

practice!

Another way of thinking about mindfulness is the idea of learning to wake up from our sleep and become fully aware of where I am, who I am and what choices lie before me. This is what happened to the prodigal son in Jesus' magnificent story. And it was this waking up moment, or 'coming to his senses' as the NIV puts it, which was the start of his beginning his path back to his true home – back to God. Mindfulness, I want to suggest, is one of the ways of cultivating this waking up – this recognising that God is here and what will be involved in following God's way for me. God is always here for me. It is me who is so often not here for God. Mindfulness can help me to be present and so to experience God in the here and now. Mindfulness can make space for God in our lives.

Secondly, nature and quiet gardens. One of the big 'wake ups' in recent decades is our gradual realisation that our traditional attitude to nature, one of dominance and exploitation for the sake of humanity is, in fact, in danger of destroying our very own habitat – quite apart from the habitats of thousands of other species. Our analytical judging minds are so quick to see everything which comes into view as either useful or not according to my own needs at the time. Well, this is one kind of paying attention which has, indeed, had a part to play in human survival. But what is needed now is this altogether different kind of attention which I have been describing above. This is the kind which persistently suspends this kind of utilitarian judgement specifically in order to create the space to come to know, appreciate and value the object of our attention in its own right – to come to recognise intrinsic value and beauty and not just its value in terms of human need – even human need for beauty!

Many involved in the Quiet Garden Movement may feel they are already engaging in this kind of attention when they walk slowly round the garden itself. But it can be helpful to keep on developing it – why not try the exercises above from the mindfulness tradition?

Revd. Tim Stead is an Anglican priest and accredited mindfulness teacher. His book "Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality" was published by SPCK on 17th March 2016.



The Quiet Garden Movement

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Mindfulness and Quiet Gardens



Rev Tim Stead, an Anglican priest and accredited mindfulness teacher, reflects on what might mindfulness have to do with Christian spirituality or with the Quiet Garden Movement - and suggests two mindfulness exercises to try in a garden setting.

Mindfulness appears to be the big new thing nowadays. You may have read an article in any number of magazines or read a book or been sent details of one with mindfulness in the title. You may have gathered that mindfulness has some connection with meditation but have also picked up that it is being used in the NHS to help with all sorts of clinical issues and also in schools and even in the house of parliament. So, what is going on?

Well, in short, mindfulness is a form of meditation practice which quite simply trains us to pay attention to our experience in the present moment in a non-judgemental way. Our minds can be so pre-occupied so much of the time with anything but this moment and this experience. Almost the moment we become aware of anything in the present moment our minds are off getting caught up in all sorts of concerns, worries, memories or fascinating theories. But the art of being able to be present to this experience which is happening now can be the gateway to a truly awakened or spiritual life: awake to who I am, awake to my place in nature and awake to God.

I was drawn into mindfulness practice 5 years ago partly because, in many ways, it looked like the Christian contemplative prayer I had been practising for 30 years but partly because it really did seem to help dramatically with how I managed stress and low mood in my life. I joined a programme to train to teach an eight week course in Mindfulness at least in part so that I could enter into it and learn it more deeply for myself. But having been teaching it for 4 years now I have reflected quite

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a lot on just how this all relates to my own Christian tradition of spirituality and prayer. I also help to run the Oxford “Forest Church” and have, increasingly, used mindfulness as part of our practice together when we meet in the countryside or woods 6 times a year in order to explore spirituality in nature.

So, first, Christianity in general - let me try to summarise my own approach to Mindfulness and Christianity. As I have said, mindfulness trains us to be present in this moment in a non-judgemental way. This way of paying attention goes against the grain for many of us as we find ourselves so often either avoiding this moment because it is either painful or boring, or judging it according to my own likes or dislikes, or for how I can change things to suit me better.

PAYING ATTENTION EXERCISE

The next time you are on a visit to a quiet garden, try this as part of your walk. If some plant or tree or section of the garden catches your attention, stop and decide to make this the object of this short practice. Then either stand or sit and see if you can really pay attention to this object.

So, first, simply see the shapes, the patterns, the colours and the shades. Notice how quickly the mind starts to think about other things like its biology, whether I like it or not and the associations it has for me, and simply keep coming back to exploring shapes, colours and patterns.

Then look harder – is there anything more to see which you hadn’t noticed up to now? See if you can keep looking beyond the boredom point and then keep looking some more. See if it is possible to allow yourself to remain curious as you gaze with respectful awe. Then you could bring other senses to bear: smell, touch and possibly, if you know what you are doing (!), taste.

Then there is one more thing to notice about nature here: you. What thoughts, feelings or even body sensations do you notice in your own self in response to this experience of noticing this object? Again, no need to judge or analyse – just notice what is here in nature – in you. Perhaps stay here exploring this one object for just a tiny bit longer than feels comfortable. And then walk on. No need to come to any conclusions or write anything down. What you have done, though, is take a tiny step towards re-uniting two parts of God’s creation the way that it was in Eden before humans decided that it was all there just for them – and began the tragic separation of humanity and the rest of nature.

WISHING KINDNESS EXERCISE

In mindfulness we have a practice which helps us to develop an attitude of kindness towards ourselves and others – even those who have hurt us or who we may find difficult. In my book I explore the possibility of using this practice in nature too to help us to develop a positive, respectful attitude to all we see in nature. So, if you choose you could continue the previous practice with this – or, of course, you could start with this or use it at any point round the garden.

Simply start by spending a short time paying attention to a flower or tree that has caught your attention and then quietly say these words:

MAY THIS FLOWER BE SAFE AND PROTECTED

MAY THIS FLOWER BE TREATED WITH RESPECT AND WITH KINDNESS

MAY THIS FLOWER FIND SPACE TO GROW AND TO FLOURISH.

You may find other phrases which are more meaningful for you or you may even be comfortable addressing the flower itself (‘May *you* be safe and protected’ ...) but either way linger a little while repeating these phrases a few times and notice the reaction it produces in you. It may feel a bit awkward to start with but, on the other hand, it may, in time, develop the deep seated respect and love for nature which so needs cultivating in us. And then, as we become increasingly aware of the connectedness of all life forms on earth, we may find it harder and harder to do anything that will cause harm to the flower I have been actively been wishing kindness, growth and flourishing for.

But, if I want to know God, I need to develop a different kind of attention: one which stays present, whether it is comfortable or uncomfortable to do so (i.e. whether God’s word to me is comforting or challenging) and also one which hesitates to judge what I am experiencing. If this is God here, then it is not appropriate to judge - but only to gaze with wonder and curiosity as Moses did with the burning bush.

So, this is our starting point in our life with God. It may sound simple in a way but actually it is so difficult to train ourselves in this way of paying attention, this way of being, which is why an eight week course, or a book containing a course is what is most helpful. Then practice, practice,