

Communities of Generosity: Mindfulness for Academics

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Abstract

Over the last four years, our team has developed a contemplative practices group centered around mindfulness, mutual support, kindness, and generosity. In our experience, this undertaking has been rewarding and enlightening. The teachings we have learned, the practices we have adopted, and the community or *sangha* we have formed have helped us feel more alert and present, manage stress, deal with anxiety and depression, and remain resilient against the pandemic's traumas, both local and global. We have noted benefits that go beyond ourselves as well. Our readings, discussions, and practices have further sensitized us to social inequalities, while helping us build our energy for and commitment to working towards justice and peace. We have experienced this at the local level in our ability to be present for and compassionate with our students during all sorts of unprecedented difficulties presented by the pandemic. We also noticed we were able to show up for our colleagues in ways we had not anticipated. In this short paper, we provide an overview of our practice to comment on the benefits of mindfulness for academics.

Key Terms: Contemplative practice, higher education, occupational stress

Communities of Generosity: Mindfulness for Academics

In 2018, a group of mid-career faculty at our university started meeting weekly with the goal of learning about and practicing mindfulness. We did so in order to reduce stress and improve work-life balance. At the time, we were all trying to publish and serve on committees while working at a teaching-intensive institution. We felt exhausted, burnt out, angry, cynical, apathetic, depressed, anxious, and isolated. We longed for better stress management and conflict resolution techniques. We were all workaholics, not knowing when or how to turn off and relax, and our career focus had left us feeling unfulfilled and incomplete. We could not have imagined the kind, generous community of practice we would be creating, but once we realized what we had made, we wanted to analyze our own experiences with this group in the hope that it might inspire other academics who were feeling similarly to try our practices out for themselves.

In founding this group, we took inspiration from many experiences. In particular, we are indebted to Dr. Beth Blue Swadener for modeling the kind of community we would eventually form. Building on lessons learned in writing accountability groups, dissertation support groups, the [Local to Global Justice Teach-In](#) planning committee, and sponsored research projects under Beth's guidance, over the last four years, our team

has developed a contemplative practices group centered around mindfulness, mutual support, kindness, and generosity. The teachings we have learned, the practices we have adopted, and the community or *sangha* we have formed have helped us feel more alert and present, manage stress, deal with anxiety and depression, and remain resilient. We found mindfulness especially useful when facing the pandemic's traumas, both local and global.

We have noted benefits of our mindfulness that go beyond ourselves as well. Our readings, discussions, and practices have further sensitized us to social inequalities, while helping us build our energy for and commitment to working towards justice and peace. We have experienced this at the local level in our ability to be present for and compassionate with our family, friends, students, and colleagues during all sorts of unprecedented difficulties presented by the pandemic.

In this short paper, we provide an overview of our practice to comment on the benefits of mindfulness for academics. First, we discuss mindfulness and provide a broad overview of its current uses. Next, we outline our approach with this paper before making suggestions for how to go about creating a mindfulness group. We then turn to our self-reported experiences collected in a simple, open-ended questionnaire. Finally, we comment on the unique character of our *sangha*.

Contemplative Practices

The goal of our group is to explore mindfulness. Clinical mindfulness expert Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012) suggests, "Mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally" (p. 1). This might be simplified to "paying attention to your intention" (as cited in Lipsky & Burk, 2009).

Though the research shows that no belief system is required to feel the benefits of these practices (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008), the purpose of mindfulness is made clear in its Buddhist roots: "to realize a tranquil heart and clear mind" (Hanh, 1975, p. 37). Buddhist monk and mindfulness master Thich Nhat Hanh (1975) teaches, "To take hold of our minds and calm our thoughts, we must also practice mindfulness of our feelings and perceptions" (p. 37). At the group's inception, our main goal was simply stress reduction. However, as Warren noted, the group's purpose has blossomed into something far more profound:

While I think this group started with a focus on building emotional or psychological tools to weather the assaults of mid-career academia, I feel as though that individual-oriented focus has fallen away and we are now collectively searching for the right ways to be in a world that is damaged by racism, consumerism, and bureaucratic means-ends thinking.

