

Facilitator's Guide

5A Group Reflection Process – May 24, 2024 draft
David Fey – Tergar Institute

Overview

This process is designed to help any group of people interested in working well together to pause, reflect, and learn from conflicts that naturally arise in the course of group interactions.

The benefits of this simple process are two-fold. The first benefit is individual. By pausing to reflect on our own feelings and thoughts, when a conflict arises, we become more aware of our current habits of thought and interaction. This awareness helps us make better choices.

The second benefit is collective. By listening to one another during this process, we learn that each person is having their own unique experience, which we can come to understand. This understanding engages our interest and compassion, enhancing how we work together.

Background

The 5A Group Reflection Process is based on a common framework from Buddhist psychology known as the Five Aggregates (5A). Simply put, the Five Aggregates are a way of describing what takes place within us as we respond to a stimulus; internal, external, or imaginary.

The process starts the moment we receive the stimulus, which might be something we see or hear, or an idea someone expresses. It begins with a simple sensation, which we experience as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. What happens next is really interesting. Our mind creates a thought about the situation: *"I like this, because..."* or *"I don't like this, because..."* If the situation feels emotionally charged, the thought might be something quite personal, like *"Why does he always react like this when I'm just trying to have a rational conversation..."*

The initial sensation and thought are automatic; they arise from our subconscious. We don't choose them; they just happen. Sometimes the initial thought follows the sensation so quickly that we notice the thought first, and then become aware of the sensation. In any case, unless we bring conscious attention to this initial sensation and thought, they will unconsciously influence how we respond. Our response may have internal and external aspects, including additional feelings and thoughts, as well as any actions we might take.

These are the first four aggregates. The first is the stimulus itself. The second is the sensation we experience. The third is the initial thought our mind creates. The fourth aggregate is our response, which may be conscious and constructive – if we reflect on the initial sensation and thought, and make a skillful choice – or unconscious and possibly problematic, if we don't reflect on our initial sensation and thought, and simply react.

The fifth aggregate is our consciousness itself: our capacity to recognize things in the present, remember things from the past, and experience thoughts and emotions. Our consciousness collects these memories of past actions, thoughts, and experiences, and shapes our automatic, unconscious reactions. How we respond to each situation either reinforces existing patterns in our consciousness or creates new ones, which then influence how we are likely to respond to similar situations in the future.

This is why bringing conscious attention to these initial sensations and thoughts **before we respond** is so powerful. It allows us to interrupt unconscious patterns of reactivity and make better choices. Over time, these more positive experiences also collect in our consciousness, helping us respond more constructively to the challenges we encounter in our daily lives.

The Process

The 5A Group Reflection Process has five simple steps:

1. **PAUSE:** Request a pause in the conversation, to reflect on what just happened, explaining that the purpose of this process is to learn about our experience and the experience of others, not to resolve the immediate conflict
2. **IDENTIFY:** As a group, identify the stimulus that triggered the conflict; it may take a few minutes to identify the first thing that happened – the original stimulus – after which people began to react to one another in a various ways
3. **REFLECT:** Invite each person in the group to reflect for a few minutes in silence and recall: 1) their initial sensation (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral) and 2) their initial thought, and then write this thought down in one sentence
4. **SHARE:** Invite each person to share their initial sensation and thought with the group, while others simply listen (no questions, comments, or feedback), keeping time to ensure that each person has a chance to speak
5. **DISCUSS:** As a group, discuss what you learned from this process of reflection, and how what you've learned can inform how to respond more compassionately and constructively – as individuals and as a group – when conflicts arise

In some cases, this process of reflection, sharing, and listening may resolve the conflict, as group members come to understand their differing experiences and perspectives. In other cases, it may be helpful to return to the topic that triggered the conflict after group members have had time to reflect individually on what they learned during this process.

How long to wait before a follow-up discussion may depend on the intensity or immediacy of the topic, and on how soon the group is able to meet again. It is up to the group as a whole to decide when – and whether – to return to the triggering topic.

Step-by-Step Facilitator's Guide

Step One: PAUSE

1. Request a pause in the conversation

a. Consider using phrases like:

"I'm feeling concerned that we are not really hearing or understanding one another's points of view on this subject. Can we pause for a few minutes to reflect on what we're each thinking and feeling, and then share that with the group?"

