MINDFULNESS AND CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Making Space for God

Tim Stead

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Foreword

I was introduced to Tim Stead's writing because of an article I wrote for *The Huffington Post* titled 'Can Christians Practice Mindfulness?' I wrote that piece because I felt I needed to do something in response to people's religious concerns about the practice, primarily the fear that its Buddhist origins made it unchristian or that it opened a path for the devil. Up until that point, much of my work had been to assure folks that no matter what their background or faith, it was completely fine to meditate and learn to be mindful. That God would actually be happy with their increased clarity of focus and connection with God.

When Tim Stead's *Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality* came into my life, the timing was perfection. I had been suffering from a headache that could not be beaten for six straight days. It wouldn't stop no matter what medication I used, no matter what holistic treatment I used, no matter how long I stayed on meditation or practiced my mindfulness. Then came the dizziness, and I knew something was off. I ended up canceling a flight I had scheduled for a high school reunion. It was at that point that my husband knew something was wrong because back then, I never canceled anything.

After a trip to the doc-in-a-box and then the next day to an emergency room, my husband telephoned my parents, beginning with the words, 'Are you sitting down?' I went from a misdiagnosis of stage four cancer to a rare bacterial infection that required two brain surgeries.

I am feeling much better now, getting an IV of antibiotics in the comfort of my own home. Still not 100 percent but very different and very changed. My illness led me to ask: Why did

this book come into my life at this particular time? Why was I asked to write about it? Why did I need to read it?

Reflecting on the intersections of mindfulness and Christian faith would hold much more significance for me now regarding my relationship with God and to life. Through this infection and all that came with it, I saw that I still held much contempt for myself. I realized that I did too much. But amazingly, I also found that I did not fear death, because I had a healthy connection with God. Self-acceptance, simplicity and focus, and deep connection with God—all of these Tim addresses in his book.

He easily puts everything in perspective. He makes it clear what mindfulness is from a scientific basis and why it is valuable for the practice of one's Christian spirituality. Mindfulness links us all, makes us all better human beings, and takes away our need to judge ourselves and others. As Jesus urged his followers: 'Do not judge, so you will not be judged'. Tim could no longer live with such judgment in his life. I give him great kudos and a huge nod for his bravery.

Tim even has a section on nature and ecology—how mindfulness makes you more aware of everything around you—not only of your body but also of your environment and the earth. Spirituality isn't just about what is inside of us but everything that surrounds us. Tim showcases how loving the environment and all of its creatures is of Christian importance.

Thank you, Tim, for bringing your book to an American audience, for making such a contribution to mindfulness, and for letting me be a part of it.

Eden Koz
Founder of Just Be, LLC
A Meditation, Mindfulness & Modern Wellbeing Company
Akron, Ohio

Introduction: Making Space for God

'What – another book about mindfulness?!' You may have noticed how books on mindfulness are multiplying like coat hangers in a wardrobe. There is 'mindfulness and this', 'mindfulness and that', and soon, probably, 'mindfulness and the other'. It is clearly the big new thing and therefore probably time to get cynical about it and start wearing the 'I don't do mindfulness' T-shirt.

However, there is very little on mindfulness and Christianity. This seems to me somewhat curious as there are so many overlaps, and something that is the big new thing surely ought to have a Christian response.

I wonder whether there are two reasons for this. One might be that we feel we already have two millennia and more of spiritual tradition behind us and so perhaps this is just 'spirituality' for those who don't belong to any faith. In other words, we don't really need it. And the other is that we have heard that mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism. Now this could be good or bad depending on your point of view, but it is still a 'competing' religion, isn't it, and surely I should be looking to my own faith for my spiritual practices?

Well, all this may be true – or true enough. But there are other questions that may still linger in the mind:

- Could it be that Christianity is still learning?
- Are we open to insights of other faith traditions?
- Is there more of our own tradition that remains generally unexplored?
- Are we open to the insights of science?
- Are we up for a further stage in the adventure of Christian faith and spirituality?

If the answer to any or all of these questions in your own mind is 'yes' – even a qualified 'yes' – then this book may be worth reading.

