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# Authentic Mindfulness Within Mindfulness-Based Interventions: A Qualitative Study of Participants' Experiences

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There are concerns that participants of some modern mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are receiving a superficial form of mindfulness training. However, empirical investigation of this issue according to participants' first-hand experiences has been limited. Thus, this qualitative study aimed to capture the first-hand perspectives relating to authentic mindfulness of participants who had recently attended an MBI in the UK. Ten adults completed a recorded, online semi-structured interview. Based on a thematic analysis, the following four master themes were identified: (a) authentic mindfulness as a construct, (b) positive aspects of the training, (c) something missing, and (d) recommendations for authenticity. Although all participants experienced benefits from the MBI, they felt that the mindfulness training they received lacked spiritual depth. Implications for the design and delivery of MBIs are discussed.

**Keywords:** *mindfulness, Buddhist, mindfulness-based interventions, McMindfulness, authenticity*

**M**indfulness is a contemplative technique that stems from Buddhist practice. It involves focussing awareness on the present moment, on the basis that the present is the only place an individual can fully embrace and experience life (Sapthiang et al., 2018). In recent decades, secular mindfulness practices have gained popularity for their potential to improve health and wellbeing, with the strongest evidence existing for their use in treating depression, anxiety and chronic pain conditions (Goldberg et al., 2018). However, such mindfulness practices have also been shown to be efficacious in the treatment of (for example) substance use disorders, physical inactivity, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, eating disorders, schizophrenia, behavioral addictions (e.g., sex addiction, mobile phone addiction, work addiction)

and diabetes (Shonin et al., 2015a; Sapthiang et al., 2020). Findings have also shown that mindfulness can foster structural changes in brain functioning (Young et al., 2018) and that it has applications in (amongst other things) forensic settings (e.g., for reducing reoffending), education (e.g., for enhancing the quality of learning environments as well as executive memory skills), and sport (e.g., for attaining peak athletic performance; Shonin et al., 2015a).

Despite such promising findings and the growing popularity of mindfulness, in recent years, debate has emerged relating to whether modern mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) capture the core principles of mindfulness based on long-established conceptual and practice models (Monteiro et al., 2015). More specifically,

mindfulness has traditionally been a fundamental aspect of a broad array of Buddhist contemplative techniques that, when practiced collectively, constitute a comprehensive path of meditation (Shonin et al., 2014). However, in the course of assimilation into various applied settings, it appears that some modern MBIs have separated mindfulness from the practices and techniques that traditionally supported it (Van Gordon et al., 2020). Claims have emerged that using mindfulness in this manner may underly emerging reports of adverse effects owing to participating in an MBI, such as false memory susceptibility, reality distortion issues and asocial behavior (Van Gordon et al., 2017). A further related concern is that some modern MBI teachers do not have the requisite training to effectively teach mindfulness (Sapthiang et al., 2019).

Such concerns have prompted and fed into a wider ongoing debate relating to the issue of “authenticity” in modern mindfulness approaches (Purser, 2019). The precise meaning of this construct in the context of mindfulness practice does not have a consensus definition, but it gives rise to a number of issues that could impair the long-term credibility of mindfulness research, teaching and practice. In particular, many MBIs are portrayed as being based on Buddhist teachings, yet if they employ a form of mindfulness incompatible with traditional Buddhist practice models, this could misinform participants. Furthermore, risks may exist owing to teaching mindfulness separate from the techniques and principles traditionally deemed to underlie its effective practice. Due consideration of such risk is particularly warranted, given a scarcity of research has sought to investigate long-term follow-up effects or potential adverse outcomes relating to MBIs.

### **Types of Mindfulness**

A brief review of mindfulness in Buddhism, in contemporary approaches to mindfulness, and in second-generation mindfulness-based interventions will provide context for the study that follows.

