

MINDFULNESS

An Overview and a Christian Response

Mindfulness is being intensively promoted in the National Health Service and in our educational system. It is receiving considerable support from public bodies. It is rooted in and deeply influenced by Buddhism.

1. The Context

People are seeking peace and purpose. The speed, noise and stress of life are increasingly unbearable for many. Stress-related illnesses have increased enormously. Anxiety and depression is widespread and has markedly increased in children and young people. Clinical depression and related conditions are creating great problems in society as a whole and for the NHS in particular.

The World Health Organisation has stated that by 2030, mental health issues will be the biggest burden on the resources of health care, larger even than heart conditions and cancer. It is estimated that about 121 million people worldwide suffer serious depression, which saps energy, lowers mood and diminishes the will to live.

The roots and contributory factors to the anguish and depression experienced by growing numbers of people, of all ages and backgrounds, are complex. They include a lack of self-worth and personal identity, bewilderment and confusion, which is often related to unstable or broken relationships and associated with a sense of hopelessness, despair, fear, remorse and regret.

Of particular concern is the escalation of mental health problems in children and young people, with an estimated 80,000 in Britain suffering from severe depression. 8,000 of these are under the age of 10 years. Significant contributory factors include cyber-bullying, internet suicide sites, family breakdown and pressures from school testing and social media.

In the UK we now live in a society in which dominant influences are determined to exclude God. The secularist seeks peace from other sources and techniques have been keenly sought by psychologists for decades. Some of them have looked to the East and explored different forms of meditation practised in Eastern Religions. In particular, they discovered the technique of Mindfulness used in Buddhist meditation. These techniques have been adopted, ostensibly separating them from their religious context, although some would say this is not possible or extremely difficult to do.

It is now reported that thousands are being trained to practise and teach Mindfulness. In 2013 it was stated that 3,000 students had been taught Mindfulness in Britain. This number is increasing. The technique is mainstream in Mental Health Services and is now being used in a wide variety of situations.

Christians should always welcome initiatives which bring help to people in need, but we have a responsibility to gain a full understanding of what is happening.

2. Its Nature

Mindfulness is a brain-training technique used to attain mental clarity, calm and concentration in place of worry, tension and distraction. The technique uses attention to posture in conjunction with breathing exercises, together with sustained voluntary and focused attention upon a selected object. The process involves

working memory, non-forgetful concentration and present-centred awareness, as well as long-term, and short-term recollection.

Mindfulness is central to the Buddhist spiritual path to enlightenment and is said to be at the heart of the Buddha's teaching. The ultimate stage of Buddhist meditation is the achievement of wisdom and insight through listening, reflecting and thinking. The process involves an awakening to the present moment, being at ease with yourself and others, relaxing both the body and the mind. It involves the rejection of threats, concerns and difficulties, and the focusing on one issue or subject at a time. It also involves the suspension of judgement and the awakening of an experience of the spiritual dimension of life.

3. Its Origin

The word Mindfulness originates in the Buddhist term 'sati', which literally means 'to remember'. The Sanskrit scriptures also contain an equivalent word which means 'that which is remembered'.

The central tenet of the Buddhist religion is that suffering is due to human attachment to this world. Buddhist teaching, therefore, focuses on learning to detach oneself from the world in order to pursue a path out of suffering into a perfect state. This teaching is summed up in the Buddha's 'Noble Eight-Fold Path', which sets out eight principles to be pursued. The Eight-Fold Path falls into three categories: Firstly, 'wisdom' – having the right view or understanding and the right resolve or intention; secondly, 'ethical conduct' – attaining right speech, right action and right livelihood; thirdly, 'concentration' – having the right effort, the right mindfulness and right meditation.

For the Buddhist, Mindfulness is a *part* of the whole aim of Buddhist teaching and, therefore, a holistic attitude to the Eight-Fold Path would be considered essential. Mindfulness would be seen as only effective when the individual has the 'right memory' and to have a 'right memory', one must have the 'right mind' and the 'right intention' when those memories are created. This in turn changes the view of self and of the world. Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and teacher Hanh says, "When Right Mindfulness is present, the Four Noble Truths and the other seven elements of the Eight-Fold Path are also present".

4. Western Use

During the 1970's, a Professor of Medicine, Jon Kabat-Zinn, started to consider the use of Buddhist teaching in the treatment of chronic medical conditions. He developed an 8-week programme, combining meditation and Hatha Yoga to help patients cope with stress, pain and illness. This technique, founded in 1979, is called 'Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction' (MBSR) and this paved the way for the founding of the 'Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society' at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Kabat-Zinn defines Mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally".