But first, let me say something about the approach of this book, beginning with what it is not. It is not a textbook on mindfulness, nor is it a mindfulness course. Plenty of these have already been written and are definitely worth turning to if you want to explore mindfulness for yourself in its own right. (A list of good books and where to find a course can be found at the back of this book.) Neither is this a theological treatise. Rather, it seeks to ask the question: 'What might mindfulness have to offer Christianity?' I could have chosen to have a go at answering the question the other way round: 'What does Christianity think of mindfulness?', but actually the former question seems much more interesting and full of possibilities – and perhaps somewhat humbler. So, although I will take time to say something of what mindfulness is and what is beneficial about it in Part 1, I am assuming that it is accepted that it is basically a good thing. Essentially, as psychologists are suggesting, this is about having a healthy mind, just as physical exercise and a good diet lead to a healthy body. But I want to go further than this and suggest that mindfulness might have a part to play in helping Christians to respond to the call of Christ in our lives.

I have always had two burning questions when I have thought about my faith:

1. Does it make sense?
2. Does it make a difference?

As far as the first question is concerned, apart from my earliest days as a Christian, when I simply took everything as read, I have always been someone who has wrestled with belief and the statements of faith that we proclaim. There have been times when I have simply wanted to say, 'I can't believe that.' But in the end, that has seemed a bit presumptuous, and anyway it doesn't really lead me anywhere. So, what has seemed a more

interesting question has been, 'I wonder what we really mean by saying that?' – about God, about Jesus, or whatever. This keeps the question open and the quest alive. So Part 2 will take time to reflect on what mindfulness might have to offer in terms of what and how we believe.

The second question has been almost more pressing for me. I know that Christian faith offers comfort, inspiration, and a sense of purpose, but can it actually change anything? Or are we simply forever 'moving the deckchairs around on the *Titanic*' – offering 'opium for the people' because basically the news is bad and always will be? I deeply want a faith and a spiritual practice that works – that can make a difference to my life and really change things for the better in all of our lives. Added to this is that many of us are acutely aware of a kind of faith that lays down very clearly what we ought to be or what we ought to do, but feel a constant sense of failure in the extent to which we have actually been able to live up to such expectations. And that is just the reasonably humble and self-aware ones! My New Testament teacher at theological college used to remark on how people would say to him that they weren't really Christian but they did live by the Sermon on the Mount. To which he would reply, 'Have you *read* the Sermon on the Mount?!' If they had, he would surmise, they would have realized that the ideal is, in fact, impossible. For those who have realized this, though, it may not be quite enough simply to accept God's forgiveness for our failure. We do genuinely want to find ways of responding, growing, moving toward this ideal, however slowly. So, does our Christian faith work? Does it make any difference? Mindfulness, for me, also has a part to play in enabling our faith to work for us, and in Part 3 I will suggest some ways in which this might be true.

Part 1, though, addresses the question, 'What is mindfulness?' This is not a mini course, but I hope it will provide a basic understanding of mindfulness itself. I approach it in three ways: first, by telling the story of the development of mindfulness in

its clinical and academic contexts; second, by reflecting on mindfulness in the Christian tradition; and finally, by reflecting on mindfulness from the perspective of my own faith journey.

However, an important point to note at every stage is that mindfulness is truly appreciated only at an experiential level. Because of this, practical exercises are interspersed throughout the book, which you are welcome to have a go at. These are no more than tasters, but will, I hope, give balance to the mainly reflective material.

Finally, a word on the subtitle of the book: *Making Space for God*. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot even heal ourselves. Christians believe that only God, in Christ, is our Savior and healer. But there is something we can do – and need to do – and that is to make space for God to come to us. We can choose to open ourselves up and invite the work of grace into our lives. This may be familiar language, but still it raises the question: 'But how do we do this opening up and inviting in?' It is my suggestion that mindfulness offers us a way of opening up, inviting in – making space for God.

Part 1

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

1

Mindfulness in Its Clinical and Mainstream Contexts

If you already know the basics of mindfulness or have even completed a course, then you might want to skip this chapter (although, equally, you might just be interested in my own slant). But for those who don't have a basic knowledge, this chapter covers how mindfulness has emerged in the past 40 years (first in clinical settings and lately in all sorts of mainstream contexts), what it actually is, how it is taught generally, and how I have been teaching it in the parish context.

