Mindfulness through thick and thin

Andreas T. Schmidt, University of Groningen
Mindfulness-Based Interventions

- Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

- Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)
The thinness vs thickness dilemma
Mindfulness as an ethically ‘thin’ programme:

- Not religious
- No strong metaphysical assumptions
- No strong axiological or soteriological commitments
- No strong ethical commitments
- Low on ‘spirituality’
Arguments for keeping MBIs thin

- Religious Diversity
- Diversity of conceptions of the good
- Reasonable disagreement about ethics
- Diverse applications
- Broader acceptance: not spiritual
Objections to thin MBIs: McMindfulness and exploitation

Objection 1: McMindfulness and exploitation: Thinness facilitates using MBIs for capitalist exploitation
Corporate mindfulness is bullsh*t: Zen or no Zen, you’re working harder and being paid less

Mindfulness matters, but make no mistake: Corporations are co-opting the idea to disguise the ways they kill us

Ronald Purser and Edwin Ng

Topics: 1 Percent, Amazon, Editor's Picks, Mindfulness, Zen, Innovation News

Mindfulness is all about self-help. It does nothing to change an unjust world

Suzanne Moore

Why are we trying to think less when we need to think more? The neutered, apolitical approach of mindfulness ignores the structural difficulties we live with.
McMindfulness

Objection:

▪ Squeeze even more out of employees

▪ ‘responsibilitisation’ individuals made responsible for the negative effects of worse social and economic conditions
McMindfulness

Response 1: mindfulness and wider social change mutually compatible

Response 2: what to do in the absence of wider social change?

Response 3: societal change not a panacea either

Response 4: could mindfulness promote empathy and awareness?
Cultural Appropriation

*Objection 2: Cultural appropriation*
What, if anything, is wrong about cultural appropriation?

(i) Problematic economic gain: one (dominant) group makes profit off the cultural product of another group

(ii) Problematic power over culture, its interpretation and development

(iii) Disrespectful use or representation of culture
Cultural appropriation

Ad (i): expensive corporate MBIs, mindfulness apps, etc.

Ad (ii) and (iii): reinterpretation of mindfulness, Buddhism light

Answer:
- Respectfully acknowledge Buddhist heritage
- Keep MBIs thin, no misrepresentation of Buddhist thought
- Avoid overly commercialised MBIs
Are MBIs too thick?
Mindfulness Meditation in Public Schools: Side-Stepping Supreme Court Religion Rulings

By Candy Gunther Brown, Ph.D.

Since the 1960s, the United States Supreme Court has found it unconstitutional for public schools to teach religious practices such as prayer. But today, mindfulness meditation—a Buddhist religious practice similar to prayer—is promoted by schools nationwide. Why

Does Mindfulness Belong in Public Schools?

Two Views

Responses by Candy Gunther Brown and Saki Santorelli. Illustrations by Pep Montanariet | Spring 2016

"If you've been in silent retreat for the past several years, this means that the 'mindfulness revolution' resembles the monastics.
Are MBIs too thick?

*Objection 1*: MBIs come with a religious message, either openly or surreptitiously

*Objection 2*: MBIs come with a problematically thick axiological message about how people ought to live

*Objection 3*: MBIs come with a problematically ‘thick’ ethical message
Are MBIs too thick?

*Objection 1:* MBIs come with a religious message, either openly or surreptitiously

- Evidence of ‘code switching’
- Evidence of some ‘Buddhism through the backdoor’
Too Buddhist?

*Answer:* exceptions exist, but most thin MBIs are sufficiently secular for widespread application

- Communication matters

- No implicit Buddhist commitments required for mindfulness teachers
Axiological thickness

*Objection 2:* MBIs come with a problematically thick axiological message about how people ought to live

- Nonjudgmental
- Compassionate
- ‘free of desires’
Liberal neutrality
Liberal neutrality

- public policies should not aim to promote particular conceptions of the good

- it’s not the government’s role to make people happy
Liberal neutrality

*Answer 1:* potential benefits of mindfulness are *psychological all-purpose goods*

- reduced anxiety, less stress, improved interpersonal skills, better attention and improved self-esteem
- strengthen rather than undermine autonomy

*Answer 2:* ‘experiential enrichment’ valuable across many different conceptions of the good
Ethical thickness

*Objection 3:* MBIs come with a problematically ‘thick’ ethical message

- Compassion and befriending exercises
- Non-judgmental attitude
Ethical thickness

*Answer 1*: general social and moral *skills*

- Psychological all-purpose good for interpersonal relationships
- Valuable from an autonomy perspective

*Answer 2*: non-judgmental attitude does not imply moral nihilism
Some take-aways

MBIs facilitate *all-purpose benefits* that promote individual autonomy

- Suitable interventions in diverse contexts and across many ethical and axiological views

*Keep it thin:* Buddhist elements should not be central MBIs for population-level interventions nor introduced through the backdoor

- Respectful acknowledgements
- Option that can be pursued individually
References and arguments in more detail in
