

## Cultivating Mindfulness in the Large Group

Bill Sell<sup>1</sup>

---

*This article describes the influence of formal and everyday mindfulness and awareness practice on the large group process. The emphasis is primarily on the experience of membership in a large group, emphasizing how participants can wade through the stimulation of the group, begin to master the environment, and feel engaged and effective with their contributions and experiences. Mindfulness will be defined as the act of paying attention. This act will be divided into three different and complementary activities: (a) what we pay attention to, (b) how and why we pay attention to it, and (c) how we react to what we have been paying attention to. In addition, this article will discuss intention and motivation (and methods for using these ideas) in relation to the practice and activity of mindfulness. I will use these directives and conceptualizations to describe the practice of mindfulness as a useful discipline in relation to participation in the large group.*

---

**KEYWORDS:** Mindfulness; large group; awareness; Buddhism.

### WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

*Mindfulness* is simply the activity of placing our attention in a specific way. It is the ability of the mind to rest on an external object or thought long enough to begin to recognize it (Mipham, 2000). It is so fundamental that it is easy to take for granted. Without it, we would not be able to recognize dirt as dirt, a rainbow as a rainbow, or our sister as our sister. Without mindfulness, our ability to depend on the consistent functioning of our external world would be compromised, and even taking a single step could trigger the fear and uncertainty of not knowing whether the ground is solid enough to support us or whether it will dissolve under our feet and suck us into the earth.

1 Deceased March 10, 2008. Correspondence should be addressed to Tamara Sell, 2236 Nicholl Street West, Boulder, CO 80304. E-mail: [compassionsangha@yahoo.com](mailto:compassionsangha@yahoo.com).

Mindfulness extends beyond the realm of form and structure into thoughts, fantasies, and projections. We are always engaged in the activity of mindfulness because we are constantly sensing and experiencing objects and thoughts with the attentiveness of our perception and mind (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005). The activity of mindfulness, as a formal practice, can manifest in the world as a conscious relationship with our daily activities. It can help us understand and make conscious our engagement with the world.

### WHAT IS AWARENESS?

An important and complementary aspect of the practice of mindfulness is awareness. *Awareness* is the recognition that our attention has become distracted from the object of mindfulness. It has the initial benefit of returning our attention to the object of mindfulness (Mipham, 2000; Trungpa, 1994). Beyond this, awareness can be described as an innate faculty of the mind that observes whatever is happening in a nonjudgmental and curious way.

The mind is a thinking, feeling, and attention-paying mechanism. We can either choose where to place its attention or that choice will be dictated by the endless combinations of factors and circumstances that go into the experience of any moment. The thinking, feeling mind is constantly active as it pays attention to, and reacts to, all of the information coming through the sense perceptions. In so doing, it has assembled the history of these sense perceptions in the form of memories, fantasies, projections, conceptions, judgments, and theoretical points of view.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, mindfulness–awareness is always taking place. We are always paying attention to something. Whether it is the sound of a blender, a child's activities, or the paranoid thought of cameras in the kitchen, our mind is constantly looking for a place to settle and/or for an object to which to pay attention. Because of the thinking mind's fickleness and the ease with which it can shift the object of its attention, it is actually quite challenging to track the thread of our thoughts. With practice, we can increase our ability to notice and recognize when we are lost in a fantasy or a deeply distracting thought. Suddenly, we are back, with stronger awareness of our thoughts and our immediate experience in the present moment. This process of noticing and coming back to ourselves is the heart of awareness.

We do this so that we can understand, tolerate, and learn to genuinely accept our own and others' emotional, conceptual, and judgmental tendencies. Deepening our understanding of these personalized tendencies allows us to develop greater empathy and compassion for others (Chodron, 1992). This process gives us more tools and a context in which to work with the suffering of others.