History

The story goes back to the 1970s when Jon Kabat-Zinn, with a PhD in molecular biology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, began to develop a meditation-based program to help support people suffering from chronic pain. Kabat-Zinn had been introduced to the practice of meditation a few years earlier and was influenced by the world-renown Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn, among others. Kabat-Zinn was born Jewish but suggests that his worldview was more strongly formed by the science and art learned from his parents than by any religious context. Similarly, when he discovered meditation it was not the religious aspects that drew him but the health value of the practices. He does not identify as a Buddhist any more than he identifies as a Jew, but rather he has explored all that he has been exposed to in relation to his own scientific

context. So, when he began to realize that the practices he was engaging with might have some significant health benefits, he developed an eight-week program that later became known as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). He offered this in the University of Massachusetts Medical School and demonstrated through controlled tests that the course could significantly reduce anxiety and stress in patients, and in particular help people to find an alternative way of managing chronic pain. The program has been running ever since and is now available all over the world.

There is a very moving video, *Healing and the Mind* (available on YouTube[1]), of Kabat-Zinn teaching a class of people with severe, untreatable chronic pain of all kinds, showing how the practices helped to transform the lives of the participants. These patients had already exhausted all the possibilities provided by conventional medicine for elimination of their pain. Mindfulness practice was *not* being offered as another way to eliminate pain, however. Instead, MBSR taught the participants a new way of *relating* to their pain. This reduced the considerable degree of stress with which most people usually respond to pain, and this, in turn, reduced the perceived experience of pain to the extent that many could take fewer painkillers and often either go back to work or engage in activities they had previously withdrawn from. But the most striking thing about the video, which seems to me particularly important to note, is the compassion that seems to flow from the teacher. Kabat-Zinn appears genuinely to care for his patients in a heartfelt way. If, as Kabat-Zinn says, this is really all science, then it was science with a difference, because it included as a necessary fundamental element the lived-out experience of love.

Fast-forward to the 1990s and we find a group of cognitive behavior therapists on two continents reflecting on the effectiveness of their treatment for long-term sufferers of depression. Recall that, up until then, psychiatry and psychology had been focusing on how to treat depression once people were already

in the midst of an episode. Cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) had been shown to have been a very successful treatment since the 1970s, but what Mark Williams, John Teasdale, and Zindel Segal were finding was that a major problem for people with depression was that it keeps coming back – it is a 'recurrent' problem – especially for those treated with antidepressant medication. These psychologists thought that such recurrence might be due to the fact that, for many who have suffered past episodes of depression, a new episode is more and more easily triggered. For these people, any small initial low mood could activate a whole chain of associations, forming into negative thought patterns that then compound and deepen the mood into a full-blown depression. CBT was known to help reduce recurrence, but no one knew how it had its therapeutic effects. Segal, Williams, and Teasdale suggested that CBT had implicitly been teaching people a way to step back from the vicious cycle of their thoughts rather than constantly getting caught up in them. If this is how successful treatment actually worked, could the same skill be taught to those who were known to be vulnerable to future depression even when they were well? But how could this be achieved? It was at this time that they became aware of Kabat-Zinn's work in Massachusetts, through his publications, which had begun to emerge in the early 1990s.

So, the CBT experts traveled to America, took part in the MBSR program, and came to realize that this could be the missing piece to their own jigsaw. After one or two false starts, most notably making the mistake of thinking that mindfulness could be taught by people who were not actually practicing it themselves, they developed an eight-week program called Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). This was based heavily on the MBSR program but was adapted to focus on the needs of long-term sufferers of depression. CBT was still in there, as it had been shown to be so effective in the past, but it was now 'front-loaded' with mindfulness. Essentially, participants were shown a way of disengaging from their negative

thought processes in order to create space around them before then employing some gentle CBT techniques.

The initial results were dramatic. Compared to control groups who continued with treatment as normal (that is, continuing with whatever their usual treatment might be, including going back to medication if they needed to), those who took part in the MBCT program showed a reduction in episodes of relapse by up to 50 percent. And it seems to be reduction in relapse for chronic sufferers that is the key achievement. It is generally advised that sufferers of depression take part in an MBCT program, if possible while they are feeling well. This is partly because the program is quite demanding in itself and partly because but what it teaches is the skills needed to avoid relapse. Once again it is important to note that compassion is built into the way the program is taught. Those who have developed the course have been motivated over the decades by their sense of compassion and have realized that this is a key part of the healing process. A final point to note is that, partly because of these initial results and partly because of the unit costs involved (mindfulness can be taught to a group of up to 25 people at a time), our National Health Service here in Britain was fairly quickly persuaded to back it. General practitioners now refer some patients to mindfulness courses.

