

Guidelines for Sathya Sai Study Circles In America

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When Heart Speaks to Heart, It Is Love That Is Transmitted.
Sathya Sai Baba

1. Purpose

Sathya Sai Baba tells us that the spiritual growth of a person is best achieved through an integrated practice of devotion, study, and service. The purpose of a study circle is made explicitly clear by Baba as follows:

“It is not just reading books. Circle, study circle means taking a point and each person discussing what is the meaning of the point to them—like a round table conference. Each person gives his point of view, and finally values are derived from this. If there is just reading, there is doubt, but if each one gives his view, doubts will be answered. The topic is viewed; the study circle looks at different facets. It is like a diamond with its different facets, but there is one facet that is flat, the top facet, and from this all can be viewed. To discover the top facet is the task [purpose] of study circle”.¹

Sathya Sai Baba further tells us, “Not information, but transformation, not instruction but construction should be the aim. Theoretical knowledge is a burden, unless it is practiced, when it can be lightened into wisdom and assimilated into daily life. Knowledge that does not give harmony and wholeness to the process of living is not worth acquiring. Every activity must be rendered valid and worthwhile by its contribution to the discovery of Truth, both of the Self and of nature.”²

The study circle carries many benefits to participants. The primary benefit is the acquisition of Self-knowledge. Sai Baba says, “In the study circle you can learn a lot of things, but the most important thing to be learnt is your own true nature – your atma-tatwa. Learning all about external things without knowing your real Self is like studying the branches of a tree, ignoring its roots.”³

2. The Proper Plan of Study

What is the proper plan of study? Swami answers this question as follows: “This is the proper plan of study—reading, reflection, and regular application in life. Study is work. Inquiry into the value and applicability of what is studied is worship. The experience of the validity and value of practice is wisdom.”⁴

Sai Baba also cautions us with the following statement not to turn the study circle into a reading group: “Then about study circles. I am not for indiscriminate reading of books,

¹ Conversation With Sathya Sai Baba, pp.125-126 (152 pages)

² Sathya Sai Speaks 9, p.56 (2nd American Edition 261 pages)

³ Sathya Sai Speaks 18, p.18

⁴ Sathya Sai Speaks 9, p.596 (2nd American edition 261 pages)

however valuable they may be. Much reading confuses the mind; it fosters argumentation and intellectual pride. What I insist on is putting the things read into practice—at least a thing or two. Moreover, you must always remember that the book is just a pointer, a guide, a signpost. Reading is not completion of the journey. It is only a first step. Read for the sake of practicing, not for reading's sake. Too many books in the room indicate a person suffering from intellectual illness, just as too many tins, capsules and bottles in the cupboard indicate a person with physical illness. The readings of books or passages from books is best done at some other time, and not as a continuation of bhajan or as a preliminary to it.”⁵ “Study with faith and devotion. Delve into the significance and the meaning of what you read, and always have before you the goal of putting what you read into practice. Unless you do so, the study circle will remain a half-circle forever; it cannot be a full circle.”⁶

3. Important Guiding Principles

The following four principles may be considered the most important guiding principles to ensure that study circle deliberations meet the highest standards set by Swami for an exchange of views by spiritual seekers.

1. **The principle of compassionate leadership on the part of the facilitator.**
Each participant deserves compassionate encouragement and direction. The facilitator, who is the person responsible for keeping the group on time, on task, and within guidelines, must act in a loving manner. The facilitator needs to encourage the faint hearted as well as to lovingly limit those who would dominate. The facilitator needs to encourage the presenter to keep their summary of study material short and to the point. That person also needs to discourage long readings and the use of language not understood by all present.
2. **The principle of equal opportunity for participants to express themselves.**
Each person should be given an opportunity in turn, around the circle, to speak on the study circle topic. It is important that the order be maintained around the circle, while avoiding the practice of calling on only those who want to be recognized immediately. Also, no individual is accorded more time or is offered less respect than another. Although some participants may be more knowledgeable or eloquent, all have equal right to express themselves. The gains made by the least knowledgeable are as valued as those by every other participant.
3. **The principle of non-argumentative exchange of views.**
All members of the circle must feel free to express themselves without fear of contradiction. Each person should express their own ideas without attempting to refute what others have said. Each person has the right to feel that their comments will be respected and fairly considered.

⁵ Sathya Sai Speaks 6, pp.221-222 (First American edition, 336 pages)

⁶ Sathya Sai Speaks 9, p.59 (2nd American edition 261 pages)

4. **The principle of opportunity for everyone to be a presenter.**

Each member should be given the chance to present a topic to the group and should be encouraged to do so. Leadership boosts their Self-confidence and helps them to apply themselves to the study discipline. When we put Swami's teachings into our own words and use examples from our own lives, we have an obligation to act on those words. With time, study and presentation skills are made strong. We need to give members a chance to grow and develop these skills, just as we foster and have patience with participants' early efforts in song leading and service.

4. Action Plan And Guidelines

4.1 Study Circle Routine

Study circles should be held on a regular schedule, weekly if possible. The meeting location should be convenient for all members and at a place where every participant will feel welcomed. Each participant is a valuable member of the group and has something to teach others. In study circles, as in other Sai Center functions, Swami asks that men and women sit on separate sides of the circle. This helps all participants concentrate on the subject at hand.

