

Buddhism/Twelve Step Group Guidelines

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for the Buddhist Recovery Network

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Introduction

Over the past several years groups have been coming together to support people who want to explore the connection between Buddhism and recovery. The Buddhist Recovery Network is vitally interested in supporting as well as learning from these groups. This guide brings together my own thoughts on how these groups might work along with information about the formats used by existing groups.

My book, *One Breath at a Time*, makes the point that what Twelve Step groups have that many Buddhist communities are lacking is “fellowship.” This means much more than casual social connection. Many Buddhist groups have monthly potlucks, family classes, or community events meant to encourage personal connections among community members. But what Twelve Step groups offer is a unique environment for “sharing,” the deep personal exploration and revelation that has been so healing for Twelve Step participants. In revealing our demons in a safe, supportive atmosphere, we have the opportunity to deal with them in ways that silent meditation often does not allow. The contemporary Buddhist form which probably most mimics this Twelve Step model is called a *Kalyana Mitta* (spiritual friends) group (more about them later).

This guide, as they say in the *Big Book*, “is meant to be suggestive only”. I realize I “know only a little.” I hope it will open the door for group exploration. Please let me know about your own experiences so that I, too, can learn about how such groups might be best organized and how they might serve the needs of the community.

Getting Started

Before a group can get off the ground, a few things need to be established:

- Intention
- Leadership
- Membership
- Form and Content

Intention

Setting a clear intention is the vital starting point for someone thinking about forming a group. Is your main focus going to be in deepening your Step work? deepening your meditation practice? dharma study? forming community and giving a place to share? Answering these and other questions about what you want from your group will help you to decide on the other questions of leadership, membership, form, and content. For instance, if your main interest is in growing the community, you might want open membership, whereas, if you want to focus on deepening meditation and forming intimate connections, you might want a closed membership.

What might be more critical in thinking about intention is in distinguishing the purpose of a Buddhism/Twelve Step group from that of an ordinary Twelve Step group. What I always try to look for in any Buddhist discussion is, How does what we're talking about relate to the dharma? So, if someone is helping a sick relative, to put it in the context of the Buddha's teaching on suffering, that we are all subject to sickness, old age, and death. This doesn't mean that we deny people their need to process grief or any difficult emotions—on the contrary, being fully present with those painful experiences is vital to the process of moving through them and healing—but it does mean that at some point we remind ourselves of the context of our experience and don't stay stuck in the "story." This is a common difficulty in any group focused on spirituality and healing—

it's so easy for us to stay in the "problem" and forget the solution. While it's helpful to talk about our difficulties, if we don't move beyond examining our pain toward looking at the Path of freedom, we miss the point of the spiritual teachings.

So, whoever is facilitating, be it a teacher or just a member of the group, this focus on intention should be kept very strong. In Twelve Step groups we call this "primary purpose" and in Buddhism "Right Intention."

Leadership

Leadership can be approached in two basic ways: set facilitators who organize and lead the group, or "group conscience" which is essentially a democracy. The advantage of having set facilitators is that they would be more experienced practitioners who could hold the group together more strongly. Some of the disadvantages are the potential for projection that a leader gets, where people in the group like or dislike things the leader says or does and the tendency for members to not take responsibility for the group, expecting the leader to do all the work. So this form opens the door for the "personalities before principles" issue that Twelve Step groups seek to avoid. The advantage of a more democratic form are that everyone feels fully invested in the group and takes their share of responsibility. The disadvantage can be that if there is no experienced practitioner, the group might find itself going down unproductive paths. Kalyana Mitta (KM) groups can devolve (as can Twelve Step groups) into little more than group therapy sessions, and, without a leader to guide the group back to its foundation principles, this can undercut the group goals. My preference, then, is for leadership, but I also know that the "benign anarchy" of Twelve Step groups can be very effective. What I think is most important in that case is that the group have a very strong intention—even a mission statement of

some sort—so that it can always come back to its core purpose, in the same way that Twelve Step groups emphasize a “singleness of purpose.”

