

Guide for Facilitators

For EcoSattva Training Groups

Introduction

Thank you for your intention to gather and facilitate an EcoSattva Training group.

The group experience is an essential part of the EcoSattva Training. We have heard over and over again how doing the training as a group has been impactful for participants and we really appreciate how you have chosen to step up. Whether you are facilitating one group meeting or all of them, your contributions are very much appreciated. Your willingness to support others as they engage with the Training materials is a gift. It is a gift to your group, a gift to One Earth Sangha, and a gift to the world. Thank you.

This Guide contains suggestions on how you might customize your group and some ideas on how to facilitate a group.

If you are new to facilitating group processes, this guide might be especially helpful. It is based on the wisdom of the Dharma, best practices described in the facilitation literature, and our personal experiences. Please use it in whatever ways are helpful to you, but do not feel bound by the suggestions offered here. We encourage you to bring your own skills, intuition and unique style of facilitation to the groups you lead.

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Building Your Group

Finding Members

You may have friends or members of your local meditation community who you wish to invite. On the other hand, you might wish to create an open group, either in-person or online, and share that in our [group directory](#). You are welcome to include in your listing with your contact information a few questions that prospective members should answer. You might even create a google form or similar questionnaire to ensure a good fit.

Co-Facilitators

Facilitating an EcoSattva Training group can be a significant undertaking. Consider inviting a member of your group to be a co-facilitator, or ask if group members would like to volunteer to lead one or more meetings.

EST group facilitators report that having one or more co-facilitators makes a major difference; collaboration lightens the load and helps generate fresh ideas.

It is helpful to have the support of other co-facilitators. Setting aside time to review the sessions and the group experience together can be helpful.

Considerations Regarding Group Size

We would suggest that a good size for a group doing the EcoSattva Training is anywhere from six to ten people, but we encourage you to do what will be most effective for your community. For large groups, identifying additional facilitator(s) could be supportive.

To develop and sustain trust in the group, we suggest that you encourage participants to attend all group meetings, or perhaps miss at most one or two, and close the group to new participants after the first two meetings.

Your Meeting Schedule

Since the training is self-paced, it's up to you and your group how often you would like to meet: you might gather weekly, every other week, monthly, etc. Some facilitators have reported that meeting more frequently, weekly or bi-weekly, helps keep energy and

momentum up; with longer intervals between meetings, participants may need more time each session to “warm back up” to the material.

Structuring Your Group Meetings

We invite you to customize session elements based on what you know about your group and its culture and your own style. Between you and your group, we hope you will make this your own.

Shared Agreements

Shared agreements remind group members of their shared intentions, build authentic connections, and protect members from harm. In your first group gathering, you might place the selection, discussion and agreement of a set of commitments ahead of or instead of the inquiries. We offer here some starting points that you might use along with the invitation for each member to share their response to this question, “What do you want or need to feel safe in this group?”

- [One Earth Sangha's Shared Agreements](#)
- [Brooklyn Zen Center's Community Agreements](#)
- [East Bay Meditation Center Agreements for Multicultural Interactions](#)
- [An Inclusive Space is a Better Place for Everyone](#) (from Designing For Inclusion)
- [Courage and Renewal Touchstones for creating trustworthy space](#)

You may decide how the group will use these agreements in subsequent sessions, e.g., by confirming them at the beginning of each gathering (perhaps following group practice and/or a [Living Earth Acknowledgment](#)) and encouraging members to invoke them when they feel that the group's intentions are at risk.

Sample Meeting Format

Each EcoSattva Training session will focus on a different topic, and we suggest that you focus on one session at each group meeting. Sessions are designed for 60 - 90 minute-meetings. You can find a [sample agenda for a 90 minute meeting here](#).

Check-ins

Each session may start with a brief check-in. This is an invitation for each member to share briefly what is going on for them at present, uninterrupted. This builds a sense of connection, allowing the group to have a sense of where each participant/member is arriving from.

Guided Meditation and Practices

The experience of going through the Training can challenge us in different ways, and practices are such essential resources to support us as we undertake this journey. You will find guided meditations included in each session and other practice resources can be found [here](#). These practices can be woven into your gatherings as a collective grounding practice at the start of the gathering, and/or may also serve to collectively attune the group to the theme of the session.

Encouraging Proactive Preparation

These teachings are deep and complex, and like all dharma, they need to be felt on an experiential, bodily level, not just understood intellectually.

Consider speaking to your group about the importance of engaging with the teachings and practices of each session well in advance of your meeting. Your participants probably have busy lives, and they may be tempted to cram the material the night before (or the morning of!) your meeting. They will gain some familiarity with the teachings by doing so, but they will miss out on the change for deeper understanding to unfold.

Check-outs and Closing

Similar to check-ins, check-outs offer participants a brief opportunity to make a last contribution to the group and provide a sense of closure to the group experience. Some examples could be a one-word check out, or reflections about how the gathering went for them.

Some facilitators may choose to, at this point, also share a poem, a picture, or a song to close the gathering. Trust your intuition on what may serve your group best.