### **Mindfulness in Buddhism**

Whereas variations exist in how different Buddhist traditions conceptualize and practice

mindfulness, all Buddhist traditions consider it to reflect a form of spiritual practice. Within Buddhism, a practice is generally regarded as spiritual when it helps undermine the individual’s level of selfishness or ego and is practiced within the context of the individual seeking to grow in compassion and/or wisdom (Dalai Lama, 2001). A prevailing view is that practicing mindfulness with the intention of attaining spiritual liberation helps the practitioner foster the necessary resolve to surmount the various obstacles that arise on the spiritual path (Nhat Hanh, 1999).

Within core Buddhist scriptures, mindfulness appears as the seventh item of a fundamental teaching referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path (Bodhi, 1994). The Noble Eightfold Path can be considered a complete spiritual path, which develops an individual’s spiritual competency across domains of wisdom (right view, right intention), ethical awareness (right speech, right action, right livelihood), and concentration or meditation (right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration; Bodhi, 1994). Although eight different elements are included in the Noble Eightfold Path, each element of the path does not operate in separation from the other elements, and individual path components are not intended to reflect competencies that must be developed in sequential order (Shonin et al., 2014). For example, if a practitioner wishes to practice right action effectively, they need to be mindfully aware of what they are doing. Likewise, in order to practice mindfulness correctly, the practitioner needs to comport themselves in a manner that is ethically appropriate.

A Buddhist scripture known as the Satipatthāna Sutta explicates that mindfulness should be cultivated with reference to the: (a) body, (b) feelings, (c) mind, and (d) phenomena (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2009). This is on the basis that the entirety of an individual’s experience unfolds across these four domains. Another key Buddhist teaching on mindfulness, known as the Ānāpānasati Sutta, explains how breath awareness can be used to help retain mindful awareness over these four reference points (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2009). The Ānāpānasati Sutta comprises 16 breathing exercises, of which the first 12 are concerned with calming and immersing

the body, feelings and mind in mindful awareness (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2009). The final four breathing exercises focus on the cultivation of meditative insight into concepts such as impermanence (i.e., the fact that nothing endures) and letting go of self (i.e., on account of the self's impermanent nature; Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2009). The inclusion of these insight practices within the Ānāpānasati Sutta highlight the fact that within Buddhism, authentic mindfulness extends beyond remaining aware of the breath, body and mental processes to an awareness of the nature of phenomena and reality more generally (Shonin et al., 2014).

A number of the breathing exercises in the Ānāpānasati Sutta follow the pattern of attending mindfully to one of the four aforementioned reference points and then experiencing the calming sensations that follow (Nanamoli & Bodhi, 2009). However, despite the calming effect that can result from practicing mindfulness, within Buddhism emphasis is not placed on using mindfulness for inducing calm or ameliorating medical symptoms *per se* (Nhat Hanh, 1999). Rather, to practice mindfulness in an authentic manner means to foster a relationship with suffering, such that the meditation practitioner learns to accept and work with suffering as part of their path toward spiritual awakening (Dalai Lama, 2001).

### **Contemporary Mindfulness Approaches**

Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which have been termed first-generation mindfulness-based interventions (FG-MBIs; Van Gordon et al., 2015), reflect two of the most established forms of intervention-based contemporary mindfulness. However, various other FG-MBIs have also been widely researched, including those that appear to be more aligned with cognitive-behavioral psychotherapeutic principles, such as Dialectic Behavioral Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hartelius, 2015).

FG-MBIs, such as MBSR and MBCT, typically follow an eight-week group-based secular format comprising (a) weekly sessions of several hours duration, (b) lectures, (c) guided discussion, (d) yoga exercises, (e) a full-day mindfulness retreat, (f) guided mindfulness exercises, and (g) provisions to support

self-practice (e.g., access to pre-recorded guided mindfulness meditations; Shonin et al., 2015b). The group design of such interventions means that, compared to one-to-one therapeutic modes, they are invariably more cost-effective, requiring as few as three instructor hours per participant based on an eight-week intervention of 30 hours total duration delivered to ten participants (Shonin et al., 2015b). The secular nature of FG-MBIs also means that they can be delivered to individuals from a broad range of cultural and religious backgrounds.