When I led a KM group, I was asked to lead it by a senior teacher. This is the typical way that one takes a teaching or leadership role in the Buddhist community, through the aegis of an established teacher. One could say that Buddhism is hierarchical (which is true), but the hierarchy isn't supposed to be based so much on *power* as on *wisdom*. What this means is that a teacher or leader's authority grows out of their realization, out of the depth of their practice and their understanding, and not out of some personal “leadership qualities” which might make them popular or powerful, nor out of their own desire to be a leader. Traditionally the person who certifies this depth of practice is another, more senior, teacher. In this way, the Buddhist tradition has kept alive a “lineage” of enlightened (or at least wise and trustworthy) masters through two and a half millenia. It's a system that, although it doesn't fit so well with our culture's current concerns about consensus, democracy, and egalitarianism, has, nonetheless *worked*, and success like that, I believe, needs to be respected and at least considered as a legitimate criteria. After all, if our spiritual leaders were elected on the basis of their popularity we'd have teachers with great personalities, but perhaps not a lot of wisdom (like our political leaders?).

So, what I'd suggest is that if a group is forming around some leaders, that those leaders should be certified or supported in some way by more senior teachers. If they are taking a leadership role, then that suggests that they have a depth of practice, which in turn suggests that they have studied with a teacher or teachers who they could call on as support. Anyone in a leadership role in a spiritual community needs such mentoring and

support—the difficulties and risks associated with these roles are too great to handle alone. Specifically, if you are thinking of starting a group, I suggest that you contact a teacher with whom you have studied and ask for their support and mentoring in your new role.

Typically, KM groups have two facilitators. This is a good idea for many reasons. (Check out <http://www.spiritrock.org/html> and select “Community” then “Dharma Friends” to find a discussion of KM groups).

If, on the other hand, a group decides to form without a leader, a different approach will be taken. What I would suggest is a revolving facilitator role, where at the end of each gathering, one or two people agree to be facilitators for the next meeting. The group could keep a list of guidelines which the facilitators would follow. Such guidelines should be simple, but specific so that the group meetings are consistent. This is essentially the *secretary* role that is held in most Twelve Step groups. This person keeps track of the time, stays sensitive to the needs of the group and the individuals in the group—for instance, making sure that one person doesn’t dominate or that a quieter person doesn’t get left out of the discussion. They lead the group through the session, ringing the bell for meditation, reminding people of the structure of the session, and so on. Structure and a sense of orderliness are important for allowing people to relax and feel safe in the group.

Membership

How should you determine membership? How many members should you have? Who decides who can join? Or should it be a drop-in group, like a Twelve Step group, which is totally open to anyone who is interested. All of these questions need to be addressed by

the facilitators and/or the members. While some KM groups require a certain meditation practice experience (like two years or a ten-day retreat), for a Buddhism/Twelve Step group, this seems unwise, because such groups are going to be especially appealing to Twelve Steppers with little or no meditation experience who want support in their practice. So, my suggestion is that groups have no requirement for meditation experience. On the other hand, if what you want is a group of experienced meditators who are also sober (clean, abstinent) then by all means, set a practice requirement. What any group will want to do is suggest that members establish a daily (or as close to daily as possible) meditation practice.

Do you want to have a sobriety requirement? Again, this is a decision for your group and/or leaders to make. If you are a closed group, you might want to have a suggested sobriety length (six months or a year?) and then take other applications on a case-by-case basis. If someone is completely new to meditation, slipping a lot, and perhaps detoxing, they might not be great members of the group. However, your group might want to reach out to such people, in the same way Twelve Step groups welcome people so openly. The only problem is that the nature of a meditation group is one of more quiet and a bit more serenity than a typical Twelve Step meeting, and any disruption could really have an adverse effect. Another person might want to join who had previous meditation experience and is newly sober but seems stable in their recovery. They might be a welcome addition to the group.

Typically a KM group is closed, as opposed to drop-in. This allows for the development of community and closeness among the members and a feeling of safety and support. Buddhism/Twelve Step groups might want to consider this structure. However,

you might feel that it's more important to be welcoming to the community than to keep the group closed. There are advantages and disadvantages to both.

