**ATTENTION TRAINING, MINDFULNESS **

by Gerard Feller

Holistic medicine is gaining ground as part of the fast-growing mental health care sector. Many hospitals, like one in Nijmegen, now have entire departments devoted to "body-mind healing". This focus on a more holistic approach is a response, in part, to the shortcomings of regular health care. Modern medicine, in spite of its many blessings, has no real answers for chronic symptoms, i.e. symptoms resulting in three months or more of disability. In the field of mental health care there is a growing realization that many health problems are part of a process that is related to other aspects of a person's life: the bio-psycho-social model. These types of symptoms account for a large percentage of health care issues. According to recent research by TNO (an independent research organization), about 250,000 people a year call in sick because of stress. Another 15% of Dutch workers are on partial disability because of stress-related symptoms. The total cost of this health problem adds up to more than 6 billion euro per year. In the search for a more "holistic" approach to the problem of chronic stress, one therapeutic practice in particular has gained prominence: Attention Training, or Mindfulness. The official term is Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Attention Training is best understood as a form of meditation which ascribes healing power to silence. In this article we will take a critical look at the theory and practice of this training. We will also discuss the exercise-aspect of several practices, the value of which depends very much on framework and setting.

**Jon Kabat-Zinn**

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, originally a molecular biologist at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre, is considered the founder of Attention Training. An experienced practicioner of yoga meditation, he developed a training program in his stress clinic which offers a systematic way to develop control and wisdom in our lives and thus attain enlightenment, based on the inner ability to relax, pay attention, and practice moment-to-moment awareness. This model is inspired by Buddhist meditation techniques. Jon Kabat-Zinn developed an eight-week anti-stress course, which, according to his book "Full Catastrophe Living", is "an intensive self-directed training program in the art of conscious living." Kabat-Zinn explains that we have to adopt a new learning process by developing a meditative consciousness. Sometimes he makes contradictory statements. On the one hand he cautions the reader that one should not practice his method as a "true believer" but rather approach it with a sceptical yet open mind, while on the other hand he teaches that the first step in learning meditative consciousness involves letting go of your critical thinking. In any case, attitude is of the utmost importance in meditation. You have to learn to control and direct your energies for optimal inner growth and healing. The seven attitudinal factors you will work on during the eight-week anti-stress course are: non-judging, patience, a beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go.

**Basic consciousness training in meditation**

According to Jon Zabat-Zinn, the seven "intentions" listed above are not independent of each other. They overlap, influence, and complement each other. This is also a cause for concern: each of these intentions contain exercises that might be useful if they were offered in a different framework, but in the context of the contributing influences of the other intentions, these exercises become ingredients in an "explosive mixture." This recipe for altered consciousness will cause a person to become increasingly exposed to the influence of the fallen spiritual world. We will analyze several aspects of this problem and show how these intentions, potentially useful in a different context, lead rapidly to a state of receptive, passive, uncritical openness for demonic influence.

**1. Non-judging**

According to Kabat-Zinn, our spirit is trapped because it judges, labels, and categorizes all our experiences. These "judgments" then dominate our spirit and we cannot find rest within ourselves. The way to find relief is to get rid of our own fears and prejudices, mainly by observing them. This makes sense to a lot of people, but this kind of non-judgment training can easily turn into spiritual passivity training by switching off our critical thinking. Although Kabat-Zinn denies this, it is clear that the more we practice this intention, the more our "spiritual ozon layer"--our natural protection against the fallen spiritual world--is dismantled. Neglect of our ability to test and approve removes, biblically speaking, the protection of a Spirit-led mind--the kind of thinking which leads to the peace which transcends all understanding (Phil 4:9). See also 2 Cor 10:3-5; Eph 4:23; 2 Cor 4:4; 2 Cor 11:3; Luke 8:12. According to Kabat-Zinn's Buddhist background, the senses must be eliminated by observation, or detachment, so your true essence can be reflected in a smooth mirror. The first thing you learn in Buddhism is "directing the spirit" in "standing water" to generate this reflection. The goal of this meditation in eastern mysticism is for the individual to dissolve in the "All", the cosmic spirit. As I said before, increasing the intensity of this exercise will lead to a sliding scale of passivity.

**Non-judging--------------------------------------->Passive spirit**

**Critical thinking**

**2. Patience**

"Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept that things must unfold in their own time" (34). In the Bible, patience carries the connotation of perseverance. Perseverance, patiently holding on to biblical truths and promises in spite of difficulty, stress, and suffering, can bring about healing. See 1 Tim 4:16, Rom 12;12; Rev 2:3. In Kabat-Zinn's program, however, this concept refers more to patience during meditation as you increasingly empty yourself.