A Definition

So, an extraordinary success story! Mindfulness is a good thing, as declared by psychologists, neuroscientists, and health professionals. But what actually is it and how is it taught?

First, a definition: mindfulness can be described as being *more fully aware of your own experience in the present moment in a nonjudgmental way*. There are four vital strands to this definition: awareness, experience, the present moment, and nonjudgment; all are key parts of what mindfulness is. It may sound very simple or even naive to suggest that bringing

mindful awareness to things would have any significant effect on the practitioner, but notice how each of these four aspects is counterintuitive – against the grain of much of our regular 'default' brain activity – and therefore needs a great deal of practice to achieve; and that each aspect plays a significant role in reducing anxiety and living more freely, which consequently seems to have such an effect on many other aspects of our health.

The emphasis on awareness is intended to be offered as a powerful antidote to the automatic way our brains tend to work most of the time. In mindfulness training we refer to this as 'autopilot'. It is important that our brains are able to act automatically (or unconsciously) much of the time, so that we do not have to keep sending a message to our hearts every second to carry on beating, or consider whether we should jump out of the way of an oncoming bus. But much of our unconscious brain activity can be useless at best and dangerous at worst, so the constant practice of bringing awareness to what is going on in our minds can be a very powerful tool. Awareness, as we shall explore later, leads to greater choice in how we use our minds.

The emphasis on our own experience is intended to counteract the brain's tendency to overanalyze. Analysis is, again, an important brain function, as many problems can be solved in this way, but not all. Crucially, very often these exceptions are not emotional or psychological ones. Whatever the case, the art of drawing closer to what it is we are actually experiencing can be an important part of the healing process, especially when analysis may be being used (even inadvertently) only as a means to move away from our experiences.

Emphasis on the present moment is also a key tool for those of us who can spend too much of our time living either in the past or in the future: worrying, replaying, or even overcelebrating what has happened, or planning what is about to happen, while never fully appreciating what is right here in

front of us. Too much focus on past or future is associated with buildup of stress.

Finally, bringing a nonjudging attitude is also key if we are to counter the human tendency to repress those things of which we are ashamed or embarrassed. Once aspects of ourselves are repressed, they are less available for healing of any sort. Only when some part of ourselves is fully present in a nonjudging atmosphere (akin, you might say, to that created by a good psychotherapist – or even better, God!) can that aspect be more fully understood and be in some way healed.

But why not try this little exercise, if you have never done anything like it before, which illustrates through actual experience what mindfulness is.

The Raisin Practice

This exercise has become a classic in the teaching of mindfulness. It doesn't have to be done with a raisin; but raisins do seem to work very well.

So, find a few moments to yourself, read through these instructions, and then see if you can follow them as best you can.

1. Take one raisin and place it on the palm of your hand. You are going to eat it at some point, but not yet!
2. First, take time simply to see the raisin sitting there on your hand and explore all the visual aspects of this raisin. I know you know it is a raisin and you have seen many before, but you have never seen this one, never at this point in time, and never in precisely your current state of mind. So, see if you can see this raisin as though you have never seen one before and you just want to experience it as fully as possible. See the smoothness and the rough patches; the various shades of color; the way the light plays on the surface; whether you can see any shadows, etc.

3. Then, when you feel ready, pick the raisin up between your thumb and forefinger and begin to explore its texture and how it feels to the touch. Perhaps roll it around between your fingers and see how the texture changes over time or as it warms up.
4. Next explore its smell by bringing it up to your nose. What do you notice? If you have a cold, there may be no smell! If so, then notice simply the absence of smell; but if there is smell, allow yourself to become aware of it for a few moments. Smell is often complex, and there may be more than one kind of aroma around, including, of course, the smell of your own fingers.
5. Now place the raisin on your tongue. Don't chew or swallow yet, if you can manage it, but explore the sensations in the mouth caused by having a raisin on the tongue. You might even move it around to see how other parts of the mouth respond to the introduction of this raisin.
6. Now, when you feel ready, bite into the raisin and notice the flavors that are released, and, again, how the different parts of the mouth respond to these flavors. Where are the flavors most noticeable? Where else are they apparent?
7. Finally, but only when you have decided to, swallow the raisin. But let the practice not end there; stay with your attention and notice all the after-effects on your mouth, throat, and body of having swallowed the raisin.