Swami says there is no specific limit on how many may participate in the circle. However, the size of the room available and the time allotted may require limitations. This is particularly true if all members cannot meet at one time or location. More than one circle may be conducted if it is helpful to facilitate the process. Differences of interest may also necessitate the presentation of themes of particular relevance to groups within a center. For example, a group of parents may wish to focus on issues of child rearing. A time limit of forty-five minutes to an hour allows sufficient time for a good discussion without becoming tiresome.

Start the study circle with three Oms to establish an atmosphere of sanctity and cooperation.

The presenter should briefly summarize the study material, bringing out the main points and issues for those who may not have reviewed the material ahead of time. It is best if the summary is short, not more than 10 or 15 minutes, and from the heart. To focus discussion, it is productive for the presenter to ask not more than one or two questions relative to the topic for the group to consider. The question should involve a practical problem that will help participants in understanding a point of spiritual practice. With transformation as our goal, it is useful to direct the sharing to issues involving our conduct as Sai devotees.

Before beginning the discussion, the group should take 20 or 30 seconds to reflect on the question asked by the presenter. This helps to create focus in members and promotes a deeper look at the question being asked. After the meditation, the facilitator may ask the

members who would like to start. After the first volunteer begins, the study circle should proceed clockwise around the circle, giving each person a chance to speak in turn or to pass. If necessary the facilitator may direct the order around the circle if it is not clear who is next or when a person has completed their comments. New or quiet members will often not respond unless given a specific turn and break in the conversation to do so.

The facilitator should make clear from the start that no counterpoints to what others have said are allowed. All should feel open to respond to the question without fear of rebuttal. There should be no judgement of right or wrong on what someone speaks. Respondents may present their own views but should not criticize the views of others. Participants who feel that their views are not respected will become quiet and may not return.

Following the first opportunity of each person to speak, the facilitator may ask the group as a whole if anyone who passed on their turn would like to respond to the question. The intention is not to pressure anyone, only to offer the opportunity. If time permits the circle can go through the order more than once. When everyone has had an opportunity to respond, the presenter may give his or her own view of the question and summarize the discussion.

The main benefits to participants are in the sharing of ideas and then applying them in a spiritual sense in daily living. Members in the circle often benefit as much by what they hear themselves say as by what they hear others say. There is little obligation to act on what others say, but much obligation to act on what we voice ourselves in the study circle. When the knowledge acquired in study circle is put into practice it can be leavened into wisdom.

4.2 The Facilitator

Facilitator: A facilitator within the Center is responsible for the overall functioning of study circle. The facilitator may be the Devotion Coordinator or their delegate. For purposes of continuity and stability, it is best for the facilitator to remain in the position for an extended period of time – do not switch the position of facilitator from week to week or month to month.

The job of the facilitator is to coordinate the choice of study material with the circle members and to choose a member to be the presenter of a topic for the coming session. The facilitator will announce study circle meetings at the Center and encourage attendance. The facilitator may also summarize the study circle rules before the meeting if new participants are present, or may wish to summarize study circles of previous weeks that bear on the current topic. This person will help facilitate the discussion by compassionately keeping members on track and within time limits. The facilitator is requested to gently remind those given to outbursts out of turn of the proper study circle format. Whenever required, the facilitator may ask for volunteers to consider being the presenter for a coming meeting.

4.3 The Presenter

Presenter: The position of presenter should rotate among members each meeting. The presenter may make a short introduction of the study circle material in not more than 10 or 15 minutes. The group may be reading from a common book from which the presenter prepares a topic. Or the presenter may put together information on a human value or other spiritual theme. (See **Study Circle Content**, section 5) It is best if the presenter draws in personal experience or otherwise leads the sharing into practical channels. Theoretical lectures and political themes are inappropriate.

The presenter is drawn from the circle membership. Each person in the group should be encouraged to be a presenter. It is important to get broad-based participation in presenting topics. It is usually detrimental to the group dynamic to set up certain members as “experts”, whose opinions carry more weight, who receive more time to present or answer, or who regularly get the last word.

The opening presentation of a topic is not a stage to show off the knowledge or the presentation skills of the leader; it is a catalyst to begin the sharing. It is preferable for the presenter to share some body of Sai teachings, rather than to simply read a quotation for discussion. Quotations or readings used in study circle should be short and relevant. (See Swami’s comments on reading in section 1).

5. *Study Circle Content*

Subjects for discussion involving reading should be drawn from resource material that all consider authoritative. The best materials are the writings and speeches of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Sri Sathya Sai Baba personally wrote the *Vahini* series of books. The *Sathya Sai Speaks* series are discourses translated from Sai Baba’s speeches. In addition, Sai Baba’s teachings during the college summer courses have been compiled in the *Summer Showers* series of discourses. Other talks are published in the periodical *Sanathana Sarathi*, which is distributed by the Central Book Trust in India, in the American *Sathya Sai Newsletter*, and on the *Sathyasai.org* official web site.

The practical spiritual problems and concerns of devotees often make good subjects for discussion. If a member is experiencing difficulty with a point of study or practice, it may be beneficial for that person to discuss the subject in a study circle. Usually, if one member has questions, others will have the same question. Young adult groups in particular often choose to focus on aspects of daily living.

Other good sources of discussion within a Sai Baba Center are discussions on the purpose of the Sai Center or on study circle itself. By conducting study circles on the meaning of the activities of the Center, newcomers gain a better understanding of the meaning and purpose of the Center activities.