Through our readings, we learned there are three traditional modes of mindfulness: prayer, contemplation, and meditation. As a group with mixed and complicated religious and spiritual backgrounds, we largely left prayer out of our discussions, though some of our readings brought it back. As professors, we frequently read and discussed, thinking deep thoughts and engaging in comforting and critical contemplation of the material presented. We found meditation to be the most interesting and challenging mode of mindfulness.

Building upon ancient wisdom handed down through primarily Buddhist sources, mindfulness, meditation, and contemplative practices more generally have recently received widespread attention in North America. Though research has lagged behind

popular interest, in recent decades, the benefits of mindfulness have been given scientific support. Central to this increased popularity is the growing recognition of the diverse uses of mindfulness techniques in hospitals and other clinical settings (Kabat-Zinn, 2012; Lipsky & Burk, 2009).

As helping professions are becoming more aware of trauma and its impacts, mindfulness techniques are becoming more widely taught and practiced in fields and professions as varied as medicine, nursing, psychology, counseling, social work, 911 operators (emergency response), emergency medical technicians, child protective services case workers, police officers, correctional staff, online content moderators, and environmental scientists (Lipsky & Burk, 2009). All of these fields struggle with problematic and pervasive levels of occupational stress. In this context, we believe learning mindfulness techniques would be useful not only for ourselves, but also for the communities we serve through our teaching, scholarship, and outreach.

Methods

About a year and a half into our experience with mindfulness and our group, it occurred to us that perhaps our own experiences might serve as both a guide to others as well as a research opportunity, and we embraced the idea of using ourselves as research subjects. As social scientists, we used a short, open-ended questionnaire to explore our experiences with mindfulness. We circulated draft questions on a shared document, setting aside 10 to 15 minutes during subsequent weekly meetings to discuss and finalize it. Our six questions focused on both personal and professional impacts of using mindfulness practices. Most questions were straightforward.

Examples of questions asked included the following: How has being a part of this group changed you? How has being a part of this group informed your pedagogy? How has this influenced or altered the way you interact with students? How has this group helped you become a better colleague? How does this reframe even what the university is? What barriers and drawbacks have you faced practicing mindfulness?

We took a few weeks to think about and record our responses. We then read each other's responses and discussed them during our weekly meetings, collectively synthesizing conclusions to be reported below. Knowing our results would be idiographic (about particulars) and idiosyncratic, we present them here simply as a case study and way of exposing commonalities and nuances in our experiences with these mindfulness practices. That said, we found our experiences align with the benefits often reported in more generalizable research.

Lessons From Establishing a Mindfulness Group

The process of establishing, supporting, and maintaining a weekly contemplative practices group taught us many lessons. We solicited reflections on this process with a question asking what advice we would give to other academics interested in starting such a group. We added to this a question about barriers and drawbacks we faced in our practice.

Although the need and desire for our mindfulness group was first articulated during a roundtable discussion for mid-career professors hosted by our faculty development center, from the start, our group has been an entirely faculty-led, voluntary endeavor. We highlight in this section some of our key findings.

Intrinsic Motivation

In our co-analysis, we agreed that our group would not have been as successful if it had been mandatory, incentivized, or otherwise directed from top down. We found intrinsic motivation is required in the form of both a genuine commitment to learning about and practicing mindfulness, and a sincere desire to join a community of practice or *sangha*. We found these were both an expression of a commitment to communal-care as well as self-care.

As we would learn, mindfulness is not easy, and we made it more difficult for ourselves by choosing readings that paired meditation with social justice and by living through a global pandemic. We would sometimes admit to each other that, without intrinsic motivation and community, it would have been very easy to skip the meeting, avoid the readings, and put off the practices for another week. Likewise, when we ran into difficult material and struggled with some of the practices, it was essential for us to know we chose to do this hard work for ourselves.

Group Membership

Because community or *sangha* is so essential to this work, we spent considerable time and effort working out the details of who, when, where, why, and how to meet. Warren reflected:

Let the membership fluctuate at first. I think a successful mindfulness group is about finding the right combination of people. We wandered through a number of different formulations before we settled on our group of four who work through important and challenging texts together and spend time in mindful contemplation in such a way that benefits all. But it took time (and a pandemic) to get here. I can imagine that other mindfulness groups could come together and take radically different forms. Let the evolution of membership and of purpose unfold, guided only by mindfulness and mutual respect.