When we teach mindfulness in classes, after this practice we simply invite participants to say something of what they experienced, or noticed in their own experience, during the practice. The array of responses is astonishing and rather wonderful. All we have done is eat a raisin, but people express a wide range of things about a raisin they had never noticed before, and all sorts of thoughts that popped up in their minds in response to what the raisin had triggered. One participant traveled (in her mind) all the way down to the south coast of England and

was in her mother's kitchen at Christmas while the Christmas pudding was being prepared. And all I had asked her to do was to eat a single raisin!

Your experience may be different: boredom, irritation, dislike of raisins, self-conscious thoughts about what on earth you are doing when you thought you were going to learn about some new life-changing spirituality! All these may be present. But it doesn't matter *what* we experience or notice, only that we notice it.

How wonderful, then, to go about life in this way: fully awake to the myriad different experiences that are going on around and within us all the time; delighting in things we had never noticed before – the subtle colors, aromas, and textures of all we encounter; even waking up fully to the thought processes that are constantly going on in our minds. However, I have only just begun to describe a process. It may sound simple, but actually it is very difficult – which is why we practice, practice, and practice. Much is said about the practices, but it is the results of being more mindfully aware that we are seeking. Mindfulness has been shown to have many health benefits; and, I will argue, it has huge benefits for the Christian.

Teaching Mindfulness

Finally, how is mindfulness taught? This is, for me, part of the genius of what mindfulness might have to offer the churches. Compare, for instance, how you learned to pray. My own experience, even as one who has been quite proactive in seeking to learn spiritual practice over the decades, has been piecemeal at best. There are any number of excellent books, from the greats to the popularizers, and I find that I have learned a bit from here and a bit from there over a long period of searching, but often there is no one on hand to help me when I get stuck. So, what about your average churchgoer, who might ask, as Jesus' disciples once asked, 'How do I pray?' Well, there are

books on prayer and courses about prayer on offer, and even the help of a spiritual director if you are really keen, but where is the course that can simply take you through the basics and get you going? Mindfulness does have such a course; in various forms, yes, but all drawing from the same well and all equipping you with the basics, from where you can continue to explore and develop for the rest of your life.

Before describing the course I teach, I want to note one further development in the mindfulness story. Not very long after it was discovered that mindfulness was effective for people suffering from serious clinical conditions, it began to be realized that it could also be of value for all of us, whether we are struggling with milder forms of stress and anxiety, wanting to find a sense of focus in a high-pressure, high-achieving career, or simply wanting to live a fuller and healthier life.

Jon Kabat-Zinn had already written a number of books for the general reader, but in 2011, Mark Williams, together with his writing partner, Danny Penman, published *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*.[2] In this book they presented an eight-week course that could be followed by the reader at home, which had a less specific focus. It was designed not for those with chronic pain or depression but for the much wider set of aspirations of people living ordinary everyday lives.

The course I teach is based on this book. The broad description below, though common to all the courses, comes from my experience of teaching with this more general book.

Let us start with two key principles.

First, there was an early recognition that mindfulness could be taught only in a mindful way. A bit like with God really; you can teach *about* mindfulness and your hearers (if they don't get bored) will acquire an intellectual knowledge that is almost entirely useless to them – because what they really need is to *experience* mindfulness for themselves. Teaching mindfulness in an experiential way involves inviting the participants to try

out the mindfulness practices for themselves, either in class or at home and then to reflect on what they experienced while trying the practice. The aim is not to achieve any particular experience but to develop the skill of noticing what happens in our experience. So the teacher becomes an enabler of experience rather than an imparter of knowledge. It is very common that members of the group will, especially in the early stages, feel despondent that they have not achieved what was required. But the response of the teacher will always be to place the main emphasis on simply noticing what did happen rather than getting frustrated with what didn't. As mentioned earlier, the skill being learned is, in many ways, counterintuitive – we have been brought up with the expectation that we need to reach targets and goals, but here, rather wonderfully, it is different. We are learning to notice what is actually happening, in a nonjudgmental way, so that we might come to know the experience more deeply. From this point all else follows.

