

THE LOTUS & THE ROSE PODCAST

LEARNING CIRCLE DISCUSSION GUIDE

LEARNING CIRCLES

Many of us find that when we explore meditation and our spiritual journeys in community, it becomes a richer experience, and we find we keep coming back to feel the deep connection and meaning. [Research shows](#) that activities that grow our sense of connection not only help us emotionally but physically as well. At Namchak, we seek to support individuals in creating community through Learning Circles—small groups where participants learn, reflect, and apply spiritual insight in a group-oriented, practical way, to ultimately make the world a better place. Learning Circles can exist in many shapes and sizes. We encourage you to bring together, family, friends, or community members to practice meditation, engage in discussion about ideas and experiences related to mindfulness, and how it might be impacting your daily lives.

INITIATING DISCUSSION

The Lotus & The Rose is an excellent source for initiating Learning Circle discussions. *The Lotus & the Rose* includes three public dialogues between Lama Tsomo and Reverend Matthew Fox during weekend workshops at Stanford University, The Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, and The Jung Center in Houston. And, a more personal conversation with no audience that takes place in Montana. Finally, individual interviews with each of them, revealing more about their own lives and worldview. These conversations offer a range of ideas for reflection and personal and collective learning through your discussions as part of a Learning Circle. The conversations can be accessed through the book, videos, and podcasts. This discussion guide focuses on the podcasts.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide was written to be adaptable to a variety of discussion groups and formats. *The Lotus & The Rose* is a rich book, full of dialogue and wide-ranging ideas, and the accompanying podcasts offer bite-sized elements of the conversations. This guide provides overall structure and timing for a Learning Circle session followed by guidance on how to incorporate listening to a podcast episode and facilitating conversations around the ideas presented.

Feel free to use this guide as just that—a guide, rather than a prescriptive process. Customize the activities and discussion to the needs and interests of your group and the time available. We recommend that whatever approach you take, you begin with the Creating Safe Space activity.

While this guide proposes an order for your discussions, choose whatever order works best for your group.

THE BASICS

LEARNING CIRCLE SIZE

2- 10 Individuals

TIME PERIOD

The structure and timing outlined below are designed for a two-hour discussion period. This length allows time for reflection and participation by most or all members of the group.

Overview of structure and timing

- Introduction – 5 minutes
- Creating Safe Space – 5 minutes
- Meditation – 10 minutes
- Opening Reflection – 10-15 minutes
- Podcast – 20-25 minutes
- Discussion – 60 minutes
- Final Reflection – 10-15 minutes
- Action Steps – 5-10 minutes
- Closing – 5 minutes

Preparation

Namchak recommends Learning Circles share or rotate hosting/facilitating responsibilities to create an egalitarian structure.

Materials for the Learning Circle host

During the course of the conversation, you may want to take notes for the group or yourself. Here are some of the materials that may be useful:

- Pen or pencil
- Several sheets of paper
- Marker(s)
- Flipchart, whiteboard, or large pieces of paper
- A watch to keep time

Materials for participants

The Learning Circle host can bring these for participants and/or invite participants to bring their own.

- Pen or pencil
- Paper or a notebook/journal

A GUIDE FOR HOSTING THE LEARNING CIRCLE

Introduction (5-10 minutes)

The Learning Circle host should introduce their self and invite Circle members to go around and share their names and preferred pronouns. The Learning Circle host can then provide an overview of the Circle structure and the focus of today's discussion. Ask if all are okay with the suggested format.

Creating the space (5 minutes)

Learning Circles are meant to be a space where everyone feels comfortable expressing their feelings and opinions. At the initiation of a Learning Circle, the group should come up with a series of agreements to help create a safe space. Write the group's ideas on a big sheet of paper or whiteboard so they can be seen and referenced during the time together. Once established, post and revisit the agreements at the beginning of each Learning Circle. Update them as needed.

Some initial ideas:

Maintain confidentiality.

Nothing will be shared outside of the room.

Shut off cell phones.

In emergencies, people can leave the space to take a call.

Address each person how they would like to be addressed.

Ask individuals to share their preferences.

Be respectful of other people's experiences and opinions.

Listen from the heart and express one's own feelings and experiences without judgment of others', which can be accomplished in part by communicating with "I" statements rather than "you" statements.

Create space for everyone.