### To What Are We Paying Attention?

One could say that the activity of mindfulness, with the support of awareness, is made up of two components: formal mindfulness practice and mindfulness in everyday life (Beck, 1989; Hahn, 2007; Trungpa, 1987). In formal mindfulness practice, we are engaging in a specific technique to strengthen the muscles of mindfulness. Simply stated, we find an upright and comfortable posture, decide on a specific object the thinking mind will use during the practice session (like a stone, words, an image, or the breath), and continually bring the conscious attention of the mind to rest on the object (Mipham, 2003). When the session is over, we bring a similar attentiveness to our daily activities and relationships. Our object of attention becomes the activity and the feelings that arise in all of our worldly interactions. By paying attention to what we are currently doing, rather than living in a world of plans, fantasies, and mental escapes, we increase our ability to be effective in the moment and to act skillfully in a way that is appropriate for the situation.

In the context of working with others, we use the practice of mindfulness to settle and calm the mind, to deepen our understanding and experience of our impulsive thoughts and emotions, and to guide the mind toward thoughts of curiosity and compassion for ourselves and others (Trungpa, 1988). By exercising the muscles of mindfulness, we strengthen our ability to rest the mind, and therefore we are less influenced by the emotionally stimulating world of activity and relationships. This allows us more choice in how we want to respond. With increased mindfulness, we develop the capacity to stop the momentum of harmful and habitual reactions. Only then can those reactions be replaced by open and intentional awareness, based on unconditional positive regard and an intention to listen deeply to others.

Thinking too much, and without a conscious direction, can serve as a barrier to a more direct experience of reality. Thoughts are often metaphorically described as the dirt and sediment that obscure the clarity of a naturally clear and open mind's water. Emotions are like waves, wind, and other forms of turbulence; they stir up the residue (our thoughts), thus clouding the clear water. By calming the mind, we allow this residue to stop its wild movement and to settle. We begin to become more familiar with the clear nature of mind and therefore have more choices when engaging with thoughts, emotions, and impulses, both during the formal practice and afterward (Trungpa, 1988).

In formal practice sessions, we simply bring the attention of the thinking mind back to the object of mindfulness, noticing and labeling the different types of thoughts and feelings as they arise in our awareness, and then letting them go. We begin to develop a familiarity with the rhythm of our own thinking and emotional mind. We practice this again and again, until our mind gradually increases its innate ability to calm and settle (Mipham, 2003). Over time, we develop a stronger ability to direct our intention, rather than having it sidetracked by unmanageable currents of unconsciously acted-out emotions. As the mind calms and settles, the

process of developing familiarity with our thoughts and feelings grows and is carried into all levels of our daily lives.

### MINDFULNESS AND AWARENESS IN A LARGE GROUP SETTING

The practice and activity of mindfulness–awareness (from this point on, the word *mindfulness* will be used to represent both mindfulness and awareness) provides a perfect complement to the myriad influences, feelings, and reactions occurring at any time during the course of a large group session. The purpose of paying attention in this way is to be able to experience with increasing precision the moment-by-moment perceptions, thoughts, and feelings we have in our lives (Suzuki, 1970; Trungpa, 1999). By cultivating this quality of mindfulness, we can come to a deeper understanding of our intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships as well as our social and communal relationships. Utilizing the skills and qualities of mindfulness in the large group format benefits both the group participants and the group leader as it gives each party more tools with which to function within the dynamic influences of the large group.

#### How and Why Are We Paying Attention?

The mechanics and logistics of paying attention are important because they provide the map we follow for the practice of mindfulness. They explain what we are to do and how we are to act. What mechanics and logistics do not give us is a reason for doing so. For an ongoing practice to become a meaningful habit of mindfulness, we need a good reason to do it. We may want to pay more attention to our state of mind while we are driving in heavy traffic, so that we do not succumb to what can be a habitually stressful activity, or we may want to be more mindful of how we listen to our children. Having a reason invokes more passion and desire to accomplish. And having an intention that is meaningful and helpful can be of great benefit to any situation. Our intentions infuse whatever we do with a direction, and it is often how we define our rationales.

The bare attention of mindfulness is nonjudgmental. The attitude and direction we bring to the attention of mindfulness affect every aspect of our experience of awareness. How we are thinking and feeling about ourselves, and our lives, has a fundamental impact on what we will pay attention to and how we will pay attention to it.

From the perspective of form and structure, mindfulness is a very mechanical process. We are simply placing our attention on a specific object, and when we notice that our mind is occupied by another thought, we gently return to the original object of mindfulness. We do this to settle our mind, to deepen our attention, and to train the mind to place itself on the objects of our deliberate choosing (Mipham, 2000).

