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Serenity Now!

Serenity as the Common Thread of Religion, Spirituality, and Mindfulness

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Pop culture resonates with the theme of self-improvement. Television shows such as *The Swan* and *Extreme Makeover* bombard us, urging us to pursue physical perfection. In the grocery store line, magazine covers surround us with offers to live a happier life with clutter-free closets. Self-improvement is even music to our ears – three recent Top 40 songs proclaim that there is more to life. Everyone wants to better himself or herself in some capacity. In this paper, I discuss well-traveled roads to fulfillment: religion, spirituality, and mindfulness. I discuss notable incompatibilities between religion and mindfulness with the following limitations. First, I must acknowledge my standpoint. I am a Pentecostal Christian recently acquainted with mindfulness. This paper is a development of my search to find the common ground between my belief system and mindfulness meditation. I contend that *serenity* is the common ground on which both religion and mindfulness stand. To share my findings, I discuss four characteristics of serenity before offering a final summary and conclusion.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) refers to Dr. Redford Williams's book, *The Trusting Heart*, in which he points out that "all the major religious traditions of the world emphasize the value of developing the qualities that science now seem to be showing are good for your health" (p. 213). Yet, science and even psychoanalysis are "bothered by spirituality" (Maaske, 2002, p. 778). Similarly, it has been my experience that religion, at least Christianity in general, is bothered by mindfulness meditation.

The meditation techniques most common in the United States originated in Eastern philosophies, and "there is sometimes confusion or concern that meditation practices are in some way antithetical to Western or Christian religious or spiritual practice and belief," when in fact, "virtually all spiritual traditions have created meditative practices" (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999, p. 68). I recently encountered a Christian classmate who had this "anti-Eastern" mindset. We were

in a study group when our discussion turned to our instructor, who, according to the student's conjecture, is an atheist. When I asked how he knew this, he replied, "Because! He said his motto is a Buddhist proverb!" Incredulous, I explained that quoting a Buddhist proverb does not mean that one does not believe in the Christian God and that, in fact, Christianity and Buddhism are compatible philosophies. Such misconceptions about Eastern traditions, including meditation, abound, stirring me to search for answers among this uncertainty. The remainder of this paper relates my answers.

Discussion

King David, a man after God's own heart, presumably wrote in Psalms 19:14, "May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer." David prayed that God would be pleased by his meditation practices, yet, as previously discussed, many "religious" people shy away from meditation because they do not see meditation as a spiritual practice. I offer two significant discrepancies between religion – Christianity in particular – and mindfulness, as possible explanations for this oversight.

Notable Differences

First, there are admittedly multiple ways to achieve mindfulness. There is no formulaic approach. Christianity, on the other hand, offers a dominant worldview that offers a "straight and narrow" way, thereby shunning the concept of equifinality that mindfulness embraces. Secondly, acceptance of self and others is essential to mindfulness, and Christianity teaches that humans are born in sin, and only by the grace of God are we spared from certain destruction. Christians are encouraged to daily repent for our wicked ways and therefore are never fully self-accepting. It is for this reason that I found it interesting that "there seems to be a reciprocal relationship between self-acceptance and acceptance of others" (Connors et al., 1999, p. 245).

Perhaps this is why Christians are often perceived as judgmental – we are taught to see ourselves as bad, and if there is a correlation, that provides a possible explanation as to why are so quick to find fault with others. These different viewpoints on equifinality and acceptance of self and others are significant, yet outweighed, in my opinion, by the principles these schools of thought share.

Serenity as Common Ground

What connects the dots between religion, spirituality, and mindfulness? In each article I read on this topic, two common themes emerged: transcendence of the flesh and the belief that there is more to life than we often realize. Each of these ideals are embedded in the concept or quest of serenity. The term “serenity” signifies peace of mind even in the midst of trying circumstances (Connors, et al., 1999). They further explain, “One can be serene without a sense of spirituality, but spiritual practices are widely recommended to enhance serenity” (p. 235). There are several overlapping, intertwining elements of serenity that I portray in four categories, the first of which is the notion of an *inner haven*.

Inner Haven

Experiencing an inner calm and peace of mind even in the midst of difficult circumstances epitomizes the notion of an inner haven, in which one experiences freedom and tranquility (Connors, et al, 1999). To achieve this peace of mind, Kabat-Zinn (1990) posits that “people have to kindle a vision of what they really want for themselves and keep that vision alive in the face of inner and outer hardships, obstacles, and setbacks” (pp. 45-46).

In Christianity, one’s faith is his or her source of strength, or the calm in the middle of the storm. II Corinthians 4:8-9, 14 relate the trials endured by Paul and the other apostles. “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but

not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed.... knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also....”

From my personal experience with mindfulness, it seems that my inner calm is not omnipresent. To summon the peace within when things are swirling around me, I have to focus on my breath and on positive, encouraging thoughts. Likewise, in my spiritual life, I can be sidetracked and let life’s circumstances overrun me, so I have to call on my faith to empower me to continue.