"I'm noticing a lot of tension around this topic; can we pause for a few minutes to reflect on what's happening right now, so it doesn't become more difficult to have a constructive conversation about this?"

"I think this would be a good time to pause the conversation and use the Group Reflection Process we've been learning. Are people willing to do that?"

2. Summarize the Group Reflection Process

- a. The purpose of this process is for each of us to **reflect** on what we are thinking and feeling, and to **share** this in a simple, structured way; knowing up front that everyone will have an opportunity to speak
- b. The outcomes of this process are two-fold: the first is to become more aware of **our own** thoughts and feelings; the second is to become more aware of the thoughts and feelings **of others**, enhancing mutual understanding
- c. After we discuss **what we've learned** from one another, we will decide as a group how and when to return to the topic that triggered conflict
- d. Thank the group for their willingness to pause and reflect, in the interest of learning from one another, so we can work together better

Step Two: IDENTIFY

1. Start by identifying the stimulus that triggered the conflict or tension

- a. It is important to **agree on the initial stimulus** to which people reacted, so that everyone in the group is focused on the same thing
- b. It may take a few minutes to identify **the first thing** that happened – the original stimulus – after which people began to react to one another
- c. NOTE: When you are introducing this reflection process to a group **for the first time**, please review the box on page 5.

Step Three: REFLECT

1. Invite each person to reflect in silence on **the initial sensation** they experienced, in response to the stimulus: was it **pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?** (just three choices)
 - a. Clarify that this initial sensation is **automatic**; it isn't necessary to explain or defend it; the goal is simply to notice what it was
 - b. Limit this reflection to **one minute**; longer will lead to unhelpful elaboration
2. Then invite each person to identify **the first thought** that entered their mind; in response to the stimulus, and to write it down **in a single sentence**
 - a. Clarify that this first thought is also **automatic**; it isn't necessary to explain or defend it; the goal is simply to notice what it was
 - b. Acknowledge that the first thought may not be something everyone is **comfortable sharing** with the group, and that's OK; in that case, invite them share one of the thoughts that followed quickly after their initial thought
 - c. Limit this reflection to **three or four minutes**, and note that each person will be asked to share a single sentence, not a longer description or explanation

Step Four: SHARE

1. Invite each person to **share their initial sensation and thought** with the group, while others **just listen** (no questions, comments, or feedback)
 - a. Emphasize that this step is **a listening process**, meaning the group should not comment or otherwise react to the speaker
 - b. Assess the **size** of the group. If there are more than 8 participants, divide the group into small groups of 6-8 participants (max); having people count off, using the number of groups, works well; if this is not the first time a group has used this process, make sure to change the **composition** of the small groups each time, so people get to hear from others
 - c. Assign a timekeeper for each group, allowing **3 minutes** (max) for each speaker to share their initial sensation and first thought
 - d. Decide as a group whether to move from one person to the next or to have people volunteer "popcorn style" to speak next; consider using a talking stick (any small, passable object) to identify the speaker
 - e. If anyone responds to a speaker, remind the group that this step of the process is **just to listen**, and that a discussion will follow

Step Five: DISCUSS

2. As a group, discuss **what you've learned** from this process, and how what you've learned can inform **how to respond more compassionately and constructively** – as individuals and as a group – when conflicts arise
 - a. If you divided into small groups, **bring everyone back together** before beginning this discussion
 - b. Remind the group that the purpose of this discussion **is not to solve the problem** that triggered the conflict, **but to share what they've learned** from reflecting on themselves and from listening to one another, and to discuss as a group how what they've learned from this process can inform **how they want to work together** in the future
 - c. Assign a note-taker to **document common themes** that emerge about what people have learned and how this can inform how they want to work together in the future, and **share these notes** with the participants
 - d. At the conclusion of this process, **ask the group** if it would be useful to return to the discussion of the topic that triggered the conflict, at some point. If yes, agree on a time and format for that discussion, allowing at least **24 hours** for people to reflect on this process beforehand
 - e. **Thank the participants** for their willingness to participate in this process, and encourage everyone to **complete a short evaluation**, which will be used to improve the process. You can print and hand out copies of the attached evaluation form, or share this link to the online version:
<https://forms.gle/mM2iTQYL9L5btsVf8>