Our everyday life is the place where we increase the scope of the mindfulness practice, not just to include our own thought stream, but to take into consideration the thoughts and feelings of others. Instead of reacting with fear and attempting to avoid thoughts and emotions induced by others and unfamiliar situations, we begin to cultivate the ability to react with openness, warmth, and curiosity. We do not immediately shut down and assume a position of polarization to protect our views and perspectives. Instead, we strengthen the impulse to remain open. If we behave in our lives in a way that is aligned with the actions, motivations, and intentions of remaining open, warm, and curious, we invite those qualities to become the fabric of our relationships, contacts, and interactions.

### **How Do We React to What We Have Been Paying Attention To?**

Experiencing the moment, and the consequences of actions, with the same attitude of clarity, warmth, and kindness we bring to the attention of thoughts and impulses (Trungpa, 1999) is the practice of mindfulness in action. Having the impulse to kiss somebody deeply, softly, and meaningfully on the lips is very different than actually doing it. If it is welcomed, invited, and reciprocated, we will feel the lovely connection of warm, inviting, and willing lips, and if it is not welcome, we will likely receive hard and pursed lips in return that say, "No invitation." In either case, if we decide to act, we are left with the consequences of our action, to which we can then react.

The activity of mindfulness can be divided into three aspects. First, we develop stability by settling the mind. Second, we cultivate wisdom and compassion by deepening the understanding of the mind. Third, we express the stability and the deepening with our speech, gestures, and actions (Chodron, 1991). Our actions are thus the culmination of a thorough and complex process that defines who we are to others and ourselves. When we can understand more fully how our actions are influenced by our thoughts and motivations, we can have more control over the direction we take in our future actions.

The formal practice of mindfulness has a definite physical quality in that we are constantly bringing our bodies back to the intended activity, whether it is sitting still or moving. Whether our impulse is to scratch, kiss, or kill, we observe the impulse with warmth and curiosity. We watch the impulse, we refrain from the action, and we bring our conscious attention back to the predetermined object. By denying the gratification of acting immediately on the impulse, we give ourselves the opportunity to deepen our understanding of both impulses in general and the specific tendencies of our impulses.

When the formal mindfulness practice is over, the transition into everyday life is a gentle slide. We feel the sensations of body and mind and bring awareness of the practice into our immediate perceptions. Whether we are walking out of a church, a bedroom, or a car, we bring the attentiveness of the practice into our very next

activity. What we try not to do is immediately jump out of the atmosphere of the formal practice and into mindless and frantic activity, such as phone calls, plans, and crises. These activities will come anyway. Our intention is to begin to see and experience all those objects of agitation from the more grounded view of mindfulness. Engaging consistently in a formal mindfulness practice may not change the quantity, content, or intensity of our experience, but it can train our minds to tolerate, contain, and let go of the endless stream of reactive thoughts and emotions that condition our response to others and to our world.

When we bring mindfulness into the world of our day-to-day activities, we make every moment an opportunity to allow our actions to express our inner intentions and motivations. This means we use our daily schedule as the stage for mindfulness practice. We wake up with mindfulness. We shower with mindfulness. We greet our family with mindfulness. We exercise, work, and socialize with mindfulness, and we especially notice more and more quickly when we are taken away from mindfulness by daydreams, revenge fantasies, uncontrollable harmful actions and utterances, and any other distracting thought or impulse.

#### DEFINING THE LARGE GROUP

In a large group, the matrix of relationships, and all the possible variations of their interplay, are commonly overwhelming for the unpracticed mind to absorb in one scan. We can only select a limited quantity of dynamic variations because our mind and senses can only process a limited amount of information. It is not unlike an IMAX movie screen—too large to be seen in a finite visual field. The audience must constantly shift their eyes, back and forth, up and down, to capture the entirety of the image on the screen.

The large group is generally said to consist of over 30–50 participants (Weinberg & Schneider, 2003). Generally, the group is large enough in number that it cannot be observed in one glance (Weinberg, 2003). But large groups are not only about a number. They offer an opportunity for interpersonal cohesion. How we manage this relationship is a reflection of our relationship with our larger social community.

