

# Living Mindfully and Beyond: Learning from Thomas Merton

By **Geoff Colvin** and **William Apel**

It may seem odd to link the incredibly popular and somewhat commercialized mindfulness movement of today to the twentieth-century spiritual leader and teacher Thomas Merton. To our knowledge, Merton did not use the term mindfulness. It seems the most direct mention of the expression appears as a report in Appendix II of *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, in which Bhikku Khantipalo describes his recollection of a conversation on the subject of mindfulness he had with Merton in Bangkok in 1968.<sup>1</sup>

Our approach is to *infer* what Merton says about the concept of mindfulness by examining similar expressions in his published works and practices in the way he lived. We think that such research, viewed through the lens of mindfulness, would be fruitful not only to those who study and benefit from Merton's teachings in their spiritual journey, but also to those engaged in a mindfulness practice. In this article we begin with a general description of mindfulness. Second, we explore what we can glean from Thomas Merton's life and writings regarding the practice of mindfulness, how he lived mindfully, and especially how he took the practice beyond current norms.

## Describing the Practice of Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness dates as far back as 2500 years and was directly associated with meditation in Eastern religions. More recently, however, we have seen extraordinary growth in the mindfulness movement within large sections of Western cultures such as secular, religious, commercial, business, public and private points of view. It has also become an extensive subject of treatment and research in several disciplines including medicine, psychology, psychiatry, science, theology, neuroscience, science, spiritual formation and education. Given the fact that mindfulness has had such a long history and, more recently, an explosive impact in the West, we feel the need



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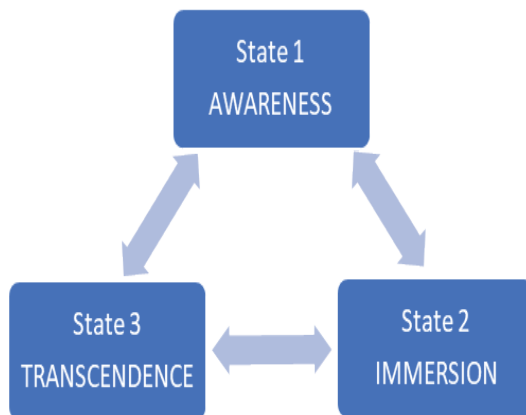
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to explore the subject more fully, especially in how it relates to our spiritual journey. We realize some caution needs to be exercised in describing mindfulness. The reason is that the practice has an incredibly wide range of application, based on its long history in Eastern religions, and, as already noted, has been extensively adopted in a variety of ways throughout Western society in recent times. We expect that any definition or description of mindfulness will need to capture this considerable variability. For example, corporate leaders who have adopted mindfulness practices for their employees would define mindfulness in relation to production and job satisfaction, whereas spiritual or religious leaders would likely describe mindfulness in terms of meditation practices and quality-of-life outcomes. We recognize the challenge to provide a description of mindfulness that needs to capture a wide range of application, to acknowledge and respect its long history and to accommodate both secular and spiritual states.

The generalized model we will describe depicts the practice of mindfulness in terms of three interacting states of consciousness depicted in Figure 1: *awareness*, *immersion* and *transcendence*.



**Figure 1: States of Consciousness in a Practice of Mindfulness**

### **State 1: *Awareness***

The first state of consciousness we denote as the starting point in the practice of mindfulness is to become fully *aware of* and *receptive to the present moment*. That is, we become directly attentive to the activity in which we are currently engaged, such as a task at work, taking care of family, feeding the dog, preparing a meal or walking in the woods. This step involves the demanding challenge that we studiously avoid dwelling on past or future events, thoughts or imaginings, and that we devote our entire attention to the object or activity of the present moment. We realize that this focus can be quite challenging because we so easily become absorbed by events of the past or obsess on the “what ifs” of the future. Clearly, we may need to give some attention to situations from the past and to responsibly plan for the future, but not in excess.

