Buddhist and Psychological Mindfulness

Explanation of my class dynamics:

My class is made up of Monks that are living in a Monastery in Nepal. All of my learners have completed 11 years of Buddhist Studies at Universities in India located in their home monasteries. Equivalent to a Doctorate in Buddhist Philosophy.

Learners: You will be given an article to read in groups. Today’s topic is Mindfulness: Buddhist and Psychology. As you know, there have been studies of meditation and its effects on health and the brain. Here, we will examine the differences and sameness of Buddhist and secular mindfulness training according to experts. These articles were extracted from two long articles published in journals of psychology. Notice that there are some references to other articles. If you are interested in further research, you can Google the name in parenthesis and search for more articles. If you need to use your phones or dictionary to look up words that are unknown, please do. I will come around to check your progress and answer any questions you may have. You will also be given a sheet of pre-reading suggested, questions to keep in mind while you are reading and post-reading tasks.
The word mindfulness may be used to describe a psychological trait, a practice of cultivating mindfulness (e.g., mindfulness meditation), a mode or state of awareness, or a psychological process. To minimize possible confusion, we clarify which meaning is intended in each context. One of the most commonly cited definitions of mindfulness is the awareness that arises through "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally". Descriptions of mindfulness provided by most other researchers are similar. Baer (2003), for example, defines mindfulness as "the nonjudgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise" (p. 125). Though some researchers focus almost exclusively on the attentional aspects of mindfulness (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003), most follow the model of Bishop et al. (2004), which proposed that mindfulness encompasses two components: self-regulation of attention, and adoption of a particular orientation towards one's experiences. Self-regulation of attention refers to non-elaborative observation and awareness of sensations, thoughts, or feelings from moment to moment. It requires both the ability to anchor one's attention on what is occurring, and the ability to intentionally switch attention from one aspect of the experience to another. Orientation to experience concerns the kind of attitude that one holds towards one's experience, specifically an attitude of curiosity, openness, and acceptance. It is worth noting that "acceptance" in the context of mindfulness should not be equated with passivity or resignation. Rather, acceptance in this context refers to the ability to experience events fully, without resorting to either extreme of excessive preoccupation with, or suppression of, the experience. To sum up, current conceptualizations of mindfulness in clinical psychology point to two primary, essential elements of mindfulness: awareness of one's moment-to-moment experience non-judgmentally and with acceptance.
Arguably, Buddhist and Western conceptualizations of mindfulness differ in at least three levels: contextual, process, and content. At the contextual level, mindfulness in the Buddhist tradition is viewed as one factor of an interconnected system of practices that are necessary for attaining liberation from suffering, the ultimate state or end goal prescribed to spiritual practitioners in the tradition. Thus, it needs to be cultivated alongside with other spiritual practices, such as following an ethical lifestyle, in order for one to move toward the goal of liberation. Western conceptualization of mindfulness, on the other hand, is generally independent of any specific circumscribed philosophy, ethical code, or system of practices. At the process level, mindfulness, in the context of Buddhism, is to be practiced against the psychological backdrop of reflecting on and contemplating key aspects of the Buddha's teachings, such as impermanence, non-self, and suffering. As an example, in the Satipatthana Sutta (The Foundation of Mindfulness Discourse), one of the key Buddhist discourses on mindfulness, the Buddha recommended that one maintains mindfulness of one's bodily functions, sensations and feelings, consciousness, and content of consciousness while observing clearly the impermanent nature of these objects. Western practice generally places less emphasis on non-self and impermanence than traditional Buddhist teachings. Finally, at the content level and in relation to the above point, in early Buddhist teachings, mindfulness refers rather specifically to an introspective awareness with regard to one's physical and psychological processes and experiences. This is contrast to certain Western conceptualizations of mindfulness, which view mindfulness as a form of awareness that encompasses all forms of objects in one's internal and external experience, including features of external sensory objects like sights and smells. This is not to say that external sensory objects do not ultimately form part of one's internal experience; rather, in Buddhist teachings, mindfulness more fundamentally has to do with observing one's perception of and reactions toward sensory objects than focusing on features of the sensory objects themselves.
What has this to do with mindfulness? It shows first that psychopathology arises from the overuse, in some contexts, of common and quite normal psychological processes without which we could not function. It is using the doing mode to suppress or elaborate emotional expression that can tragically backfire, for it reduces attentional control and capacity, and further increases the emotional disturbance and helplessness it was intended to fix. Mindfulness training is not about getting rid of these processes or clearing the mind, but about coming to see where natural, automatic reactions stop and the simulation, elaboration, and avoidance processes begin.

Mindfulness training aims to cultivate an alternative (“being”) mode through meditation practices that teach people how to pay open-hearted attention to objects in the exterior and interior world as they unfold, moment by moment. Attention is paid not only to the objects themselves but to our reactions to them, particularly reactions of wanting positive states to last, negative states to end, and neutral states to be less boring. In this way, the meditation practitioner begins to see clearly the difference between Darwinian reactivity, and the over-learned simulation processes that construct mental models and imbue objects and situations with extra implications. Figure 2 illustrates how one commonly used meditation practice, the Body Scan, is structured to (a) increase sustained attentional focus, (b) teach the difference between thinking about sensations versus experiencing them directly, and (c) teach participants to see clearly and relate differently to mental states such as boredom and restlessness. Participants have many opportunities in such practices to practice seeing their own “simulations,” simply and non-judgmentally, as mental events in the field of awareness, rather than truths that should be taken personally and require urgent action.
Pre-reading

As you read your article, take notice of the following questions:

1. What is mindfulness?
2. How is it useful?
3. What problems does mindfulness address?
4. Can it be only secular without Buddhist teachings?

Reading:

First, divide into your groups, A,B and C. Read the article silently or quietly. (AAA) (BBB) (CCC)

Discussion:

Next, look up or ask one another about any words that you might not know.

Then, discuss the article using the question for pre-reading or about your own ideas.

Take notes on the points your group discusses and answers to the pre-reading questions as a guide.

New Groups Discussion:

Now, form groups that include members from each of the other groups . (ABC) (ABC) (ABC)

Choose one member from each group (if more than one) to report on the article they read.

Together, make a list of any words that were not known or any questions about the article that you have that were not answered in your group.

Make a table listing the differences between Buddhist and psycho-secular mindfulness ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddhist</th>
<th>Psycho-secular</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ex. Impermanence</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Make a list of the psycho-secular symptoms that can be treated by mindfulness. (Those listed and your own)
Post-reading debate: (Debate is a Monastic tradition that we carry into our language studies. It be difficult to explain, here.)

Test your classmates knowledge!

Post-reading discussion

1. What differences do you find in Buddhist mindfulness and secular mindfulness?
2. Do you think that Buddhist teaching such as The Eight-fold Path and the 4 Noble Truths should be taught along with secular mindfulness? Do you think that these teaching would heighten the affects of secular mindfulness teachings?
3. What mindfulness techniques do you find helpful in your life?
4. What illness, problem or injury have you used to help yourself cope or heal using mindfulness?

Post-reading assignment

Go to at least 10 monks and ask them what types of mindfulness techniques they use. Find the most common. Then ask them, what reasons they use mindfulness besides meditation. (ex. Back pain, stress, headaches......) Make a list and include your own use of mindfulness.