



*Namchak*

# *Learning Circle*

## Toolkit

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The self-reflective exercises and facilitation skills in this kit are from the work of Aaron Stern, founder of the [Academy for the Love of Learning](#).

Purchase of Lama Tsomo's book, *Why is The Dalai Lama Always Smiling?*, is not required to participate in the Namchak eCourse or the Learning Circle activities.

# Introduction

Welcome! Thank you for your interest in Namchak’s Learning Circle Toolkit. In the following pages, you’ll find simple steps to get started. Remember— we are here to help you every step of the way.

At Namchak, we offer students a myriad of ways to learn Tibetan Buddhist practice, and have educational programs for all levels. Our eCourses offer easy access to the material, if you’re just getting started, while our in-person retreats and expanded programs give experienced students rare opportunities to receive individual support from Tibetan and Western master teachers.

Regardless of your level of experience, this toolkit gives easy-to-follow steps to start a Learning Circle, or if you want to start smaller, to have great practice sessions with a “Meditation Buddy.”

We hope you find this guide useful, and we welcome your input. Find more learning materials online at [Namchak.org](https://namchak.org), and email [info@namchak.org](mailto:info@namchak.org) with specific Learning Circle questions. If you are looking to fuel your practice and connect with others, join us at a retreat. Find our retreat schedule here: [namchak.org/events](https://namchak.org/events).

# What Is Sangha?

There are three components within the heart of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Together, they are known as the three jewels.



**Buddha** refers to the enlightened mind of the Buddha that is brought forth through meditation and practice.



**Dharma** refers to the teachings of the Buddha: the “map.”



**Sangha** refers to a community of like-minded people who are pursuing their journey together.

While all three of the jewels are essential on the Buddhist path, at Namchak, we bring a special focus to the jewel of the sangha, or community, providing tools for people to come together, form groups, and relate to one another in a deep and harmonious way. We provide Learning Circles with the support and tools they need to create truly fruitful learning environments, apply spiritual insight in a group-oriented and practical way, and ultimately, make the world a better place by beginning with the world of sangha.

**In this toolkit, we focus on ways to initiate, cultivate, and sustain healthy sangha.**

# Personal, Community, World

We believe that in order to live fulfilling and meaningful lives, it is not enough to just focus on our own personal well-being. We also have to feel our connection to others, those both near and far, living our lives in harmony with the greater whole. This involves focus on three connected spheres: personal, community, and the world.

**Personal** refers to our time on the cushion (or in the chair) as we meditate.

**Community** refers to our sangha, the rich connections we share with those closest to us. This can include our families, our co-workers, our neighbors, and those in our Learning Circle.

**World** refers to our awareness of the events of the world, and our active engagement to make the world a better place.

## Widening the Lens

In the West, with our individualistic society, meditation and spiritual practice is often considered something we do on our own. However, in the East, where these practices originated thousands of years ago, the practices were designed to support healthy relationship with others and with the world around us.

As you use this toolkit, think about the ways you, and members of your Learning Circle, can widen your lens beyond your Circle, perhaps through doing a service project in your community or supporting people living in other parts of the world.

## **TAKING YOUR MEDITATION PRACTICE OFF THE CUSHION**

Consider dedicating a portion of your meetings to discussion about how your meditation practice is impacting your life and interactions with the world around you. In particular, these discussions can be helpful to:

- Identify and share where each person finds meaning and joy in their day-to-day lives
- Explore what areas group members feel drawn to
- Work through strategies and ways to increase each person's work in the world through meditation

Another way to weave in the world perspective is to plan an alternative gathering that is in service to a cause, such as volunteering, or an opportunity to experience something you're passionate about. For example, invite a guest speaker or share a reading from other texts.

# Setting Intention

In the flurry or excitement involved in starting a new project or endeavor, it's sometimes easy to overlook *setting intention*, which provides our essential motivation, or “why.” Begin with some basic questions:

**Why are you interested in starting a practice group? What do you hope to gain? What do you hope to bring to others? How will you exercise your role?**

In many spiritual traditions, teachers often ask students to set an intention at the very outset of a practice. In fact, the Dalai Lama says that the very first thing he does each morning is “check motivation!” In the case of initiating a Learning Circle, it's important to clarify the “why” in your own head before you get rolling.

## TRUE INTENT

Read more about finding the root of your intention in the excerpt from Lama Tsomo's book which can be found in Appendix A.