Bhikkhu Bodhi, American Buddhist monk, author and teacher, provides a helpful description of what is involved with this first state of consciousness in a mindfulness practice:

In the practice of right mindfulness, the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event. All judgments and interpretations have to be suspended, or if they occur just registered and dropped. . . . The whole process is a way of coming back into the present, of standing in the here and now without slipping away, without getting swept away by the tides of distracting thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

We believe that a particularly challenging step for us during this *awareness* state is to approach the present moment in a non-judgmental way. To begin with, we need to become aware of the many ways in which our thoughts and emotions, wherever we are, can readily turn to making judgments based on our biases, resentments, prejudices, self-serving manipulations and skepticism or cynicism. These judgments seriously limit what the present moments may offer us and can trap us into toxic dispositions. It is imperative that we develop strategies to let go and detach ourselves from these negative judgments when they arise. By contrast, we need to develop a non-judgmental orientation that enables us to be open and receptive to whatever may come to us in the current situation. Jon Kabat-Zinn, MD, author and founder of the Center for Mindfulness, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts, summarizes these initial steps for readying ourselves when he succinctly writes: “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”<sup>3</sup> Finally, it is important to note that in this first state of consciousness, *awareness*, there is *separation* between what we are attending to and ourselves. That is, there is clearly a distinct subject (ourselves) and a separate object (the focus of our attention).

### **State 2: *Immersion***

Once we attend more fully to the object or activity within the present moment, we often experience a different state of consciousness which we are calling State 2: *Immersion*. This state of consciousness involves a sense of *oneness* with the object of our focus. The initial separation between the object of our attention and ourselves dissolves, giving rise to a strong feeling of integration. There exists the sense not so much of losing self as the self becoming *one* with the object of our attention. For example, when we walk in the woods, initially we become aware of the steps we take, the sounds that come to us and the colors of the trees. However, as we become more tuned into just being there, allowing the sights, sounds and odors to be received, we experience a sense of absorbed by the woods – becoming one with the woods. Similarly, if we are fully present and attentive to a friend who is having problems, then we will more likely be able to listen more carefully, show more compassion and empathy, and become one with the friend. The friend senses this oneness and in turn, feels supported and connected. Thich Nhat Hanh, revered Buddhist monk, often regarded as the “father of mindfulness in the West,”<sup>4</sup> refers to this oneness as *interbeing* when he writes: “But with strong and steady concentration, we can continue to see the nature of interbeing of things within and around us.”<sup>5</sup>

One explanation for reaching this second state of consciousness, *immersion*, is that when we let go of inordinate obsessions from the past and preoccupations regarding the future, we have removed a strong source of negative thinking that can readily degenerate to unproductive or harmful actions, anxiety, and in some cases, depression. By attending fully to the present moment we create *space*

within ourselves to receive and respond in ways that can help us grow. Thich Nhat Hanh succinctly captures this transformation when he writes: “Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves.”<sup>6</sup>

### **State 3: *Transcendence***

We have no doubt that these first two states of consciousness in mindfulness practices, *awareness* and *immersion*, benefit many people. However, our position is that there is much more to a mindfulness practice. Specifically, there is a third state – *transcendence*. Until now we have described mindfulness in terms of clear outcomes such as stress reduction, improved concentration and production, clearer understanding of situations, serenity, and so on. In a sense, we have a high degree of control over the process. This is not the case with this next state of consciousness. Here we enter a state that is less defined and less clear in terms of outcomes. Thomas Merton captured this feeling of uncertainty, yet showing a willingness to stay the path, with his famous prayer “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.”<sup>7</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh continually reminds us that we need to become more fully engaged in the present moment and that we must always be ready to see more deeply into the present reality: “Reality . . . transcends every concept. There is no concept which can adequately describe it” (Nhat Hanh, *Miracle* 56), and furthermore that “contemplation on interdependence is a deep looking into all dharmas in order to pierce through to their real nature, in order to see them as part of the great body of reality” (Nhat Hanh, *Miracle* 46). In effect, he urges us to penetrate reality more deeply and go beyond our initial perceptions and experiences.

Our approach is to explore this third state of consciousness, *transcendence*, based on the writings and life of Thomas Merton. This review will help us to learn from Merton what it means to live mindfully and in particular to understand more fully the deep *spiritual* realm of our life-long journey of union with God.

