

**DR KATHERINE  
THOMPSON**

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**AUSTRALIA'S CHRISTIAN  
MINDFULNESS EXPERT**

# **CHRIST CENTRED MINDFULNESS**

**'Katherine Thompson's call for Christ-centred  
mindfulness leads us to the place of contemplation  
where we can find ourselves and God.'**

**Tim Costello**

**CONNECTION TO SELF AND GOD**

*Katherine Thompson has done the church and the followers of Jesus a great service in writing this book. Mindfulness is everywhere – schools, business and counselling. In this book, the strengths and weaknesses of mindfulness, including its Buddhist origins, are looked at respectfully and honestly. A very balanced, yet creative Christian alternative is outlined that builds on the best of mindfulness. A must read for those committed to Christian meditation and taking our faith into the marketplace where such spiritual disciplines abound.*

— Ross Clifford  
Principal, Morling College

*Katherine Thompson's call for Christ-centred mindfulness leads us to the place of contemplation where we can find ourselves and God. Quiet and meditative hearts seem rare these days. Our age is geared to speed and sound, but God cannot be easily seen or heard amid the noise and restlessness. The quest for inner peace seems both critical and difficult, and we need mindful silence to touch our souls. Quiet wisdom is what humanity desperately needs.*

— Tim Costello  
Chief Advocate, World Vision Australia

*A timely and brilliantly practical book, Thompson brings her skills as a counsellor and her experience in analysing culture to the topic to help people ask the right questions to decide whether Christian mindfulness is the right thing for them and if so, how to take it up in a Christ-centred way. She has written a guide that will be helpful for Christians in everyday life, for reinvigorating spiritual practices and for addressing those times of stress and pain in our lives.*

— Tracy Lauersen  
Senior Associate Vicar, St Hilary's Anglican Church, Kew, Melbourne

*In Christ-Centred Mindfulness, Dr Katherine Thompson demonstrates abiding faith and psychological rigour as she evaluates the historical and religious origins of mindfulness, and the complexities of employing mindfulness practices for believers today.*

*Through biblically guided meditations and plenty of practical examples, Thompson capably illustrates how Christ-centred mindfulness can be employed as a psychologically informed practice of faith, not just acceptable to the Christian faith, but valuable and harmonious.*

— Kylie Maddox Pidgeon  
Registered Psychologist

*For many of us, the world is full of spiritual complexity and ambiguity intersecting with our everyday. Spiritually loaded practices of positive psychology, meditation and yoga impact on our workplaces and our exercise choices. Mindfulness is increasingly being offered as a therapeutic solution to ailments, and to increase our enjoyment of life. In Christ-Centred Mindfulness Katherine Thompson skilfully explains where mindfulness originated, how it is being used therapeutically, and where it fits in a biblical framework and in the Christian tradition. In doing this, she provides a wonderful model of engaging biblically and critically with our world. The Christian mindfulness exercises in Part III provide a useful alternative to any practices we might feel focus on self rather than on Jesus. This is an intelligent, well-researched and wise book.*

— Kara Martin  
Author, Project Leader with Seed  
and Lecturer at Mary Andrews College

*This book provides a fantastic overview of the religious influences behind the current mindfulness craze. This kind of work is utterly missiological – providing an honest appraisal of the merits (and also the drawbacks) of a contemporary issue in order to allow Christians to form responses, sort through ideas, and engage the world around them. The beauty of this book is its willingness to adapt in order to promote psychologically sound principles, even while refusing the temptation to appropriate another’s culture for one’s own profit. The author undertakes the difficult task of returning back to the ancient Christian ways in order to promote wellbeing and good mental health amongst contemporary Christians. This kind of reflexive, resourceful and self-aware Christian is exactly what the world needs right now.*

— Tanya Riches  
Worship Leader, Theology Lecturer and Researcher



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# List of Abbreviations

<b>ACT</b>	acceptance and commitment therapy
<b>CBT</b>	cognitive behavioural therapy
<b>DBT</b>	dialectical behaviour therapy
<b>MBCT</b>	mindfulness-based cognitive therapy
<b>MBSR</b>	mindfulness-based stress reduction

# Introduction

## The Mindfulness Maze

**I**n recent years, interest in the idea and practice of mindfulness has exploded. Mindfulness is about living in the now. In the area of counselling and mental health, it has been widely adopted as part of therapeutic treatment. This has trickled down into popular psychology and everyday health advice. A search for mindfulness titles on Amazon turns up hundreds of pages of books, DVDs and course materials, all promising to reveal the ‘five core skills’ or ‘twenty top benefits’ of mindfulness practice. And it’s now the norm to find a mindfulness course at your local community centre.

