

Mindfulness: Buddhist or Catholic?

In a world that often confuses new age practice with authentic Christian spirituality, some people may be concerned about the Buddhist roots of the word and practice of mindfulness. It is true that “Right Mindfulness” is one of the steps for a Buddhist on the path to “enlightenment.” Through a superficial analysis, there may be some cause for concern here. Let’s look a little deeper.

First of all, it is helpful to understand what is essentially wrong with Buddhism for a Christian to believe. The most important reality of Christianity is the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity. We are presented through this reality with the idea that God is a Trinity, both three and one. As God is the source of all creation, all being, all that is, His mysterious three-and-one nature is found in all that exists. Humanity itself is both a unity and a diversity of being. We are all one human family, ultimately made for the *communion* of saints, while at the same time we are all individual human beings. A Buddhist, on the other hand, does not believe in both the unity and diversity of being. A Buddhist believes that only the unity is real, while the diversity is an illusion. The path to “enlightenment” for a Buddhist is the process of discovering that all sense of diversity is an illusion. This means that the self does not exist as a separate being from anyone else. This means that there is no God that exists separate from all being. Obviously this way of understanding the world is completely opposite of a Christian worldview.

There are, however, many important insights into humanity developed by Buddhist thought. The path to “enlightenment” has eight steps, and while Christianity does not agree with its final destination, there are a number of steps that are consistent with the Christian sense of flourishing. Two other steps on the path to enlightenment, for example, are Right Speech and Right Action. We find here within the Buddhist teaching instructions for leading a good life that are very similar to what would be found in Catholic moral teaching.

Mindfulness as a Buddhist practice is simply the ability to stay focused on the present moment. Buddhist teachers have cultivated a specific understanding of the way the human mind works in light of this goal. While the idea of focusing on the present moment is found in Christian spirituality, the explicit understanding of the psychological process for paying attention to the present moment hasn’t been developed much in those spiritual contexts. Mindfulness is a psychological process, not a spiritual one, so spiritual writers haven’t been as concerned with the “how” of paying attention. If there is some concern about mindfulness somehow replacing authentic Christian spirituality, one has only to look past the surface to realize that mindfulness is not spiritual at all.

Mindfulness came to be known as a treatment protocol as the result of the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, a researcher at the UMASS Medical Center. In 1979 he launched

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) as a treatment for chronic pain in his patients there. Kabat-Zinn studied Zen meditation and Buddhist practice before that, and realized that he felt much more at peace as a result of his practice. He sought to introduce the benefits of his practice to a secular clinical population and thereby created MBSR.

While some practitioners try to connect MBSR to Buddhist philosophy, it is not an inherently Buddhist practice. In fact, Buddhist teachers can be very critical of mindfulness as it has been developed in our culture now, as it is detached from the full Buddhist path to enlightenment.

Kabat-Zinn realized, however, that as a result of his Buddhist belief, some of his mental practices brought peace to his racing mind. He wanted to bring that gift to his patients, and so he dissected the brain practice out of the larger system and presented it as mindfulness.

Mindfulness is Not Mind-Emptiness

Some meditation practices lead you to try to empty your mind of all thought. Some people further confuse the idea of mindfulness with being the same as these ancient traditions of spiritual meditation from the East, or even some kinds of Christian meditation that have been heavily influenced from the East. A further distinction to learn about healthy mindfulness exercises and potentially misleading forms of spiritual meditation is found by simply paying attention to the word “mindfulness.” The word itself dispels the confusion. Where some of those Eastern practices become dangerous is in the effort to empty the mind of all thought. Some religious traditions will use a mantra, some sound or word, or name of a Hindu god to repeat over and over again, with the express purpose of emptying the mind of all thought and developing a kind of empty awareness. The subjective experience of this kind of meditation can be misleading. This is where these worldviews end up considering all thought and division, and then even the sense of self, as an illusion, because of what it feels like when one enters this state of emptiness.

Mindfulness is the exact *opposite* of this kind of practice! Mindfulness is the effort to FILL the mind with all that is around it. Mindfulness is waking up to reality, to the sights, sounds, tastes, feelings, smells, and thoughts that are happening in each moment. We seek to fill our minds with these realities during mindfulness exercise, not empty them of anything.

Being Healthy Is Human

Christianity does not require us to be less open to the human experience, but more. When Pope Benedict was Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he wrote, “A Letter to Bishops on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation.” He was concerned about syncretism, or letting incongruent aspects of other religions mix with the practice of Catholicism. He clarified these issues for our contemporary culture. In this letter he made

the important point of not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. First he made the distinction between health of the spirit and health of the body.

