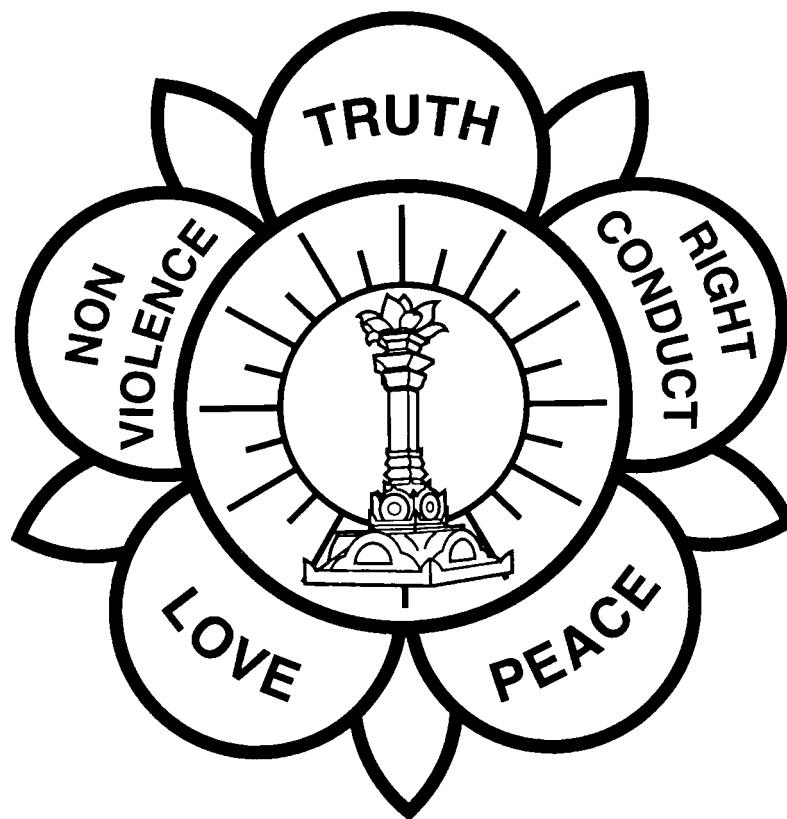


Sathya Sai Baba Centers of Northern California & Nevada  
Special Study Circles on Study Circle

*Study Circle: A Tool for Transformation*  
*Chapter 1*  
*Pathways to God by Jonathan Roof*



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Sai Ram!

# Study Circle: A Tool for Transformation

(from Chapter 1, Pathways to God, by Jonathan Roof)

## 1. How Spiritual Training Begins

An ounce of honest doubt and a commitment to self-improvement are the only requirements for beginning the spiritual journey. When we first set foot on the path, our only assurance of success lies in our sincere inquiry. Faith, devotion, and knowledge grow in time, but an open mind is required for their development. Earnest seekers will find that a harvest of joy awaits them when they cultivate the field of divinity.

Spiritual growth needs to be approached along several avenues. Devotion, study, and service are especially required. Study alone cannot carry us to God-realization: our knowledge must be seasoned with devotion to win the Lord's grace. Similarly, devotion without study and service limits our realization of our full spiritual potential. A balanced approach to the spiritual life promises the best results.

The Sathya Sai Baba study circle promotes an integrated approach to spiritual endeavor. Practice and sincerity are held in higher esteem than voluminous knowledge. Experience and devotion are given greater credence than academic learning. The study circle seeks to transform our behavior — not to fill our heads with undigested information. It conveys practical knowledge that uplifts and ennobles our characters. Only the process of character-building can be called true education.

*Not information, but transformation; not instruction, but construction should be the aim. Theoretical knowledge is a burden unless it is practiced, for then 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.*

*Sathya Sai Speaks 9, p. 51*

## 2. The Study Circle's Purpose

The study circle is a human dynamo that charges us with ideas, inspiration, and resolve. It lifts the weary and points the way when we become lost. The discipline pushes us from behind as it holds a light in front to guide

us. The process is simple, but the results can be wondrous.

A study circle is a group of aspirants who meet regularly to discuss spiritual topics. A group leader coordinates the discussion, giving each participant an opportunity to present his or her view of the current subject. The study circle is not a debate. Members are encouraged to state their views, but are discouraged from criticizing others' views. A variety of perspectives is sought on a common theme. During the course of the discussion, the group leader attempts to summarize major themes and to develop a consensus on the important points.

*Hislop asked the question, "What is study circle?" 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 roundtable 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 of the study circle.*

*Conversations, pp. 125-126*

The study circle enables us to learn from the wisdom of saints and sages through quotations and references, and also from our peers. The sacred scriptures of all lands may be consulted as sources of wisdom, but in discussing spiritual topics with our contemporaries, we interpret behavior appropriate to our own time and culture. The newcomer benefits from hearing the views of those with more experience. Experienced members gain by restating and clarifying their views. Participants who find book study difficult profit from the discussion, while the studious learn from the practical comments of those with a less academic and more service-oriented bent. In each case the aspirant is encouraged to make a systematic habit of study and practice.

## 3. Knowledge and Self-Confidence

A rose blossoms in the pure sunlight. With proper food, water, and care, it grows full and tall. The study circle

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provides us with similar benefits. With the care of every member, it grants the pure light of inspiration, the food of knowledge, and the water of self-confidence. Through regular discussion and study, we build confidence in our knowledge — and perhaps even acquire some wisdom. We clarify our ideas and learn to express our views on spiritual topics. We learn to listen more closely to others' ideas and to consider other viewpoints. By fellow aspirants, we are inspired to regularly practice spiritual disciplines.