Acceptance & Present Centeredness

Taking one day at a time and forgiving oneself of past mistakes exemplifies *acceptance* (Connors, et al, 1999). Similarly, being *present centered* refers to the ability to think about the past without anger or regret (Connors, et al, 1999). Marlatt and Kristeller (1999) reflect that these are the foundation of mindfulness:

What is mindfulness? To be fully mindful in the present moment is to be aware of the full range of experiences that exist in the here and now. It is bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment to moment basis. (p. 68)

We must perpetually remind ourselves to be mindful, to experience the moment, for each moment is unique and fleeting, disappearing as quickly as we realize its existence.

James, one of the disciples, pointed out that we do not know what will happen tomorrow because our life is only a vapor that appears for a moment and then vanishes away (James 4:14). Likewise, Matthew 6:34 says not to worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will take care of itself; besides, we have enough to worry about today.

Although I agree with these statements by psychologists and disciples alike, and though I endeavor to be accepting and present-centered, I struggle with this component of serenity more

than any other. As a student, I live by due dates. I would guard my jam-packed, color-coded planner with my life. As soon as I finish one thing, I have to start the next, or more often, I have several projects going at once. I constantly tell myself, "it's worth it though, because in May 2006 I'm going to graduate; then in May 2008, I'm going to have my M.A. in Interpersonal and Organizational Communication; then that fall I am going to Iowa or UNC-Chapel Hill or UC-Santa Barbara to pursue my Ph.D... and someday... these papers will pay off." I am consistently future-centered, which has been the biggest detriment to my stress level. To combat these urges, I need to take one day at a time, one thing at a time, one moment at a time.

Trust

By *trust*, Connors and his colleagues (1999) mean that one is confident in the ultimate goodness of people, and that "life events happen to fit a plan which is larger and more gentle than [one] can know" (p. 241). To feel serene, we are encouraged to trust others and ourselves with the knowledge that we will fine no matter what comes our way (Connors, et al., 1999; Kabat-Zinn 1990). This confidence in everything working out for the best sounds generic and cliché, but imagine how much easier it is to be accepting and present-centered if one recognizes that in the end, everything will be okay.

The concept of trust is found throughout the Bible. We are assured that all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord (Romans 8:28) and that He will perfect everything that concerns His children (Psalms 138:8). Connors et al (1999) further elaborate on trust as it pertains to Christianity:

Trust is based on a belief in the benevolence who offers forgiveness, with no questions asked as illustrated in the biblical story of the prodigal son and his father.... Another

aspect of trust within a theistic context is that one is guided by God toward some task or predetermined destination. (p. 247)

In my church, we sing songs about our trust in God such as “I Can’t Even Walk Without You Holding My Hand” which describes our dependence on God. Likewise, I think trust plays a large role in mindfulness, because being trustful rids us of paranoia and enables us to focus on enjoying the moment.

Forgiveness & Benevolence

Going beyond forgiveness, *benevolence* signifies one actually wishing well the persons who caused him or her pain (Connors, et al, 1999). Goldstein (1993) offers a way to liberate the benevolence and compassion within. He suggests the following:

Think of a person in difficulty, and as you hold him or her in your mind, gently repeat the phrase “May you be free from suffering.” As your mind concentrates more and more deeply on the person and on the repetition of the phrase, the feeling of compassion flowers within you. You can then extend this feeling to groups of people, and finally, to all beings everywhere. (p. 149)

This takes courage, strength, and what my dad always called “rising above it.” I remember getting those words of advice many times throughout periods of middle school blues and high school drama. “Rise above it!” he would say, and I would reply, “I don’t want to rise above it!” It seems silly, but in actuality, we seem to cherish holding grudges with no regards to the repercussion on others or ourselves.

From a Biblical standpoint, we have Jesus as the greatest example of forgiveness and love. My favorite example of this is when Jesus and the disciples were praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and the soldiers came to arrest Jesus. He healed the ear of one a soldier who was

there to arrest him! We also have the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," and I certainly hope I am merciful to those who do harm to me, because I need that mercy from God.

To be fully aware, we need to realize the load that will be lifted off our shoulders when we forgive others and wish them well. Marlatt & Kristeller (1999) advise taking an objective look at the habits we perpetuate in order to realize that we do not have to continue these patterns.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I examined the different standpoints of religion and mindfulness regarding both the self and equifinality. I contended that serenity is the interweaving thread throughout religion, spirituality, and mindfulness by discussing four characteristics of serenity that I see as being particularly relevant. I examined how maintaining an inner haven, acceptance and present-centeredness, trust, and forgiveness and benevolence foster a serene, mindful, spiritual being. I think the strongest ideal found in both religion and mindfulness is that one can have this ultimate epiphany and awaken to a whole new world – the world they had been dead to. I have found that one cannot tease these concepts apart and therefore, one should take an all-encompassing approach to life, for as author M. P. Follett said so eloquently, "The divorce of our so-called spiritual life from our daily activities is a fatal dualism."

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