

How Christian Faith Compares and Conflicts with Mindfulness



by JOANNA JACKSON

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?

In order to think wisely about this approach, we need to understand mindfulness in both its modern-day, secularized form, as well as in its original context. Once we understand what mindfulness is, and its aims, skills, and

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applications, we will then bring it under the lens of Scripture, wrestling through how biblical truth compares, connects, and critiques it. We can then consider if and what mindfulness has to offer the biblical counselor.

The Recent History of Mindfulness

Before considering the origin of mindfulness, it is worth first understanding mindfulness in its popular form, as this is how most people encounter it. 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. In 1979 he founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Clinic, followed by the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society. His programs and best-selling books, including the landmark work on mindfulness, *Full-Catastrophe Living*,¹ sparked the application of mindfulness ideas and practices in medicine and beyond. Since the founding of the MBSR Clinic, there has been an explosion of research within the field, testing mindfulness-based techniques for varied problems.

Although he derived his approach from the Buddhist tradition, Kabat-Zinn introduced mindfulness to the psychological community as a universal rather than a specifically Buddhist practice. He explained that mindfulness would benefit people in Western society who might be unwilling to adopt Buddhist traditions or vocabulary.² His aim was therefore to introduce mindfulness practice as a skill—independent, yet respectful, of its religious and cultural origins. He believed that regular people could appreciate a mindfulness removed from its Buddhist packaging.

¹ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full-Catastrophe Living: How to Cope with Stress, Pain and Illness Using Mindfulness Meditation* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

² Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future,” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10:2 (2003): 144-156.

What Is Mindfulness?

According to Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”³ Within this definition, mindfulness is understood both as a quality of consciousness (a focused awareness), as well as a practice in itself (a set of skills and techniques). Mindfulness meditation is usually the means by which both of these are developed and experienced.⁴

There are typically two components present within mindfulness meditations:⁵

1. *Self-regulation of attention.* Focus is maintained on the person’s internal experience in the present moment, often aided by attending to breathing. For example, in a guided mindfulness meditation, participants focus on their flow of breathing in each moment. When the mind wanders off onto other things (e.g., anticipations of the future or recollections of the past), participants direct their attention back to the physical (to breathing and to their bodies), and to their experience in the present moment.⁶
2. *Adopting a particular orientation toward one’s experience in the present moment.* This component is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance. So when the mind wanders, rather than focusing on the content of thoughts or feelings, the participant simply observes them as transient events in the consciousness. Regardless of whether such thoughts or feelings are neutral or highly charged, the participant observes them without judgement, not pursuing or rejecting them, but “letting them go” until they dissolve of their own accord.

³ Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 4.

⁴ Kirk Brown, Ryan Warren, M. Richard, J. David Creswell, “Mindfulness: Theoretical Foundations and Evidence for Its Salutary Effects,” *Psychological Inquiry* 18:4 (2007): 211-37.

⁵ Scott R. Bishop, Mark Lau, Shauna Shapiro, Linda Carlson, Nicole D. Anderson, James Carmody, Zindel V. Segal, Susan Abbey, Michael Speca, Drew Velting, Gerald Devins, “Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition,” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11:3 (2006): 230–41.

⁶ Jon Kabat-Zinn, “*Mindfulness Meditation: CD Series 1*, (USA: BetterListen!, 2013) CD.

Such mindfulness meditations are now standard practice in most evidence-based treatments for depression, anxiety, and stress and have been incorporated into popular psychological therapies.⁷ They are primarily used as a means of emotional regulation or calming the mind and are therefore recommended in the treatment of various physical and psychological disorders, as well as for maintaining mental wellness.⁸

The Roots of Mindfulness

To be respectful of the religious and cultural origins of mindfulness, as Kabat-Zinn suggests, requires understanding the roots of this practice from a Zen-Buddhist perspective. This is not only respectful, but goes some way toward

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guarding us from underestimating or failing to appreciate the epistemological assumptions behind secular forms of mindfulness meditation. It can also explain the focus on the present moment and the emphasis on letting go of thoughts and feelings.

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.⁹ Mindfulness

⁷ For example, Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

⁸ “Mindfulness Report 2010,” Mental Health Foundation, United Kingdom, https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/Mindfulness_report_2010.pdf.

⁹ Kevin Trainor, *Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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