

Merton's Mindfulness

By **Rick Mathis**

Presence is what counts. This was Thomas Merton's assertion as he began a series of talks to a group of contemplative nuns toward the end of his life. His presentations, which were later transcribed to become the book entitled *The Springs of Contemplation*,¹ were delivered at a pair of retreats Merton held at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky for prioresses of contemplative orders in December 1967 and May 1968. They focused mainly upon the place of contemplation and contemplatives in modern times. By beginning with presence, Merton was emphasizing the need for the participants to be fully present in order to understand themselves and what they needed to do. "We want to be present to each other and then trust what happens," he said (*SC* 3).

Merton's interest in presence was in part driven by the turbulent times in which he lived. Among other things, the country was divided over the war in Vietnam and the Catholic Church was still adjusting to the changes brought about by Vatican II. Merton felt that presence was essential to facing life openly, honestly and courageously in the face of doubt and confusion. One of the participants in the retreat, Sister Mary Luke Tobin, wrote in her introduction to the book that as the meeting progressed she could see themes emerging which Merton was to emphasize in the writing of his last days – namely, standing on your own two feet, giving courage to the creative and imaginative new members who need a compassionate community and proceeding to live your life as you think you must (see *SC* x-xi). Merton was specifically interested in overcoming alienation in order to live autonomously and courageously. Presence, he felt, was essential to this.

Although his comments at the retreat were intended for people who had taken religious vows, laity seeking to apply contemplative approaches to daily life can also gain from his insights. Living compassionately, autonomously and courageously are concerns that many share, not the least of whom are those interested in being more contemplative. Merton himself says that God wants to know "the divine goodness in us. This is a deep truth, this desire on the part of God to become self-aware in our own awareness. That's why contemplation is for everyone" (*SC* 14). Interestingly, much of the advice that Merton gives to the nuns is consistent with mindfulness approaches that are popular today. This is not surprising due to Merton's deep interest in the Buddhist thought from which mindfulness teaching derives. What separates Merton from many writers on mindfulness, however, is his use of Christian ideas to inform his recommendations. This is especially helpful to Christians that are interested in mindfulness but also want to remain true to their tradition.

Merton discusses three interdependent ideas at the retreat that are consistent with mindfulness. These are presence, detachment and silence. We have already touched on Merton's emphasis upon presence. One leading



Rick Mathis

Rick Mathis is a researcher and writer living in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He earned a Ph.D. in Political Science from the Johns Hopkins University and is the author of several books, including *The Christ-Centered Heart* and *Finding a Grace-Filled Life*. More about his work may be found at www.rickmathis.net.

proponent of mindfulness, Bhante Gunaratana, writes in his book *Mindfulness in Plain English* that mindfulness is about “present-moment awareness. It takes place in the here and now. It is the observance of what is happening right now, in the present. It stays forever in the present, perpetually on the crest of the ongoing wave of passing time.”²² Another leading proponent of mindfulness, one whom Merton knew personally, is Thich Nhat Hanh. In *The Miracle of Mindfulness* Nhat Hanh defines mindfulness as “keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality” and as being practiced “right now in one’s daily life, not only during meditation sessions.”²³ Presence, it seems, is a foundational spiritual idea for both Merton and Buddhist practitioners.

Detachment also figures in Merton’s talks as well as in mindfulness writings. Merton warns of not getting attached to such things as praise and work. The effect of such attachment can be similar to the effects of drugs and can lead to unhealthy dependencies. “Anybody who does anything in life soon finds out,” Merton says, “that you have to purify your intention, you have to do it with a certain amount of detachment. Otherwise it’s disastrous” (*SC* 208). Merton references Buddhist thinker D. T. Suzuki in emphasizing our need to get into the “realm of straight being, away from the realm of mere existence and activity.” We need to treat passing things “as *non-definitive*,” he continues. “They’re provisional. Everything that happens to go by is all right, it’s real, but it’s *provisional reality*. We deal with it in perfect freedom because we are in contact with something that we don’t know. And we don’t kid ourselves that we do know. This is fundamental for the contemplative life” (*SC* 261).

Detachment also figures in Gunaratana’s thinking. He sees meditation as teaching us how to scrutinize

our own perceptual process with great precision. We learn to watch the arising of thought and perception with a feeling of serene detachment. We learn to view our own reactions to stimuli with calmness and clarity. We begin to see ourselves reacting without getting caught up in the reactions themselves. The obsessive nature of thought slowly dies. We can still get married. We can still get out of the path of the truck. But we don’t need to go through hell over either one. (Gunaratana 30)

Similar to Gunaratana, Nhat Hanh recommends meditations and practices that are designed to bring about detachment. He encourages, for example, that people take a detached viewpoint toward such things as success and failure, recognizing that there is a great deal of chance and interdependence involved with either one. Specifically with respect to failures, detachment allows us to be “free and no longer assailed by them” (Nhat Hanh 146).

A final shared concern between Merton and mindfulness is the emphasis upon periods of silence in relation to presence and detachment. This is, of course, one of the distinguishing characteristics of contemplatives. Merton says, for example, that being silent is part of the job of contemplatives. Modern life is filled with noise and activity, and it is important that there be people who practice silence in the face of this. Contemplatives need “to keep silence alive . . . because no one else is doing it” (*SC* 6). Meditation and silence are also hallmarks of mindfulness. Gunaratana writes that silent, focused meditation “prepares you to meet the ups and downs of existence. It reduces your tension, fear, and worry. Restlessness recedes and passion moderates. Things begin to fall into place and your life becomes a glide instead of a struggle. All of this happens through understanding” (Gunaratana 10). Nhat Hanh also emphasizes silence as important to mindfulness practice, writing

that it is important not only to find silence during periods of meditation but also to “maintain a spirit of silence throughout the day” (Nhat Hanh 45).