Subjects for discussion usually differ from session to session. Questions or quotations based on general themes, such as those contained in this book, can create the basis for excellent discussions. The spiritual questions or concerns of members also provide good subjects. If a member is experiencing difficulty with a point of study or practice, it may be beneficial for him or her to discuss the subject in a study circle. Usually, if one member has questions, others will have the same question.

Authoritative texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* or Swami's published discourses, are sometimes chosen for systematic study because they cover a variety of pertinent topics. Whatever theme is chosen, it is best to maintain some flexibility in the discussion. Related issues may be aired without drifting too far from the original subject. If the group chooses a topic in advance each week, members may research the theme before discussion. This tends to create a more rewarding exchange because members arrive prepared with thoughts and quotations on the topic.

## 4. A Typical Study Circle Routine

Study circles will inevitably vary in some respects. Each group of aspirants radiates its own distinctive light, and so each group adopts an approach that suits its needs. However, some aspects of the circle should remain fairly constant.

A study circle should meet regularly, weekly if possible. The location should be convenient for all members. Every participant should be welcome, for each is a valuable part of the group. In study circles, as in other center functions, Swami asks that men and women sit on separate sides of the circle. This helps all participants to

concentrate on the subject at hand. Only at public functions, where outside guests are invited, does Swami relax this rule.

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 certain pre arrangements. More than one circle may be conducted if many participants are present. This is particularly true if all members cannot meet at one location or at one time. 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 related to child-rearing. A limit of forty-five minutes to one hour allows sufficient time for a discussion without it becoming tiresome.

A successful study format begins with a short presentation by the week's leader. This presentation may last from five to fifteen minutes, depending on the subject matter. Complex, research-oriented topics take longer to present than subjects of general knowledge. The purpose of the introduction is to highlight the important themes of the subject. This allows participants to focus on the subject, particularly if they have been unable to read previously the passage under discussion. An introduction also starts to generate ideas for discussion when the subject is opened to members' comments. It is desirable for the presentation to include various viewpoints and to conclude with a question for discussion. Quotations with apparent contradictions frequently stimulate discussion. After a question is posed, a one- or two-minute meditation allows participants to collect their thoughts before speaking. Rotation of the leader's task affords each member an opportunity to research and prepare for a meeting. All regular participants are encouraged to present a topic, but they should not be required to do so.

## 5. Suggested "Rules"

Rivers aid us in food production, transportation, and recreation, but they are only helpful when they remain within their banks. If they overflow their bounds, they can cause untold destruction. For aspirants, rules are the banks which make our efforts productive. In the study

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circle, it is important that all participants be aware of the “rules” from the start. Rules may vary in detail, but some guidelines should be maintained for a productive discussion. Nine rules to encourage active participation are suggested below.

1. The meeting should be started with omkar (the repetition of Om three times) and a prayer or spiritual song to raise the atmosphere of the meeting room. This creates a climate of brotherhood and cooperation among all participants and a feeling of working toward a common goal. If the study circle occurs after a devotional song meeting, it is not necessary to sing additional songs.

2. The study circle is not a debating society; it is an exploration of viewpoints. Each participant should feel free to speak without fear of judgment or personal criticism.

3. Active and equal participation should be sought from all members. The facilitator of the discussion may need to encourage new members to speak. New or quiet members often require a break in the conversation to present their views, and will not speak if another participant appears ready to speak.

4. Dominant members must take care not to monopolize the conversation. A time limit may be placed on individual comments to deter enthusiastic members from “lecturing” the group. However, tact and courtesy should be used by the facilitator in observing this rule.

5. The discussion leader and members should avoid reading long quotations. The study circle is not a reading club. Lengthy quotations often prove tiring. It is particularly inappropriate to read long passages in foreign languages which other members do not understand.

6. Each group member should be engaged in turn. This is done by taking turns, with members speaking in a circular order. Although reticent members should be encouraged to speak, they should not be required to do so. They may elect to pass and perhaps comment after all

others have taken their turns.

7. Quotations or anecdotes should be relevant to the topic. Quotations particularly should be chosen from sources which all members would consider authoritative. In the Sai Baba study circle, the most appropriate quotations are from the discourses and writings of Sathya Sai Baba.

8. A moderator should be named in advance for one or more discussion sessions. It is that person’s duty to see that participants follow study circle guidelines. The moderator is responsible for helping the group adhere to the meeting format and for keeping the discussion moving. The moderator for the week need not be the person presenting the topic.

9. A single specific question should be posed to the group for discussion. It should concern a practical aspect of spiritual life. In small circles, more than one question may be posed if time allows. It is helpful to take several minutes of reflection on the question before starting the discussion.

If these guidelines are followed, the study circle should proceed well. Above all, members must feel welcomed and that their views are regarded as valuable. Respect all participants and encourage them to speak, for each has a special viewpoint to share.

### **6. The Goal of Self-discovery**

Self-discovery fills us with joy and confidence. It fulfills our expectations and grants us spiritual satisfaction. It is the prize which encourages us to further effort. Through the discipline of the study circle, we learn to visualize the goal of our efforts. Equipped with greater knowledge, our practice and devotion both benefit. With inspiration and incentive from the group, we strive to advance in self-understanding. In such an atmosphere of loving cooperation, each of us progresses closer to the goal of discovering the vast potential within. The honest doubt with which we began the journey gives way to a joyous knowledge as we experience the truth of ourselves.