

Some Tips For Leading Meditations And Discussions **by Ven. Thubten Chodron ©**

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Prior to the session

- A daily meditation practice is essential. It's hard to lead meditations that we don't practice ourselves or to guide a discussion about a topic that we have not thought about and explored in our own minds. Daily practice is the opportunity for getting to know and transforming ourselves. Who we are and how we are makes a huge difference in what we can give to a group. It's more important than having a script of what we're going to say.
- Think about the meditation or discussion topic. You can check your notes from teachings and Dharma books for outlines to follow. You may or may not want to jot down some notes.
- Just before going to the session, spend some quiet time alone. Do some practice and think about what you're going to do in the session. It's difficult to go from a social situation or a meeting to lead a Dharma activity, so make sure you have some quiet time. Spend some time reflecting on your motivation: generate the sincere wish to be of benefit to the people who attend.
- Your appearance should be neat and fresh. Dress appropriately and avoid shorts (even in the summer) and tight fitting clothing.

At the session

- Start by doing breathing meditation, with some prayers or mantra beforehand, depending on the group. During this time, in your meditation, say some mantra of the far-reaching attitude of wisdom: *tayata gate gate para gate para samgate bodhi soha* and reflect on emptiness, to remove obstacles. Then visualize Buddha, Chenresig, Manjushri, Tara or whichever Buddha you feel closely connected to. Think of them as the embodiment of the Three Jewels and of all the lineage teachers up to your own teacher. Then pray:

May what I say be truthful and not distort the Buddha's teachings in any way.

May I say what is most suitable for this group of people, i.e. what they need to hear.

May I say it clearly so that they can understand.

May what I say sink into their hearts and into my heart, transforming our hearts/minds into the realizations of the Dharma for the benefit of all sentient beings.

- Then imagine the Buddha dissolving into light and absorbing into you and feel the inspiration of the Three Jewels.
- At the conclusion of the silent meditation, lead the group in generating the altruistic intention. This can also be done at the beginning, before doing the breathing meditation.
- When speaking, your manner should be cheerful. This is a reflection of your motivation, so if you feel dull, go back and cultivate your altruistic motivation.
- Avoid singing your own praises or pointing out the faults of other people. Reflect on impermanence in order to abandon pride. Abandon miserliness, i.e. don't hold back key points.
- Be on the lookout for the judgmental mind. There is no such thing as a stupid question. Respect people for whatever they ask. Also, it's not necessary to respond to every comment someone gives. Sometimes their simply having the space to say it is sufficient.
- When someone asks a question, especially if it is long or unclear, it is good to rephrase it. This allows you to check if you have understood the question and it enables the person to feel heard. Sometimes a person asks one thing, but you can sense there is an underlying issue or that they are really asking something else. Listen with your heart to try to understand what their real question is. Don't try to answer questions until you have understood them. Sometimes a person asks a general question, but you can sense they are thinking of a specific situation. Ask them to give an example or be more specific about what they are referring to.

When leading a meditation:

1. Speak slowly and loudly enough so everyone can hear you. Pause so people can do the visualization or contemplate the point. Don't talk all the way through a meditation.
2. When leading a visualization or deity practice, leave enough time for people to do the visualization, for example, to think of specific things to purify in the Vajrasattva meditation, to contemplate the "Eight Verses" in the Chenresig meditation, to do the absorption in both meditations and after doing prostrations. Don't read the text word for word each time you lead it, especially if the group does the practice often, because it becomes too rote. Add some new perspectives or things to contemplate, amplify the visualization, etc. so that people get some new ideas how to do the meditation.
3. When leading a checking meditation, give enough time for people to think about the point. Introduce each point individually, emphasizing how it relates to our lives. Posing a question to contemplate about that point is often useful.

When leading a discussion or exercise:

1. Give people a minute or two to come out of their meditation. Then present the topic. You may want to have a paper with some questions for people to think about and give them time to reflect and jot down notes before beginning the discussion. If you don't do that, but just pose the questions orally, tell people they'll have a few minutes of silence to reflect on what they want to say before the discussion begins. This allows people to collect their thoughts so that they can really listen to others as they speak instead of thinking about what they'll say.
2. Sometimes you may want to have a go-around in which everyone speaks. Other times you may want to leave it open and people can speak when they wish.
3. By meditating first and cultivating a good motivation, a certain tone is set for the discussion. This often prevents people from monopolizing the floor, interrupting, etc. If you have a group in which people do this anyway, you may want to spend some time on group rules first. Remind them to let people finish their thoughts and to allow for a brief pause before another person speaks, to keep their comments concise, etc. If you're having a go around, you may want to tell the group that each person has approximately X minutes to speak. If a person goes over that, gently remind them that they need to conclude.
4. As part of the introduction of the topic or the ground rules (if you need to go over them), explain your role as a facilitator. It is to guide the discussion when need be, although you may offer personal comments from time to time. If you do, be sure that you say, "This is my opinion" etc., so that they know you're not speaking in the role of facilitator. Tell people that they should not look just at you when speaking, but address the entire group. If someone does focus on you, remind them to talk to the group.

5. Avoid a situation in which the group tries to solve one person's problem. People should focus more on expressing their feelings and thoughts than on giving advice to others. Should this happen, remind people that we want to discuss a specific topic, that our focus isn't to solve one person's problem.
6. Encourage people to speak in first person, i.e. "I," not to speak generally as "you."
7. If you do an exercise, explain its purpose before the group does it. Debriefing afterwards is important. Encourage people to talk about their experience. If there are specific points that you want people to think about, ask questions to steer them in that direction and to draw them out.
8. Don't worry if there is silence. If you're comfortable with it, the group will be. Silence gives people time to digest a feeling or thought. When someone has something to say, they will.
9. It's not necessary to talk too much as the facilitator unless people are going way off track or some hostility arises between some participants. Don't feel that you have to control everything in the discussion.
10. At the end summarize the major points that people made. Try to tie it together. You may want to summarize further points to continue to think about. Each discussion doesn't have to produce conclusions. It may produce more questions instead and that's okay. Give people some direction on how to think about the new questions, what are good resources or where to seek guidance or more information.

At the Conclusion of the Session

1. End more or less on time. If things go on way over time then people start to leave. It's good if people can sit quietly together and then dedicate as a group before leaving.
2. Chant the dedication verses. You may also wish to lead them in more specific dedications, according to the circumstances. For example, if an important issue was discussed, you could dedicate for all beings to be able to understand and actualize it; if someone is sick or died or if something happened in the world, special dedication could be made for that. In general, it is wise to dedicate:

May all sentient beings encounter all the external and internal circumstances necessary to encounter the Dharma, practice it, attain realizations, and quickly become Buddhas. May they have lasting happiness and peace.

May the Dharma exist purely in our minds and hearts and in our world forever.

May our spiritual teachers live long and continually teach us. May we continually be open to follow their guidance.