Then, circle back to logistics. What do you think others expect? How will you structure the meetings? How many people do you want to attend? Consider using the **Guiding Questions** (see Appendix B) at your first meeting.

It is also key to establish how you will rotate leadership duties on a weekly or monthly basis. What might the group want? Consider a basic structure.

# Shared Leadership

At this stage, you're playing the role of initiator—not teacher or mentor. You will send the first email out and gather people for the first time, but the idea is that the group shares responsibilities, creating the experience together.

What does initiating mean? Sending out the call, inviting people to the initial meeting, and sharing the idea of a Learning Circle. In this model, you organize the first meeting through a short agenda and provide a welcoming atmosphere. If your group decides to move forward with more gatherings, these responsibilities will rotate among the group equally.

## **SET THE SPACE—A PRACTICE IN ITSELF**

Before your group arrives, spend a few minutes in the space where you will convene. Consider if there are enough comfortable seats for everyone. Determine if it is quiet and clean enough. Close your eyes and check-in with yourself. How are you feeling? Are you excited, nervous, neutral? Notice your sensations and thoughts.

## **CREATE THE CONTAINER—A SAFE, INTIMATE SETTING**

Once the group arrives, offer a gentle set of agreements (i.e., no interrupting, listening from the heart, etc.), and ask if there are any additions (see Appendix C for examples).

## **STRUCTURE AND DURATION**

Consider using the **Guiding Questions** (see Appendix B) at the back of this toolkit to help the group come to agreement on the appropriate duration and frequency of meetings.



# Structure and Duration

Once you've landed on your ideal duration, consider using the "arc" structure for your meetings:

**Start:** Use the first part of the gathering as a quick check-in and reminder of the group's agreements. Spend a minute or two (we recommend using a timer) on each person. Use it as an opportunity to tell stories, hear from one another, and establish connection and intimacy. A great way to seed the check-ins is by asking, "What is happening for you on the cushion and in daily life? Do you see any connections between the two?"

**Study:** This is the time to explore the teachings. Consider discussing an excerpt from a book, watching the weekly videos from the Namchak eCourse, or doing a meditation practice together (See **Discussion Content and Questions** section for more ideas.)

**End:** Wind down by noting the emerging questions from the group. If you haven't yet, spend 5 to 10 minutes in a seated practice. Ask group members to reflect upon the impact of the session and how they feel.

Come to an agreement on what's to be done for the next meeting. Will people read a specific chapter in the book or watch an eCourse video? If there were emerging questions, consider working on them in the interim and bring ideas back to the group.

Close by reading the dedication of merit (on the following page) as one voice, followed by a moment of silence.

### **Dedication of Merit**

*By the power of this compassionate practice,  
May suffering be transformed to peace.  
May the hearts of all being be open,  
And their wisdom radiate from within.*

Finally, once the group has departed, spend a few minutes reflecting on your personal experience. How was your leadership experience? What did you learn? Did you keep to the structure? Do you think the group felt safe? When/how did you feel any loss of skill?

Remember, at this point your key role is simply to bring stability and hold the equanimity for the group, should difficult moments or questions arise.

### **Sample Agendas**

The sample agendas below incorporate the “arc” method and allow for some flexibility depending on the group’s preferences.

<b>Option 1</b>	<b>Option 2</b>	<b>Option 3</b>
Meditation	Check-In	Tea
Check-In	Study	Check-In
Study	Tea Break	Study
Tea Break	Meditation	Meditation
Close	Close	Close

# Discussion Content and Questions

You have several options for the study or discussion part of your meeting:

## **READ TOGETHER**

**Start with *Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?*** (Available on Amazon.com)

- Call out how to move through the book. It is not meant to be read cover to cover. In fact, Lama Tsomo originally wrote *Always Smiling* to be used as a guidebook for an introductory class that she was teaching. It is meant to be read a few pages at a time. Take turns reading aloud and then you all discuss!
- Often, the themes that come up in the check-in also come up in the subject of the reading. It's uncanny how the subject matter that comes up in the reading is often related to what is up for people in that moment.

There are also a number of excellent books on meditation, both for practice and general reading. To get started on a new book, we recommend using any book by Pema Chödrön, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, Sharon Salzberg, and Jack Kornfield.

## **WATCH AND LEARN TOGETHER**

### **Sign up for an eCourse**

The Namchak eCourses offer groups an easy way to begin learning about Tibetan Buddhist practice and how to meditate.

Options include:

- Sign up as a group for an eCourse and use the group meeting to watch that week's video and try the new meditation practice.