Mindfulness has wide appeal. In popular culture, it is marketed as a way to achieve psychological wellbeing by making us feel better. A practice that takes a few minutes per day seems like an easy and promising fix to life’s problems, especially if it makes us feel great in the process. It seems like the perfect antidote to the frantic pace of our society, which constantly bombards us with excesses of information and demand.

Mindfulness practice has become a self-administered form of therapy, easily accessible by anyone, anywhere. On my smartphone, I can now choose from numerous different mindfulness and meditation apps. The most popular app in Australia is *Smiling Mind*, developed

by a not-for-profit organisation of the same name. *Smiling Mind* has a vision to make mindfulness meditation part of the Australian school curriculum by 2020, with the ultimate aim to make mindfulness meditation accessible everywhere, including the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

But where has mindfulness come from, and what is its core message? Much of the mindfulness taught in our society is a form of meditation that has come from Buddhist religious practice. These Buddhist roots are not always evident because the practice has been repackaged and mixed with popular psychology to give it credibility. It is thus defined in a number of ways. According to John Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness advocate and developer of mindfulness-based stress reduction, ‘mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.’<sup>2</sup>

This definition only really scratches the surface. Other questions need to be asked. Where did the concept of mindfulness arise? Does it work, and if so, how? Is it backed by evidence? For Christians, the questions go a little further. We’ve heard that mindfulness practices come from Buddhist roots, and we have been given conflicting opinions about how to engage with it. Should we take up mindfulness meditation when our doctor recommends it to reduce stress? Should we do that mindfulness course at work – the one the boss is recommending to increase productivity? Should we download that meditation app that promises to help us sleep better? What do we do when our kids come home from school and say they were taught mindfulness without our consent?

And if we do engage with mindfulness practices, are there ways to do this consistently with our Christian worldview? What about our own

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1 *Smiling Mind*, ‘Who We Are’.

2 Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*, p. 4.

faith heritage – does it have anything to offer us that could enrich our prayer lives, help us to draw near to God and grow in Christlikeness?

As someone who has worked in the area of mental health for nearly twenty years, as both a mental health researcher and counsellor, I've become increasingly unsettled about the wide and indiscriminate adoption of mindfulness practice. Very few people are asking the right questions; even counsellors rarely stop to think about how mindfulness became so popular and why it is suddenly an accepted part of treatment.

For the past couple of years, therefore, I've been winding my way through the mindfulness maze. These are some of the questions that have surfaced:

- Where is the evidence for whether mindfulness works?
- What does it do to our brain?
- What kind of change are we encouraging in people?
- How does this change impact people spiritually?
- Can deep emotional problems be solved by short daily meditation?
- If the most common forms of mindfulness are actually Buddhist meditation, should they be taught to those who have a different faith or set of beliefs? Is that respectful of their culture and faith?

While asking these questions, my aim has not been merely to critique the potential pitfalls of mindfulness-based techniques, but also to examine healthy ways that Christians can engage with similar styles of practice. I have seen that there is clearly a benefit to practices that help us connect with the present moment and become fully engaged in life.

I have come to understand mindfulness as a way of using all our senses, and the quiet part of our mind, to connect well to both our internal and external world. Such mindfulness does not need to be rooted in Buddhist meditation, but can be based in Christian practices such as silence, rest and prayer. These things help us slow down, connect to what is happening inside ourselves and make space to listen for God's guiding in everyday life. This can produce a practice that is deeply embedded in faith values, bringing greater transformation, Christlikeness and a sense of fulfilment. We can become less stressed and anxious, and more able to respond to what is happening 'now' in a healthier way. Such spiritual growth cannot be achieved in five superficial minutes per day, but through disciplined habits that need to be tended to and integrated into life to create healthy change.