**Slowing down------------------------------------------------------>Emptying**

**Patience**

**3. Beginner's mind**

Attention Training encourages us to see the richness of the present moment with "a beginner's mind", as if we were seeing everything for the first time. During yoga exercises or sitting meditation we have to maintain an "open spirit" so we are not hindered by feelings and thoughts from earlier experiences. This can be a valuable tool for learning to stay focused on the "now", especially in a setting other than Attention Training. Many people have become sensitized, or hypersensitive, because of certain experiences or thoughts, and a measure of de-sensitizing can have a healing effect. In attention training and meditation, however, intensive practice of this exercise, combined with other aspects of altered consciousness, may lead to "erasing the past". This intention, particulary in combination with the previous one, leads to a quicker emptying of the spirit and, therefore, to receptiveness toward the demonic world.

**De-sensitization-------------------------------------------Erasing the past**

**Beginner's mind**

It also leads to a dismantling of personality and identity, which have been shaped partly by the past, but this fits right in with the Buddhist idea that the "atman" (the self) must become one with the "All". The Bible places much more emphasis on the specific individuality of the person when it talks about our connectedness with God and other believers; it certainly does not refer to an impersonal All.

**4. Trust**

According to Kabat-Zinn, "Developing a basic trust in yourself and your feelings is an integral part of meditation training. It is far better to trust in your intuition and your own authority than. . . to get so caught up in the reputation and authority of your teachers" that you always "look outside of yourself for guidance" (36). Meditation is about yourself, and whoever imitates someone else, Kabat-Zinn says, is on the wrong track. This is the main difference between Buddhist and Christian meditation: Christians do not focus solely on themselves; rather, their focus is first and foremost on the presence and the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who is omnipresent yet lives in us (Rom 8:9-11; John 14:26). The Bible encourages us to follow the example of Christ and the apostles through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Pet 2:21; 2 Tim 1:13; 1 Tim 1:16). Our basic trust and our intuition are not based on ourselves but on Jesus Christ. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Kabat-Zinn is much more in line with the concepts of "tao" (Chinese mysticism) and "dharma" (Hindu mysticism), which denote a conscious spiritual mindset and practice. According to these principles there are many paths, and everyone must find the way which is best suited to them. Doing so will help them rise above social circumstances and genetic predisposition and will lead, according to eastern mysticism, to the true meaning of life. Experiences and requirements simply become opportunities for growth along this path.

**In Jesus Christ-----------------------------------------------------------> In yourself, in tao and dharma**

**Trust, intuition**

**5. Non-striving**

"Everything we do, we do for a purpose, to get something or somewhere" (37). According to Kabat-Zinn, this is an obstacle for meditation. You have to consciously develop a state of "non-striving". I think this is a contradiction in terms, because not wanting to strive is in itself a goal. What Kabat-Zinn refers to is the stress of having to do certain things. In the case of compulsive thoughts and inner turmoil this is a praiseworthy goal. Still, there is the danger of going to the other extreme of a form of dissociation! For example, if you are criticizing yourself, he says, observe the activity of the judging spirit. I would put it this way: detach yourself from yourself, to the point where you lose all contact with yourself. Dissociation is a state of altered consciousness in which the person experiences himself as outside the body. In the occult world, among shaman witch doctors for instance, this is the method of choice to make contact with the spirit world. Drugs and yoga exercises can have the same effect. Chemical biologists explain this phenomenon as a result of the release of certain chemical messengers in the brain during life-threatening circumstances. In this state, the individual is a pliable pawn for fallen angels, save the exceptional case where the Holy Spirit offers protection in this situation. An out-of-body experience is a breach of the God-given unity of spirit, soul, and body (Gen 2:7; 1 Thess 5:23) which separates body and spirit by means of occult techniques and meditation.

**Relief from inner turmoil, compulsion--------------------------------------------Out-of-body experience**

**Non-striving**

**6. Acceptance**

"Acceptance means seeing things as they actually are in the present. If you have a headache, accept that you have a headache" (38). In our daily life we often waste a lot of energy trying to deny and resist those things that are already facts. Acceptance does not mean that you have to enjoy everything or that you have to be positive about everything and give up your principles and values, says Kabat-Zinn, but "in the meditation practice, we cultivate acceptance by taking each moment as it comes and being with it fully, as it is. We. . . remind ourselves to be receptive and open to whatever we are feeling, thinking or seeing and to accept it because it is here right now" (38). Once again we find a sliding scale where on the one hand we are perhaps set free from compulsive thoughts, while on the other hand we expose ourselves heedlessly to anything and everything in and around us, including the spiritual world, which can easily manipulate us in this situation. Paul views acceptance in light of the fact that God is in control of his life regardless of the circumstances, even though he does not always understand. In Phil 4:11-12 Paul says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

**Observe present----------------------------------------------------> Receptive spirit**

**Acceptance**

**7. Letting go**

According to Mindfulness/Attention Training, "cultivating the attitude of letting go, or non-attatchment" (39) is essential for achieving altered consciousness. Many people have thoughts, feelings or experiences they would like to get rid of, or that they would like to prevent because they are too painful. In the Bible letting go is an important principle, as well, but it means handing things over to God, surrendering to a God who is merciful, who has everything under control, and who will ultimately fulfill his just purpose for our enemies (Luke 6:37). This is a different type of letting go than the kind we encounter in attention training, which teaches "detachment". One of the principles of Buddhism is the idea that the individuality of the person is an illusion, "maya", nothing more than a series of conscious moments. The four "Noble Truths" are: a) Every living being expiences suffering. b). The cause of suffering is a desire for sensual pleasure, for existence. c). When this desire is set aside, suffering ceases. d). Emptying of the self, by means of an eightfold path focused mainly on concentration and meditation, is necessary to eliminate suffering.