- Have all members sign up and watch videos on their own during the week; then use the study portion of the meeting to move through the “Learning Circle Questions” section at the end of each week’s eCourse.

We find many groups enjoy repeating the eCourses and rereading sections of the book to deepen their practice.

## **PRACTICE TOGETHER**

### **Reflect and ask questions**

Once your group has completed *Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?* or the Namchak eCourse, consider using the study portion of your meetings for an extended practice. You could try Shamata with one of the three methods of support or Tonglen with a different theme from week to week. And, you’ll want to kickstart each practice with “Clearing the Stale Energies.” Use the video on the [Namchak.org](https://www.namchak.org) guided meditations page to help guide the group using this special piece of Tibetan technology.

## **OFF THE CUSHION**

As you practice meditation, you’ll find the experience influences your mindset off the meditation cushion. For more ways to bring meditation and compassion into your everyday life, try the Namchak mini-eCourse on Mind Training (in Tibetan it’s called Lojong). You’ll find guided exercises from Lama Tsomo that teach you how to train your mind to be more compassionate, calm, and focused. You can find it on [Namchak.org](https://www.namchak.org).

# Logistics and Recruitment

Nowadays, it can be hard to find 10 minutes, let alone a full hour, to meditate or meet with a group of people to share progress on a collective journey.

Below, we offer tips for getting a group started and creating a fun, invigorating atmosphere that compels people to return each week.

## **IT'S FINE TO START SMALL**

Find a meditation buddy to practice with. Once you're comfortable, reach out to four or five friends to ask if they would be interested in starting a meditation or contemplative study group. On page 13 we've included an email template invitation that you can customize.

## **CONSIDER GROUPS YOU'RE ALREADY IN**

Have a book club? Meet regularly with a group of colleagues or friends to discuss trends in your field? Are you a community activist working on a particular issue?

Consider asking members of the group if they'd be interested in adding a contemplative or meditation component to the group meetings.

## **USE SOCIAL MEDIA**

Start a closed Facebook group page to post announcements, changes in meeting time, or food for thought to carry the group through the week and give people things to look forward to.

Consider offering a preview of what's on tap for the upcoming meeting to pique interest and establish a consistent line of communication with your group. Allow space for people to comment, reflect, and share progress on the

spiritual path in the social space. Make the social space a topic of discussion for the group. How can the group improve the experience on the page?

Another option is to use a group messenger app such as WhatsApp to stay in touch between meetings.

See **Ideas for Using Social Media to Support Your Group** in Appendix D.

### **MAKE IT CONSISTENT AND COMFORTABLE**

Starting with your initial group members, set a weekly day and time that works, and stick to it. Even if only two or three people show up on a given week during a busy time of year, it's important to continue meeting and sharing.

Having snacks and beverages can make the meeting more comfortable. Start out by bringing a snack yourself and then ask members to switch off duties in coming weeks.

Consider logistics and space. What type of meeting place is most convenient for your group? If it's a group of work colleagues, perhaps an office common space is most convenient. If it's friends, meeting at someone's home might be comfortable. Or, if your group is large, consider reaching out to local yoga studios, mindfulness centers, or other community centers.

### **PUT THE PHONES AWAY**

Ask the group to make the meeting space and time a digital-free zone. Texts and phone calls can be very distracting to other group members. If someone needs to stay connected because of a personal or professional emergency, ask them to keep their phone on vibrate and leave the room to text or talk.

## **EMAIL TEMPLATE OR PRIVATE MESSAGE INVITATION**

Bigger isn't always better! Instead of a public post or inviting people to a page (which can get lost in a feed in a snap), consider sending a special email invitation to a few, trusted friends. Some of the best group interactions can happen with two-to-four people. A few things to consider when sending an initial invitation to friends to meet in a practice group:

- Explain why it's important to you
- Make it easy for people to understand
- Include a picture or link to more info about benefits of meditation or a spiritual practice—visit the Namchak blog for a list of links and info
- Make a tangible request—for example, “Will you let me know by this Friday if you're interested in my group?”

# Creating True Connection

Anytime we humans meet as a group to discuss a topic, manage a project, plan an event, or even just informally talk, group dynamics come into play. Each of us has a distinct personality. Some of us are comfortable in larger groups and have no problem speaking up about our feelings or ideas. Others might be more shy. Plus, everybody will arrive at a group meeting with a host of recent personal or professional experiences that might be contributing to their mindset that day.