It is surprising that the church and Christian therapists have been slow to respond to the growing secular interest in mindfulness meditation. Even though there has been some rediscovery of Christian meditation and contemplative prayer practice, this knowledge is only held and practised by a relatively small number of people. It is not practised in the mainstream church, Catholic or Protestant.

A measured dialogue and response is needed, because there is much that could be said in this space. A number of Christian books have recently been published in this area, but they either provide practical exercises, explaining what the present moment is and how it relates to faith, or apply mindfulness techniques to prayer.<sup>3</sup> None of these books take a deep look at the Buddhist roots of mindfulness-based practice, how it became part of mental health treatment, whether it works and how it may or may not fit with Christian faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Rohr, *The Naked Now*; Stead, *Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality*; Welch, *How To Be a Mindful Christian*.



I've therefore written this book to provide a carefully considered Christian response to the use of popular mindfulness. My purpose is to:

- explore where mindfulness comes from
- evaluate whether it assists with improving mental health
- critique its place in therapy and counselling
- offer practical exercises to encourage mindful connection to self and God that are compatible with a Christian perspective.

If you're a Christian who, like me, is curious about mindfulness practice but wants to think it through carefully, this book is for you. Or perhaps you work as a psychologist, counsellor or social worker and are trying to sort through your own approach to mindfulness-based therapies; while this book is written for a general audience, you may find it helpful for you or your clients. My hope is that this book will become a resource and encouragement for everyday people who want to increase their psychological flexibility and well-being by integrating mindful living into their daily life as part of their Christian spirituality.

Part I, 'Navigating Popular Mindfulness', aims to provide a well-considered Christian response to mindfulness. It examines how mindfulness-based interventions drawn from Buddhism can be measured against a Christian worldview and compares one particular therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), with components of Christian contemplative spirituality in order to define what Christ-centred mindfulness could look like.

Part II, 'Exploring Christian Roots', goes deeper into the idea of Christ-centred mindfulness by looking at contemplative strands in the Bible. It then engages with our rich history of contemplative practice from the Christian mystic tradition (both ancient and modern) and explores the similarities these share with ACT.

The greater purpose of this book is to move beyond discussion and theory and into practice. Part III, 'Practising Christ-Centred Mindfulness', provides practical mindfulness exercises that are rooted in Scripture, the Christian mystic tradition and ACT.

I encourage you to read sections of this book as they are relevant to you. If you want to, it is possible to skip the theory and go straight to practising the exercises provided in the last part of the book.

My greatest hope is that, in reading this book, you will be able to navigate the mindfulness maze with confidence and learn how to connect with God and with yourself – through *Christ-centred* mindfulness.



**PART I**

Navigating  
Popular  
Mindfulness



# 1

## Critically Contextualising Mindfulness

**T**he dialogue between faith and daily living is complex. Christians take different approaches to the task of evaluating cultural practices and their compatibility with faith. Some of us prefer to rely solely on what is written in Scripture as a measure of what God says and ignore Christian tradition, personal experience of God or things of cultural importance. This can sometimes result in unthinking rejection of cultural practices. This is a missed opportunity, because it can isolate us from what is happening around us and make our beliefs and message seem literal, inflexible, alien and irrelevant to other people.

The opposite can also be true. We can uncritically live within the values of our own culture or inadvertently absorb secular and other religious thinking without considering whether these ideas are consistent with our faith. In so doing, we risk being indiscriminate by assimilating with those values and worldviews. For many Christians in the West, this is perhaps a bigger concern than outright rejection.

Because the Christian faith is governed by broad principles and not vast sets of laws, there is a great deal of freedom for believers in how we interact with our culture. But as Paul reminds the

Corinthian Christians, who so loved to abuse their freedoms, “All things are lawful”, but not all things are beneficial. “All things are lawful”, but not all things build up’ (1 Cor 10:23). Paul also speaks to the Christians in Rome, who were arguing over cultural practices of which foods they could eat and which days were sacred, reminding them that they need to accept the one whose faith is weak without quarrelling over disputable matters (Rom 14:1). He goes on to say that whatever we decide is between each person and God, and we will be judged for that decision. At the same time, we are warned not to do anything that causes another person to doubt or question their own faith practice.