He has spelt out several core principles to this teaching:

- (i) Increasing awareness of internal and external experience (feelings, thoughts, images, bodily sensations, sights, sounds, smells)
- (ii) Non-judgemental observation and acceptance of the use of experiences
- (iii) Cultivation of compassion towards self in these experiences
- (iv) Developing curiosity and openness towards experiences
- (v) Returning to the present moment when the mind wanders into day-dreaming or fantasies.

Since the introduction and worldwide spread of MBSR, the application of the technique of Mindfulness has been variable, with different emphases according to the practitioner and the need. During the 1990's 'Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy' (MBCT) was developed by Zindel Segal, John Teasdale and Mark Williamson. Other applications include Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), both of which involve less meditation and more focus on the attentional aspects.

The Western use of Mindfulness focuses on two key components: the self-regulation of attention and the adoption of a particular orientation towards experiences. The first is described as non-elaborative observation and awareness of sensations, thoughts and feelings from moment to moment. This requires an ability to anchor the attention on what is happening together with the ability to intentionally switch attention from one aspect of experience to another. The second component encourages an attitude characterised by openness, curiosity and acceptance of experiences. This acceptance is not a passive resignation to what is happening but rather the entering into of experiences and events fully, without resorting to the extremes of pre-occupation or suppression. This requires a 'non-judgemental' attitude to oneself and everything else, accompanied by a sense of kindness and admiration towards self and others.

The benefits of this kind of meditation are promoted on the basis that they will help anyone, irrespective of their religious beliefs. The technique is presented as essentially 'non-religious'. However, the *attitude* which is necessarily cultivated in the practice of Mindfulness embraces the beliefs of Buddhism regarding self.

Kabat-Zinn claims that Mindfulness is "*a way of being*". He stated, "*It is thousands of years old and is often spoken of as 'the heart of Buddhist meditation'*". He does, however, claim "*Its essence, being about attention and awareness, is universal*". He says that the commitment to follow this course is "*Ultimately a radical act of trust and faith in yourself*".

Mindfulness is presented as accepting so-called 'guilts' and 'fears' from the past as 'straws in the wind' from which the technique can give 'respite'. The resolution of the problems of the past is to let go of them and the exponents say that Mindfulness is a truly different way of knowing the world.

5. The Programme

MBSR and MBCT are taught through an eight-week group-based programme. Tuition is also available through CD's and the internet in addition to books.

Participants usually meet for two hours per week with the group teacher and have a full day session between weeks five and seven. The participants are encouraged to engage in homework for at least one hour per day in order to attain the necessary change in thought patterns and attitudes.

Individuals are encouraged to become familiar with the way that their mind works by using a self-assessment 'Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale' which uses eleven questions through which an individual's level of mindfulness can be assessed. This includes statements such as "*I could be experiencing some emotion and not*

be aware of it until later", "*I forget a person's name almost as soon as I have been told it for the first time*", "*I rush through my activities without being really attentive to them*", "*I find myself listening to someone with one ear and doing something else at the same time*".

Participants in the classes are given precise instructions in terms of posture, silence and attitude. They are guided through a series of stages such as the following

- Initially, they are to be still.
- Wandering thoughts should be escorted back to awareness of breathing.
- Giving quality of attention to even smallest movements and sensations is important.
- Each 'in' breath, is a new beginning. Each 'out' breath, is a letting go, is a letting be.
- The raw sensation of sounds, and sounds within sounds, should be noted.
- Participants are urged to be alive to the sound, becoming aware of the space between sounds.
- Thoughts should be observed and, with worries, allowed to go and die away like sounds.
- Thoughts should be treated like clouds – coming and going.
- Participants are warned to be aware of emotions rising up, to observe mental events and be detached from them. In the face of this, there should be a conscious return to a focus on breathing.
- Participants are instructed that breath is always available to help bring yourself back to the present moment.
- While sitting, thoughts may be distracting. Participants are urged to allow difficult sensations and problems to be moved to a part of the body where the sensations are strongest.
- Participants should deliberately bring to mind any problem which they are thinking about at that moment. It may be something unresolved, a misunderstanding or an argument. It may be something that generates anger or regret.
- Constantly, participants are urged to direct the focus of thoughts on that part of the body where they have been led. They are urged to cradle the sensation in their awareness.
- They are encouraged to notice how they react and to hold these reactions in spacious and compassionate awareness.
- They are led to explore sensations with friendly curiosity – not trying to change. Participants are told to say to themselves silently "it is OK to feel this"; "It's OK to allow myself to be open to it".
- The participants are encouraged to cultivate a sense of kindness towards themselves and to others.
- They are told to deliberately take time to wish themselves well. They are told to have ease of being by offering their love to themselves and to think of others who they love, recognising their humanity.
- They are encouraged to adopt an attitude of kindness and friendship to all living beings on the planet, including themselves.
- They express the wish to be free from pain and suffering, and to be happy and healthy, to have ease of being.
- They are encouraged to allow themselves to be just as they are – complete and whole.