When introducing this process for the first time

1. When you introduce this process to a group **for the first time**, it is best to start with a training run, using a pre-selected stimulus
2. This should be a situation or topic about which you know people have differing views, but not one with really high stakes
3. You can suggest a topic or two and have the group choose one, or you can ask the group to suggest topics and then choose
4. In any case, make sure to emphasize that the purpose of this training run is **to become familiar with the process**

Author Bio

David Fey is a student of Tibetan Buddhist master Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche and a member of the inaugural class of Tergar Institute, 2023-25, under the guidance of Executive Director Justin Kelley. He is developing this Group Reflection Process as part of an Independent Study Project at Tergar Institute. His project is designed to expand the benefit of Buddhist principles and practices by translating them for use by groups and organizations.

Recognizing that much of the suffering human beings experience is structural and systemic – and cannot be eliminated through individual practice alone – the purpose of this ongoing project is to develop practical tools to transform group and organizational cultures, as a direct method of revealing and addressing structural and systemic causes of suffering.

David began his journey on the Buddhist path over 20 years ago, studying and taking refuge with Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. After reading *The Joy of Living* and meeting its author Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche in 2009, he became an active member of the Tergar Meditation Community in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He served as the first full-time Executive Director of Tergar International, from 2016-2018.

A nonprofit and public-sector leader for over 30 years, David began his career as an architect with a passion for affordable housing. He has served more than 40 nonprofits as a consultant or Executive Director, assisting them to assess changing community needs, conduct organizational assessments, and develop healthy, productive, values-driven organizational cultures.

Use of this Document

The design and presentation of this group reflection process is a work in progress. My hope is that it can help any group of people interested in working well together to pause, reflect, and learn from conflicts that naturally arise in the course of group interactions. You are welcome to use this facilitator's guide to introduce this process to any group that you believe could benefit from it. Feel free to share this document with others who may have similar opportunities.

I would only ask that you explain to participants that this is a work in progress – and that you share any feedback you receive – in the interest of improving this process. Please encourage every participant to complete the attached evaluation, either online or on paper.

If you have questions or would like to discuss your experience as a facilitator of this process, please reach out to me at davidf@tergarinstitute.org. Thank you in advance for your assistance. I hope this process proves beneficial for you and your group.

Group Reflection Process Evaluation

To help us refine the 5A Group Reflection Process and Facilitator's Guide, we would appreciate your honest feedback and suggestions for improvement. Please take a few minutes to complete this brief evaluation and email it to David Fey at davidf@tergarinstitute.org. If you prefer, you may complete this evaluation online: <https://forms.gle/mM2iTQYL9L5btsVf8>. Thank you!

1. What was your **overall experience** of this group reflection process? (check one)

- I found it very helpful
- I found it somewhat helpful
- I did not find it helpful

2. What was **most valuable** to you about this group reflection process? (check one)

- What I learned about myself
- What I learned about others
- What we learned and discussed as a group
- Something else: _____

3. Which part of the process was **most comfortable** for you? (check one)

- Taking a pause from a difficult conversation
- Identifying the stimulus that caused the conflict
- Reflecting on my own thoughts and feelings
- Hearing about the thoughts and feelings of others
- Discussing how to improve how we work together as a group
- Something else: _____

4. Which part of the process was **most challenging** for you? (check one)

- Taking a pause from a difficult conversation
- Identifying the stimulus that caused the conflict
- Reflecting on my own thoughts and feelings
- Hearing about the thoughts and feelings of others
- Discussing how to improve how we work together as a group
- Something else: _____

5. How **accessible** did you find **the language** used in this process? (check one)
- I found the language very accessible
 - I found the language somewhat accessible (please comment below)
 - I did not find the language accessible (please comment below)
6. Was this process **worth the time** it took for your group today? (check one)
- Yes, the process was worth the time
 - I'm not sure if the process was worth the time (please comment below)
 - No, the process was not worth the time (please comment below)
7. Would you **recommend** this group reflection process to other groups? (check one)
- Yes, I would recommend this process to other groups
 - I might recommend this process to other groups (please comment below)
 - No, I would not recommend it to other groups (please comment below)
8. If you facilitated this process, how helpful was the **Facilitator's Guide**? (check one)
- I found it very helpful
 - I found it somewhat helpful (please comment below)
 - I did not find it helpful (please comment below)
9. Please share any additional comments or suggestions:

Thank you for taking the time to complete this evaluation!