



Namchak

Tibetan Buddhist
Practice & Retreat

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.

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Introduction

Thank you for downloading Namchak's Learning Circle Toolkit.

At Namchak, we offer students myriad ways to learn Tibetan Buddhist practice and have educational programs for all levels. Our eCourse, blogs, and social media sites offer easy ways for beginners to access the material, while our in-person retreats and expanded programs give experienced practitioners exclusive opportunities to receive individual support from Tibetan masters and experienced Western teachers working in this unique lineage.

This toolkit seeks to give new students easy-to-follow steps to start a learning circle, maintain a supportive environment, and enhance Learning Circle facilitation skills.

We hope you find this guide useful and informative. Find more learning materials online at namchak.org, and we hope to see you at an upcoming retreat. Find our retreat [schedule here](#).

What Is Sangha?

There are three components within the heart of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Together, they are known collectively 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 this journey together.

While all three of the jewels are essential on the Buddhist path, at Namchak we focus especially on the jewel of the Sangha, or community, and provide tools for people to come together, form groups, and relate to one another in a deep and harmonious way. We strive to provide Learning Circles with the support and tools they need to create truly fruitful learning environments, apply spiritual insight in a

group-oriented, practical way and, ultimately, make the world a better place, beginning with the world of Sangha.

In this toolkit, we focus on ways to initiate, cultivate, and sustain productive Sangha.

Setting Intention

In the flurry or excitement involved in starting a new project or endeavor, it's sometimes easy to overlook *setting intention*. It's important to ask 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 starting a Learning Circle, it's important to clarify the “why” in your own head before you get rolling.

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** in the Toolkit Appendix at your first meeting.

Depending on your own style, you may want to consider whether you will be the consistent “convenor” or if you will rotate duties on a weekly or monthly basis. What might the group want? Consider some basic structure.

Holding Space and Time

At this stage, you’re playing the role of convenor—not teacher or mentor. Your duties are simply to set up the space and time for people to come together in a container of reflection and study.

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

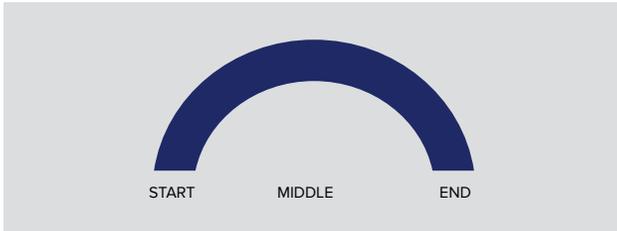
Once the group arrives, offer a gentle set of agreements and ask if there are any additions:

- Establish confidentiality—nothing will be shared outside of the room.
- Make it a phone-free zone (In emergencies, people can leave the space to take a call.).
- Ask each person how he or she would like to be addressed (access and gender identity).
- Ask each to listen from the heart, no interrupting.
- Restate the meeting duration and structure and make sure all are okay with structure.
- Always remember the intention of the group—to reduce suffering in the world, beginning with the world of the Sangha. Offer gentle reminders when needed to avoid inadvertently causing suffering in community.

Structure and duration

Consider using the Guiding Questions at the back of this toolkit to help the group come to agreement on the appropriate duration and frequency of meetings.

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 check-in and reminder of group agreements. Using a talking stick can be a nice ritual. Spend a few minutes (use a timer) for each person. Use it as an opportunity to tell stories, hear from one another, and establish connection and intimacy.

Middle

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

End

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

Come to 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 with them in the interim and bring answers back to the group.

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? Send your observations to info@namchak.org and you could be selected for a personal, leadership coaching call.

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.

Discussion Content and Questions

As a convener of a Learning Circle, you have several options for the discussion (“middle”) portion of your meeting:

Read together: Start with “*Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?*”

Ask group members to read a chapter a week from Lama Tsomo’s *Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?* Each week, ask a different member to email a discussion question (or a few questions!) to the group. Spend time reflecting on

the book and its content. Visit the Namchak.org blog for excerpts and discussion question ideas.

Watch and learn together: Sign up for Namchak’s 8-Week eCourse

The Namchak eCourse offers groups an easy way to begin learning about Tibetan Buddhist practice and how to meditate. Options include:

- Sign up as a group 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 middle portion of the meeting to move through the “Learning Circle Questions” section at the end of each week’s eCourse.

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 middle 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 at the Namchak.org guided meditations page to help guide the group using this special piece of Tibetan technology.

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.

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.

It’s fine to start small.

Reach out to four or five friends to ask if they would be interested in starting a meditation or contemplative study group. See “Sample Email or Private Message Invitation” in the Appendix.

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?

