

What About "Mindfulness"?

One of the trends in counseling is the use of "mindfulness." This sounds compatible with biblical discipleship (such as the need to "renew your mind, Rom. 12:2, etc.), but a closer examination of the philosophy and practice of mindfulness reveals that it is contrary to Christ Centered Counseling.

Dr. Joanna Jackson wrote an excellent article on this topic in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*. Here are some excerpts:

Mindfulness has become a buzzword in our modern Western world. It appears on the cover of magazines, in the news, on bestseller lists. It is a go-to treatment in the therapy room, and it is heralded in schools, the military, and businesses alike. It is the antidote to everything from daily worry to clinical depression. Celebrities swear by it, neuroscientists study it, monks practice it, and psychologists are trained in it. And with good reason. An increasing body of research attests measurable benefits for a wide range of physical disorders and psychological distresses. Something in mindfulness is resonating deeply.

In addition to its popularity in the wider world, it has received an increasing level of commitment and following from many Christians who testify to the benefit that mindfulness has been to their own faith, and who recommend its use in therapy and counseling. At the same time, many Christians remain skeptical and cautious about mindfulness, both for themselves and in their roles helping others. So what are we to make of mindfulness? What is it really about? What should we be wary of, and to what degree can we benefit from the insights that mindfulness provides?

[Background] While elements of mindfulness have been taught for centuries by Buddhist monks, it is Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn who is generally considered to have introduced the practice in the West. Kabat-Zinn, now Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, was first introduced to meditation by a Zen missionary. He went on to study meditation with various Zen-Buddhist teachers and began using mindfulness in the secular context of his work in the 1970s.

There are typically two components present within mindfulness meditations:

1. Self-regulation of attention. Focus is maintained on the person's internal experience in the present moment, often aided by attending to breathing...

2. Adopting a particular orientation toward one's experience in the present moment. This component is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance...

The roots of the term mindfulness are found in many original Buddhist texts. It is a translation of the ancient Indian word *sati*, which captures a kind of present-moment awareness. Mindfulness meditation holds deep importance in Buddhist teachings and practice. It goes hand in hand with the doctrine that all of existence, without exception, is transient and fleeting. This doctrine of transience includes the idea of the non-self—the concept that there is no unchanging permanent self, soul, or essence in living beings. meditation is designed to penetrate the delusion of the permanent self by cultivating detachment from ordinary consciousness. It is taught that as we detach from our thinking, desires, and identity, we will see the world (and ourselves) as it all really is—a form of projection.

In spite of presenting mindfulness as compatible with almost any spiritual, religious, or philosophical belief, it brings with it metaphysical commitments that involve Buddhist accounts of the self.

[Essential differences]

1. The problem and the solution.

Mindfulness contends that mental afflictions are our greatest problem.

2. Perspective vs. person.

Biblical Christianity recognizes the problems of anxiety and inner dissatisfaction that mindfulness also identifies, but locates them within a very different understanding of reality.

3. The present in context of the past and future.

To put it succinctly, within mindfulness, the present moment is re-oriented because the past and future are not seen as a reality but as a transitory creation of the mind. They are not controlling concepts or determining factors, because it is only the present moment that truly

exists or has meaning. In contrast, a Christian worldview radically reorients the present moment because the past and future are real, regardless of our perception of them. This enables us to embrace the present moment because we trust that the past and future belong to our merciful Father in heaven, whose plans are good and glorious.

4. Where does our help come from?

Mindfulness is a form of self-salvation.

"Mindfulness" could remind us of some useful concepts.

1. Silence, space, and timeout

[Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth! Psalm 46:10]

2. Biblical meditation

[But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night. Psalm 1:2]

3. The body and the breath

[But there is a spirit in man,
And the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding. Job 32:8]

4. The present moment

[Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. Matthew 6:34]

[Summary]

Although mindfulness practice contains some common-grace wisdom, we must not be naive in thinking it is easy to engage in mindfulness meditation in a non-Buddhist way. It is incredibly difficult to divorce the techniques of mindfulness from its metaphysical framework. In light of this challenge, I do not advocate "Christian mindfulness," or efforts to Christianize mindfulness practices for use in counseling. Rather, it is more prudent to let the mindfulness revolution spur Christians on to

revive and more fully realize the contemplative resources for living well that are already contained within centuries-old Christian practices.

We have a rich heritage that can teach us the discipline of biblical meditation, psalm-like reflection on our inner lives, the importance of embracing the present moment as God's precious children, and the need for silence and solitude. Having support for how to do these things in the current context of our individual lives and church communities would be of great value. Herein lies the possibility for developing further resources that are tailored to the challenges our culture presents and the individual struggles that we face." [1]

[1] Joanna Jackson, *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 33:1 (2019): 25–45.
www.CCEF.org

[2] For a good downloadable booklet that compares Biblical meditation with eastern meditation, see <https://comeandreason.com/meditation-guide/> (Note: Dr. Tim Jennings is a Seventh Day Adventist psychiatrist and author.)

Bracketed content added, J.B.W.