As Christians, we therefore need to be discerning about how we engage with the culture around us. Absorbing ideas and practices into our lives that are inconsistent with the teachings of Christ risks watering down our faith. Jesus wants us to be the ‘salt of the earth’ and warns us not to lose our saltiness in the world (Lk 14:34). The challenge is to work out how our faith in God informs our worldview and values and determines what sort of people we need to be and how we are going to live our lives.

Within our own culture of origin, we can find it hard to think critically about cultural beliefs and practices because we have become dulled to them. The need to be thoughtful about the relationship between faith and culture is more obvious when we’re in a cross-cultural situation. I found this when I went as part of a team to live in Kazakhstan for 18 months. During this time, my fellow team members and I had to grapple with how much the Kazakh identity was shaped by Islamic faith, and how much by culture. For those who do not know much about this former Soviet country, faith and identity are a messy integration of ancient animistic practices,

shamanism, Islam and Soviet communism. As Islam did not really take hold among these traditionally nomadic people until more recently, most Kazakhs are only nominally Muslim and do not attend the mosque regularly or pray five times per day.<sup>1</sup> Women do not have any particular dress requirement and are often more liberal in their fashion than we would be in Australia. Day to day, people are more concerned about the evil eye and needing protection from evil spirits. It is normal to pray a blessing on another person, hands open, in a public area.

The last thing we wanted to do was impose our Western ideas of faith on these people. We needed to consider what it might mean for people in this context to be a follower of Christ. Christine Mallouhi writes that it is possible to be both a follower of Christ and retain Islamic culture.<sup>2</sup> The point of difference is that each part of that culture needs to be measured against Christ's teaching. Anything that is not contradictory can be kept. The thinking is that it is better to be a follower of Christ in this context by retaining some cultural practices than by unthinkingly abandoning them and becoming completely separated from family, community and identity as a result.

The need to contextualise our faith is not merely a modern issue. The early church faced frequent challenges of how to integrate faith and culture. For example, they grappled with tensions between Jewish and gentile believers and had to decide whether gentile followers of Christ needed to be circumcised (Acts 15; Galatians). The Apostle Paul worked to help the Corinthian Christians think through how to relate to its cultural context – for example, whether to participate in eating food sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians). Other fledgling

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, *After Atheism*.

<sup>2</sup> Mallouhi, *Miniskirts, Mothers and Muslims*.

churches needed help to figure out how to articulate and live out their faith in the face of the growing influence of Gnosticism, which had a dualistic view of the world (see 1 John). In all of these cases, the early church had to consider the cultural ideas and practices around them through the lens of the Christian faith.

In the same way, contemporary Christians need to learn how to critically evaluate ideas that come from our own societies and cultures. (In this book, I am writing to Christians in Western, industrialised societies and cultures, although the concept is equally applicable to other cultures.)

This is vital for Christians who are seeking counselling, therapy or treatment and trying to discern if practices such as mindfulness meditation will be helpful or harmful to their faith.

The purpose of this chapter is to help us to ‘contextualise’ mindfulness – that is, to understand what it means within our cultural context and to see how this relates to our faith. First, we’ll take a deeper look at the ideas of worldview and contextualisation. Next, we will look specifically at the Buddhist concept of mindfulness and think about how it does, and doesn’t, fit with a Christian worldview.

## **WORLDVIEW AND CONTEXTUALISATION**

Worldview is a term used by anthropologists to describe how we understand and see the world. It is the lens through which we view everything in our experience: the way we interact with and interpret our environment, how we feel about it and the thoughts we have about it. It is not necessary to have a religious belief to have a worldview, but for many people faith is one aspect that informs the way they see the world.