Although we ultimately became a group of four, when we first began, Sher sent out an email to a dozen faculty or more, judging interest. Though nine faculty have attended our meetings at least once, and some attended for a semester, eventually, because of schedules and interest, our group settled at four, the present authors. In her advice in the questionnaire, Missy addressed this question of group size by suggesting,

Just do it. But start small. I'm not at all sure that this group would have made me feel like I do, had it begun as a 30-person group or even a 10-person group. Keep it small. Small enough that even the quietest of members has to talk. And as the quietest member of our group, I speak from experience.

Accepting that the form and membership would fluctuate until we found some equilibrium, we focused on process. We aimed to create a sense of welcoming and inviting hospitality. Before the pandemic moved our meetings online, we spent time locating a quiet, private space on campus with a preference for a room with natural light and moveable tables so we could face each other.

Participant Orientation

It was clear from our experiences and discussions that the participants should drive the experience. We set up the group as a self-guided seminar, a collaborative process of collective inquiry. There is no expert or leader, a non-hierarchical approach that both Tim

and Sher appreciated when they were involved with Local to Global Justice, the activist student organization that Beth co-founded (Faragó et al., 2018). This made sense for leveling power differentials because of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, academic rank, seniority, etc., but also because we were all learning the material together. We enjoyed this peer leadership and wondered if this leveling of power differentials could be maintained if administrators, senior faculty, or senior staff joined the group.

Because we were guiding ourselves through the material, we ensured there was nothing prescriptive. We enjoyed a flexible rather than punitive approach, particularly because the hierarchical, punitive nature of academic work and service is what burned us out, at least in part, if not entirely. The dehumanization we felt started us on our path to find a way to reengage and reenergize ourselves, but on our own terms. We treated each week as an invitation to practice mindfulness by trying techniques we read about or had previously learned. We checked in with each other about our progress, but did not shame, tease, or criticize when, inevitably, we struggled some weeks more than others. We did, however, remain encouraging and supportive and reminded each other that small, incremental growth is the name of the game.

Trust

Trust was essential. Establishing ground rules was important. We practiced turn-taking and tried not to interrupt one another. More fundamentally, we respected the confidentiality of what was said in our group.

To build rapport, we needed to get to know each other better. We suggested talking about how meditation, prayer, and contemplation have already played a role in our lives. As conflicted or painful as they sometimes were, we found it necessary to express religious, spiritual, and philosophical experiences. It was only then that we started to understand each other's foundations and hurdles. To this end, we suggest starting with more foundational books and concepts that will let you begin to get to know each other. We began with Thich Nhat Hanh's *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (1975). It probably would not have worked for us to start with *Radical Dharma* (2016) or *Love and Rage* (2020). These books required some heavy emotional lifting that we likely would not have been prepared to handle had we not learned the basics of mindfulness first.

A Sample Format

The membership, format, and purpose of our contemplative practices group emerged over time, and we encourage anyone interested in starting such a group to allow for such an organic unfolding. To provide some suggestions, in its current form, our group meets online weekly for an hour and a half and follows a modified academic seminar or book club format.

We started with one-hour meetings but, after the pandemic, we have often stretched them into an hour and a half or longer. As our community has developed, we have found that time usually flies. We often have to rein in discussions to make sure members get to class or appointments on time.

We started with in-person meetings and moved online with the pandemic, retaining the online format to date for its flexibility. We enjoy the option of being in our offices, at home, or even in another state. Meeting as a group on campus sometimes felt too visible and thus subject to internalized institutional pressures. Getting off campus eliminated much of the performative aspect, the appearance of engagement sometimes required when administrators or colleagues popped in on a meeting or ran into us in the hallway on the way over.