A large group offers a place where we can feel all of the feelings related to living in a large and diverse social community. As opposed to the relative intimacy of a small group, usually 5–12 participants, or the classroom dynamics of medium-sized groups, with a membership between 15 and 30, the large group creates the opportunity to examine our feelings and our reactions as they arise in the context of this mass of impersonalness and invisibility (Weinberg & Schneider, 2003). In the large group, we are members of a crowd. The feelings induced are often more related to the fear of alienation/exile and destruction/pulverization than they are to the intimacy and cohesion that is often a treatment goal in small- or medium-sized groups. Our sense of being unique, of our *specialness*, is challenged by the

number of participants, and we are supported to see ourselves and understand our reactions in this light.

### **The Large Group's Value**

In the large group, whether we intend to or not, we appear to be regularly shifting the direction of our attention all around us in a virtual surround sound of thoughts, feelings, emotions, words, shouts, concepts, pleas, and so on. Our thinking mind expands as we attempt to accommodate the ever changing and dynamic movement of the group.

What we pay attention to, how and why we pay attention to it, and how we react to what we pay attention to, is the process of mindfulness. In the large group, this is a delightfully rich task to unravel. The seemingly infinite combinations of inter-relational dynamics—spoken and unspoken, whispered and shouted, displayed and hidden—can affect us very strongly. These are all better managed and understood (by both leaders and participants) when consciously reorganized within the frame of mindfulness.

The value of the large group experience is that it is a rare opportunity to see ourselves in this immense context and learn how to not only tolerate it, but feel effective, and even flourish in it. To approach the large group with the intention of increasing awareness of our subjective experience in local and world communities, and to strengthen our ability to tolerate the induced feelings in such an environment so that we can feel connected and effective within those communities, is a function of the large group experience.

The benefit of practicing mindfulness in the large group is that participants can increase their tolerance of painful emotions and inducements they experience in their larger community. As we sit in our chairs and listen to the process and content of what is being said by the leaders and other members, we feel the feelings and notice the thoughts that arise throughout the course of the session. We plan and strategize about what and when we may want to speak, finally deciding whether to speak or not. We can then experience the effect of our gesture and, while we are still sitting in our chairs, continue the process of noticing our emotions and inducements in the large group.

Attention to mindfulness in the large group is not intended to support or encourage a specific type of intervention technique. It is intended to deepen our relationship with the theoretical orientation in which we have been trained, and to which we are naturally inclined, and to give more meaning and relevance to the effect of our clinical choices. The discipline of mindfulness in the large group increases our flexibility, our curiosity, and our psychological strength, thereby enhancing our ability to thrive and grow as professionals and as human beings. In a large group, the intentions and the actions of the individuals, subgroups, and group-as-a-whole

meet in ways that can be used to enlighten and enrich all of these experiences, while hopefully avoiding the traps and pitfalls of our habitual tendencies to politicize and polarize when we feel uncomfortable or threatened.

### Cultivating Mindfulness as a Group Member

Mindfulness in the large group utilizes both a formal mindfulness practice and an everyday, living-in-the-world practice. Cultivating the qualities and strengths of mindfulness can only add to the emotional and cognitive learning opportunities of the large group. If we, as group members, enter the large group with the attitude that what we are doing can be of benefit to ourselves, our fellow group members, and the world outside of the group, then we can allow the group to affect us in a way that enhances these aspirations.

The large group has the propensity to induce many of our most primitive emotions related to survival and annihilation within a societal context (Hopper, 2003). It can highlight how we subgroup and organize our emotions in an attempt to prevent the experience of a fantasized death or banishment. The large group is particularly adept at showing this luminous display, but within a container set up to observe and respect the safety and process of its members. It is a fantastic opportunity to test what effect the practice of mindfulness will have on the individual and the group and how it can ripple out and begin to influence our relationship with the larger world.