Our worldview shapes the way we categorise our experiences and the assumptions we make about them. It determines whom we trust





Figure 1.1. *Worldview (adapted from Hiebert).<sup>3</sup> Our worldview is based on our individual inner thoughts, feelings and evaluations, and these determine our explicit beliefs and values. As a collective group of people we can view the world in a similar way, and share some of the same beliefs and values, and this shapes the outward working of our social institutions.*

and how we think about things (see Figure 1.1). On an affective level, it influences what music we like, how we dress, the kind of buildings we live in and use, and how we feel towards other people and life in general. We evaluate our world so that we have a standard of comparison, which helps us determine what is truth, what we like and what we see as right. These evaluations help us prioritise what is important in our culture.

When we move from the individual to the community, the worldview of the majority determines how families and groups interact as well as their laws and government. It determines artistic expression, the way money is used and how technology is used to advance society. These collective aspects of worldview make up what we refer to as our culture.

When we apply this understanding of worldview to Western culture, we can see the various influences that have shaped our social institutions and the way our society functions. In Australia, for example, Judeo-Christian religion has influenced the ethics of our legal and justice systems. Economic rationalism and capitalism influence the functioning of our economy. Democracy is the dominant value in our structure and style of government. Where once our collective religion and faith primarily aligned with the Christian church, now

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<sup>3</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, p. 46.

our culture is increasingly secular in nature. Religion has become individualistic and multicultural and exerts less influence on society.

These values and ways we have organised our culture stem from changes that occurred during the Enlightenment, and they have dominated much of Western thought since the eighteenth century. Values we have unknowingly adopted from this period form the basis of modern thinking (Figure 1.2). These include the rise of science as truth and the understanding of religion as private, individualised faith. Another important modern idea is the belief in human progress, which underpins our thinking that we need to continue to improve and develop things.

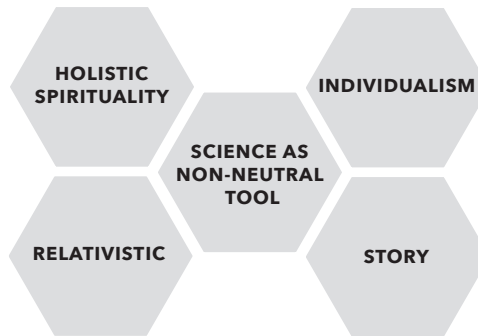
In contrast, postmodernism is a reaction against the influence of modernity in Western society (Figure 1.3). It has tried to challenge the basis of some of the assumptions we hold. It places greater importance on personal values over scientific rationalism, and it has prompted a renewed interest in forms of spirituality that are not grounded in mainstream institutionalised religion. This has helped our society see that science and history are influenced by issues of power and motivation and need to be challenged rather than taken as fact. It has made us take stock of the connection between our lifestyle and our physical and mental wellbeing.

The downside to postmodern thinking is that values and beliefs have become more relativistic and individualistic and are no longer challenged. There is no longer any standard or accepted way to measure right and wrong. Spirituality is valued but not defined, and religion is rejected.

As followers of Christ, we live between two worldviews. The first worldview is our lived experience, seen through the eyes of our faith. The second worldview is the one we have grown up in and live in.



*Figure 1.2. The values that form the foundation of a modern worldview*



*Figure 1.3. The values that form the foundation of a postmodern worldview*

We become people of the middle ground – keeping everything that is consistent with our faith and rejecting the cultural values that are not in line with it. Doing this is anything but simple; the process challenges our beliefs to their core and asks us to determine what is both essential to and helpful for our faith.

For many of us today, worldview has developed even further complexity due to globalisation and migration between countries. For some of us, there may be a third or fourth worldview in play, shaping our personal perspective.

Given this complexity, it is tempting to adopt a kind of cultural relativism, where all worldviews and the values and belief systems they are built upon are judged to be equally good. But such a stance is not meaningful; it stops dialogue between cultures and, in its extreme form, leads to a disbelief in science, religion and all forms of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> It is nihilistic and makes life meaningless. As followers of Christ, we need to take another path and weigh up different cultures, beliefs and values according to Scripture and objective reality.<sup>5</sup> This reality extends to our own personal faith experience and the inherited traditions and practices of the church. In evaluating our faith against the practices of other people and cultures, a response is required. New knowledge is evaluated and either integrated in some way into our faith, or it is rejected as being inconsistent with it. This evaluation process is called critical contextualisation, and it produces transformation.