FG-MBIs typically adhere to Kabat-Zinn's (1994) model of mindfulness, in which mindfulness is defined as the process of "*paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally*" (p. 4). This characterization of mindfulness has become almost definitive in the theory and practice of contemporary MBIs; however, it has also caused debate regarding the authenticity of modern mindfulness practices, including the extent to which they are truly informed by the overarching Buddhist principles from which they derive (Grossman, 2015; Monteiro et al., 2014; Purser, 2015, Walsh, 2016). Though Kabat-Zinn's definition has done much to smooth the way in allowing mindfulness-based practices to be adapted, reformed and assimilated into dominant medical and psychotherapeutic paradigms that inform the treatment of suffering in Western culture, it is notably vague regarding the spiritual dimension often viewed as inherent and inseparable from its purpose in traditional Buddhist practice.

This decontextualization of mindfulness from its roots in Buddhism and the Noble Eightfold Path is particularly troublesome when it comes to fostering a deep understanding of the roots of suffering, wherein mindfulness is framed as a tool of insight into, and liberation from, *dukkha* (a Buddhist principle meaning suffering). It also distracts from the pursuit of important underlying metaphysical insights into the nature of impermanence (Pali: *aniccā*) and the unfolding realization that all phenomena, including ourselves, are devoid of an inherently existent self (*anattā*). It is the deeper cultivation of these important insights that naturally create the conditions of compassion, wisdom and insight through which individuals may not only

find liberation, but also become positive agents in a naturally concomitant moral universe.

In recent years, the term “McMindfulness” has been formulated to refer to the way mindfulness, in adapting to the norms of Western capitalism, has been commodified, manufactured, marketed, and distributed in much the same manner that fast-food outlets operate. Purser (2014, 2019) has been particularly vocal about the dangers of what he sees as watered-down and ethically sanitized versions of mindfulness being deployed with such zeal by corporations whose primary concern is not the health and wellbeing of their employees, but increased profits through improved workforce productivity and resilience.

To adapt a Buddhist practice to conform to the needs of highly individualistic Neoliberal capitalism is inherently extremely problematic. The fundamentals of Buddhist philosophy simply cannot be squared with a *Weltanschauung* (i.e., a comprehensive conception of the world) so entrenched in the very myth of individuality, which Buddhism seeks to undermine. In fact, contemporary neoliberal ideology would appear diametrically opposed to the transformation advocated by Buddhism. For example, whereas in Buddhism the ego is something to be transcended, contemporary society arguably seeks to do the opposite, reifying and concretizing the self, inflaming desire to drive consumption. Neoliberal capitalism, in fact, appears to be the very embodiment of Buddhism’s wandering existence (Pali: *Saṃsāra*), with its cycle of craving, grasping and rejecting, and pain.

The secularization of Mindfulness, therefore, has been particularly fraught. An easy compromise can be found by simply excluding—or at least sidelining—Buddhism and its ethical facets, stripping mindfulness down to its bare bones and refashioning it into a form more palatable to Western medicine and unencumbered by any troublesome ethical responsibilities. To Purser (2014, 2019), these ethical issues appear to underscore the role neoliberal capitalism and its institutions play in creating and perpetuating suffering.

Ethical considerations hold little sway for those whose primary concern is to extract as much profit as possible from the world while strategically

sidestepping any responsibility for consequent human suffering. Furthermore, by placing the focus of suffering within the individual, it is much easier to distract from the external causes of suffering. Rather than examine suffering imposed by these structures, such as poor living and working conditions and unmet needs, responsibility (and therefore blame) for suffering can be placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual. McMindfulness presents itself not as a path to liberation from a suffering which is spiritual in nature and self-imposed through ignorance (Sanskrit: *avidyā*), but as a palliative technique for managing the more worldly forms of suffering imposed upon people externally, fostering “resilience” to these causes rather than questioning their legitimacy or moral authority. Purser (2019) argued that such forms of mindfulness, stripped of their ethical moorings, fundamentally change the character of this practice, making it little more than a means of stress reduction or concentration training.