Self-monitor to ensure everyone present has been given the opportunity to speak while honoring that some people need silence to gather their thoughts. No interrupting.

Remember the intention of the group—to reduce suffering in the world, beginning with the world of the Sangha.

Offer gentle reminders when needed to avoid inadvertently causing suffering in community.

Meditation (10 Minutes)

10-minute Shamata and Tonglen practice

Opening Reflection (10 minutes)

After the meditation, invite participants to share reflections on the experience of meditation and how they are feeling in this present moment. If you are in a smaller group, have participants share with the entire group. If your Learning Circle is more than seven people, invite people to pair up or form triads for the opening reflection.

Podcast (20-30 minutes)

Choose a podcast for the focus of discussion and listen to it as a group. They include:

1. Meditation (21:49 total)
2. Compassion (23:33 total)
3. Divine Feminine (32:15 total)
4. Sacred Masculine (21:42 total)
5. Choosing a Spiritual Path (23:34 total)
6. Trust & Faith (20:03 total)
7. Buddha Nature (23:31 total)
8. Interfaith (21:31 total)

Discussion (60 minutes)

After listening to the podcast, use the questions in the Discussion Questions section as a guide for conversation. If your Learning Circle has seven or fewer people, discuss the questions as a group. If it has eight or more, consider breaking into smaller groups of three to five.

You can write the questions on a large piece of paper/whiteboard or type and print them out as a guide in preparation for the Learning Circle.

Final Reflection (10-15 Minutes)

Wind down by asking participants to reflect upon the discussion and its impact on how they feel. Invite them to sit quietly for reflection or to spend 5 to 10 minutes silently writing. To end this reflection, invite participants to share their emerging questions or a brief statement summarizing how they are feeling at this present moment with the group. Capture the emerging questions or themes on a large piece of paper or whiteboard to explore in future Learning Circles.

Action Steps (5-10 minutes)

This time can be used for reflecting on how participants will begin to actualize what they've learned and/or determining the focus of the next Learning Circle. Ask participants to take a silent moment to identify one action they will take in response to their learning during this time together and then briefly share it with the group. It might be as simple as pursuing an answer to a question that emerged or taking a practice into daily life. If the group has a lot of energy around action steps, use the opening reflection to check in on the experience of their progress at the next Learning Circle.

Closing (5 minutes)

Invite participants to share one last word or brief phrase that captures what they are taking away from this session.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

MEDITATION

Lama Tsomo addresses some of the myths and challenges around meditation. The most pervasive of which is, "I can't turn my mind off." She reminds us that it is not the act of turning off or emptying the brain, but rather giving your brain and thoughts their due. With focus and attention you can learn to passively accept your thoughts. She describes the act of returning our focus to our thoughts as a river bouncing over rocks.

- How do you find this during practice? Easy? Tiring? Natural?
- Rev. Fox Fox also speaks to the variety of experiences when we observe the mind, sometimes it is of absence and silence, the via negativa. How does your practice vary?

Deity practice purifies the senses.

- What would you anticipate as the benefits of taking on the experience of a deity as Lama Tsomo describes?

Lama Tsomo was drawn to Tibetan Buddhism due to the effectiveness of its methods as well as the breadth of practices for cultivating different aspects of awareness. Her toolbox is full and rich with ways to understand the world around her and live with meaning.

- What tools would you like to have in your spiritual toolbox?

When our meditation practice deepens, we have the chance to focus on giving rise to Bodhicitta, the heartfelt sense or essence of our feelings. Lama Tsomo speaks to the Four Boundless Qualities, compassion, loving kindness, sympathetic joy, and compassion.

- How do you experience these qualities?
- Do you see them as different? Similar? Interconnected?
- Which quality do you feel most? What quality would you like to feel more often?

COMPASSION

Near the end of this podcast, Lama Tsomo walks listeners through a Tonglen meditation. Before you start the podcast, encourage Learning Circle participants to participate. In the end, discuss the experience:

- What was the experience like for you?
- In what ways was it challenging?
- How did you feel by the end?

Siddhartha, the Buddha, was sheltered from suffering early in his life. When he finally did go out into the world, he was struck by the suffering that he saw.

- What is your own response to suffering when you observe it in the world?

Rev. Fox describes how in Western traditions, "we are the causes of suffering" and in Eastern Buddhist traditions, "everyone suffers."