The second key principle, as noted already from the MBSR and MBCT programs, is compassion. At every stage the atmosphere we seek to create is one of openness and nonjudging compassion. Initially we simply seek to model it; later on, in the course from Williams and Penman's *Frantic World* book, we actually teach it in a particular way. We are hoping that people will learn to be honest and open about their own experiences, and this will happen only if people feel that their teacher is basically on their side and cares deeply about their struggles.

So, against the background of enabling experience in an atmosphere of compassion, the course works through a number of different but related mindfulness practices. Each week there is a new practice, which participants are invited to try at home on six days out of seven, with the help of a guiding CD (which comes with *Frantic World*), and then come back the next week to reflect on the experience.

There are three types of the main formal practices. They often overlap, but we gradually move through the three types

over the eight weeks. I call these three types 'focus', 'awareness', and 'kindness'.

The focus practices are the starting point and the bedrock of all that follows. First we need a focus – an anchor, or if you like a place to 'stand' from which we can become aware of what is going on in our ever-changing experience. The focus could be anything that stays still; however, in mindfulness we tend for a number of reasons to use the body as our starting point in bringing focus. So one of the basic practices involves developing the ability to direct the mind's attention to various parts of the body in turn. This is called the 'body scan'. Another related practice is to see if it is possible to bring your attention to your own breathing – and keep it there! The first thing most of us find is that it is not possible, or at least not for long. And when I say not for long, for some of us it can often be only a few seconds! So, the first thing we discover in mindfulness is how active the mind is – indeed, how it has a 'mind of its own'. You can be at the end of a long stream of thought about the day's events or plans for tomorrow before you even realize it. The moment you become aware of this, though, you are invited to congratulate yourself for 'waking up' and then simply to return to the focus, whether it is the breath or the body.

This can be such a frustrating phase, as all we seem to be discovering is how little ability to focus we have. And added to this, we are annoyingly assured, there is nothing we can do about this except keep noticing when we have drifted off. Gritting our teeth with the determination to do better this time just doesn't seem to work. And when people have asked me whether I have gotten better at focusing for longer periods of time over the years, I am afraid I have to answer: not really! I think I have gotten better at 'waking up', though and am definitely better at becoming aware during the day, but I don't feel I have gotten any 'better' at meditating; which, thankfully, is not actually the aim. The aim is to become more mindful in daily life.

The Focus Practice

To get the basic idea of this kind of practice you could try it for yourself now – this could take as little as five minutes. When you have finished reading the instructions, put the book to one side.

Sit up straight but in a relaxed way, close your eyes if you feel comfortable with that, and deliberately bring your attention to noticing your own breathing, focusing on the part of the body that seems most apparent to you as the breath moves in and out of the body. No need to slow it down or speed it up; just see if it is possible to keep your attention on your own breath for a while. If you find your mind wanders, just take note of this fact and return to focus on your breathing. And that's it. Try this now and then read on after a few minutes.

So – what happened? All sorts of things are possible depending on who you are and what state of mind you were in at the time. You may have become aware of aspects of your breathing that you hadn't noticed before, or you may have found that within seconds your mind was off wandering along in its own sweet way following its own sweet path. Either, or anything else for that matter, is probably normal. All you have noted is what happens when you make it your intention to bring your attention to a certain point of focus. This is the basic principle behind a number of 'focus' practices that take up the first part of the course.

Once there is the tiniest degree of focus developing, however, we begin to move into practices that more directly encourage *awareness* of what is going on in our own experience. We tend always to begin with some form of practice that enables focus and then move into beginning to take more note of the experiences we are having in our bodies, in our feelings, and in our thinking; once again, this is always in a nonjudgmental way. We encourage one another not to decide whether a particular experience is good or bad but just to notice it as an experience.

