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Mindfulness: A Christian Critique

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Abstract

Mindfulness, which is derived from Zen Buddhist meditational practices, has enjoyed increasing popularity in recent times. Research on the effectiveness of mindfulness is briefly described along with an introduction to the definition, practice and possible mechanisms of mindfulness. A Christian critique is then applied, carefully assessing the usefulness as well as potential limitations and weaknesses of mindfulness.

Mindfulness: A Christian Critique

Recent trends reveal that the field of psychology has become increasingly interested in studying spirituality and religion, especially as they relate to physical and mental health (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Such trends have been promising for those involved in the area of integrating psychology and Christianity. It is important to recognize however, that as the field opens itself up to the study of religion and spirituality, it also lends itself to non-Judeo-Christian religious traditions and perhaps even more so due to the fact that America is becoming an increasingly post-Christian society.

In particular, evidence for a growing interest in Eastern religions has been found in mindfulness, which has its roots in Zen Buddhist meditation practices. Typically utilized in cognitive-behavioral therapies, the literature on mindfulness has proliferated exponentially in the past decade and continues to appear with increasing frequency. The growing popularity of mindfulness can be attributed to its effectiveness in alleviating a wide range of problems. Mindfulness-based therapies have been found to decrease many general physical and psychological symptoms (Krasner, 2004). Several studies have shown that a mindfulness-based stress reduction program has been successful in decreasing stress (Astin, 1997; Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and in particular, the stress experienced among women with breast cancer (Tacon, Caldera, & Ronaghan, 2004) and medical students (Rosenzweig, Reibel, Greeson, Brainard, & Hojat, 2003). Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) has been found to successfully reduce depressive relapses in major depression (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Other mindfulness-based interventions have effectively decreased symptoms of anxiety (Boswell & Murray,

1979), reduced physical pain among chronic pain patients (Kabat-Zinn, 1982), and improved psoriasis (Bernhard & Kabat-Zinn 1988). Additionally, due to the relationship between anxiety and the leading cause of death among Americans, heart disease, a mindfulness-based stress reduction program had beneficial effects on heart disease (Tacon, McComb, Caldera, & Randolph, 2003). Moreover, mindfulness has been used as a component of Linehan's (1989) dialectical behavior therapy, used for one of the most difficult to treat disorders, borderline personality disorder.

Furthermore, in light of managed care, studies have also shown mindfulness has a positive impact on cost-effectiveness and health (Krasner, 2004). It has been suggested by Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) that mindfulness can also be utilized to combat the greater social issue of mindlessness, which is described as absent-mindedly dealing with complex situations. Mindfulness has also been used on healthier populations and reveal that in addition to reducing levels of anxiety and depression, a mindfulness-based stress reduction intervention increases empathy levels and scores on a spiritual experiences measure (Shapiro, Schwartz, Bonner, 1998). Mindfulness has gained increasing popularity in the business world where studies have shown that mindfulness can enhance creativity and decrease burnout (Langer, Heffernan, & Kiester, 1988).

Because mindfulness has gained prominence in psychological literature and its popularity is growing rapidly, it is necessary to carefully understand mindfulness and its implications from an integrative perspective. Mindfulness, as practiced and implemented in the above literature, was developed from Zen Buddhist meditation practices. Used in therapies, the goal of mindfulness is to facilitate an enhanced awareness of one's thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations without trying to change or judge them (Segal, Williams,

& Teasdale, 2002). In mindfulness, the individual is taught to view thoughts as “events of the mind,” and in this way, be nonjudgmental towards thoughts and actions (Teasdale, 1999). It involves accepting unwanted experience rather than fixing or avoiding it, and through this, new learning occurs through achieving distance and perspective on one's thoughts.

The mechanism through which mindfulness appears to work is what Langer and Moldoveanu (2000) describe as a process of “drawing novel distinctions” between things. In other words, one does not make a judgment about a particular thought, but rather views it as something new. The resulting consequence of mindfulness on the individual includes: 1) an enhanced sensitivity to the environment, 2) greater openness to new information, 3) the formation of new categories to structure one's perception, and 4) increased awareness of several perspectives in problem solving (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Simply put, it involves taking away past understandings and facing it again with no perspective in order to gain a different perspective on it. The activities of mindfulness include observing, describing, being nonjudgmental, and engaging in one activity at a time with focused attention (Heard & Linehan, 1993). Observing is fully sensing an experience, without avoiding or extending the experience. This results in a distancing of oneself from one's thoughts, emotions and behaviors. Describing involves verbally expressing the experience, absent of judgment or analysis. The two tasks of observing and describing encourage the client to attend to one's own reactions to themselves or external environment (Heard & Linehan, 1993).

The purpose of mindfulness is for the patient to experience what Teasdale (1999) calls a “metacognitive insight,” in which thoughts experienced simply as events of the

mind. In dialectical behavior therapy, mindfulness is used to increase tolerance of oneself as well as events that occur (Heard & Linehan, 1993). Krasner (2004) describes mindfulness as calling for an individual to “consciously shift the locus of control internally, to acknowledge and accept whatever challenges arise, and apply wise attention to the challenges without judgment in the present moment.”