We have used both Zoom and Microsoft Teams for these online meetings. We have our cameras turned on and generally leave ourselves unmuted unless barking dogs, road noise, or construction prevent it. Internet connection issues have occasionally led to some lag, stutters, or restarts but, for the most part, we have been able to have relatively organic, free-flowing conversations. We have found the visual cues from the video are important for turn-taking, practicing empathy, and community building. Catching glimpses of a dog or cat in the background is a stress-relieving bonus, making our cozy community feel even warmer in contrast to the cold austerity often felt in academia.

Our practice has evolved over time but settled into a typical pattern: debrief, discussion, practice, wrap up. First, as people log on, we greet each other, catch up, and debrief the week as needed. This might last for five minutes or half an hour. Throughout the pandemic, this became a time when we shared information, compared experiences, vented frustrations, and solicited advice. We have recognized these informal starting conversations are highly beneficial for our sense of community and individual well-being. We have often been able to provide support and perspective for each other, as well as concrete advice and suggestions, pooling our institutional memory and knowledge.

Support may even take the form of simply providing “settled energy” to others in the group, especially on rough days (Menakem, 2017). On this, Missy reflected:

Even if I can't offer intellectual insight, I can offer a calm, settled energy. I can help everyone to feel grounded simply by bringing that energy to the group. And on the days when I can't even be settled, I remind myself that we are all educators at heart, and even if I do nothing else aside from show up and learn from my *sangha*, all of these wonderful people are always ready, willing, and excited to teach anyone who wants to learn, me included.

The mutuality or collectivity of our experience has been central. We are learning together, understanding more deeply by teaching one another.

Eventually, someone tries to come up with a clever segue, and we transition from this informal conversation into a more guided discussion of the chapter we read for the week. Usually, we let the discussion flow freely, starting with a prompt, if needed, of simply asking what we found interesting in the reading. Our facility with running seminar groups has paid off, as various members have stepped up to guide discussions depending on preparation, interest, and energy level that day.

Like we would in a seminar, if someone is quiet, or some of us have a lot to say and have been talking for a while, we call on members with broad questions, such as: What do you think? What stood out to you this week? We often hop around a chapter, making connections to prior readings, discussing key concepts and experiences with any practices described in that week's readings.

After the discussion, if time permits, we move on to one of the meditation practices. We have tried every practice we encountered in the books we read, but the practice that stuck was Lama Rod Owen's (2020) Seven Homecomings. We have done that meditation dozens of times. One member, Tim, has chosen to read while the others close their eyes and go through the guided meditation. We discussed rotating the reader but prefer familiarity.

Building on the Buddhist notion of the Three Jewels (the language used to describe the three ideals of Buddhism, specifically the Buddha, the dharma or teachings, and the *sangha* or community), the aim of the practice of the Seven Homecomings is to become mindful of seven sources of support always available to us: our guides, wisdom texts,

community, ancestors, the earth, silence, and yourself (Owens, 2020). While we found it cerebral and a little tedious at first, over time, it has become very relaxing, centering, and empowering. With repetition and ritual, our members have discussed how the practice has deepened at unpredictable intervals. Some members have reported that our experiences of support from these resources have become more visceral and felt. That is, the practice has become personal and meaningful.

In the early days, when we were still finding our stride, instead of discussing a chapter, we sat through a 10-to-15-minute guided meditation, often on an app, podcast, or online video, and then discussed both that experience and our successes from the prior week. This proved to be a little too unstructured, and we transitioned to a reading group.

Our reading list so far has included Hanh's (1975) *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Williams, Owens, and Syedullah's (2016) *Radical Dharma*; Owen's (2020) *Love and Rage*, Menakem's (2017) *My Grandmother's Hands*, hooks's (2001) *All About Love*, Hanh's (2001) *Anger*, and Chozen Bays's (2017) *Mindful Eating*.

Warren suggested the first text. After that, we decided each text as we went, assembling suggestions and doing an informal vote a few weeks before we were scheduled to finish the book we were currently reading. As our reading list attests, we have let our curiosity lead us from book to book.

We read one chapter each week. Typically, this has been our practice even if they were very short chapters. We rarely found we lacked things to talk about and, if we did, we seemed to naturally spend more time catching up and debriefing at the start. It also meant we had more time to fit in a mindfulness meditation at the end. On rare occasions, we have simply ended early.

