

# Calgary Dedicated Practitioner Group

*By Leslie Ellestad*

Since September, 2013, I've been gathering with a group of fellow meditation practitioners once a month to take part in the Calgary Dedicated Practitioner Group (CDPG). We've made a year-long commitment to the group to get together to meditate, share our experiences and learn more about the Buddha's teachings.

There are many reasons I was inspired to attend this program. From a study point of view, I was interested in learning about the dharma through more exposure to the suttas and was hopeful that reading them in the context of group discussion would support bringing them alive. While I still find contemporary sources more accessible, I have begun to develop appreciation for sutta study. The contemplations and suggestions for weekly practice bring out new perspectives that support me to look in places that I may not have been looking in myself and therefore reduce my "ignorance". In other words, blind spots have the opportunity to be brought into the light.

It's also wonderful to have the opportunity to share with others who have a passion for dharma practice. This happens both at the group meetings and when we pair up each month with another group member for our "dharma buddy" meetings. Through the course of the year we will have a chance to meet individually with most, if not all, of the other group members. This gives us each an opportunity to build bonds with the other people attending and to experience more deeply how another person is incorporating dharma practice into their life and to share our own experiences.

The most subtle and most helpful part of the program for me has been the opportunity to see more clearly through the sharing of experiences with a group of people who are abiding by the 5 Precepts. This increases the sense of safety and makes it more possible to reveal challenges and share joys. Over time, there can be a deep sense of safety and compassion that develops as we share our unfolding dharma paths.

When there is a compassionate reflection given about something I share with others, I feel seen and heard and I feel more alive. As well, others sometimes are able to add to my understanding of my own experience because they are able to see something I have not seen yet. When this is done gently, with caring, there is the possibility of transformation.

When others share something about their dharma practice, I have another opportunity to widen my perspective by seeing what others experience. I also have an opportunity to develop my capacity for compassion and caring reflection. There can be a deep sense of refuge and the development of compassion as we share the unfolding of our dharma paths. I am grateful to my dharma friends for their passion for this process of waking up and their kind support over these first months of the Calgary Dedicated Practitioner Program.

I am also grateful for the leadership of Carmen Wyatt, the facilitator of this program. Carmen sends readings and practice suggestions to the group between meetings that are the basis for our group discussions. The articles and suttas are based on material that was offered in the Spirit Rock Dedicated Practitioners Program (DPP) she finished last spring. They explore many aspects of the teaching through a loose structure based on the Eightfold Path. Carmen is supported in her practice and in her leadership of this group by Heather Martin (guiding teacher of the Salt Spring Island Vipassana community), who guided a similar group as part of the DPP program.

The homework each month includes several readings such as translations of Pali suttas, and writings on dharma topics by both monastic and lay contemporary teachers. There are a series of topics on which to reflect, and this can be done in writing or through contemplative practice. Contemplative practice means reading the question posed or topic explored and letting the mind rest on it. There is also a weekly suggestion for our daily meditation practice.

At our dharma buddy meetings between the monthly meetings, we chat about the homework and our practice. We are also planning to have a day of practice January 12, 2014. Carmen has given us the task to review many sources related to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness sutta in preparation for the day of practice...we are encouraged by her faith in our capacities!!

Carmen was inspired to offer to facilitate this group after attending the Spirit Rock DPP. She was the only Albertan to participate in that program last session and really felt the benefit of being able to meditate, study the Dhamma and have discussions about what the practice means in her own life and the lives of fellow practitioners in a close-knit group. She was eager to try to help build this kind of opportunity in Calgary for people who might be interested in taking the Spirit Rock program in the future or who just want the opportunity to deepen their practice, study and share their experiences.

If you are interested in delving deeper into dharma readings, want inspiration for contemplations and practice direction, or would enjoy the opportunity to share your practice life with a group of others who have an interest in the dharma, the Calgary Dedicated Practitioner Program may be just right. Although registration for this year's group is full, if you're interested in CDPG or might wish to participate in a similar program in the future, you can contact Carmen at [carmwy@gmail.com](mailto:carmwy@gmail.com)

#### **How it works:**

- In order to accommodate all of those interested, there are meetings on one Tuesday evening and one Saturday evening per month. Participants choose the evening which will work best for them most of the time, but are able to switch evenings on a particular month when their schedule doesn't allow them to attend on their preferred evening.
- We meet for 2 hours, starting with a half hour meditation and then we discuss the homework that we have done over the previous month.
- Participants meet with a Dharma Buddy from the group once a month.

- The commitment to the group is for one year, with the possibility of extending that commitment if desired.
- Homework is sent out at the beginning of the month for participants to read and practice and used as a basis for discussion at the next meeting.
- CDPG is dana-based, with no set fee.

In summary, the Calgary Dedicated Practitioner Group Program is an opportunity to deepen your dharma practice by engaging more deeply with the three refuges: buddha in the form of meditation practice, dharma in the form of study and contemplation of both ancient and contemporary sources, and sangha, in the form of precept guided interaction with fellow dharma students. This is a deep opportunity and I am grateful for Carmen for making it available to us here in Calgary, to Spirit Rock for making it possible for Carmen and others to participate in a similar program in the past, and to my fellow students for sharing in this experience here in Calgary.