### **Connecting Merton’s Writings to the Meaning of Mindfulness**

As noted previously, Merton did not directly address the subject of mindfulness. However, he constantly used various synonyms and expressions throughout his writings that capture its spirit such as awareness, awake, alive, alert, heightened consciousness and attention. For example, in the context of describing parallels between Buddhism and Christianity he noted: “The meaning of life is found in openness to being and ‘being present’ in full awareness.”<sup>8</sup> We believe that most mindfulness devotees would regard this statement by Merton as a reasonable description of what it means to live mindfully. Merton constantly reminded his novices to devote their full attention to what they were doing at the present moment. Abbot Timothy Kelly reported that brothers would often bring a book to read during the silence at meal times and “Fr. Louis would say: ‘Don’t do that. When you eat, eat, and be present to what you’re eating. Enjoy it, be aware of what you are eating. When finished eating, go do the reading.’”<sup>9</sup>

He frequently used the term “awareness” in his teachings especially in relation to aspects of prayer. For example, in describing *continuous prayer* he writes: “What it really means is continuous openness to God, attentiveness, listening, disposability, etc. . . . In terms of Zen, it is not awareness

of but simple awareness.”<sup>10</sup> Regarding *meditation* he writes: “this is the real end of meditation – it teaches you how to become aware of the presence of God; and most of all it aims at bringing you to a state of almost constant loving attention to God, and dependence on Him”;<sup>11</sup> and for *contemplation* he explains that “It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. . . . It is gratitude for life, for awareness and for being. . . . Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source” (*NSC* 1).

### **Illustrations of Mindfulness Practices in Merton’s Life and Writings**

In examining Merton’s life and writings, it is clear to us that he moved freely between the three states of consciousness *awareness*, *immersion* and *transcendence*. It is important to note that he was always seeking more, looking to the beyond, never satisfied with just being in the present moment. His adult life, in a very real sense, was committed to the third state of consciousness – *transcendence* (union with God, that is, the contemplative life). The following illustrations show how Merton lived mindfully, embodying the three states of consciousness with State 3: Transcendence as his overarching priority. We hope that that these examples may serve guidelines for us to utilize in our own spiritual journey whether we are directly or indirectly following a mindfulness practice.

#### **Transforming the Ordinary**

Given that most of us spend a great proportion of our day engaged in “ordinary” activities, it is not hard to see why Merton highlights the importance of these events in our spiritual journey. If we are to live in the present moment then we need to learn how to engage more fully in these ordinary activities and to place more value in them. In this regard Merton teaches: “Every moment and every event of every man’s life on earth plants something in his soul” (*NSC* 14). He helps us to understand that “One of the most important – and most neglected – elements in the beginnings of the interior life is the ability to respond to reality, to see the value and the beauty in ordinary things, to come alive to the splendor that is all around us in the creatures of God.”<sup>12</sup> Merton shows us that these so-called ordinary everyday events can become beautiful prayers: “Prayer must penetrate and enliven every department of our life, including that which is most temporal and transient. Prayer does not despise even the seemingly lowliest of man’s temporal existence. It spiritualizes all of them and gives them a divine orientation.”<sup>13</sup>

#### **Decluttering Our Minds**

While mindfulness stresses the importance of living in the present moment, Merton stresses the need to *cleanse* what is holding our attention, which may or may not be helpful. He points out that “The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes of all political and social life a mass illness. Without this housecleaning we cannot begin to *see*.”<sup>14</sup> In addition, he explains how we are continuously drawn to certain attachments that impede our ability to meditate, to rest in the present moment: “The earthly desires men cherish are shadows. There is no true happiness in fulfilling them. Why, then, do we continue to pursue joys without substance? Because *the pursuit itself* has become our only substitute

for joy. Unable to rest in anything we achieve, we determine to forget our discontent in a ceaseless quest for new satisfactions.”<sup>15</sup>

Once we attain this state of concentration, we are in a better position to enter the present moment in prayerful silence that Merton describes: “When I am liberated by silence, when I am no longer involved in the measurement of life, but in the living of it, I can discover a form of prayer in which there is effectively, no distraction. My whole life becomes a prayer. My whole silence is full of prayer. The world of silence in which I am immersed contributes to my prayer” (*TS* 93).