Though the academics in us sometimes wished for more density of content or less summary, this pacing proved helpful for digesting this material. That said, we have occasionally voted to read parts of a book more quickly, two chapters per week, or even to skip chapters none of us found relevant after a quick preview. Valuing the experience of learning together, we talked about and have (mostly) resisted reading ahead, even when many of these books excited us and we found ourselves compelled to do so.

Finally, to end each meeting, we do a quick wrap up and planning session. This typically involves a discussion of what chapter or chapters we are reading next and can be very quick. If needed, we discuss future books to read, as well as any upcoming scheduling conflicts that might prevent one or more of us from attending. As our community has developed, we have often found this is a time when we express sincere and unsolicited appreciation for our support and time together. We make it a point to say goodbye before signing off.

Experiences With Mindfulness

Our *sangha's* collaborative inquiry enabled us to explore a number of dimensions of this experience. To start, we simply asked how being part of this group changed us. Our responses painted a picture of our state beforehand.

For context, most of us had recently been tenured and were adjusting as mid-career faculty. More than one of us was or had recently been the chair of their department. Later, we would accept Lama Rod's (2020) diagnosis for this feeling: heartbrokenness. As Tim put it, "This was my way of learning what we're all taught in mindfulness, the same lesson from airplanes: In an emergency, secure your own oxygen mask first."

Missy expressed how being a part of our community has challenged and changed her thinking:

I am a better person. . . . I feel more centered, more generous, and more loving toward the world at large. When someone cuts me off on the road or lets go of a door that then hits me in the shoulder, I still swear at them in my head, or maybe even under my breath, but I don't hold it against them. They are wrapped up in their thoughts. It is hard to practice mindfulness, and so it is hard to be aware of all that is going on around you. I forgive them quicker. I feel like I am approaching the best version of myself but also the most authentic version of myself.

We understood these changes socially as well. Sher wrote:

In this group, I've found a space that is open and welcoming to discussions of spirituality, that has provided me with grace and patience as I stumble awkwardly through this new spiritual pathway. Like my other group members, I have come to feel fundamentally changed by participating in this group, more open to new ideas, practices, belief systems, more forgiving of myself and, by extension, other people. I never saw myself as being part of a church, temple, or coven, but here in our little *sangha*, I'm finally experiencing what I've long denied in myself—a spiritual life and practice.

Warren expressed a similar feeling that the biggest change was a return to a community of practice. He noted:

I don't know that the group has changed me so much as allowed me to access parts of myself that I'd left untended for years. Though I was raised in a church community and, as an adult, found a home in a Quaker meeting, it's been twenty years since I've enjoyed a place in a community of people who are interested in discussing how to live a moral/ethical/good life.

We also asked ourselves about how mindfulness impacted us specifically in our roles as academics. First, we focused on our pedagogy and interactions with students.

Our answers suggest two pedagogical effects from our work. The first is curricular in nature. Tim mentioned our studies equipping him with “new perspectives to round out what is provided in the course text.” Sher describes bringing new mindfulness techniques into the class, providing her students with tools to manage “secondary trauma exposure on workers in the Criminal Justice field.” In Warren's comments, he discussed a commitment to including more marginalized voices in substantial ways into his classes, a result of the *Radical Dharma* (2016) and *Love and Rage* (2020) texts.

The second effect we observed was administrative. This course of study has had an impact on who we are in relation to our students. Missy discussed a turn away from the strict imposition of course policies to a regular check-in with students that sometimes leads to a respectful conversation about how elements of the course can be reorganized to best meet the students' needs. Warren noted that, in teaching a Sociology of Love class, he adjusted his approach mindfully. He gave his course structure fewer assignments as an act of trust, and divulged personal information in early lectures as an act of respect and communion.

Looking more closely at how mindfulness has changed our interactions with students, we noted that we have become more patient, charitable, and open-minded. Mindfulness

allows us to check our egos, decenter ourselves in these interactions, and interrupt typical professor-student or elder-youth scripts. In this way, we have created space to further humanize our students and offer understanding.