This distinction between different forms of suffering is especially important, due to key differences between its conceptualization in Buddhism and its everyday, secular form. Buddhist teachings describe three “levels” of suffering: “the suffering of suffering (*dukkha-dukkhata*); the suffering of change (*viparinama-dukkhata*); and the suffering of conditioned existence or all-pervasive suffering (*samkhara-dukkhata*)” (Purser, 2015, p. 680). The first level refers to suffering in its most basic form, as physical pain, mental pain, or as mental elaborative pain, through which conditioned psychological reactions compound or perpetuate personal suffering. This is the level of suffering conventional medicine or psychological therapies typically address, including FG-MBIs.

However, deeper, second- and third-level metaphysical sources of suffering (*suffering of change* and *suffering of conditioned existence*) are considered more fundamental in Buddhism. The second level of suffering articulates the cycle of craving, disillusionment and pain that people endure when they chase and fixate on transient pleasurable experiences, or deny unpleasurable ones; the grasping and rejecting within this *samsara* creates a constant state of inner tension, itself a

source of suffering. This, in turn, is rooted in the most fundamental but also the most subtle level of suffering, stemming from the ultimate reality that all people, like all things, are *anattā*, devoid of an inherently existing, separate self. This ontological level of suffering is based on a deep, nagging sense of unease or fear wherein the ego at some level recognizes its illusory nature, but represses it, struggling instead to fortify a sense of existence as an independent permanent agent.

It is this deepest level of inquiry that Buddhist forms of mindfulness ultimately aim to address by cultivating a profound transcendence of self, thereby cutting the roots of craving off at the source. FG-MBIs cannot really directly address this deeper aspect of suffering, and the type of mindfulness involved—in which suffering is individualized—may serve only to reinforce the subject-object divide, providing a temporary relief from first-level suffering, but ultimately failing to tackle this deeper duality at the root of ego.

This is not to diminish the value of FG-MBIs, and the evidence attesting to their positive impact on a wide range of conditions (Keng et al., 2011), but these criticisms of authenticity in mindfulness have not always been taken well, especially when they are in a form that would appear to exhort Buddhists to become more politically active and vocal in denouncing societal causes of suffering. Analayo (2020), for example, has argued that Buddhist practice involves refraining from any active part in politics, holding spiritual above political concerns; however, one might argue also that politics and spirituality are so deeply interconnected that they are ultimately inseparable. Others, like Repetti et al. (2016), have argued that even when mindfulness practices are removed from their ethical framework, serious, long-term commitment to mindfulness will naturally foster the development of the *right action*, which aligns it more closely with its purpose in Buddhism.

## **Second-Generation**

### **Mindfulness-Based Interventions**

The narrow definition of mindfulness provided by Kabat-Zinn has therefore been challenged on many fronts, and this definition and model are not adopted by what have been

termed second-generation mindfulness-based interventions (SG-MBIs). These interventions have been formulated more recently in an attempt to address some of the aforementioned authenticity concerns relating to modern MBIs (Grossman, 2014; Monteiro et al., 2014; Purser, 2015; Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020). SG-MBIs generally subscribe to Van Gordon et al.'s. (2015) definition of mindfulness as corresponding to the “*process of engaging a full, direct, and active awareness of experienced phenomena that is: (i) psycho-spiritual in aspect, and (ii) maintained from one moment to the next*” (p. 592). In addition to inclusion of the term psycho-spiritual, a key difference between this and Kabat-Zinn's (1994) FG-MBI mindfulness definition is the use of the term “active awareness” replacing “non-judgmental awareness.” According to some SG-MBI advocates, non-judgmental awareness does not adequately capture the discerning aspect of mindfulness that helps the meditation practitioner avoid becoming morally indifferent (Shonin et al., 2014).