### **A Life of Openness**

A key to living mindfully is not just to live in the present moment but to do so without judgment – to display *openness*. There is no question that Thomas Merton lived a life that could be described as *living openly*. Take, for example, his interest in other religions. He not only studied other religions, he strongly acknowledged how these studies have significantly enriched his own religious beliefs and practices: “And I believe that by openness to Buddhism, to Hinduism, and to these great Asian traditions, we stand a wonderful chance of learning more about the potentiality of our own traditions, because they have gone, from the natural point of view, so much deeper into this than we have” (*AJ* 343).

It is simply amazing to see the depth to which Merton engaged in these studies. So much so that Fons Vitae, a distinguished inter-faith publishing company focused on world spirituality, has published a series of volumes focusing on his interactions with these world religions and their scholars. These publications, a highly valued collection of nine books, cover Merton’s studies and involvement with Sufism, Hesychasm, Judaism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Taoism, Indigenous Wisdom, Confucianism and Hinduism.<sup>16</sup> The richness, depth and scope of these books emphatically speak to Merton’s openness to other religions.

Merton was also a strong advocate for how to deal with disagreements during discussions on religious topics, specifically how to respect one another’s position and to move forward, when he wrote: “I will be a better Catholic, not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further” (*CGB* 129).

### **The Art of Listening**

We understand that being mindful when we are with someone, or in the presence of others, means being able to listen *attentively*. Thomas Merton provides an excellent example of what is involved in listening attentively to others without judgment. Trappist Abbot Timothy Kelly, one of Merton’s novices, reported: “If you were speaking with him, he was very present to you” (Sweeney 57). In one of his poems Merton provides an incredibly succinct and helpful suggestion on how to listen: “Be still: / There is no longer any need of comment.”<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the clearest record of Merton’s capacity to listen is the extraordinary number of letters by him and to him, numbering more than ten thousand, involving people from an incredibly diverse section of affiliations and interests. The fact that so many of these people maintained ongoing in-depth correspondence with him meant that they felt comfortable with him, that he was not judging them or their positions, enabling them to take the subject matter and their relationship with him to

considerable depths. Henri Nouwen, revered author and spiritual leader, captured this endearing quality of Merton's ability to listen with his expression of *spiritual hospitality*: "Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening is paying full attention to others and welcoming them into our very beings. . . . Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which you invite strangers to become friends, to get to know their inner selves more fully, and even to dare to be silent with you."<sup>18</sup>

### **Cultivating Silence and Solitude**

Thomas Merton struggled throughout his life to achieve the state of silence and solitude that would enable him to live in the presence of God and acknowledged the challenge: "Just remaining quietly in the presence of God, listening to Him, being attentive to Him, requires a lot of courage and know-how."<sup>19</sup> He continually stressed the importance of silence when he wrote: "Let me seek, then, the gift of silence . . . where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is all in all" (*TS* 94). As with many practices he emphasizes that changes have to occur within oneself first in the present moment. For example, regarding solitude he wrote: "Solitude is not found so much by looking outside the boundaries of your dwelling, as by staying within. Solitude is not something you must hope for in the future. Rather, it is a deepening of the present, and unless you look for it in the present you will never find it."<sup>20</sup>

### **Ongoing Transformation**

While Merton is very clear that the goal of the contemplative life or, using the context of this article, the goal of living mindfully, is union with God, he strongly emphasizes our need for continual transformation when he writes: "What is essential in the monastic life is not embedded in buildings, is not embedded in clothing, is not necessarily embedded even in a rule. It is somewhere along the line of something deeper than a rule. It is concerned with this business of total inner transformation. All other things serve that end" (*AJ* 340). He explains how this is to be accomplished: "We are transformed by love, and transformed in proportion to the purity of our love for God and for other men."<sup>21</sup>

### **Contemplative Prayer: The Essence of Transcendence**

It is clear that Thomas Merton's life as a monk can be summed up in one word: *contemplation*. His writings are replete with statements related to his commitment to and growing awareness and understanding of the pivotal role contemplative prayer plays in his life. For example, he writes: "how mistaken I was to make contemplation only *part* of a man's life. For a contemplative his whole life is contemplation."<sup>22</sup>