“Some physical exercises automatically produce a feeling of quiet and relaxation, pleasing sensations, perhaps even phenomena of light and of warmth, which resemble spiritual well-being. To take such feelings for the authentic consolations of the Holy Spirit would be a totally erroneous way of conceiving the spiritual life. Giving them a symbolic significance typical of the mystical experience, when the moral condition of the person concerned does not correspond to such an experience, would represent a kind of mental schizophrenia which could also lead to psychic disturbance and, at times, to moral deviations.”

Here he starts off with a significant warning about confusing physical sensations of peace with an assumption that all is well on a spiritual level. We know that spiritual well-being springs from moral virtue. Sometimes feelings betray that reality, and people can feel bad even though our actions are mostly good, or people can feel good even when our actions are mostly bad. We cannot confuse feelings with spiritual reality. Therefore no amount of “practice” or exercise, or nutrition, or spa treatments or anything else that makes our bodies feel good can be an indication that we are spiritually close to God.

Pope Benedict goes on to say, however, that we can’t disregard the importance of taking care of the body, or even using exercises that prepare the body and mind to enter into spiritual experiences:

*“That **does not mean that** genuine practices of meditation which come from the Christian East and from the great non-Christian religions, which prove attractive to the man of today who is divided and disoriented, **cannot constitute a suitable means** of helping the person who prays to come before God with an interior peace, even in the midst of external pressures.”*

Non-Christian eastern practices can be seen, according to Pope Benedict, as “suitable means” for preparing the mind to enter into a spiritual practice. So not only is mindfulness not an inherently eastern practice, but even if it was we would still have good reason to learn how to practice it if it quiets the mind and helps us enter into prayer with interior peace.

As a side note- there are some practices that are inherently contrary to our Catholic faith in themselves. They are not simple practices of meditation, but introduce elements of belief that are actively against a Christian faith. Reiki for instance speaks of supernatural “energies” that heal, without counting on the work of the Holy Spirit to be the only source of any good kind of healing “energy.” The power to heal is passed down from master to student through a process of laying on of hands. These practices are not simple meditation. Many New Age practices are problematic for Christians, but at the same time the Church Magisterium teaches that certain “genuine practices of meditation which come from the Christian East *and from the great non-Christian religions*” can be seen as

acceptable ways to quiet the busy mind, calm the stormy spirit, and prepare us to enter deeply into prayerful recollection and relationship with God.

A Truly Catholic Practice

Ultimately mindfulness as a psychological practice works because it teaches us how to live in a brain state that is only possible when we have a neurological sense of being **safe**. The practice itself doesn't explain *why* we might feel safe. From the Buddhist perspective, we are safe because the idea of safety and danger are illusions. Our individuality is an illusion, and dying is an illusion. Mindfulness could be practiced with this underlying philosophy, and in many places it is. If you are Googling mindfulness and hear mention of the "illusion of self," "loss of self," or "ultimate unity with all being," you have found Buddhist mindfulness. Christianity proposes a different reality. There is another reason why we are ultimately safe.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:25 to "not be anxious about your life." It is not a suggestion, or a hope- it is a command. He then goes on to explain that the birds and flowers are taken care of, because of the Father's love. **The Father's love is key**. If we believe the Father loves us, even more than the flowers and birds, then we can let go of "tomorrow's troubles."

This is why St. Paul tells us "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and **the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus**" (Ph 4:6).

A strong tradition of spirituality has developed throughout Catholic history based on this idea. One of the most well known examples, and a recommended book for further reading, is Fr. Jean Pierre de Caussade's "Abandonment to Divine Providence." In it he describes how our entire lives can be given over to trusting the Goodness of the Father who loves us, guides us, and always gives us good things. This is a spirituality that is meant to include *all* things in life that we experience, especially the bad ones. Ultimately we never see reality unfolding as God does, and we don't know the full extent of the meaning or purpose of any event the way God does. This can be a very difficult point for many people, and probably one of the most common roadblocks to faith in Christ. "If God is good, all-powerful, and loves us, why does He let bad things happen to good people?"

Mindfulness presupposes faith that God the Father is a *good* Father. Once I sent out a flyer for a mindfulness course that mentioned "Trustful Surrender To God Who Loves Us" and a woman wrote to me very upset. She asked how she could be expected to practice mindfulness based on a God who loves her when he let her child die. There are no words to take away the horror and tragedy of an experience like this. However, these kinds of things are not outside the scope of what God knows, understands, and plans for. It is our way of thinking that needs to change - not God. It is precisely during these

tragedies that our way of thinking has an opportunity to change in a way that someone who hasn't experienced that level of tragedy can only imagine.

When we experience that kind of pain, we immediately want it to go away. We think of everything possible to make it go away, and the thought that God, who could make it go away but doesn't, can be too difficult to bear. Therefore our minds come up with all kinds of arguments against God; either his goodness, his power, his love, or his very existence. At times like these, it might make more sense to believe that God is angry, doesn't care about us, doesn't pay attention to us, or doesn't even exist.

