KM groups across the United States. These small groups were created to serve dharma students interested in having ongoing support for their practice. SF groups consist of six to twelve meditation students who are committed to supporting one another as they explore the practice of the dharma in their daily lives. 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.

GROUP FOCUS

Some groups have a specific focus (for example, right speech, relationships, classical study, or compassionate action) while others more generally address how to keep the practice alive and fresh in one's daily life. The group members may work together to select a focus, or the focus may be determined by facilitators who start a new group; in either case, the focus may change over time.

MEETING INTERVALS AND COMMITMENT

Groups can vary greatly in how often they meet. Groups may choose to meet every other week or more or less often.

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, generally, between three to six months, he/she commit to attend every meeting unless business, travel or unforeseen circumstances make attending impossible. At the end of that time, the member can re-evaluate their commitment, and the group as a whole may assess whether it should continue.

GROUP FORMAT

The format will be influenced by how long each meeting will last. Groups generally meet for 1 ½ to 2 hours. Below is a suggested format for SF groups:

Suggested Spiritual Friends Group Format:

- **Meditation (20-30 min).** It is strongly encouraged that each meeting start with at least 10 minutes of silent meditation.
- **Check-in - about personal practice between meetings / mindful listening (30 min)** The check-in may be specific to a dharma topic selected by the group, or it may relate the dharma to the individual's life, practice, or experience in the moment. 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/item.
- **Mindful discussion (30 min)** Depending on the focus and agreements of the group, this might be discussion of a topic (for example, sharing reflections on an article or book chapter everyone has read, or on some issue that the members have been consciously looking at since the last meeting), or on themes, questions, or responses arising from the check-ins. It's helpful for everyone to have a sense of how long the discussion will be. As with the check-ins, groups may wish to use some method to identify who has the floor at a given moment.
- **Process time (about current group meeting experience) (5-15 min).** After the discussion, before ending the meeting, 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 for new groups. It gives people a chance to give feedback about what is or isn't working for them in the group. Everyone can benefit from individual observations, and see if there's anything to do differently that would be helpful in making 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.
- **Final short sit / lovingkindness “metta” meditation (5-15 min).** 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 intentions of KM groups is to nurture our dharma practice in an ongoing way. Whether or not the group is focusing on a topic, the dharma comes alive through a commitment to explore patterns in our daily life. The observation of these patterns, or the conscious choice of breaking away from such patterns, may then become a starting point for the check-in 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 how other members learn to work with mindfulness during the week.

GROUP MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES

Agreements. 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, such as:

- A commitment to avoid judging or giving gratuitous advice.
- An agreement to keep personal sharing confidential.
- Expectations for attendance and how to notify the group when someone will not be attending.

Group Dynamics. Another important aspect of group membership is awareness of the energy of the group and flow of discussion. The following elements should be considered:

- **Ensuring that everyone has a chance to be heard**, and that a few people do not dominate, is essential to healthy group dynamics.
- **Addressing issues of group vitality and commitment.** If a group member's interest is waning, they should feel safe in 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, one member's articulation of a perceived issue can inspire others to also relate more consciously to the issue, ultimately leading to an improved group dynamic.
- **Determining the degree of personal sharing.** Personal sharing requires - and fosters - a sense of trust and intimacy among the participants. It's useful to be aware of the balance between personal and general discussion, and to approach personal issues from the perspective of the dharma.
- **Practicing mindful listening.** From a dharmic perspective, it is often most wise to listen deeply, offering respect for each speaker's point of view, and compassion for the depth of suffering that may be expressed in the moment, rather than to explain, deny, or advise. When those who are listening intend to suspend judgments and analysis, and open up to the mystery of what is being shared, deeper insights can often occur.
- **Allowing for silence and a slower pace of conversation.** Longer periods of silence allow for reflection and can foster mindfulness, minimizing reactivity and judgment. 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.
- **Fostering respectful and skillful inquiry.** During the discussion phase after the check-in, the group can begin to explore possible insights into underlying patterns of thought and feeling that might have come up for group member(s) during the check-in. Examples of skillful inquiry offering questions, proposing possible connections between what is shared, or offering a reading. A guiding principle with any form of inquiry is to ensure that everyone feel as safe as possible, that feelings are acknowledged, and varying points of view are respected.
- **Encouraging inner noticing.** Group members can be supported in internally noticing (and supporting each other in noticing) their own particular way of reacting to events in the group that "trigger" them personally, for example, tendencies for attachment, aversion, or confusion. Sharing this perception 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.