Presence, detachment and silence are areas of commonality between Merton and mindfulness practitioners. These are core ideas that are important for living a more centered and aware life. In his final talk of the second retreat, titled “Contemplative Reality and the Living Christ” (SC 259-74), Merton departs from Buddhism by focusing more directly on Christian ideas. He recommends that the nuns draw from the Bible, and specifically the situation of Adam, in their practice. “Anything that is said about Adam in the Bible and in commentaries on the Bible,” he says, “is deeply relevant for the contemplative life, because Adam is every human being” (SC 261). Merton feels that considering the question that God posed to Adam after his disobedience has great potential. “Adam, where are you?” God asks. The call for Adam to answer at this point is the same call that all of us, especially contemplatives, have. “God speaking to Adam in Genesis,” Merton says, “gives us all kinds of typological situations for the contemplative life. Everything about the temptation and Fall is a pattern that we live through all the time, the pattern of our problems” (SC 262). Answering God’s question requires confronting our fallen nature and being present to it. As Merton says, “God comes to us and it isn’t just a question of answering by saying, ‘I’m here,’ although that’s a part of it. For Adam, in this situation, reality is the *admission of presence*. We make reality insofar as we consent to be present to a situation” (SC 263). This provides us with an opportunity for an honest accounting of our standing before God.

Another practice that Merton recommends is to focus on the Resurrection. This is, he argues, the central truth of Christianity. “This is what it boils down to,” he says. “Either Christ is risen or he isn’t. If he isn’t, as Saint Paul says, we’re just a bunch of fools, the most to be pitied. On the other hand, we know we’re not that crazy because we know from experience that when we commit ourselves to this faith, our life changes” (SC 269). The Resurrection is central for Christian contemplatives. Life changes as a result of committing to it. “Something happens to us which cannot be accounted for otherwise,” Merton says. “Some people might say that it’s a question of making yourself feel good. I don’t know. But something does happen. This is the truth. This is where life is. This is central for us” (SC 269). One result of this focus is to empower contemplatives to consider the world around them and their place within it. They may need to question authority, or to consider whether in following accepted standards or customs they are doing what is right. We need to be inspired to live autonomously, compassionately and courageously in the face of an ever-changing world. The Resurrection provides the strength to do this. The meaning of “Christ is risen and Christ lives” is, as Merton says in his concluding remarks, “that Christ has *really* risen and lives in us now. It’s a question of the reality of a tradition that is *alive*. It’s a matter of Christ actually being and living here and now in us.” This instills contemplatives with confidence that they are “walking in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (SC 273-74).

Although Merton’s talks at the retreats were not meant to outline a formal program for meditation and action, they are helpful in considering what present-day Christians can do. The popularity of mindfulness attests to the fact that many living today in all walks of life are interested in ways to practice meditation and to carry its results into daily life. Merton’s ideas are particularly helpful for Christians wanting to do this. To begin with, we can learn from Merton’s interests in overcoming alienation in order to live autonomously, courageously and compassionately. We live, of course, in times of deep political and social divides, characterized by the fear of economic disruption and

violence. This leads to a great deal of noise and fruitless activity. Present-moment awareness is one means of recognizing what is going on and responding more wisely to it. Detachment, too, is helpful in enabling us to refrain from getting caught up in emotions that can be destructive to ourselves and to others. Meditation and silence are, of course, essential to facing life's ups and downs more reflectively.

Merton's additional suggestions to consider Adam and the Resurrection are especially helpful for Christians seeking to place contemplative practices into their lives. Answering the question, "Where are you?" demands an immediate and potentially life-changing response. Am I doing anything that I shouldn't be doing? Am I caught up in envy, jealousy or pride, or in the mindless rush to get ahead? Am I overly concerned with myself and my circumstances and not paying attention to larger issues? Am I doing what I need to do to help the poor or tend to the sick?

The call to consider the Resurrection is an important next step after answering God's question to Adam. It provides us with the strength to live more in line with better answers to the questions posed above. Recognizing Christ's sacrifice for us, instilling it into our nature, helps us to overcome petty concerns and to respond more autonomously and compassionately to those around us.

One can put Merton's mindfulness into practice by following the suggestions noted above. We can begin by establishing some time each day for meditation and silence. It also helps to select entire days throughout the year for longer periods of reflection. Carrying over the results of these periods of silent meditation to our daily activities is essential. Practicing present moment awareness is also important and can be done through gentle reminders when we find ourselves distraught over our circumstances. Such practices can themselves lead to a sense of detachment, although it also helps at times to try to view oneself as an observer would, as it is easy to get caught up in whatever emotional reactions we may be having. In undertaking these practices, it is especially helpful for Christians to include a focus upon their standing before God and to consider the Resurrection. The Resurrection changes us, causing us to live with more courage and compassion. Merton sums this up beautifully in saying that the purpose of contemplation "is not just that we may become aware of God or truths about God, but that God may see the Trinity reflected in each of us, in our own particular identity" (*SC* 14-15).

Although it has been nearly fifty years since Merton delivered his talks at the retreats in Gethsemani, our times have not changed all that much. We continue to be challenged by turbulent times, by appeals to authority and by the various distractions of daily life. Merton offers insights to those of us living today who desire to live more mindfully in the face of these circumstances. For Christians he embodies a spirit of openness to other faiths while maintaining a commitment to the truths of our own.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992); subsequent references will be cited as "SC" parenthetically in the text.
2. Bhante Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2002) 134; subsequent references will be cited as "Gunaratana" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1987) 16; subsequent references will be cited as "Nhat Hanh" parenthetically in the text.