The goal is to create a safe, inspiring environment for participatory discussion, where people who want to talk feel heard, and people who want to listen feel comfortable. We're not trying to fix anyone or advocate points-of-view when there is disagreement. We want to help people connect with one another and hold stable ground for exploration. Kindness, respect, and equality are paramount. See the **Challenges Chart** in Appendix F for more guidance on moderating.

One of the most common issues in group settings is balancing the needs of people who enjoy talking and participating on a frequent basis with those who may not talk as much. Keep in mind that there are many ways to participate in a conversation or gathering, and deep listening is just as valuable in a person's learning as talking and verbal participation.

When the setting feels relaxed, safe, and comfortable, you can trust that those who are more quiet will speak when they feel the need. Likewise, by reminding participants of the agreements (i.e., no interrupting, listening from the heart, etc.), you create opportunities for the group to check its own tendencies if one person is dominating the conversation. For now, as you're starting out, consider using the following approaches to serve the needs of the personalities in your group:



## **SELF-REGULATION**

Make it a group agreement that each person will use awareness to help self-regulate. This is a community practice, meaning that everyone will attend to the needs of those who need to listen or talk. At the end of the meeting, ask the group to bring awareness to their participation that day and do an internal self-check.

## **BALANCING**

If the conversation becomes unanimous or one-sided, consider shifting the focus to include other perspectives that may not have been addressed. Name those who have spoken and ask others to contribute. Ask for an opposing viewpoint, or for someone to role-play a devil's advocate.

## **CREATING SPACE**

Allow for time and space (silence) during discussions, this sends the message that there is an opportunity to speak without forcing it. Be on the lookout for body language that indicates a wish to speak, and issue an invitation.

## **ENCOURAGING TALKERS TO LISTEN**

To prevent conversation from becoming too narrow or uncomfortable for others, consider implementing a structured "go around the circle" style for your discussions which will invite everyone to contribute and everyone to listen.

# Reflect

As your group continues to meet, it's important to return on a regular basis to your intention—the reason you came together. Perhaps you have been moving through sections of *Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?* Perhaps you have been going through Namchak's eCourses as a group. Or maybe you've simply been spending most of the meeting in a shared, seated meditation. Whatever your format or style, it's important to regularly reflect as a group to ensure the gathering is continuing to serve the expectations for a shared spiritual practice. Ask yourselves how well you're applying the teachings on the spot during meetings. Are you finding more equanimity? More grace?

Consider having members complete a simple survey (use our **Example Survey** from Appendix E) to get a good read on how the group structure is working for everyone and what ideas people may have to improve the experience. Or, revisit the **Guiding Questions** (see Appendix B).

And, don't forget to share your ideas with us at Namchak! We would love to hear about your group, or ways that we can improve this toolkit. Email us at [info@namchak.org](mailto:info@namchak.org).

# Appendix

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# True Intent

The following Q&A is an excerpt from Lama Tsomo's book and a great guiding example on how to find the root of your intention with a partner or teacher. When identifying your intention for anything, it is often multi-layered and more profound than you realize.

**Student:** *What if I'm struggling with motivation?*

**LT:** I say this often, and I'll say it now: A practice session is a "come-as-you-are party."

On any given day, for any given practice, we do what we can at that moment to bring to mind all those beings who are depending on us. Most of them are far worse-off than we are but can't do anything about it. Do we want to reach enlightenment just to save our own posterior portions? And never mind about the other poor suckers? Just remembering those other beings (and for the vast majority of my own incarnations, I've been every kind of creature other than human) often helps me. Compassion is a Buddha quality because it's evidence that we feel ourselves to be one big awareness. That's why when someone hurts, we feel it.

Then again, if your motivation still isn't so great, be compassionate with yourself. You're just a sentient being too, after all. Sometimes we have to "fake it till we make it." The important thing is to show up and do your best.

Fortunately this is only the first ushering-in to the practice. What follows—practices designed to bring forth compassion and mindfulness—will hopefully help. That’s why we use all these skillful means, after all!

Now I’d like to ask YOU a question. What’s a typical motivation for you, when you sit down to do a session?

**Student:** *Well, to be honest, it’s often that I just want to slow my mind down and get it to focus better.*

**LT:** Great. Why do you want to do that?

**Student:** *So I can function better.*

**LT:** And what will that do? What are you looking for?

**Student:** *I’m looking to really be there when something good happens—not distracted. To do better work, stay on top of my interactions with my husband and kids.... I mean, I’d like to be more aware, present, and compassionate for everything. I’m especially concerned that I be as compassionate as possible with my kids.*

**LT:** So if you do better work, and are more aware and compassionate with those around you, what are you hoping will come of that? This may seem like a dumb question, but bear with me.

