

## The Four Possibilities of Silence and Speech

Contemplative Group Dynamics relies on a group of mindfulness practitioners coming together in real time. The practice involves periods of silence and speech. The group cultivates attention to changing individual and group appearances structured by sensation, feeling, mental events, and experience. Such attention discloses the transparency of the seemingly solid conceptions of “individual” and “group.”

During Contemplative Group Dynamics practice a synchronisation of body, speech, and mind occurs both within the individual as well as among members. This synchronisation, of being in time with one another, manifests in the interplay of speech and silence. To provide a framework for contemplating the relationship of the individual to the group, four possibilities of speech and silence are offered:

	SILENCE individual & group	SPEECH group
ATTENTION	A	B
DISTRACTION	C	D

- A. The group or an individual rests in *silent* attention
- B. Individuals in the group *speak* from attention
- C. The group or an individual are *silent* but distracted
- D. Individuals in the group *speak* from distraction

Moment to moment permutations exist of the four possibilities. We may move in and out of a given space. The practice is to notice where our individual and group attention is resting. When distracted (C & D) we are no longer available to ourselves or the group/world. When we are undistracted (B), and speech arises from silence, deeper silences may be generated.

Contemplative Group Dynamics foregrounds the “we.” We then discover how joint attention shapes the reality of shared experience. By attending and expressing perceptions having a relatively immediate (1-10 seconds) time duration, the contemplative group can be distinguished from exchange anchored only in the narrative (10 plus seconds).<sup>1</sup> This immediate focus helps attention stay within shared embodied experience and discern the perceptual from the conceptual. For a time, such discernment frees one from habitual or stereotyped speech patterns. Patterns which express and maintain the narrative time frame. (This parallels the discursive thought process we work with during individual mindfulness-awareness practice.) As the group’s experience becomes more complex there remains an ongoing apprehension of the bodily basis of shared experience which includes the bodily act of speaking.

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<sup>1</sup>These distinctions (including a third sub-personal one) were proposed by Varela to describe *nowness*. Varela, F. J. (1999). Present-time consciousness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6 (2-3): pp.111-140