Usually a KM group tries to maintain a range of membership, typically between 5 and 12. I'm not at all sure a Buddhism/Twelve Step group needs to stick to these relatively low numbers. Again, consider the pluses and minuses. It's amazing how intimate a Twelve Step group can be even when there are dozens of people there—still, there's no doubt that a smaller number allows for more of a sense of safety and support.

If you are starting a group, how will you attract members? If you're in a large urban area, you probably won't have much problem. You might even know a dozen people already, or at least by inviting a couple friends and seeing if they know anyone who might be interested, you might quickly fill the group. In a smaller area, or one in which Buddhist practitioners are more scarce, you might need to do some outreach. Clearly the first place to go is your Twelve Step meeting. If there's an Eleventh Step meeting in your area, that would be a likely starting point. You might also consider putting up a notice at a health food store or independent bookstore. Of course, the Internet gives us almost unlimited resources in terms of connecting with people.

Once the group is formed, you'll want to consider how new members are added. Can anyone in the group nominate someone or should everything go through the facilitators? In either case, any decision to confirm a new member should be contingent on their visiting the group and seeing how they fit in. Once someone's in, it's tough to get them out, so you don't want to make mistakes at this stage.

The KM model is obviously a restrictive one and one which Twelve Steppers used to the benign anarchy of meetings may find too rigid. In fact, I know of two very

successful groups in the Bay Area which are completely open. They do have fairly strong leadership, but they don't seem to have any restrictions on membership. These groups tend to be full of energy and inspiration and are allowing people of all levels of sobriety and meditation experience to come together to form a strong community. My perspective as someone who is used to being the "teacher" and having more control over the setting probably biases me toward more restriction, but, the truth is that both models are completely valid and, again, the important question is, what do you want from your group? So, it comes down to intention. It's likely that a KM model will provide more opportunity for structured meditation practice, study, and development. The more 12 Step open model I think fosters more connection, service, and opportunity for new people. Ideally, it would be nice if both could be available to people.

Form and Content

Now we get to the meat of the group: what's going to happen when we get together? There probably aren't that many different things that a group will do: meditate, talk, read, socialize. It's just a matter of finding the form and content that is most helpful for your group.

In most meditation groups, the sitting, or meditation, period comes first. The reason for this may be that the meditation itself makes us more sensitive and open and allows us to both speak and listen with a clearer attention afterwards. It helps bring calm and stillness to the group and to give people a break from the busyness of their lives.

So, I recommend that once everyone is settled, that the group do some meditation. If you are an open group with drop-in members, it's probably best to do give at least a little bit of meditation instruction. You can use the guided meditations in my book or any

of a number of other books (see my booklist on <http://www.kevingriffin.net/booklist.htm> for some suggestions), or, if your leader is an experienced meditator, they might want to just give their own instructions.

Generally it's recommended that a meditation period be at least 20 minutes. For new people this might seem long, but it seems to be a widely accepted period. In fact, regular Buddhist meditation groups often sit for 45 minutes or even an hour. Obviously, each group will want to decide on the length of the meditation period.

Most groups end meditation with a bell. These can be purchased at spiritual bookstores, futon shops, meditation centers, health food stores, and online. A bell is a pleasant way to end a period of silence non-verbally. Some groups do chanting at the end of the meditation period, and, of course, a group might want to use a prayer, like the Serenity Prayer. In any case, it's nice to have a ritualized way of ending meditation. It allows for a smooth transition out of the silence.

After the meditation, depending on how long the meeting is going to last, you might want to have time to stretch and have tea. At most meditation groups the break is fairly short so that the quiet developed during the sitting doesn't dissipate too much, but for Buddhism/12 Step groups, the break is usually a more important part of the evening. This is when people get to connect informally which is very valuable.

Now you begin the interactive part of the session. If you are simply an open group, then you might just go right into sharing. A KM group often has a time for check-in where people talk about what's going on in their lives right now before going into a chosen topic. Or the leader/facilitator might want to begin by talking on a topic as a way

of stimulating conversation and sharing some dharma understanding. Any of these models can be effective.