"Why, God?" is that question we ask, but there is a different question. We might ask instead, "Where are you, God?" And if we can cry out to the Father, "Why have you abandoned me?" we just might hear, in between those sobs, the faint echo of our cries resounding from the mouth of Jesus who suffers with us.

It is not that God doesn't want to take away our suffering. It is that we have gotten to a place so far away that we must experience the suffering of purification in order to be close to God, like the fire that melts gold to purify it of its impurities. There is a certain element of mystery here and no amount of words will ever adequately plumb its depths. However, if we tweak a bit the way we ask the question and the answer we are looking for, we might draw a lot closer to the healing insight at the heart of this mystery of suffering.

Let's accept for a moment that God isn't supposed to immediately stop all of our suffering. If we need any evidence of this, we have only to look at the Cross. If there's anyone a father would save from suffering, it would be his own son. As mysterious as this is, removing suffering isn't the way God proves His love. If He didn't do it when his own son cried out for him to "remove this cup" and cried out from the cross, "Why have you abandoned me?" there must be more to understand here.

Why let his son and himself go through such suffering? The answer can only be unrelenting love. God's love for us is why Jesus suffered the cross.

Here's a different way to understand suffering. Catholics are fond of the phrase, "offer it up" to try to encourage one another in the midst of suffering. There might be some validity to the sentiment, but I think it is also sort of misleading (and many times unhelpful). If you've ever been the one suffering and someone said, "offer it up," you know what I'm talking about. "Offer it up" has a sense of choice about it, as if you are choosing the suffering you are going through. We don't choose suffering; suffering is forced upon us. Sometimes we suffer as a direct result of our choices, but even then we certainly didn't choose the suffering. Because of original sin, we suffer. Because of the world, our fallen nature, or spiritual temptation, we suffer, and not by choice. The one who actually did have the freedom to "offer it up" is the one who didn't actually have to suffer. The one who did have a choice was Jesus. He didn't have original sin, and he didn't have to suffer.

This is the reality that we need to let shift our thinking on the matter. Jesus, who did not have to suffer, chose to suffer because we suffer. He looked at us, upon our crosses, and he said to himself, "If that's where you are, that's where I want to be." He was like us in "all things but sin." This means he suffered everything we suffer. He suffered the heartache of losing friends, of loved ones dying, of being misunderstood, even of being overworked (trying to get away from the crowds for a little time to himself but being pulled back in because of people's needs). Ultimately he even allowed himself to go through the excruciating pain of suffering all this without the consolation of God's presence. "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Why did Jesus go through that? Because we go through that. He knew he wasn't going to take away our suffering, so he joined us in it.

Again, the point is not to present something to you here that might fully take away your pain in times of great suffering. The point is to get you to think a moment that, if you are tempted to doubt the goodness of the Father, maybe your doubt has more to do with the way you are thinking about it than the actual existence of the Creator of the Universe. Maybe there's a different way to see things in which, even in the midst of this earth's greatest tragedies, God is still Good.

The Pieta

This is the disposition that Mary had. She joined her son in his suffering, also choosing it for our sake, and in doing so presented a perfect model of faith for us. The image of Michelangelo's *Pieta* shows us what this faith looks like. Mary, who raised the Son of God, witnessed countless miracles, hoped constantly in the salvation of the world through the Kingship of her son, then watched as he was beaten, crucified, and lay lifeless, dead in her arms. What tragedy can you imagine that could more powerfully test one's faith in the goodness of God? She held her dead son in her arms and still trusted God's goodness and his plan. Besides the agony in the garden, I can't imagine another moment in all of human history more complex with the spectrum of human emotion at the deepest levels. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." This is faith.

That is the faith we aspire to. That is the faith we pray for, and want to live our lives by. That is the faith that can change the way we actually live. I don't mean only in a spiritual way (though that is certainly true). I mean in a *felt, experienced, lived* way. I mean in our day to day life, the mundane activities we shuffle through every day. The depth of that faith can change the way we shop for groceries, take care of kids, get stuck in traffic, manage finances, deal with co-workers, employees, or employers, love our spouses, take care of leaky faucets, drink a beer or glass of wine with friends, meet strangers on the street or at the department store, spend time online or on our phones, pick out the clothes we wear, choose how to spend time with extended families, and countless other things. Our faith *should* affect these things. Not just in trying to be more charitable, less greedy, more patient, and less selfish, but in letting "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding. Do you have that? Is that just a spiritual reality for you, or can you say you really feel that in the small day-to-day moments of your life? It is too easy to compartmentalize our faith, but we need to integrate it, so that the peace St. Paul speaks of changes everything.