## **MINDFULNESS IN CONTEXT**

### Buddhist origins

The term ‘mindfulness’ has long been associated with Buddhism, and most people assume the term actually arose from Buddhism. Few people realise that in the West, the word ‘mindfulness’ was first used in 1530 in the context of Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> This is something we will delve into in later chapters. However, much of the interest

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4 Hiebert et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 21.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

6 Sun, ‘Mindfulness in context’, p. 395.

in mindfulness in contemporary Western society is connected to Buddhist ideas, and so we must begin our contextualisation with understanding its Buddhist form.

In Buddhism, the English term, 'mindfulness', is drawn from the word *sati*, which is found in the Buddhist Scriptures.<sup>7</sup> It can be described as a 'presence of mind'. This word is closely related to the word *sarati*, which means 'to remember'.<sup>8</sup> These were traditionally translated in the West as 'conscience' and 'meditation'.<sup>9</sup> Together these terms refer to having a bare awareness of your inner and outer world in the present moment. It was not until around 1881 that the word mindfulness was first used as the English translation of the Buddhist concept of *sati*.<sup>10</sup>

Buddhism aims towards the elimination of suffering. It is based on the Four Noble Truths:

1. All life is suffering and pain.
2. Suffering is caused by selfish desire.
3. This selfishness can be overcome.
4. The way to do this is through the Eightfold Noble Path.

The Eightfold Noble Path is comprised of wisdom, ethics and meditation.<sup>11</sup> In its purest form, it uses radical inquiry to understand how things really are. It teaches that humans do not possess an eternal soul or self; rather, they are 'no-self'. Buddhism understands that everything in the world is interconnected. It values compassion, and aims towards the elimination of suffering, with the ultimate goal being liberation from the cycle of reincarnation.<sup>12</sup>

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7 Chiesa & Malinowski, 'Mindfulness-based approaches', p. 405.

8 Ibid., p. 406.

9 Sun, 'Mindfulness in context', p. 396.

10 Ibid.

11 Dawson & Turnbull, 'Is mindfulness the new opiate for the masses?'

12 Sun, 'Mindfulness in context', p. 396.

In Buddhism, the aim of mindfulness meditation is to achieve insight into and freedom from suffering. It seeks to balance the mind and emotions to produce a state of serenity and peacefulness. In its purer form, different stages of meditation and mindfulness are practised, like focusing attention on an object, observing thoughts and feelings, serving others, guarding others through your own patience and loving-kindness, eradicating bad habits, and attaining happiness or enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

## Western adaptation

In recent decades, mindfulness has made its way into our modern Western culture. This began in the realm of psychology, where mindfulness meditation practices have been separated from Buddhism and adapted for use in therapy, using language that is more accessible to the everyday person. Indeed, the mindfulness exercises contained in three of the four mindfulness-based psychological interventions are grounded in these Buddhist meditative practices, and we'll take a closer look at these in the next chapter. This focus on mindfulness, rather than Buddhist meditation, is also reflected in an exponential increase of academic mindfulness-based publications: these numbered less than 76 before 1990, compared to over 2705 between 2010 and 2014.<sup>14</sup> This rapid increase bears no relation to the number of Buddhist publications in the same period, which has remained relatively consistent.<sup>15</sup>

The question is whether this simplified form of mindfulness is a skilful *recontextualisation* of Buddhist teachings by religious proponents, or whether it is a secular *decontextualisation* that has divorced

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<sup>13</sup> Chiesa & Malinowski, 'Mindfulness-based approaches'.

<sup>14</sup> Sun, 'Mindfulness in context', p. 402.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

the practice from its ethical and religious roots, separating it from the wisdom and ethics of the Eightfold Noble Path.

