

## Group Process Guidelines – by Joe Litven

*Overall, there is no strict “how to do it” manual on starting and maintaining a group. Thank goodness! That’s what makes groups so intriguing, frustrating and enlivening. So much depends on what the group is presenting and how individuals are experiencing that on the spot. Groups are simultaneously rich, infuriating, confusing and full of wisdom. Let it be so! But here some guidelines that may help inform the clarity of the group process:*

**Be clear about what the *intention/purpose of the group* is**—why are we having this group and what’s it for?

**It can be good to start by having people share** why they were attracted to be in the group.

**In PTOD groups, some *ritual* is good.** For example starting and ending with a bow. In any case, groups usually develop their own rituals.

**Offer a short *practice* at the beginning.** This is important as groups are a way to join experience and contemplation.

**It’s useful to have a *focus***—a chapter in PTOD, or even a paragraph for *close reading*. Having something read, then contemplated, then discussed can be very powerful.

**Prepare *questions* in advance.** This can help guide the discussion as well as arouse curiosity. Usually questioning rather than concluding turns up more.

**Having a leader/*facilitator* is often helpful.** Facilitators can be rotated, or there can be single principal facilitator. Self facilitated groups can also work well, depending on circumstances.

**Distributing “air time” is critical for groups.** Everyone should feel invited to share (but not compelled). Time and space for all.

**Sometimes some “tricks” or interventions can be useful.** For example, a “go-round” with everyone saying something (or passing) can bring out discussion around a given topic.

**Be alert to one or two people dominating the discussion.** The go-round can be an antidote to that, or simply asking others what they think.

**Silence is OK** and can mean many things. It is a learning process to deal with silences in a group. At times, though, discussion should be jump started.

### **Common guidelines for a group:**

CONFIDENTIALITY (What goes on in the group, stays in the group);

RESPECT (Acknowledging and appreciating where others are coming from, including their strengths and weaknesses);

EMPATHY (To the extent you can, feel what others may be feeling, especially difficult emotions and personal challenges);

NON-JUDGEMENT (Maintain equanimity whatever comes up);

COMPASSION (Go beyond personal discomfort to tune into and “dance with” the discomfort of others);

DIRECTNESS (Be forthright and honest);

COURAGE (Don’t be afraid to be a fool, do and say what the situation requires).

These guidelines, and others, can come from and be agreed upon by the group—they can also be explicit or implicit, depending on circumstances.

**Keep things on track without a heavy hand.**

Sometimes, if someone is going through a challenging experience or is showing a lot of vulnerability, that person can be encouraged to share the experience later, one-on-one. This is a tricky one, and always a judgement call. Today's reality fortunately or unfortunately can churn up a lot of emotional stuff. Whether a particular group is the best setting for these upheavals is an open question.

**At the end of a session**, tap into the wisdom of the group by asking what were the highlights or compelling points for people (rather than a group "summary").

**Consider having an informal social gathering after the group**, even if it's partly or wholly online. This can strengthen the sense of community, which is so important these days.

**Consider holding a longer group practice session**, such as a nyinthun or even half nyinthun, in the middle of class sessions—this can deepen people's experience of the topic(s).