Merton helps us to tap the challenge involved with trying to make ourselves available and to participate in a transcendent state of union with God in contemplative prayer. For example, his letter exchanges with Rabbi Abraham Heschel capture his life-long quest for deeper understanding that there is something "more" to what we think we know about prayer:



I think the one [book] that really appeals to me the most of all is *God in Search of Man*. I do not mean that I think it contains all your best and deepest thought, but it is what appeals to me, at least now, because it has most to say about prayer. This is what I can agree with you on, in the deepest possible way. It is something beyond the intellect and beyond reflection. I am happy that someone is there, like yourself, to emphasize the mystery and the Holiness of God.<sup>23</sup>

Merton also stressed a special form of prayer, contemplative prayer, that *transcends* words: “And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept” (*AJ* 308).

### Closing

While the word “mindful” is not formally discussed by Merton, we can readily infer its spirit in his writings and in the way he lived. We see clear similarities of the common practices of mindfulness with what we have learned from Merton’s writings and life-style. It is clear to us that Merton lived in the present moment. We described living mindfully in terms of three states of consciousness: *awareness*, *immersion* and *transcendence*. We saw many instances of Merton portraying the first two states of consciousness, *awareness* and *immersion*, where gave his fullest attention to whatever he was engaged in at the time. However, we strongly suggest that his writings and life centered more fully on the third state of consciousness – *transcendence*. Specifically, his monastic life was about union with God. Consequently, the activities he engaged in, no matter how small or “trivial,” through his contemplative life-style were seen as opportunities for union with God. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, author and Merton scholar, captures this abiding focus on transcendence in Merton’s spirituality when he writes: “he is extraordinary because he is so dramatically absorbed by every environment he finds himself in. . . . all these influences flow in to one constant place, a will and imagination turned Godward.”<sup>24</sup>

While we recognize the benefits of the popular practice of living mindfully by becoming more aware of and immersing ourselves more fully in the present moment, we have learned from Thomas Merton that there is *more*. Through his writings and the example of his life, he teaches us to look *beyond* the present moment, and to allow ourselves to be drawn to a deeper spiritual realm of *transcendence* to union with God.

1. Bhikku Khantipalo, “On Mindfulness,” in Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 297-304; see also 14 and 21-22 n. 12 for the context of this material (subsequent references will be cited as “*AJ*” parenthetically in the text).
2. Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering* (Onalaska, WA: BPS Pariyatti Editions, 1994) 76.
3. Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life* (New York: Hyperion, 1994) 4.
4. Aidyn Fitzpatrick, “The Monk Who Taught the World Mindfulness Awaits the End of This Life” (24 January 2019); available at: <https://time.com/5511729/monk-mindfulness-art-of-dying>.
5. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Transformation at the Base: Fifty Verses on the Nature of Consciousness* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2001) 209.



6. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987) 14 (subsequent references will be cited as “Nhat Hanh, *Miracle*” parenthetically in the text).
7. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 83 (subsequent references will be cited as “*TS*” parenthetically in the text).
8. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 81.
9. Jon M. Sweeney, ed., *Awake and Alive: Thomas Merton according to His Novices* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022) 57 (subsequent references will be cited as “Sweeney” parenthetically in the text).
10. Unpublished letter to Mother Mary Therese, quoted in William H. Shannon, “Awareness,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen & Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 19.
11. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 217 (subsequent references will be cited as “*NSC*” parenthetically in the text).
12. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 33.
13. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 143 (subsequent references will be cited as “*CP*” parenthetically in the text).
14. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 64 (subsequent references will be cited as “*CGB*” parenthetically in the text).
15. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951) 21.
16. See <https://fonsvitae.com/product-category/thomas-merton-series>.
17. Thomas Merton, “When in the Soul of the Serene Disciple . . .” in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 279.
18. Henri Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins 1997) [March 11].
19. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 363.
20. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 262.
21. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961) 160.
22. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 303.
23. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 430-31.
24. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 19.