We even try to see thoughts in the same light. I may be harboring angry thoughts toward my neighbor or critical thoughts about my friend, but at this stage we are simply learning to see these as thoughts that are present in our experience. 'How interesting!' I might be heard to say one too many times in the teaching sessions. But actually this is the point – to bring curiosity and wonder to what we are experiencing, not judgment.

The Awareness Practice

This can be more difficult to experience at first, but you could try extending the focus practice above by staying just that bit longer with the focus of your attention on the breath. When (not if!) you notice that your mind has wandered, simply take note of what it has wandered to and then come back to your focus on the breath. Spend as long as you choose doing this, as the same thing will probably happen over and over again. Try it now before reading on.

What happened this time? What did you notice? Whatever you noticed, this is awareness. It can seem very simple to start with but equally can reveal the most profound things to us. Of particular interest can be noticing our minds acting in the same way or being drawn to the same subject over and over again. There is still no need to judge or analyze what is going on – just being aware of it is of enormous value.

The third type of practice, which we teach in the *Frantic World* course (but which, for particular reasons, is not incorporated in some other courses), is compassion or 'kindness'. Now this is an interesting thing to include in an apparently 'secular' course. How can kindness be a 'practice'? How can one learn compassion? Isn't it just something you feel or you don't feel? Well, as it happens, it is not really about feelings at all, but about developing an attitude of kindness both to ourselves and to others. The good news for those of us who don't find that this

necessarily comes naturally is that it *can* be practiced and learned. I will look into this practice and its implications for Christians in detail in Chapter 13; here I am just noting its existence as part of the course. What it involves is the repeated saying of certain phrases that express kindness and compassion, first toward oneself and then toward selected others in our imagination, including people we may find we feel very little compassion for. For some this is quite a challenging practice, but for others it has a great beauty to it. For all of us, though, it is a key part of the course and one that comes to color all the other practices.

The Kindness Practice

Again, you could try something very simple here. You can sit exactly where you are, close your eyes, imagine yourself sitting here, and say this phrase: 'May I be kept safe and may I know kindness'. You could say it several times. Try this now and notice how it feels to be saying these words.

What did you notice? It may feel very moving – or it may not! It may even feel awkward and create some sort of reaction in you. Whatever you feel, what you have done is to begin – just begin – to cultivate an attitude of kindness toward yourself. There is a long way to go, but it is worth discovering how it feels just to have made a start.

So, these are the three basic types of practice we teach over the eight weeks. Of course, the object is not to enable people to become good at meditation practice but to help us to become more mindful in daily life. This is where the benefits come. We add in a number of other kinds of practice that help to bridge the gap between our formal practice, which we are likely to do at the beginning or the end of the day, and the rest of our lives. We have something we call the 'three-minute breathing space', which can be practiced at any time of the day when you might

be able to create some sort of brief pause (it doesn't actually have to be precisely three minutes). We also have 'mindful activities', where you might choose to carry out a simple task but in a more mindful way. And we even have 'habit releasers', which can be quite fun. These are designed to help us to notice the ruts we can get stuck in; through changing a very simple, habitual way of doing something, we may find we have opened up to a whole new experience that we might not otherwise ever have encountered.

So, that was a whirlwind tour of one version of the eight-week course, intended to give you just a glimpse of the process. If you would like to experience mindfulness to the full, I strongly advise you to join a course run by a trained teacher or follow one of the courses mentioned at the back of this book.

I have been teaching the *Frantic World* course in the parish context for four years, with very little adaptation of the material. I made an early decision not to mix in spirituality, so that the basic good of mindfulness could come through as clearly as possible. However, I do start by dedicating the evening to God and then inviting people to trust the God we have invoked to look after them in whatever happens through the evening, and we finish with a blessing. I have found it challenging, fun, and enormously fulfilling to teach. The real joy is in receiving the feedback forms and hearing many participants (though never all) describe how mindfulness is making such a difference to their lives. And this is the point: it really does work for a lot of people. But, as one Christian member noted toward the end of the eight weeks: 'Yes, I see very clearly now the emotional and psychological benefits of mindfulness, but what about the spiritual aspect?' At the time I was only able to say that it was for him, and each one of us, to find out for ourselves, as we incorporate what we have learned into our own spirituality. In some ways I still stand by this, but for Christians this does seem to be a question that keeps coming up. The rest of this book attempts to offer some possible responses.

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