**Student:** *Okay. At work I know I could help so many people if I make the right decisions and am really focused and present. Of course I love my kids and want to be the absolute best for them. And I hope that in the future, they will go out and benefit many people too. A lot of that depends on how I am with them. [Now with tears in her eyes] I guess my motivation, under all that, is really just to benefit beings after all.*

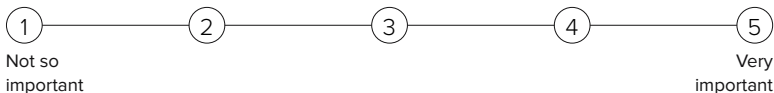
**LT:** Yes. It was just a little covered over. Now you've really brought it forth. Now, imagine how much more powerful your meditation will be. Then the rubber of your Vajrayana vehicle will really hit the road. So ask yourself these questions, and a couple of questions behind the questions, when you begin your day. And ask yourself again when you begin your meditation session too (if your motivation's not so great right when you wake up)

## APPENDIX B

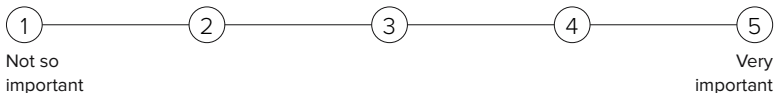
# Guiding Questions for you and your group—add your own!

Use a scale of 1–5 and have participants circle how they feel about each question.

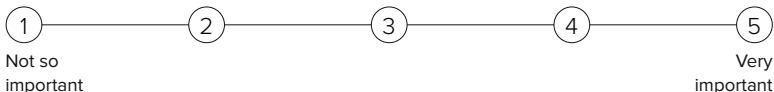
**It's important to spend the majority of time together in seated practice.**



**It's important to spend the majority of time together in discussion and study.**



**I would like us to begin with guided meditations.**

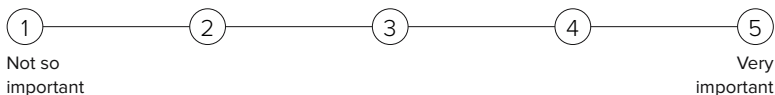


**I would like us to initially commit as a group to gathering:**

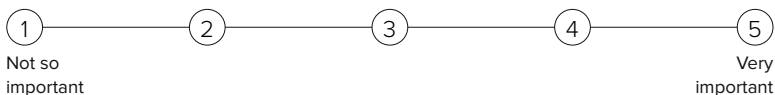
4 times       8 times       12 times



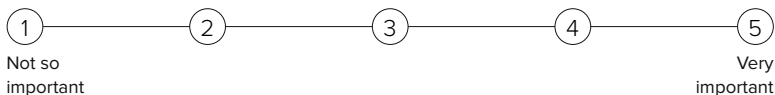
**It's important that the meetings have a social quality.**



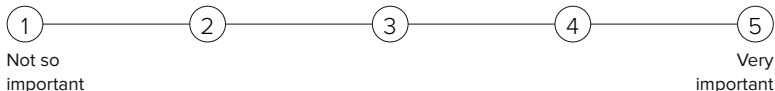
**It's important that the group has regular check-ins and assessments.**



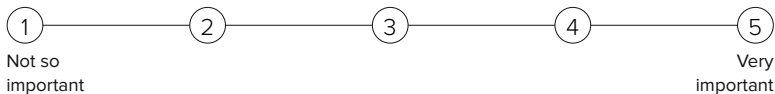
**It's important that every meeting is structured the same way.**



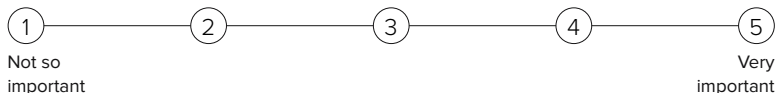
**It's important that the structure is flexible and that there is room to evolve over time.**



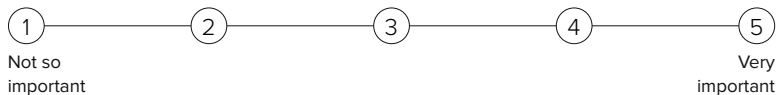
**It's important that we spend time each week reading/discussing certain aspects and chapters of *Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?***