Advertising and supporting literature makes clear that Mindfulness is derived from Buddhist meditation but gives the assurance that the courses used are entirely secular and do not contain any religious content.

6. Development & Promotion

Following the publication of the first MBCT clinical trial in 2000 and the associated book 'Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for

Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse' by Segal Williams & Teasdale in 2002, Mark Williams took up a ten year Principal Research Fellowship in 2003, sponsored by the Wellcome Trust, at the University of Oxford. His research focused on the psychological processes underlying recurrent suicidal depression and an exploration of whether a Mindfulness-based approach could be therapeutic.

Following an approach by Professor Richard Gombrich of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, the Venerable Kamai Dhammasami and Mr. Geoffrey Bamford, the founder of the Society for the Wider Understanding of Buddhism in 2006, the Oxford Mindfulness Centre (OMC) was founded in 2008, with Professor Mark Williams as its Director. The OMC is fully integrated into the University of Oxford's Department of Psychiatry and has a charitable arm called the 'Oxford Mindfulness Foundation'. The Oxford Mindfulness Centre claims it is "preventing depression and enhancing human potential by combining modern science with ancient wisdom".

A 'BeMindful' campaign has been launched and there has been a rapid expansion of meditation retreats in the UK in recent years. The OMC provides programmes specially designed for those suffering from anxiety disorders and/or depression who are referred by their doctors. They also run a public programme where anyone can learn about Mindfulness. The use of Mindfulness is actively encouraged in schools and in places of work. The OMC are training Mindfulness teachers by arranging one-day introductory courses, five-day experiential courses and teacher training retreats. They run master classes and workshops and also offer a two year Master of Studies in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. This is a degree course arranged through the University of Oxford Continuing Education Department. Its exponents refer to 'the science of Mindfulness', whilst emphasising that it has been practised for thousands of years. The OMC is aiming to raise over £7 million to establish a permanently endowed Mindfulness Research Group within the University of Oxford.

Mindfulness training is operating in many organisations such as Google, Transport for London, PricewaterhouseCoopers and the Home Office. A debate on Mindfulness was held in the House of Commons in December 2012 and it is now being adopted by business leaders, politicians, academics, educationalists and many in the Health Service.

7. Clinical Research

Since the advent and claim to success of MBSR, there has been a huge increase in interest in the use of Mindfulness in clinical settings and a considerable amount of money has been invested in research, including magnetic resonance brain imaging during meditation.

Collational research suggests a positive association of Mindfulness with a variety of indicators of psychological health such as higher levels of positive affect, life satisfaction, vitality, adaptive emotion regulation and lower levels of psychopathological symptoms. However, **there is very little good quality research** to support the claims that are made.

Mindfulness is advertised as being recommended by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE). However, **NICE only recommends this intervention in one specific clinical situation** – the prevention of recurrent depression in patients who have suffered two or more episodes previously. Clinical research does not support the claim that it is proven to be effective for everyone suffering anxiety and depression.

In the instances where research has suggested there may be benefits associated with MBCT, there is usually also a caution due to methodological shortcomings, small sample sizes, and the inability to assess, from the research, whether Mindfulness can be

claimed to be the sole reason for clinical improvement. The studies are also short-term with no assessment of long-term effects. The fact is that the research involves multiple components which are not easily separately accounted for and, in addition to this, there is variance in the way that Mindfulness is taught.

The evidential base is also confused because Mindfulness is used in conjunction with a variety of other psychological and psychotherapeutic techniques and there has been no evaluation of the part played by individual components. The technique of Mindfulness has been used in a huge variety of experimental situations ranging from use in prisoners, to addicts, to children. However, there is no clear evidence as yet of its efficacy and certainly no assessment of its cost effectiveness or of the type and amount of training that is needed.

Qualitative research has been conducted in schools where Mindfulness has been taught. The results of this research showed no clear outcome and wide variance in the reports by students of their experience.

8. The Spiritual Dimension

Although it is widely known that Mindfulness is rooted in Buddhist meditation, many who have been introduced to this technique, and even those teaching it, are ignorant of its spiritual roots. It is claimed that the western use of Mindfulness only uses helpful technique without embracing the underlying spirituality. However, most people familiar with Eastern religions would confirm that the body postures adopted and the techniques used are inseparable from the original spirituality. Despite the claims that the western use of Mindfulness is secular, many of the publications include Buddhist material as suggested further reading.

Mindfulness is based on the belief, held by Buddhists, other New Age practitioners and secularists alike, that all healing comes from within. It is fundamentally a self-help process which totally excludes the concept of God.