See “Ideas for Using Social Media to Support Your Group” in the Appendix.

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 on the larger end, consider reaching out to local yoga studios or other mindfulness centers to inquire about using their common spaces.

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 his or her phone on vibrate and leave the room to text or talk.

Facilitation 101

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 naturally 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.

At its essence, the role of a Learning Circle facilitator 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 doing so. We're not trying to fix anyone or advocate points of view when there is disagreement, just help people connect with one

another and hold stable ground for exploration. Kindness, respect, and equality are paramount.

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 a certain person is dominating the conversation. For now, as you're starting out, consider using the following approaches to serve the needs of 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 this question and do an internal self-check.

Balancing

Shift group 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

Send a 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 one-sided or uncomfortable for others, consider implementing a structured "go around the circle" style for your discussions.

Remembering self care

After your group leaves, spend three minutes in silence. Let go of the tensions of the group that you will inevitably hold. Acknowledge all members with compassion, thank them for being who they are, and let things go. Tonglen is a good practice to do on your own. You could focus first on yourself, then on individuals in the group, then on all Learning Circles and beyond.

Measuring Success

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 chapter by chapter through *Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?* Perhaps you have been taking Namchak's eCourse, "Always Smiling: An 8-Week Introduction to Tibetan Buddhist Practice" 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 check back in with your group members to ensure the

gathering is continuing to serve their 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 the Appendix) 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.

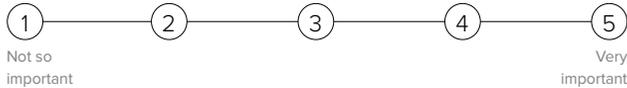
And, don't forget to share your ideas with us at Namchak! We would love to hear about your group, or ways that we can improve this toolkit. Email us at info@namchak.org.

Appendix

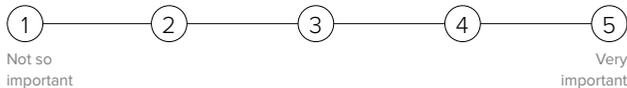
Guiding Questions for you and your group— add your own!

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

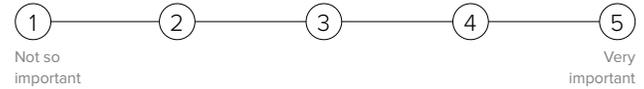
It's important to spend the majority of time together in seated practice.



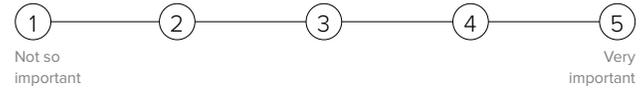
It's important to spend the majority of time together in discussion and study.



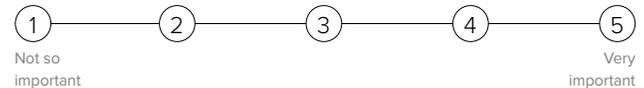
It's important that the meetings have a social quality.



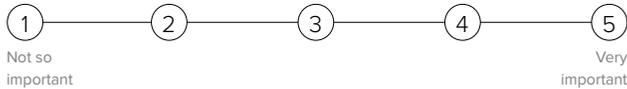
It's important that the group has regular check-ins and assessments.



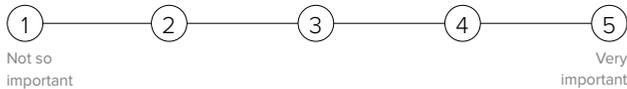
It's important that every meeting is structured the same way.



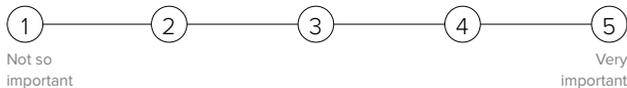
It's important that the structure is flexible and that there is room to evolve over time.



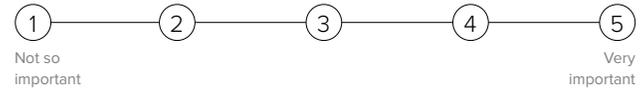
It's important that we spend time each week reading/ discussing certain aspects and chapters of *"Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?"*



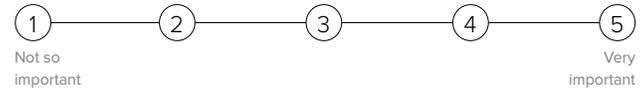
I am interested in integrating Namchak's "Always Smiling" eCourse into our regular meetings, watching learning videos together, etc.



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



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



Sample Email 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 interaction 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?”

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 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.

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 to have a PDF of the Challenges Chart sent to you.

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 matches up with expectations of participants 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?