- How are these statements different from one another?
- How are they similar?

Compassion is described as our participation in both the joy and the suffering of others.

- Can you recall a time when you truly felt yourself experiencing the joy of another? Or feeling the suffering of another?
- What was that experience like for you?

Lama Tsomo and Rev. Fox discuss how compassion without wisdom can become sentimentality, that place where our own emotions are still involved, and we're "getting off" on showing compassion. The ego is still involved.

- Go back to a time when you perceived yourself to be fully participating in either the joy or suffering of another. Describe what you were feeling, if anything, beyond the joy or suffering of the other person.
- To what degree were your own emotions part of the experience?

Rev. Fox describes compassion as justice.

- What do you think he means when he says this?
- Can you give an example in history or from your own experience that represents this idea?

When Lama Tsomo's teacher Gochen Tulku Sangak¹ Rinpoche (Rev. Fox calls him Guru) was jailed by the Chinese, he reportedly maintained his compassion by looking in the face of his torturer and seeing that this person was not happy.

- Have you ever looked deeply into the eyes of a person who was hurting or oppressing you? What did you see?
- How might you respond if, looking into their eyes, you recognized the shared suffering and hurt inside that person?

¹ Sometimes spelled "Sang-Ngag"

DIVINE FEMININE

Lama Tsomo describes Yum Chenmo (Prajnaparamita), who is the great mother. She is beyond thought, beyond time, beyond form. Everything issues from her, she is the source of all Buddhas. The parallel teaching in the West that Rev. Fox describes is the godhead, which is about mystery. All things emerge from the godhead, and it is where we return.

- As you listen to their descriptions, what parallels and what differences do you see between the two traditions as they conceive a great mother and the divine feminine?

Rev. Fox speaks to how the divine feminine is not just about being sweet and motherly; it also about being fierce.

- How might this ferocity manifest? In what ways and to what ends?

Lama Tsomo and Rev. Fox discuss how Western culture is unique in believing that the mind is in the brain, rather than the heart, resulting in lots of knowledge and no wisdom.

- What does it feel like to visualize your mind residing in your heart?
- What would the benefits be?
- How do you think you can make the shift to your mind residing in your heart?

Lama Tsomo observes that there is a lot of toxic feminine in our society today, which manifests as longing and intense desire, although we're not sure what we're really longing for. It shows up as longing and desire for items from a store, food, lovers, etc. Rev. Fox observes the toxic feminine as "Barbie," among other things.

- Where do you see the toxic feminine manifesting in our society today?
- What longings and desires for things in the material world have you had recently? What might you really be longing for?

Rev. Fox describes how we are longing for "healthy marriages," and the first step is for men to recognize the divine feminine, in women and themselves, and not resist it, and for men to get over their terror.

- What do you think he means by "healthy marriages"? Is it meant literally or symbolically, and how does that shape what is meant?
- Where does this resistance in men to the divine feminine originate?
- What do you think men are afraid of?

SACRED MASCULINE

Archetypes return at critical moments in history for important reasons.

- What moments do you associate with archetypes?

History shows us a few, father sky, the blue man, and the green man.

- Do you recognize any of these archetypes in your life?
- How does the duality of mother earth and father sky resonate with you?
- Rev. Fox mentions that plants are the wisest creatures, utilizing father sky (sun) and mother earth to grow. What parallels can you draw between humans and plants? What can we learn from their wisdom?

The green man archetype is a warrior on behalf of the earth, the goddess within the man. He represents creativity and generativity and is often closely associated with nature and the sacred masculine. The sacred masculine is also present in women, the connection to the garden and constructive arts (like sculpture and woodworking).

- Lama Tsomo mentions that she feels resonance with the green man as a tomboy and lover of nature. She sees the application of archetypes as expansive beyond gender lines. Have you experienced feelings or interests different from what is perceived as the norm?
- These archetypes use the masculine and feminine and men and women to codify and give examples rather than restrict experiences. If we all contain a spectrum of feminine and masculine qualities, do the binary terms help or hinder you in seeing archetypes in your experiences?

Many young people abstain from organized religion and prefer to explore spirituality. Rev. Fox dreamed about creating a spiritual order dedicated to defending mother earth (which he has since created, <https://www.orderofthesacredearth.org/>).

