

Mindfulness

Walking with Jesus and Buddha



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Introduction

My teacher, the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (whom I like to call Thay¹), is the one who introduced me to the term *double-belonging*. It was during a retreat at Nottingham University, UK, in 2012, with nearly one thousand retreatants present, many, if not most coming from a Christian background. I am always moved by the way Thay introduces Christianity into his talks or writings.

It is not a theoretical or abstract comparison, but rather makes the words of the Bible very concrete, something I can use in my daily practice. He has encouraged me to write a book on Christianity and Buddhism, and see what it is that Christianity can offer to Buddhism. This has helped me to follow in his footprints and discover how to make Christianity a practice for everyday life. The teachings of Jesus in the gospels are like doors that can be opened to find a daily practice of mindfulness. One of the reasons why Thay and I found each other was that he is not caught in Buddhism. Another reason is that he has

¹Thay is the Vietnamese word for teacher.

understood and appreciated the more beautiful aspects of our Western culture.

In our time, many of us have become familiar with the term *double-belonging*. It means you can belong to more than one spiritual tradition. It could be Christianity and Buddhism or Buddhism and Judaism or any other combination of two or more paths. You begin to see Buddhism with Christian eyes or Christianity with Buddhist eyes. You do not have to choose this or that. Christians, while going to church and upholding their Christian practice, can also benefit from mindfulness and meditation retreats led by Buddhist monks and nuns.

I, myself, though a Buddhist nun, am also one who *doubly belongs*. Although well versed in the Buddhist scriptures and meditation practices, I still have in me the religion of my ancestors, my parents, and my childhood. When I go to the church for a funeral service, to support our neighbors, for example, I still make the sign of the cross and genuflect. These things are not outer forms but gestures that help my mind and body to be present in the here and the now. The sign of the cross is made with one in-breath and one out-breath. I listen to the Christian scriptures and recognize the meaning of the words in the light of what I have learned from Buddhism. I often feel deeply moved during these services when I recognize how the roots of the spiritual life transcend the boundaries of separate religions.

I began life as an Anglican and was baptized as a baby in the Anglican Church. I attended a Catholic convent as a primary school child and then as a middle schooler went to a Church of England school. At London University, I attended the Catholic chaplaincy. During my early years, I felt free to go back and forth between the Anglican and Catholic Churches.

The practice of mindfulness, although taught in detail by the Buddha, can fit in with the teaching of any religion or spiritual path. Here, in this book, we want to look at how Christians can make mindfulness a part of their everyday lives.

Sometimes we say that Buddhism is not a religion but an art of living. Practicing a religion, you feel devotion or awe in the presence of God. When you practice mindfulness you still have that sense of awe: when you look up at the night sky and see the galaxies, when you look at the Himalayan or Alpine ranges covered in snow sparkling in the sunlight, when you see a tiny flower poking out of the grass.

Mindfulness helps you to notice the wonders of life because you are not being carried away by thoughts about the past or the future, but it is not a religion.

I learned about mindfulness first from my teacher Thay, who has been called the Father of Mindfulness.² I

²*Time* magazine, January 24, 2019, and the *Irish Times*, April 10, 2012.

also learned from my blood father, Reginald Laity, who taught me how to varnish a boat in mindfulness, without hurrying to finish the job, or how to peel an apple in mindfulness and then eat it in mindfulness.

In the end, everyone has to find their own way. The important thing is to do just that and not be caught in doctrines, theories, or ideologies. Your spiritual path is for you alone, and no two people's paths will be exactly the same. You can make these little teachings on mindfulness part of your spiritual life. They can bring you more happiness, and they may also bring you nearer to the heart of Jesus Christ and Christianity.

What is mindfulness? Mindfulness is the ability to dwell in the present moment, the only moment when life is possible. This will make it possible for us to be aware—to recognize what is happening within ourselves and what is happening around us. Mindfulness helps us to concentrate on what we are doing. We can begin by being aware of our bodily activities of breathing, walking, and eating, for example. Then we can be aware of our feelings and thoughts that, if we are not mindful, can go by unnoticed. Because we are aware of what is happening in the present moment, we can live in the present moment, free from regrets about the past or worries about the future.