Facilitating Meetings

Based on our experience with previous EcoSattva Trainings, different types of facilitation are helpful for different types of groups. Informal groups consisting of a few friends may need very little or no facilitation. Groups composed of acquaintances or colleagues may need a little more. And groups made up of people who don't know each other may need the most facilitation.

It may also be helpful to think about how you see yourself as a facilitator. Do you see yourself as someone who convenes the group and then acts mostly as a participant? Or do you see yourself as a convenor and someone who goes on to facilitate the group's process. Either role, and anywhere in between them, can work well but is best a conscious and transparent decision.

Thinking about the group's need for the facilitation and your own style may help you to decide on the type of facilitation that's most appropriate - "light" or "active". This Guide attempts to cover both "light" and "active" facilitation, although we have erred on the side of providing more suggestions rather than just the bare minimum.

Following this introduction, there is a general description of the role of a facilitator and then there are specific suggestions on what facilitators can do to:

- Help to create and sustain a space for transformation
- Work with participants' strong emotions
- Support deep and authentic group discussions
- Recognize and work with vital differences in a group
- Respond to conflict skilfully

In two of these sections, we offer "Additional suggestions for active facilitation".

The Role of a Facilitator

At the most general level, the role of a facilitator in this Training is to support the group, including yourself, in fully and authentically engaging with the material in the sessions. This is a journey that invites participants to open to, and stay connected with their hearts, as well as their minds, their bodies as well as their heads, their emotions as well as their

thoughts. Think about what role you want to have and others may want in supporting the group to respond to ecological crises as whole human beings.

More specific facilitation roles include:

- How will you bring forward heart qualities, such as loving kindness, gratitude, compassion, forgiveness, taking joy in others, and equanimity.
- Modeling group norms and ensuring that the group's shared agreements are respected.
- Supporting interactions between group members and encouraging collective responsibility in holding space for group processes.
- Keeping an eye on the time and balancing the suggested activities (e.g., watching the videos, discussions, and experiential exercises) with the group's need to process its own interactions. This is often referred to as maintaining a balance between a group's tasks and its processes.

Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment

Probably the most important way that a facilitator can support a group in fully and authentically engaging with the material in the sessions is to help create and sustain a safe, nourishing and supportive environment, capable of holding strong emotions, and multiple truths. This is because a safe and supportive environment makes it more likely that people will participate in a deeply personal way that will lead to individual and group transformation.

Here are some suggestions to do this:

- Offering all participants your warm and compassionate presence.
- Inviting participation from all members of the group, while appreciating that some people may choose not to speak.
- Notice who is speaking and who is silent. If some people dominate the discussion, you might consider intervening. Conversely, if some people are not speaking, you could invite them to speak saying something like “Would anyone who has not

spoken yet like to say something?” It’s best to avoid asking specific individuals to speak.

- Suspending your own judgments, as best you can, and refraining from advocating your own views and beliefs.

Additional suggestions for active facilitation

- Consider intervening if you notice group members judging others, making assumptions, or offering unsolicited advice.
- If the group’s energy is either low or high, you could invite the group to take some full, deep breaths, stand up, and/or engage in some mindful movements.
- If someone is emotionally struggling or stuck, it might be helpful to remind them of sources of wisdom and guidance, for instance from the voice of their heart, their wisest self, or a benefactor.

Attending to Strong Emotions

The EcoSattva Training materials may surface strong emotions, such as sadness, fear, grief, anger and guilt. These emotions do not need to be avoided or feared. Almost the opposite: the more participants are willing to be open and express their sadness, fear, grief, anger and guilt, the more they are likely to experience transformative insights about themselves and the world.

If there is a safe and supportive environment, it is likely that the group will respond to strong emotions with understanding and compassion. Here are some suggestions for how you and the members of your group can support one another in this potential:

- Be aware of your own strong emotions about ecological crises as this will help you to support others in feeling theirs.
- Honor participants’ emotions by being fully present, without trying to make anyone feel better. Tears can be a release and a source of healing, so let them flow. Our tears for the world can cleanse our eyes and help us to see everything more clearly.

- Offering advice is particularly tricky. It might seem helpful at the time but is often a sign of difficulty in witnessing another in distress. When you feel the impulse to offer advice, unless explicitly asked for, best to bring kindness to your own heart and work with any discomfort you find there.
- Respect participants' boundaries, defenses and resistance. People can only experience so much emotion at one time before they become overwhelmed or numb out. If you sense it would be helpful to speak, best to ask for what might be helpful and feel supportive.

Engaging in Collective Inquiry

Each session will contain discussion prompts and inquiry questions intended to support deep and authentic group discussions. These suggestions may be helpful to support these conversations.