We solicited more general reflections about how mindfulness has changed our experiences of academia and the university with a complex question that left much room for interpretation. Our responses spoke to the community we created.

We reflected that, at the very least, our contemplative practices group is a multidisciplinary faculty learning community, a social network and support group outside the department. At best, it is a *sangha*, a spiritual community, a community of practice. It is renewing and sustaining for those involved. It has helped us connect and be more authentic and human in our interactions.

We agreed that, to be a *sangha*, we must learn to love each other in the sense of committing to helping one another do the hard work of unfolding, knowing thyself. Love is a risk; it is scary. Trust is built over time.

It was for these reasons such a group probably would not work as a top-down mandate. Tim wrote, “We’ve developed past collegiality to friendship. We have built trust through gradual, natural, mutual self-disclosures and maintaining confidentiality about what is said in our group. We share responsibility for each other. We look out for and support one another.” While institutional encouragement and logistical support such as classroom space were greatly appreciated, we quickly understood that hospitality was essential, rather than mandatory attendance or even incentivized participation.

Finally, given its roots in Buddhist teachings, we asked ourselves how we felt about the spiritual or religious elements of mindfulness work. As mentioned above, our group has a mixed and complicated history with religion, most of us growing up with Christianity in one form or another. Some of us had read Buddhist texts before. One of us had a grad school mentor with a Zen practice. Two of us have traveled in Southeast Asia, and one of us has visited the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment. None of us identified as Buddhists.

Initially, we dodged this issue by focusing on Buddhism as a philosophy and thinking about the historical figure of the Buddha. Getting sociological, we investigated and talked about the cultural contexts for Buddhism in Hanh’s Vietnam and French monastery, and angel Kyodo Williams’s and Lama Rod’s New York.

Eventually, we began to learn about and become more sensitive to the colonization of mindfulness (Lynn et al., 2016). Such efforts try to take meditation out of the yoga or spiritual path. The secularization of these practices speaks to colonizers’ entitled attitudes, as if an entire culture’s traditions are a grab-bag to which they can help themselves, thus separating the physical practice from its original intended form and erasing both peoples and histories at the same time. Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning to join, to yoke, or to unify, and refers to a range of traditional Indian practices aiming to unite mind and body, humanity and nature, local and global consciousness (Basavaraddi, 2015). As we acknowledged and confronted our dodge, the underlying message of interconnection began to open us up to other understandings.

As indicated above, some of us found the spiritual dimensions of this work to be transformational. Sher reflected, “The grounding of these works within Buddhist and other spiritual traditions has been a pleasant change from what sometimes feels like a relentless focus on ‘objectivity’ in certain facets of the academy.” Similarly, Tim wrote, “I began to challenge myself, asking questions like, Why do I believe scientists should

be atheists? and, Why do I insist on empiricism and instrumental rationality when I know so many other forms of knowledge and consciousness coexist?”

Conclusion

Our contemplative practices group has provided much support and energy through these challenging times. It has bolstered our resiliency in ways that have translated into our ability to be present and supportive for our students, colleagues, friends, family, and ourselves. It has transformed us individually and as a community.

The spirit of service to our communities is deeply ingrained in all the members of our group, but it is also something that we have actively cultivated as a community. We remind ourselves that each of us is called to be a teacher to support our students and educate about issues of social justice. We also try to be aware that it may be this tendency to push ourselves, sometimes to extremes, when we believe we can be of help, that prompted our turn towards mindfulness as self-care.

As our group’s initial organizer and de facto meditation guide respectively, Sher and Tim took much inspiration from their shared mentor, Beth. More than just her energy and passion, we took away a fundamental focus on process, the doing of a thing in the right way. As we would learn later, this is a very mindful approach.

In our work, we uphold feminist, democratic spaces with an emphasis on flattened hierarchies, face-time, community, openness, transparency, deliberation, kindness, generosity, and respect. These were not just words but lived practices shaping how we spoke with and worked alongside our many diverse teams. Continuing the legacy of Local to Global Justice, we have attempted to bring these ideals and practices to our contemplative practices group. We believe our individual spiritual awakenings and the growth of our *sangha* is proof of their success.

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