Some groups find it helpful to read some literature together, following the 12 Step “Book Study” model. If it’s a KM group, you might suggest that people read a chapter of a book before the group meets so people can go right into discussion. A drop-in group might read aloud from the study book during the gathering. And, of course, a discussion would follow. Besides *One Breath at a Time*, a couple books that I think are suited for this kind of study are Jack Kornfield’s *A Path with Heart*, Sharon Salzberg’s *Lovingkindness*, and Pema Chodron’s *When Things Fall Apart*. I’m sure members of your group will have their favorites as well.

Besides someone giving a talk, group sharing, reading, and discussion, a group might be interested in doing interactive exercises for working with specific Steps and concepts for bridging Buddhism and the Twelve Steps. The following section of this guide will offer some suggestions in this regard.

For a KM group, it’s helpful to have a “check-out” time where people can mention what was beneficial and what not so beneficial for them in the gathering. The facilitators can then adjust things according to people’s needs.

It’s nice to end any group with a blessing, prayer, or short lovingkindness (*metta*) meditation—less than five minutes. This puts a nice closing energy into the end of the session. One group I visited did both a “dedication of merit” and then got up and held hands to say the Serenity Prayer, just like a 12 Step meeting. That seems like a nice combination of the two.

Whatever of these suggestions you might adopt, I think you will find that a meditation group of any kind will be of great help to its members. When we practice together we strengthen our practice in a way that solitary meditation can't. The support and insight of others is invaluable in developing our practice. Everytime I join with a group to meditate my practice is inspired and energized. I wish you great joy, happiness, and awakening through your inner work.

Group Examples

I have contacted various Buddhism/12 Step groups to find out how they run things. There are a lot of similarities. Obviously all the groups have time for meditation and some sharing. They are all open to members of any 12 Step program, although there isn't usually any requirement, although many encourage 12 Step participation. One of the benefits of the open group is that people get to see the fundamental similarities among different addictions, be they to substance, behaviors, or people. Leadership varies from people who simply organize and invite speakers/teacher, to people who are more actively functioning as dharma teachers.

The Buddhist Recovery Network website, www.buddhistrecovery.org, lists many groups. The basic format is often outlined here.

One of the things I expressed a concern over is that people use these groups as a way to avoid being in a 12 Step program. Many of the group leaders said similar things. Craig V. from Minneapolis said this: "I share your concern re: AA avoidance. We specifically suggest that members attend a sangha, practice meditation and study, and have a meditation instructor, and also attend a 12 step group, and work the steps with a sponsor as suggested. We state very clearly that we view the two practices as parallel

supports that can enhance each other. We also stress the effectiveness of abstinence (5th Precept) as an indispensable tool in experiencing the full benefits of recovery.” In a later email he said “I plan to add a sentence to the closing to the effect that this meeting is not a substitute for your 12 step meeting to give that point emphasis each week.”

Here is some information about the various groups.

SF ZEN CENTER

The San Francisco Zen Center has been offering a Buddhism and Recovery session every Monday night for several years. They were kind enough to describe in detail the way their group runs:

They meet from 7:30 to 9 pm every Monday night.

The first 5-10 minutes or so, the leader speaks about some specific aspect of meditation (posture, breath, doing “mini-meditations” throughout the day, etc.), followed by a short general instruction.

They then sit (silently) for 20 minutes.

Following that, people introduce themselves (the leader always says that it is not a Twelve Step meeting, so people are free to introduce themselves as alcoholics, addicts, whatnot, or just say their names--there are no requirements to attend). They do respect anonymity and confidentiality.

Then the leader speaks for about 20-25 minutes on some aspect of dharma and recovery. (they’ve spoken on the Steps, the paramitas, the 4 noble truths, etc). Generally, they will bring in literature from both traditions which is read at the beginning of each talk. They always work to tie Buddhism and recovery together--and to let the teachings

speak for themselves. They find it especially helpful to speak about non-theistically based spirituality, as that is what a lot of people go there to find.

They then open the floor for sharing, as in Twelve Step meetings.

They end with another 10 minutes (or so) of meditation and a dedication of merit. This is a format the leaders and members have worked out over the past 4+ years, and they find that it works pretty well.