- While history shows us many examples of sacred orders and cause-based movements, could you see yourself joining a spiritual order now, whether related to conservation or another cause?
- Do you equate environmental conservation with spirituality?
- If more people saw conservation as a spiritual pursuit, would it strengthen the movement?

The feminine often represents emptiness while the masculine is luminosity or appearance; together, they are the sacred marriage.

- If all beings are capable of finding the balance of both qualities (exemplified in the union of the sacred marriage), how can we transform the toxic masculinity into the sacred masculine? And how can we transform the toxic feminine into the sacred feminine?
- The subtle quests to find these points of balance are often ridiculed. Why?
- The predominance of toxic masculinity is well documented and often experienced. How can the divine feminine encourage the transformation without taking full responsibility or enduring the majority of the labor?

CHOOSING A SPIRITUAL PATH

Lama Tsomo and Rev. Fox both describe their spiritual paths.

- How did you arrive at this point on your spiritual path?
- What brought you here?

Lama Tsomo discusses how meditation practice is an essential part of her spiritual journey. She describes how, even today, she still feels some resistance to sitting in meditation. Once deeper into her practice, she realizes how wonderful it is.

- Describe a practice (spiritual or otherwise) that you are or were dedicated to in your life.
- What resistance did you encounter in maintaining the practice?
- What did that practice ultimately bring you?

The spiritual journeys of both Lama Tsomo and Rev. Fox were driven by their search for something deeper.

- On your spiritual path, what are you seeking?
- How has what you are seeking evolved over time?

Lama Tsomo talks about trying different spiritual paths on for size before embarking on her journey in Tibetan Buddhism.

- What spiritual paths have you "tried on for size," and what were those experiences like?

Rev. Fox had very catalyzing mystical moments as a teen and young adult. He went into the Dominican order because he wanted to explore spiritual and mystical experience.

- What kind of mystical experiences have you had, if any, and what impact did they have on you?

Lama Tsomo notes that enlightenment is one of the end goals of practicing Buddhism.

- What goals have you set for your spiritual life?
- Are there milestones along your spiritual path that you are striving for?

TRUST & FAITH

Rev. Fox opens this episode speaking to the relationship between faith and trust.

- If faith is genuinely translated as trust, how does this (if at all) change your relationship to the concept?
- "Trust the universe" is a profound idea, and he notes there seems to be such a precious and remarkable number of commonalities and coincidences in our world. As a foundation, do you think this idea could encourage resilience, both personal and in community, in the face of adversity?

Faith is often used as a directive when knowledge is missing or absent. Lama Tsomo speaks to her desire for knowledge rather than proof or demands of faith.

- Knowledge, which she ties to personal experience, she feels is much stronger than most conceptions of faith, it cannot be removed from your consciousness by conjecture or objection. What knowledge do you rely on to help you understand the world around you?
- She admits, though, that the paths she took often included aspirational faith, an acceptance of the possibility for truth, despite a lack of personal experience. When have you allowed this type of possibility into your life? What does it ask of you and do you associate it with stories or experiences from your path?
- Meditation helps our minds settle and allows us to see what is true more clearly. This refined insight creates the type of knowledge that Lama Tsomo references. Has meditation increased your feelings of trust or faith? Does the silt resonate with you and, if so, in what ways?

Lama Tsomo seeks blessings, not from a person or teacher but their expanded consciousness, their ineffable mindsets. This is quite different from the Western concept of blessings and the acts of prayer.

- A specific example of this approach is the original title of Lama Tsomo's introduction to Tibetan Buddhism, *Why Is the Dalai Lama Always Smiling?*. The title speaks to her curiosity, and perhaps our universal curiosity, and desire for a life in which we are always smiling like His Holiness. A mindset that is so overwhelmingly positive but also authentic even in the face of extreme hardship is commendable and sought after.
- Is there anyone in your life who makes you think, "I wish I faced each day with their attitude." Or perhaps, "She makes me feel better by simply walking into the room." These reactions are a microcosm of wanting to be "infected" by another's mind or perspective. Who brings these feelings into your life? What is the essence of their effect?

Mutual interests: Western Science and Spirituality

While often viewed as opposing, Western science and spirituality have begun to identify areas of study that allow for the possibility of scientific proof of spiritual concepts.