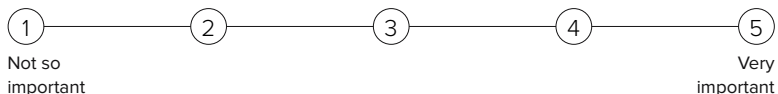
**I am interested in integrating Namchak's Always Smiling eCourse into our regular meetings, watching learning videos together, etc.**



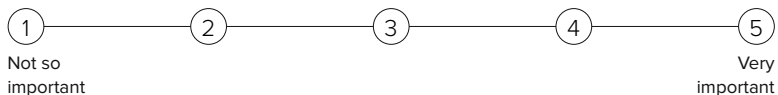
**It's important that the group meet on a weekly basis.**



**An invitation is always open for others to join the group.**



**I would like us to offer an open house once a month.**



# Group Agreements

- Establish confidentiality—nothing will be shared outside of the room.
- Put the phones away. You've taken the time to be with each other in-person and this is a way to make the most of it!
- Ask each person how they would like to be addressed.
- Ask everyone to listen from the heart, no interrupting.
- Restate the meeting duration and structure and make sure all are okay with the structure.

### **A few additional suggestions:**

- Sharing advice is okay, if it is requested.
- As human beings we all project, but in our effort to wake up and be as kind to each other as possible, consider agreeing to be aware (as possible) to projections. This includes, being open to feedback from others when they feel a projections coming from you. For more information on projections, you can read Lama Tsomo's blog with Sounds True, "Coming Awake to Your Projections and Loving Yourself" at [Manyvoices.soundstrue.com](http://Manyvoices.soundstrue.com).
- Make a declaration to the group at the end of the first meeting that they are committing to the agreed upon number of weeks.
- Agree that we all want respect and appreciation and so we should offer that to each other as much as we can.

- Agree to abide by the principles of the Nonviolent Communication Model.
  - Focus on emphatically listening and honestly naming your observations, feelings, needs, and requests without assuming those of others. For more information please see *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* or [cnvc.org](http://cnvc.org).
- Agree that we are all doing our best to see each person as they really are and allowing ourselves to be seen the same.

# Using Social Media to Support Your Group

Starting a Facebook group is not rocket science. But how many groups or feeds just sit dormant after a flurry of initial activity? Here are some tips for using social media to support your practice group and ensure it's the best site it can be:

- Align your group page with Namchak's learning community: Send your name and some basic info about your group to [info@namchak.org](mailto:info@namchak.org) and receive beautiful custom cover-image art for your Facebook group page.
- Add a trusted friend or colleague to the administrators list—someone to help share the load of uploading new material.
- Each week, create a fun post (canva.com has great templates for images!) that captures the essence or feeling of the group's meeting.
- Two to three days prior, post a reminder of the upcoming meeting with any logistical details (meeting space, snacks, change in time, etc.).
- Ask questions to seed conversations—for example, “What inspired you to sit today?” “How long did you sit today?”
- Post links to interesting news or resources on mindfulness, meditation, or Buddhism.
- Include calls to action—if your group is activist oriented, post service or volunteer opportunities.

# Example Survey

Starting and supporting a group dedicated to meditation study and practice takes ample time and energy. By checking in consistently with group members, leaders can keep tabs on how meeting content, format, and delivery match up with participants' expectations, and make any tweaks necessary to be sure the group experience is a meaningful one.

Consider keeping your "survey" very informal and ask open-ended questions to get qualitative feedback. The simplest method might be setting up three-to-five questions via [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com) or some other free service, and posting a link in the group Facebook page. If members of your group are not on Facebook, consider emailing the link to the survey. If it feels more suitable to your group, you can print a copy or simply ask questions informally in person.

1. What do you like best about the group meetings?
2. What changes would most improve your meeting experience?
3. Overall, would you say you are satisfied, dissatisfied, or neutral?
4. What keeps you coming back each week?
5. Any specific suggestions for meeting structure, Facebook page, etc.

## Challenges Chart

Sam Kaner, in his “Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making,” offers a nice, three-page chart detailing how facilitators can handle common obstacles. From dealing with dominant group members to those who often don’t say a word, he offers new approaches that might take the group in a different direction.

Please email co-author Duane Berger at [duane@CommunityAtWork.com](mailto:duane@CommunityAtWork.com) to have a PDF of the Challenges Chart sent to you.