Most of the time the same teacher leads the group. Now and again they have a guest speaker--the criteria for such are at least 5 years of recovery and to have received Buddhist precepts.

For more information about this group, you can email the San Francisco Zen Center at coffice@szc.org or call the front office at 415 863 3136.

COMMON GROUND MEDITATION CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS, MN

3400 East 26th Street in Minneapolis

Leader: Craig V. – the following information was sent by him.

Newsletter which includes the schedule and description of 12 Step Recovery offerings is accessible from the web-site, www.commongroundmeditation.org The Guiding Teacher is Mark Nunberg. The weekly 12 Step Recovery and Mindfulness Meditation group meeting is on Friday nights, 7:00-8:15, except the first Friday of the month when Mark leads an evening of Metta practice.

FORMAT:

Welcome &, if newcomers, brief introduction. Then 15 to 20 minutes of check-in. We go around the room, each person says their name, program (optional), and talk about their week re program/practice. Next 20 minute meditation, usually silent, brief

instructions if newcomers, time for questions and comments after end of meditation.

Next, 10 minute talk on some subject, dhamma/step related. After talk, break into groups of 3 or 4 each, to discuss topic or whatever; about 10+ minutes. Then announcements, closing - confidentiality, dedicate merit and serenity prayer. Meeting starts at 7:00 and ends at 8:15+.

I'm going to offer a kind of "first step" type meeting for people new/uncertain about meditation. We'll meet in a separate room while the rest of the group discusses the evening's talk. This idea came up from our Twin Cities Network group meeting that we had last month. We got off to a good start to that endeavor, I feel.

LEADERSHIP

I'm [Craig V.] the regular leader although we've started having volunteers, once a month, give the 10 min talk on their experience. I am not an authorized dharma teacher.

FWBO BUDDHIST CENTRE, SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

The meeting began as an offshoot of a sit I [Guy H.] lead before the Erskineville AA meeting which meets for an hour Thursdays & Sundays. On Sundays we are joined in the sit by some Alanons who go off to a meeting in an adjoining room. Over the years some hundreds of people have been introduced to the Mindfulness of Breathing practice at those sits. We have only 20 mins with people arriving late and I lead it so as a newcomer will get the idea and experienced practitioners don't object. In some cases I'm re-igniting a lapsed or poor practice in others introducing them to something they would never have contemplated. It's done in the spirit of the 11th step and probably half of the regulars in both fellowships have given it a go. 25 or so have a regular solid practice and some have become or were Buddhists.

FORMAT

We have what I've called up to date an 11th Step Meditation Workshop which is held Fridays for 1½ hrs at the FWBO's Sydney Buddhist Centre. Up until recently the main emphasis is to teach a basic meditation technique (mindfulness) with some posture work and support a regular practice. We have had a couple walking meditation & Metta sessions. We usually begin with a 20-30 body awareness by listening to an Alexander Technique Semi Supine CD or I lead them through it. We then have a 20-30 min sit. After that we have a general share on how our practice is going in general. Just recently I was inspired by your 12 step Contemplative Interactive Exercises to try something similar. We have also "gate crashed" an FWBO weekend retreat (with their support) which was universally acclaimed success (I think the Buddhist got as much out of it as us with a few really identifying.

LEADERSHIP

I [GUY H.] usually lead the sit and I am training for ordination and have a preceptor who is aware of my involvement but there is no formal input.

12 WEEKS CLASS, SAN FRANCISCO, CA

This group was started as a short-term class, with guest speakers/teachers each week covering one of the 12 Steps, but the group may live on. Here's the latest information on it from one of the group organizers Nancy W.:

“I'm in the process of thinking through next steps for 12 Weeks. I'm pretty sure I'm going to continue 12 Weeks as a weekly sitting group, although where and when might be changing.” Contact her at nancywilloughby@gmail.com

FORMAT

- * We introduce the speaker.
- * Speaker leads a meditation for 30 minutes.
- * 10 minute break.
- * Speaker talks for 20-25 minutes.
- * Discussion for 20-25 minutes.