Although mindfulness is part of the Zen Buddhist tradition, the philosophical underpinnings of the practice are not necessarily in discord with Christianity. More specifically, a central tenet of mindfulness is being present in the moment. This is a theme that resonates within Christianity, especially in the book of Ecclesiastes. For example, “there is a time for everything” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8) and “the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. For there is a proper time and procedure for every matter” (Ecclesiastes 8:5-6). Scripture appears to support the heightened awareness of one’s present time and place. Additionally, in Philippians 3:13-14, Paul is “forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,” which seems congruent with the idea of applying one’s attention to the present moment and be able to see through a new rather than the old perspective. Again reinforcing the idea of being in the present is Matthew 6:34, which states, “Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” As Bonhoeffer (1954) states, “a day at a time is long enough to sustain one’s faith; the next day will have its own cares.” In this way, mindfulness is beneficial in that it allows one to sift through one’s thoughts in order to focus attention on the importance and relevance of the present time.

A problematic issue however, arises in mindfulness due to the fact that it promotes a nonjudgmental view of one's thoughts. Although mindfulness does call for one to be attentive to one's thoughts, the nonjudgmental stance runs the risk of being unaware of a more objective view. It is difficult however, because the concept of being nonjudgmental in mindfulness is elusive. One is encouraged to observe a thought without analyzing it and focus on their reactions to the thought. Whether one should remain nonjudgmental to the reactions is unclear.

Still, a major tenet of mindfulness is this nonjudgmental stance and absence of analysis of one's thoughts. This problem appears to be related to the different belief system between the Buddhist and Christian religious traditions. A primary goal of Buddhism is to empty oneself of desire in order to achieve nirvana, which is illustrated by extinguishing a flame. This belief is exhibited in the practice of mindfulness, because one is, in a sense, emptying oneself of one's judgment. As noted elsewhere, cognitive-behavioral therapies are rooted in atomism, which have a tendency towards dissolving the self (Jones & Butman, 1991). A nonjudgmental attitude towards one's thoughts results in a lack of an objective awareness of oneself. While it might be tempting to liken mindfulness to prayer, the difference is that the latter requires an anchoring towards objectivity, such as through concentrating on Scripture. For instance, in the Christian tradition, contemplative prayer, which is also known as centering prayer, emphasizes silence, but a silence in which the purpose is to experience God. Again, however, a critique regarding this aspect of mindfulness is difficult due to an elusive operational definition of mindfulness, especially as it has become secularized and taken from its spiritual roots (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003). While the majority attribute the origin of

mindfulness to Zen Buddhist traditions, some state that it also has roots in Christian contemplative traditions (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003). Hebrews 10:16 states, “I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” As Christians, we are to be aware of our thoughts and compare them with what we know to be good. In Christian prayer, there is what is known as listening prayer, in which one listens for God to speak. The fact that one seeks God with a desire for His response is exhibited in Psalm 139:23-24, which states “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” In this way, Scripture supports an objective and judgmental view of one’s thoughts and God’s judgment of these thoughts. While mindfulness teaches the emptying of oneself, Christianity promotes the filling of oneself of God’s presence. However, mindfulness and Christianity are not necessarily in discord for this reason. Especially in our modern society, it may be necessary to first empty ourselves in order to be more open to or make room for God.

Mindfulness is useful in that it helps us to concentrate and focus on the present reality. Throwing away hindrances of the past, mindfulness calls us to be attentive. However, it is limited in that while attentive, this practice requires the individual to be nonjudgmental. Mindfulness appears to be an intermediate stage between accepting and rejecting a thought. While we may have the tendency to immediately accept or reject the thought, mindfulness allows us the necessary time to focus and concentrate on it. The difficulty however, is that there is no resolution due to the nonjudgmental stance. As Christians, we are called to have an objective view of ourselves in order to promote greater growth. Mindfulness has the tendency towards not being fully aware of the limitations of one’s

being, but rather hiding behind a nonjudgmental stance. Peck (1983) describes evil as the refusal to acknowledge our own sins and a nonjudgmental stance, at an extreme, runs the risk of leading towards a desensitization or numbness to truth. Additionally, the emphasis of mindfulness to concentrate solely on oneself has the potential of leading to narcissism. By doing this, we leave no room for judgment or critique.

In conclusion, mindfulness is useful, but appears incomplete. The practical implications of mindfulness are clear and can be seen as a sort of common wisdom. Especially in our increasingly hectic and fast-paced society, the idea of slowing down to focus attentively on thoughts is similar to the Christian perspective of focusing on what is most important in the present time. It can benefit the individual by filtering out the superfluous and have a concentrated focus on the task at hand. However, rather than being nonjudgmental, the sifting through of such thoughts should ultimately be for the purpose of making room for God and His objectivity. It would be wise for Christians to utilize the beneficial aspects of mindfulness. The increasing popularity of mindfulness reveals the needs of our society. For this reason, it is important that Christian psychologists understand these needs and utilize aspects of mindfulness, which will help us to serve individuals more effectively.

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