An element of recontextualisation is likely. Buddhism tends to be syncretistic when it spreads to other cultures, building on elements of indigenous beliefs that were already present so that it is more appealing to people of other faiths.<sup>16</sup> Some Zen masters believe that a health-related motivation to engage in mindfulness does not necessarily pose a problem, because they hope that, over time, people who practise these techniques will have less attachment to this initial motivation and move towards the deeper Buddhist teaching that undergirds mindfulness.<sup>17</sup>

On the whole, however, the adaptation of mindfulness to the Western context appears to be more likely a product of decontextualisation, where Western practitioners have separated mindfulness techniques from their Buddhist framework in order to use these methods to improve health and wellbeing. This has been the overt intention of practitioners such as Kabat-Zinn, the founder of MBSR.<sup>18</sup> It could be argued, therefore, that psychological theories that use mindfulness have not invented a new therapy tool so much as repackaged Buddhist mindfulness meditation without its former religious strings attached. The end result is a secular, humanistic distortion of the original concept, devoid of the depth of meaning and significance that it originally had. Some have called this ‘McMindfulness’.<sup>19</sup>

This recent secular distortion has not gone entirely unnoticed, although the voices of dissent remain surprisingly few. Some Buddhist psychotherapists have called into question the way that

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 404..

<sup>17</sup> Chiesa & Malinowski, ‘Mindfulness-based approaches’.

<sup>18</sup> Kabat-Zinn, ‘Mindfulness-based interventions in context’.

<sup>19</sup> Sun, ‘Mindfulness in context’, p. 406.

modern psychology has extracted mindfulness practice from Eastern religion and separated it from the deeper values of Buddhist ethics.<sup>20</sup> They comment that the benefits of mindfulness to psychological health are not in dispute; rather, the ideas that underpin Buddhist mindfulness are missing. Their main concern is that mindfulness will become just another psychological technique used to reduce distress without addressing the deep cause of this suffering. It potentially leads to only superficial calmness, and it might have the function of being an opiate for Western society.<sup>21</sup> It will not necessarily lead to personal change.

What has happened in practice is the mindfulness found in Buddhism has been adapted to fit the Western modern worldview. As we discovered earlier, Buddhism's aim is to eliminate suffering, with the ultimate goal being liberation from the cycle of reincarnation. In contrast, Western modernity is rationally orientated towards productivity, profit and efficiency.<sup>22</sup> It values facts and objective truth. An object is assigned worth according to its cost effectiveness. This value functions alongside neo-liberalism, consumerism and individualism. These values have produced distortions in our society – we have now become more narcissistic, so that we see the value of everything in terms of how it can meet our own self-need.<sup>23</sup> Divorcing mindfulness from its Buddhist roots and merging it with psychology is an example of just this type of narcissistic distortion.

It is apparent that mindfulness meditation has become another commodity that our Western culture uses to improve itself to get ahead. It has become self-centred, a personal possession that can be

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20 Dawson & Turnbull, 'Is mindfulness the new opiate for the masses?'

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Twenge, *The Narcissism Epidemic*.



used for our own end to get relief from physical and psychological symptoms. Divorced from its true context, it is devoid of any significant meaning.

## A problematic divorce

With the rise of postmodern thought, Western contemporary society is becoming more syncretistic. While modernism has contributed to the way that the West has turned mindfulness into a commodity, in many ways the current resurgence of mindfulness in our society is a postmodern Western response to that same rational thought. In postmodernism, there is a tendency to incorporate ideas from different sources without critique and reflection. Cherry-picking from the Buddhist faith makes sense within a postmodern perspective, where values and beliefs are considered relative. In this context, it is not surprising that mindfulness-based psychological interventions have become popular.

A non-critical response, however, is not adequate in the context of faith. As Christians who want to carefully consider cultural practices in light of our faith, we need to critique the way that Western culture has unthinkingly adapted Buddhist meditation practices for therapeutic use.

First, there is the issue of disrespecting or misrepresenting the Buddhist framework from which mindfulness practices have been extracted. While this may not seem like a large consideration for those of us who do not hold to a Buddhist worldview, consider how you would react if psychologists started adapting the Christian sacramental rites of Baptism or the Lord's Supper for therapeutic use but emptied them of their original meaning.