### INTENTION AND MOTIVATION

When our intentions and motivations are engaged, our mind becomes strong enough to withstand and work with the obstacles to maintaining an ongoing relationship with the discipline of mindfulness. Knowing, in detail, what you are doing and why you are doing it is what fuels motivation (Hahn, 2007; Mipham, 2000; Trungpa, 1988). Understanding the value of mindfulness is an antidote to the often frustrating, and surprisingly difficult, process of cultivating awareness. Attempting to live a life based on the practices, morals, and ethics illuminated by this process takes time and discipline. Again, our intentions and motivations deepen and expand our awareness and understanding of our views, concepts, and rationalizations.

The intention of being kind, discriminating, and patient with our own thoughts, feelings, and impulses, combined with the motivation to carry that view into relationship with others, will cultivate in us more openness, warmth, and tolerance to their feelings and experiences. We are not just resting and training the mind, but we are also transforming the mind's ability to direct itself toward a deeper experience of nurturing, care, and patience.

On the other hand, if we use the practice of mindfulness to act in an increasingly self-serving, aggressive, and narcissistic manner, we will strengthen the mind's



tendency to objectify and polarize. If we direct the power of our mindfulness into thoughts and impulses of hating our enemy (who could be a geographical or ideological neighbor, someone in our own home, a spouse or a child, or even ourselves), we solidify our tendency to hate and to channel the energy of that hate into hateful thoughts, hateful impulses, and hateful actions. By directing the intention and motivation of mindfulness practice toward the solidification of negative or polarizing thoughts toward others, we actively separate ourselves from others by creating a wall of self-defensiveness and self-justification.

The intention we bring to our participation in a large group will have a significant influence on our engagement, learning, and satisfaction in the entire experience. A mind that is open, flexible, and curious can be very beneficial when cultivated and prepared for the process of a large group. This is no easy task. It requires the discipline of mindfully attending to details in an ongoing manner, before, during, and after the group. The resulting experience is a good reflection of how we prepare or do not prepare for the activities of our life.

Without some intention of knowing how we want to approach our engagement with the large group, we are likely to fall back into old, familiar, and unhelpful responses to emotions activated in the large group. The large group is particularly adept at provoking a wide range of emotional reactions, from outrage and powerlessness to envy, greed, and fear of annihilation (Hopper, 2003; Weinberg & Schneider, 2003). The participant's relationship with the large group's physical environment, including the setup of the room, offers him or her many opportunities to learn from his or her responses to all of the emotional inducements in the relative safety of the large group container.

As we view the large group from the perspective of mindfulness, we should know that this is a place to experience and learn about ourselves in the context of what is induced by the large group. The less mindfulness we bring, the further we solidify patterns of alienation, explosive impulsivity, and seemingly justifiable outrage. As we cultivate the intentions of self-awareness and self-growth, we gain the freedom to speak and act from the groundedness of our immediate experience. Before we communicate, we can contemplate the impact our words or actions may have in the large group, either from the group toward us or from us toward the group.

The impact of this conceptual and emotional learning is easily transferable in the world outside of the large group container because mindfulness, when practiced in this context, provides us with a clear mirror for the feelings we will be attending to outside the large group.

### **The Therapeutic Group Contract**

One object of mindfulness in any group can be the therapeutic contract (Ormont, 2000). This is an agreement made between the group facilitator(s) and the group members as to the basic rules, expectations, and intentions of the group.

The therapeutic contract can include physical parameters such as time boundaries, location, and room setup (i.e., how the chairs are configured to enhance the experience of play between belonging and separating). It can also define the manner in which the group will be conducted such as the use of talking as the primary means of communication. The contract can clarify intention and motivation for members. Group members are asked to speak to issues important and meaningful to the individual speaking and to address others in the group in a way that does not attack or demean them (Ormont, 1992).

An important benefit of the therapeutic group contract is when it is used as a means to study the individual and group transferences and resistances to the expectations of the group (these are often quite unique in a large group). How and when all of the elements of the contract are implemented and discussed is up to the individual therapist, but it can be assumed that there will be a variety of reactions to it—all worthy of scrutiny.

Another benefit of the group contract is when it is used as an object of mindfulness. It can serve as a reference point (just as the breath or a mantra in formal practice) to which members can return their attention. Whenever we, as group members, find ourselves daydreaming, planning, not listening, fantasizing, or plotting, we can recognize these thoughts and feelings as inducements and explore them with openness and curiosity. We can then return our attention to the group via the group contract.