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama, is open to accepting scientific proof that rejects the findings of Buddhism. Does this surprise you?
- Have you ever questioned the "reality" or practicality of meditation and Buddhist concepts?
- Rev. Fox touches on a compelling argument for the existence of the soul, that it corresponds to the human capacity for self-reflection. This is often considered a uniquely human capability, do you agree?
- They point to the breath as an example of the value of the invisible. Do you find value in the unseen? Do you believe there are gaps in our current ability to understand and recognize such influences?

BUDDHA NATURE

Suffering as an Archetype

- How do we create and engage with the suffering we experience? What gives it greater impact and what alleviates it?
- If suffering is personal and impersonal, our responsibility and yet not our fault, how do we relate to it?
- Remember, we are already Buddha mind, pure, beautiful, and perfect, but we suffer. Why?
- Rev. Fox references Jesus' crucifixion as an archetype of unjust suffering. What other archetypes of suffering or pain do you relate to in today's world?
- The objectification of suffering through archetypes and acceptance as part of the divine relieves guilt. Does your practice ever return you to feelings of guilt or shame? What is the essence of the experience, is it true?

The Universe, Buddha Nature, and Mysticism

- Light as a metaphor for Christ and many forms of mysticism and spirituality helps to explain the idea that Rev. Fox shares about Cosmic Christ, the essential nature of Christ in the universe. Christ as the photon that is present in every atom. Of course, that doesn't mean a tiny man from two thousand years ago but the essence of his nature and teachings. How does this align or depart from your perception of Buddha nature?
- "Letter kills, the spirit gives life," Rev. Fox quotes the Apostle Paul. He doubles down by saying that, "Nothing important should be taken literally." This is in opposition to fundamentalism and can be hard to fathom as it relates to early steps on any spiritual path. How do you accept or learn about spirituality without the common comfort of linear boundaries?

Eckhart said, "it is only when we are born that we enter history and encounter God, and when we die, we return to the Godhead."

- How does the Godhead metaphor relate to the ocean metaphor that Lama Tsomo uses?

Rev. Fox speaks to the sacred nature of creativity and the right-brain experience of mysticism.

- Have you ever had an experience where you are simply observing sensations rather than taking them in?

A Lama is the gathering of the Buddhas. Lamas and master teachers prepare our minds to meditate and access the buddha nature of the deities.

- The hundred peaceful and wrathful deities of Vajrayana can feel like one of the largest departures from Western spiritual traditions. If we reframe this idea to focus on accessing the minds and essence of people like Christ who we wish to understand and be able to personify, can we find congruence and harmony between the traditions?
- How does this relate to the way we use archetypes in the West?

Bonus question: Do you find it easier or more difficult to meditate in the dark? And why?

INTERFAITH

Americans, especially the Baby Boomer generation, are often associated with a wide range of religious or spiritual experiences, from being raised in their parent's faith, transitioning to Eastern or other spiritual endeavors as they come into adulthood, and then settling into a sampling of spiritual beliefs as they age. This multifaceted but ultimately shallow path becomes the "smorgasbord" that Lama Tsomo and Rev. Fox describes.

- What path do you recognize in yourself and your peers? Do you see the opportunity to dive deeply into spiritual practices? Or does that level of commitment feel frightening?

The analogy that Rev. Fox shares is that God is an underground river that can be reached by many different wells or traditions. This analogy focuses on spirituality as "hidden" or reserved, only available to those who are willing to dig.

- Does this open your mind to the possibility of true spiritual awakening or underscore the difficulties of being a seeker?

Lama Tsomo and Rev. Fox agree that no single tradition has yielded all the answers to understanding spirituality and the human experience. They discuss how Eastern and Western traditions have things to offer one another.

- How do you see these traditions coming together or overlapping?
- How does this resonate with your own experience? What do you, as a Westerner, bring to the Eastern tradition you may be studying?

Lama Tsomo speaks to the richness of the traditions in which we are raised and the impact that early archetypes have on our subconscious. In her search for meaning, she was able to identify paths that worked or made sense from her perspective using her training as a psychologist. Rev. Fox also points to the importance of humility when in search of the divine.

- When studying religion and spirituality, how do you remain engaged while still responding authentically to your callings or objects?
- How can this increase your capacity for not only our own interfaith but to spread interfaith to other aspects of life and community?