**Release to God---------------------------------------------------> non-attachment, not connecting with anything**

**Letting go**

Kabat-Zinn puts great emphasis on these seven aspects of authentic Attention Training and meditation, and he indicates that he tolerates no casual participation in his eight-week training course. After analyzing the dangers from a biblical perspective we feel compelled to underline this fact for a different reason. Meditation training leads people to a dangerous spiritual path, the path of tao and dharma, and not the path of Jesus Christ who is the only way.

**Breathing technique as meditation aid**

In addition to the meditation techniques discussed above, Attention Training places a lot of emphasis on breathing exercises. Again, observation is one of the primary components. In a chapter on breathing, Kabat-Zinn gives a lengthy description of physiological, diaphragmatic breathing, which has little to do with the actual exercises, however. What is emphasized instead is the age-old yoga technique called prana breathing.

On p. 56 Kabat-Zinn states:

"It is possible to direct your breath with great precision to various parts of your body in such a way that it will penetrate and soothe regions that are injured or in pain, at the same time that it calms and stabilizes the mind."

This claim is based on the Hindu belief that the cosmos is made up of energy (prana, or, in tao thought: chi), which we can breathe in and direct throughout our body through proper technique, in order to gain strength, partake of the divine, or heal our energy stations by means of chakras. Observation of breathing is also important in stress-physiology; its value there is quantifyable by anazyzing technique, frequency, depth, pause, etc. Based on our observations we can make active, purposeful, corrective changes that lead to physiologically calmer breathing and healing in other areas, as I describe in my book "Bijbels Omgaan met Stress Deel 1: Lichamelijke Aspecten" (Biblical Stress Release Part 1: Physical Aspects). Kabat-Zinn insists, however, that you should not strive to influence your breathing in any way, and he uses breathing exercises in a framework of cosmic energizing and chakra healing.

**Other exercices**

The seven meditation-intentions are also emphasized in the so-called body-scan and sitting meditation. To be sure, it is healthy for people who suffer from fear, neuroses, compulsive thoughts or delusions, to learn to pay attention to the contact areas between their bodies and their environment. Physical contact determines reality to a large degree (i.e. senses, gravity, etc.) For these types of patients I, too, use exercises that focus on observing body temperature or pressure on the skin receptors, for example. Muscle tension or the physiological aspects of breathing are other things that are useful to observe. There are many good exercises available, as long as they are presented within the context of physiology, which is in harmony with the biblical view of man. Attention training, generates similar observations, but you are then encouraged to let them "flow out" on the outbreath during the sitting meditation and the body scan (p. 77). During the body scan your attention is directed systematically from the toes to each part of the body. Directing your breath to painful areas is another form of prana yoga where you try to stabilize problems in the body with the cosmic energy in your breathing. It is not always expressed in these words, but the setting and execution have the same (occult) effect. Attentive breathing symbolizes cosmic, healing power. Sometimes Kabat-Zinn, in spite of his "non-judging" directive, recommends visualization as part of the body scan and sitting meditation. On page 87 and 88 he describes a visualization of "detoxification" during a body scan. (See our web site for an analysis of visualization techniques).

On page 77 he has participants breathe through an "imaginary hole" in the top of their heads. This is a clear example of prana breathing, which must be directed via the chakras (the top of the head is the crown chakra).

**Healthy attention training**

Fortunately, healthy forms of attention training do exist. Unlike Kabat-Zinn's method, these exercises help people pay attention to their body and its sensations based on physiology and pathology in the context of a biblical, rather than a Hindu or Buddhist, view of man. Special attention is given to the functioning of our senses, muscle tension, and breathing (See "Bijbels Omgaan met Stress Deel 1: Lichamelijke Aspecten). God created us as threefold beings with a spirit, soul, and body. Our understanding of health must include all three aspects. (See our web site for the article: Behoedzaam Balanceren in Bijbelse Begeleiding" (Caution and Balance in Christian Counseling). There are many Christians who would benefit from paying more attention to, and taking responsibility for, the signals their body is sending them, because they try to deal with their stress as a purely spiritual or, alternatively, as a purely psychological issue. But meditation is safe only in the presence of Jesus Christ, the one who gives us rest and peace which transcends understanding.

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<http://www.stichting-promise.nl/artikelen/body-mind-methodes-en-occultisme/aandachttraining-mindfulness.htm>