### Speech

In the large group, the medium of speech is our most valuable tool for expressing our thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the moment and for connecting, or not connecting, with others in the group (Ormont, 2000; Weinberg & Schneider, 2003; Yalom, 1970). In many groups, it will likely be an overtly expressed expectation that the group participants should use words to express any thoughts, feelings, or impulses, instead of acting in any other manner. Consequently, speaking as a participant in the large group offers the potential of a large sphere of influence.

Some of the challenges to cultivating a good exchange in the large group are the limitation of talking time, the amount of physical space between group participants, and the acoustics of the room. The issues of how the talking time is divided, and how the amplification is handled, will determine much of the group's process because it will influence what is heard and said (Weinberg & Schneider, 2003). Another potential obstacle to speaking in the large group is our own fear. Speaking to an audience that is listening closely to every word is a challenging, even daunting, situation. It rarely feels ordinary to speak up in a large group, and our bodies will attest to that. It is common to speak with a racing heart, sweaty palms, a shaky voice, and shortness of breath.

What we say and how we say it is the apex of all of our practice. Whether the words, and the feelings behind the words, represent our internal experience

accurately or not, they are the only indication to others about what we do with our minds and how we work with our rationalizations and judgments. Our speech is a bridge from our own internal world of thoughts, feelings, and impulses to the world outside. It is a bridge to the world of community and the world of others. The large group, therefore, could be considered a practice field, where we can train in verbally expressing ourselves and then reflecting on the feedback.

## CONCLUSION

This article is an introductory exploration into the relationship between the practice of mindfulness and the large group experience. It is meant to introduce the reader to the values and benefits of mindfulness and propose its use as a way to enhance and deepen the participant's experience of the large group. With increased mindfulness, we develop the capacity to stop the momentum of harmful and habitual reactions. Through practice, those reactions can be replaced by open and intentional awareness based on unconditional positive regard and an intention to listen deeply to others. Mindfulness in a large group leads, therefore, to the use of skillful speech and action in our individual lives and allows us to keep that intention extending outward during our engagement with the rest of the world.

## REFERENCES

- Beck, C. J. (1989). *Everyday Zen: Love and work*. San Francisco: HarperCollins.
- Chodron, P. (1991). *The wisdom of no escape*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Chodron, P. (1992). *Tonglen: The path of transformation*. Halifax, NS: Vajradhatu.
- Germer, C. K., Siegel, R. D., & Fulton, P. R. (2005). *Mindfulness and psychotherapy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Hahn, T. N. (2007). A teaching by Thich Nhat Hahn. *Shambhala Sun*, 16, 58–62.
- Hopper, E. (2003). *Traumatic experience in the unconscious life of groups*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Mipham, S. (2000). *Seminary transcripts and personal notes from lectures*. Red Feather Lakes, CO: Shambhala Mountain Center.
- Mipham, S. (2003). *Turning your mind into an ally*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Ormont, L. (1992). *The group therapy experience*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Ormont, L. (2000). Personal interview. In *Comparing and contrasting the six paramitas and the clinical theory of modern analytic practice*. Boulder, CO: Publisher unknown.
- Suzuki, S. (1970). *Zen mind, beginner's mind*. New York: Weatherhill.
- Trungpa, C. (1987). *Cutting through spiritual materialism*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Trungpa, C. (1988). *Shambhala: Sacred path of the warrior*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Trungpa, C. (1994). The practice of mindfulness. *Journal of Contemplative Psychotherapy*, 9, 1–8.

- Trungpa, C. (1999). *Great eastern sun: The wisdom of shambhala*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Weinberg, H. (2003). The large group in a virtual environment. In S. Schneider & H. Weinberg (Eds.), *The large group revisited: The herd, primal horde, crowds, and masses* (pp. 188–200). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Weinberg, H., & Schneider, S. (2003). Introduction: Background, structure, and dynamics of the large group. In S. Schneider & H. Weinberg (Eds.), *The large group revisited: The herd, the primal horde, crowds, and masses* (pp. 13–26). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Yalom, I. T. (1970). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.