



The Hows—and Whys—of Starting Your Own KM Group

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For many SIMS members, the small group discussions that happen every other Tuesday night exemplify the affirming quality of sangha. These discussions are opportunities to share from the heart about our practices, lives, difficulties, and understandings—and to listen to and learn from others.

Kalyana Mitta (KM) groups extend and deepen this kind of small-group sharing. “Kalyana Mitta” is Pali for “spiritual friend.” KM groups typically comprise 6-12 people, who meet on a regular basis for meditation, study, reflection, and sharing the journey that is practice. They typically are formed around a particular theme, book, or question, which may evolve over time. Some groups have been meeting for a decade or more.

When the KM group I had been in for two years ended, I thought I might like to facilitate a group and so attended a facilitator training. Shortly after that, I was put in touch with another sangha member who was interested in facilitating a group to study the Four Noble Truths in depth. Our first meeting was a year ago, on a beautiful late-summer day, still light and warm enough to begin the meeting sitting on my front porch. We’ve come together twice a month since then and have one more session to go to complete our year-long exploration. Through our shared practice, study, and reflections we have come to know each other and understand the dharma in a deeper and more personal way.

KM groups tend to have openings only when created. Two people get together to form a group, invite the sangha to join, and a group is formed. But once full, the groups typically close, and subsequent openings can be infrequent or even nonexistent, never meriting another general announcement. Meanwhile, many SIMS members who have wanted to join a KM group have been frustrated by the absence of any openings.

One obvious solution is more KM groups. But SIMS does not create them—sangha members do. More KM groups means more people willing to start them.

It is surprisingly easy to start a KM group. The facilitators are just that; they do not teach and are not expected to have any particular attributes or qualifications other than two (for one of them) or three (for the other) years of practice experience in our tradition and a sincere intention. SIMS provides a facilitator training several times a year to acquaint facilitators with the KM format and best practices and give them pointers on process—how to set the tone, establish ground rules, and generally create a space in which people feel safe and free to share their experience.

The training, led by Pamela Johnson, is a single, two-hour group session. A new facilitator training is scheduled whenever there is enough interest to make it worthwhile. (If you’re thinking at this point that you might be interested, you can let the trainers know by sending an email to kmcoordinator@seattleinsight.org.)

One of the advantages of starting a KM group is that you get to choose the topic. One of the facilitators of the current “Harmonious Living” group first started it as a group on death and dying because that was what he wanted to explore and there were no groups currently working with that topic. He found someone interested in the topic and willing to co-facilitate, took the training, and the group was formed.

Facilitating a group is also good practice in itself. From the perspective of a facilitator, one learns to listen with an awareness of the group as a whole—its energy, mood, and dynamics—to maintain a space without directing, to let go of outcomes while safeguarding the group’s commitments. All of this can be tricky but is equally rewarding.

Finally, starting and facilitating a KM group is a service to the sangha. There may be others who would like to join a group but are reluctant or unable to facilitate who would benefit from your effort. Making this experience available to them greatly strengthens and enriches the sangha, which, as the Buddha told Ananda, is “the whole of the path.”