- The focus in the technique of Mindfulness is entirely on self. In keeping with the Buddhist aim of detachment from the world, emotional disengagement is encouraged by treating feelings as unwanted thoughts.
- There is a right rejection of the denial, suppression and repression of feelings and emotions and an encouragement to face reality by 'being' in the present moment. However, in keeping with the Buddhist rejection of the concept of personal sin, individuals are taught that feelings such as guilt should be 'let go' as unwanted thoughts.
- Mindfulness requires the cultivation of a core attitude of acceptance of self, the environment and situations, combined with an attitude of kindness, acceptance and friendship towards self, and all living beings, particularly in the face of negative 'internal experiences'. Whereas there is a right recognition for the need for self-acceptance, the position of 'non-judgment', which is in keeping with the Buddhist teaching of neutrality with regard to good and evil, does not help those struggling with a fundamental need for forgiveness.
- Practitioners recognise that the practice of Mindfulness may trigger the surfacing of disturbing emotions in some individuals and recommend avoidance in these situations. It does not offer any help for those with deep emotional needs or unhealed traumatic memories.
- The goal of mindfulness is the pursuit of personal peace by one's own effort, independent of everything and everyone else. This encourages detachment from relationships and, therefore, has no part to play in the furthering of peace in families or communities.

A Christian Response to Mindfulness

Our Foundations

Christian meditation and contemplative prayer have been practised over the past 2000 years and, prior to this, meditation on scripture was an important part of Jewish practice.

Britain is founded on a Judaeo-Christian belief system. Despite secularisation over recent decades, the vast majority of the British population desire values such as differentiating between right and wrong, and caring for others, to be an essential part of our culture.

The Christian Attitude

Christian teaching is that humankind is created by a personal God, whose nature is Love and whose desire is for every individual to know Him as a loving Father. This is made possible through Jesus Christ. We cannot heal ourselves. It is God's nature to heal.

Healing is the result of putting right wrong relationships – with others, self, creation and, fundamentally with God. This healing comes through the giving and receiving of forgiveness, made possible only through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Essential truths of the Christian faith include:

- God loves us as we are, unconditionally. It is the fundamental need of all human beings to know this truth.
- God commands us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love others as ourselves.
- God's Spirit convicts us of the areas in our lives where we fall short of God's intention for us – this is sin.
- Jesus' death on the Cross is the sacrifice which makes it possible for us to be forgiven for all our sin. Forgiveness is assured for all who ask, confessing their need.
- Forgiveness is God's gift – grace – which cannot be earned.
- True peace comes through right relationships – with God, others and ourselves – forged through forgiveness.
- Following Jesus does not mean detachment or withdrawal from the world but rather a detachment from the things of the world. Relationship with Jesus increases compassion and empathy for those in need and generates selfless giving to others, building families and communities.
- We are set free from the troubles and concerns of the world by having our minds renewed by God's Spirit and His Word.

Christian Meditation

The centuries old practice of Christian meditation involves time spent in focusing attention upon God and His teaching in scripture. The purpose of this practice is to deepen relationship with God, to engage in spiritual growth, which always involves healing and to grow in the love of others and of self. Focusing upon God increases self-awareness and also awareness of our relationships with others. However, the primary focus is upon God and not self.

The reality of God, who is Father, Son – Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit is experienced in both His immanence (nearness) and His transcendence (beyond comprehension). It is an experience of relationship with Him.

It is recognised that meditation frequently provokes diversion of thought or surfacing of emotions. This may be simply due to distraction, in which case the attention is brought back to God. On the other hand, more commonly, this may be due to the highlighting of an area of need or perhaps an emerging memory which can be brought to God for healing.

Some Helpful Verses

"Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever!" Rom. 11:33-36

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" John 3:16

"Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us, by letting us be called God's children; and that is what we are." 1 John 3:1

Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in His love. I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you and your joy be complete". John 15:9-11

Jesus says, "Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace that the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid." John 14:27

"You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you." Is. 26:3

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Matt. 6.33-34

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." Phil. 4.8-9

Conclusion

Mindfulness appears to meet the widespread need for a way of coping and attaining peace in a stress-filled and noisy world. The huge resources which have been invested in promoting this practice have led to a widespread belief that it is the answer to all our problems! On first inquiry the tenets and simple steps presented in Mindfulness training are appealing, particularly as it claims to be 'non-religious'.

There is little clinical evidence to substantiate the elevated claims for the effectiveness of Mindfulness and it is a matter of curiosity that the Wellcome Trust has so heavily funded something that does not have a more substantial evidential basis. Mindfulness can have a deleterious effect for some.

The hunger for techniques such as Mindfulness and the plethora of other New Age therapies should, perhaps, be a wake up call to the Church. Only Jesus Christ can give true peace and healing. The Christian Church itself must rediscover that time spent in meditation upon God and His Word brings healing and true peace, not only for ourselves but for all those with whom we live, work and worship.

Further resources are available from the Maranatha Community.