Does everyone have the capacity to be mindful? We all have the capacity, but we do not use it. You may remember one time in an emergency situation, you had to

be 100 percent there in the present moment and do just what needed to be done. You could not waste any energy thinking about the past or the future. Your capacity for mindfulness at that moment was very important and could have saved your own or someone else's life.

We do not have to wait for an emergency in order to be mindful. If we want, we can use that capacity every day. Breathe in and just recognize you are breathing in. Breathe out and just recognize you are breathing out. Breathe in and switch on the light. Breathe out and take a step away from the light switch. As you switch on the light, be aware of what you are doing. You may repeat a poem to yourself as you put your hand on the light switch to be more aware:

Forgetfulness is the darkness, (breathe
in)
Mindfulness is the light, (breathe out)
Awareness comes back, (breathe in)
And lights up the world. (breathe out)

The practice of mindfulness can be described as setting your feet in a wide-open place.³ When we practice dwelling in the present moment, we find space in the present

³See *The New Jerusalem Bible* translation for Psalm 31:8: You "have given me freedom to roam at large."

moment, as we allow our minds to rest there and not be carried away by meaningless thinking. The practice of mindfulness is not a constraint but allows us to feel spaciousness.

One of the teachings of Thay, for which I am most grateful, is the teaching on walking meditation. About ten years ago I was busily walking somewhere on an errand while organizing a retreat in the European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany. Thay was walking down the staircase, and I was walking unmindfully up it. When I came close to him, he said, with much love, “Here is your challenge. Every step can bring happiness.” Thay has said that if people want one way to find happiness, it is to take every step in mindfulness. If people can do this, it will save the world. This for me is the deepest teaching. Every step, wherever you are and whatever you are doing, can bring happiness. Even if you are going through many difficulties, you can still take a peaceful step and smile. It is a challenge. Can you do it? It is up to you, because happiness does not come from outside. Every day I take up that challenge from my first steps in the early morning until my last steps at night. Thay cannot walk at the moment,⁴ but his disciples can walk for him.

Many great spiritual teachers and mystics have been

⁴He suffered a severe stroke in 2014.

able to expand the boundaries of their spiritual path and help their spiritual path to grow. If a tree is truly alive, it will send out new branches and leaves every year. The same is true of spiritual paths; they need to renew themselves. All of us have the capacity to help renew our own spiritual path in order to make it more relevant to our own times, able to reduce the suffering of our times and especially the suffering of young people.

The expansion of our spiritual boundaries may begin with intellectual knowledge, but it cannot stay that way. It depends on our daily practices. When we see that a certain daily practice brings about transformation in our life, then we have faith in that practice. That is not blind faith but is based on something concrete.

Our practice of mindfulness leads to a better ability to focus and to concentrate. When we concentrate, we are able to see things more clearly, more as they are, and this helps us expand the boundaries of our spiritual paths.

Once a Vietnamese Catholic nun was visiting our monastery. She had an interview with Thay. She said she was enjoying the practice of Buddhist meditation very much and was wondering whether she should leave her order and become a Buddhist nun. Thay said, “My child, your order really needs you. Please stay with the path you have chosen. You can continue to practice mindfulness as a Christian nun and you can help your order and the world by doing so.”

They also said, “We do not need people to convert to Buddhism, we have enough Buddhists already. Please go back to your roots and renew them. In the past Christian missionaries came to Vietnam and tried to persuade us to give up our ancestral altars, a very important and meaningful part of the Vietnamese spiritual life. We do not want to do the same kind of thing when we come to the West.”

You can do the practices suggested in this book, for instance, mindful breathing, walking, and eating, on your own. However, they become much more enjoyable and easier when you do them with others, either in a retreat setting or in an informal gathering. Throughout the world there are groups practicing mindfulness together, and some Christian churches have their own mindfulness groups.