- Use the discussion prompts and inquiry questions provided to the extent they are useful for the group. You do not need to use all of them, and you could supplement them with your own relevant prompts and questions.
- Encourage and model mindful listening by listening with your heart as well as your head, maintaining an open and curious attitude. Give lots of space, perhaps more than you're used to and avoid interrupting while people are speaking. Try to understand what is being said before you mentally prepare a response.
- Encourage and model mindful speaking by saying only what you know to be true, helpful, necessary and kind. Speak from your own experience and from your heart.

Vital Differences

In any group, there will be vital differences of race, gender, age, ability, etc., as well as differences in power and privilege. Welcoming and supporting differences will enhance personal and group transformation.

Understanding differences in a group offers opportunities to celebrate the strength that can come with diversity, at the same time as we acknowledge our shared common humanity. Understanding differences in power and privilege offers opportunities to correct systemic racism, injustice and oppression in ourselves and in social institutions.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Working within groups that have certain forms of diversity, namely along lines of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ability, etc. can produce gross and subtle challenges as these can lead to unconscious power relationships. We encourage you to recognize the potential for these challenges, especially within your self but also within other group members, with sensitivity, compassion and accountability. Especially if you are new to navigating such forms of diversity, it may be helpful and to do some research on the dynamics of power and privilege.
- You could invite the group to commit to the [East Bay Meditation Center's Agreements for Multicultural Interactions](#), especially understanding the difference between intention and impact, as part of the group shared agreements

Responding to Conflict Skillfully

Conflict in groups is inevitable and when handled skillfully it can lead to insight and a greater sense of connection, trust and safety. Like strong emotions, conflict in groups does not need to be feared or avoided.

- Try to be aware of conflicts in the group before they escalate. If not dealt with, conflicts can go underground, expand and turn into resentments that can undermine group trust and safety.
- Step back from the immediate disagreement and look at the larger picture of the whole group. Notice the group dynamics. Do some people feel marginalized or not heard in the group?
- As best you can, stay open to different perspectives. You might support those who may feel marginalized or not heard, but be aware of any tendencies to project need where and respond by rescuing.
- Understanding the illusion of neutrality or impartiality can help each member maintain awareness of your own cultural conditioning and then rely on mindfulness and curiosity that includes your own process.

- It can be helpful to invite people to pause, take a few deep breaths and speak from their hearts about their experience in the present moment, by making “I” statements and suspending their judgments about others.
- If a shared agreement is being violated, every member can share the responsibility of reminding one another about those intentions, always from a place of kindness and not the need to control.

Additional suggestions for active facilitation

- Whenever possible, support those in conflict to resolve it themselves. However, if a conflict threatens to disrupt the entire group, it may be appropriate to actively intervene to resolve it.
- If you decide to actively intervene, it can be helpful to consider what the conflict is actually about because this can help you to respond effectively. For example:
 - If it's about different beliefs, views or philosophies, you could say something like “Let's pause for a minute. I invite each of you to say what is underneath your words. What is the desire, fear, concern, or need that leads you to that view?”
 - If it's about a misunderstanding, you could invite those involved to say more and explain what they mean.
 - If it's about differing personality types, you could identify what the participants have in common, for example concern about the ecological crises, appreciate the diversity in the group, and lead a discussion about possible solutions.
- If the conflict only involves 1-2 group members and you think they can resolve it themselves, you could ask them if they are willing to deal with it outside the group meeting.

Facilitating Online Meetings

If you are facilitating an online group, there are typically several features on video conferencing platforms (eg. Zoom) that can be helpful for facilitating your online group processes such as raising virtual hands, using breakout groups, screen share, chat etc.

Over time, you and your group may grow to be familiar with these functions and how they work best for you.

The following are some starting points (non-exhaustive) which may be supportive for your online group:

- Encourage group members to locate a quiet and conducive physical space that is supportive from which to attend the online group gatherings.
- Be mindful of group members who may need extra technical help during the online gathering.
- Welcome people to turn off the camera if it's supportive for their practice.

Concluding Words

We hope that these suggestions are useful. This is a new edition of this Guide as of September 2023, and our team is especially grateful to Katie Davies for the significant effort she put into the initial version. If you have additional suggestions that you would like us to consider for inclusion in future editions, or if you have any comments, please send them to us at: connect@learthsangha.org

In closing, thank you, once again, for your willingness to step into the role of being a facilitator for this Training. We hope that your experience is beneficial to you as you cultivate your own response to the climate crisis.

Resources

Shared Agreements, Container Building

- [Courage and Renewal Touchstones for Creating Trustworthy Space](#)
- [East Bay Meditation Center. Agreements for Multicultural Interactions](#)
- [Liberating Structures, Including and Unleashing Everyone](#)
- [Council on the Uncertain Human Future](#)
- [Productive Conversations: Using Advocacy and Inquiry Effectively](#)

Resources on Facilitation

- [Seeds for Change](#)



- [Strategic Questioning: An Approach to Creating Personal and Social Change \(1997\)](#)
- [The Circle Way](#)
- [Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation: 11 Key Concepts You Did Not Know You Did Not Know](#)
- [Essential Facilitation Skills](#)
- [Living with the Climate Crisis - Facilitators' Guide](#)