LEADERSHIP

Nancy W. and Vince M. are the organizers. Each week is led by a different speaker/teacher. What is the format of your meeting? As much detail as you want to give will help.

5TH PRECEPT ENCOUNTER BELLINGHAM SHAMBHALA CENTER, BELLINGHAM, WA

This group operates independently from the Shambhala Center.

FORMAT

We meet for an hour weekly. We utilize a typical 12 Step format with two short sitting meditation periods (10 minutes at the beginning and end of each meeting). We end the meeting with a Dedication of Merit. We stress anonymity, no cross-talk, and a 5 minute limit on sharing. We use your book and a set of essays from the SF Zen Center as study/reference material. We organize discussion around a particular step and how it may relate from a dharma perspective or any other relevant topic.

LEADERSHIP

I [JOE M.] offer facilitation. I am not an "authorized" dharma teacher, though I have received meditation guide training in the Shambhala sangha and have completed the

graduate level study for Shambhala Training. I'll attend Sutrayana Seminary in Nova Scotia in a week. I'll receive final meditation instructor training later this year. I've been a member of AA for 21 years and I'm also a licensed mental health counselor in WA State, in private practice. I refer group participants to several dharma resources in town depending on their individual need and motivation.

ATLANTA SOTO ZEN CENTER

1167 C/D Zonolite Place, Atlanta Ga. 30306

Contact: For more information call Jon S at (404) 788-5733

Sundays 1:30pm

FORMAT

We start with 20 minutes of sitting meditation. Any form is fine, but if people are new to practice and want instruction, it is provided. After that we have tea and an open discussion (like a regular meeting). We then close with 10-15 minutes of sitting.

LEADERSHIP

Jonathan S.

Reading Suggestionss

Here's a booklist from "Laura S.," author of *12 Steps on Buddha's Path*.

Alcoholics Anonymous

Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th edition (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 2001)

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A.A. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1957)

Living Sober (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1975)

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1953)

Buddhism

Dalai Lama, His Holiness. The Four Noble Truths (London: Thorsons, 1997)

Goldstein, Joseph, and Jack Kornfield. Seeking the Heart of Wisdom: The Path of Insight Meditation (Boston: Shambhala, 1987)

Gunaratana, Venerable Henepola. Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001)

Gunaratana, Venerable Henepola. Mindfulness in Plain English (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991)

Hanh, Thich Nhat. Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha (Parallax Press, 1991)

Kornfield, Jack. A Path with Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life (New York: Bantam Books, 1993)

Salzberg, Sharon. Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness (Boston: Shambhala, 1995)

Smith, Jean. NOW! The Art of Being Truly Present (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004)

----- . The Beginner's Guide to Walking the Buddha's Eightfold Path (New York: Bell Tower, 2002)

Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans. Dhammapada (Barre, MA: Dhamma Dana Publications, 1998)

Here are some of my own reading suggestions:

Buddhism and Recovery:

One Breath at a Time, by Kevin Griffin

12 Steps on Buddha's Path, by Laura S.

The Zen of Recovery, by Mel Ash

Cool Water, by William Alexander

Mindful Recovery, by Thomas and Beverly Bien

Dharma Punx, by Noah Levine

Buddhist

The Experience of Insight, by Joseph Goldstein (also, *Insight Meditation* and *One Dharma*)

Living Dharma, by Jack Kornfield

Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

Buddhism without Beliefs, by Stephen Batchelor

What the Buddha Taught, by Walpola Rahula

Breath by Breath, by Larry Rosenberg

A Gradual Awakening, by Steven Levine

When Things Fall Apart, by Pema Chodron

Pay Attention for Goodness Sake, by Sylvia Boorstein

Thoughts without a Thinker, by Mark Epstein

Wide Awake, by Diana Winston (not just for teens)

Buddha's Nature, by Wes Nisker

Who Is My Self? by Ayya Khema

Online Resources

12foldpath – Yahoo group. Go to groups.yahoo.com and type “12foldpath” in the “Find a Yahoo Group” box.

<http://www.11thstepmeditation.org/> - inter-faith meditation site for 12 Steppers.

www.mysoberlife.com