Second, we need to ask ourselves whether such practices are as benign as they appear. History provides some warning about how adapting mindfulness practices can result in destructive distortion. In World War II, for example, the Japanese merged nationalism with mindfulness, employing mindfulness techniques in what they called a 'Holy War'. The military received Zen training in mindfulness, or 'zazen', so that it became combat zazen. This harmful adaptation of mindfulness practice was aimed at enhancing the capacity of soldiers to concentrate in order to kill, and to do this serenely and unquestioningly.<sup>24</sup>

While we might not consider that this distortion could occur in our own society, to some extent it already has. Organisations use mindfulness to reduce stress and boost the productivity of their workers. Here in Australia, secondary school students are encouraged to learn mindfulness so that they optimise their exam performance. And, perhaps more disturbingly, the US military have adopted mindfulness practice into their training so they can optimise combat performance.<sup>25</sup> When mindfulness becomes a mere tool, unbound from any ethical injunctions or a wider moral framework, it has potential to be dangerous.

Finally, Christians need to be wary of adopting the practices of other religions that can open the door to harmful spiritual influence. Both prayer and mindfulness use the quiet part of our mind. If prayer opens us up to hearing God's Spirit, it therefore follows that mindfulness potentially opens us up to other spiritual influences. Even though this seems benign, it could prove to be harmful. This is one of the main concerns I have for people who unknowingly

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24 Dawson & Turnbull, 'Is mindfulness the new opiate for the masses?', p.61.

25 Sun, 'Mindfulness in context', p. 406.

engage in popular mindfulness. Are they opening their mind to spirits they don't understand?

The influence of other religions can gradually lead us down the path of idolatry. We can see this tension and struggle between faith and culture in the Old Testament, in the example of Solomon. When he took over the throne from King David, he 'loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of his father David' (1 Kgs 3:3) and God blessed him with great wisdom and discernment (1 Kgs 3:8–9; 4:34). Over the span of his rule he built a great temple so that Judah and Israel could worship God. Their country experienced a time of peace and prosperity.

But as Solomon's forty-year reign continued, he adopted the cultural practice of intermarriage with foreign princesses – a practice common for kings in the ancient Near East, who used these marriages to strengthen political ties with surrounding nations. However, the Israelites had been warned against this practice because it could lead them into idolatry (1 Kgs 11:2). Gradually, this practice inclined Solomon's heart away from the God of Israel, and he followed the gods of his wives and stopped observing what the Lord had commanded (1 Kgs 11:1–11). So God tore his kingdom from him, and thereafter Judah and Israel were two separate kingdoms.

From then on, we see the history of Israel and Judah as fraught by a pattern of following God's ways, then drifting away to follow the gods of the nations around them, incurring God's wrath and repenting, and returning once again to worship their own God. The cycle continued, and it is an example to us of the importance of following God's ways and not totally assimilating with the beliefs of the people around us. Our God wants us to be fully devoted to him.

In the same way, it is wise for contemporary Christians to be cautious about wholeheartedly embracing mindfulness practices

that stem from Buddhist roots. Paul says our bodies are the temple of the living God (2 Cor 6:14—7:1). We are to be separate from unbelievers and touch nothing that is unclean for both our body and spirit. We are to be holy and fear God. This means we will not engage in a practice that can open us up to spiritual harm or idolatry. We need to make wise choices. To uncritically assimilate Buddhist mindfulness practices into our daily lives can lead to syncretism, whereas a process of thoughtful evaluation can lead to healthy transformation.

To be people of the two worlds of faith and culture forces us to confront this issue and decide how we are going to respond. As in the example of Solomon, God wants us to follow his ways and not follow the teachings of other religions. Mindfulness meditation and inner transformation need to be based on Christian values so that we do not lose our saltiness but stand out as a light to the world.





**Does mindfulness improve our wellbeing?**

**Can it be practised within a Christian worldview?**

**Can it be Christ-Centred?**

**Yes.**

In the award-winning *Christ-Centred Mindfulness*, leading academic and experienced mental health worker Dr Katherine Thompson addresses these questions and draws on the rich Christian tradition to present Christian mindfulness exercises that help us slow down, connect to what is happening inside ourselves and make space to listen for God's guidance in everyday life.

Whether you're a Christian who is curious about mindfulness practice and its benefits, or you work in a counselling profession and are trying to sort through your own approach to mindfulness-based therapies, this book is for you.

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