SG-MBIs, such as the eight-week Meditation Awareness Training (MAT) intervention (Van Gordon et al., 2014), are asserted to adhere more closely to how mindfulness was contextualized in traditional Buddhist settings. SG-MBIs are distinct from FG-MBIs because they are typically (a) openly spiritual in aspect, (b) using a broader range of meditation techniques (i.e., in addition to mindfulness), (c) including ethics as a core aspect of the teaching syllabus, and (d) requiring instructors to have undergone several years of supervised mindfulness practice (Van Gordon et al., 2020). Some of the additional meditative techniques employed in SG-MBIs include those intended to cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, awareness of impermanence, ethical awareness, and insight into the ultimate nature of self (Van Gordon et al., 2015). Furthermore, in the case of some SG-MBIs such as MAT, participants are required to acknowledge that they understand that while the intervention is not intended to teach Buddhism, it makes direct use of Buddhist meditative principles (Van Gordon et al., 2020).

Some head-to-head studies have been conducted to evaluate directly the effects of FG-

MBIs versus SG-MBIs within specific population groups. For example, a head-to-head study (Bayot et al., 2020) using a general population sample ( $n = 78$ ) showed that an SG-MBI resulted in greater improvements in subjective wellbeing and self-compassion, while the FG-MBI led to greater increases in levels of mindfulness. Another head-to-head comparison study (Chen & Jordon, 2020;  $n = 621$ ) showed that although both the FG-MBI and SG-MBI helped improve satisfaction with life, reduce stress and improve self-awareness, the SG-MBI was more effective for improving personal growth and prosocial behavior. Other studies of SG-MBIs have shown applications for improving various aspects of health and wellbeing, including (amongst other things) (a) psychological disturbance, self-compassion, experiential avoidance, secure attachment style and anxiety (Navarro-Gil et al., 2020), (b) post-traumatic stress disorder (Lang et al., 2020), (c) fear of being compassionate towards oneself (Goldin & Jazaieri, 2020), (d) emotion regulation in gifted children (Turanzas et al., 2020), (e) caregiver wellbeing and coping capacity (Singh et al., 2020), (f) chronic pain (Cayoun et al., 2020), (g) compassion (Pizarro et al., 2020), and (h) depression (Alsubaie et al., 2020).

However, despite evidence suggesting that SG-MBIs can complement FG-MBIs by providing greater choice in terms of the range of MBIs available, more head-to-head studies are required to ascertain the precise outcomes and population types for which a given SG-MBI or FG-MBI reflects the most efficacious approach (Van Gordon et al., 2020). Furthermore, although SG-MBIs appear to be more closely aligned than FG-MBIs with traditional Buddhist meditation principles, this does not by default mean that SG-MBI instructors are more adept than FG-MBI instructors at teaching mindfulness. This is because a given mindfulness teacher's competency is highly individualistic and is often influenced by the teacher's natural affinity for mindful awareness more than the amount of training they have completed *per se* (Nhat Hanh, 1999).

### **Authentic Mindfulness**

Studies have been conducted exploring the relationship between mindfulness and authenticity as a personal attribute, typically defined as “the

unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise” (Kernis, 2003, p. 13). Such studies have shown that (for example) (a) mindfulness is positively correlated with authenticity (Lakey et al., 2008); (b) mindfulness mediates the relationship between authenticity and verbal defensiveness (Lakey et al., 2008); (c) authenticity mediates the relationship between mindfulness and work engagement (Leyoy et al., 2013); and (d) authenticity mediates the relationship between mindfulness and wellbeing (Chen & Murphy, 2018).

However, to the present authors' knowledge, no study to date has sought to investigate directly the construct of “authentic mindfulness,” in which mindfulness rather than the individual is the subject of authenticity. Nevertheless, a perspective on authentic mindfulness has been provided by Van Gordon et al. (2016a), who asserted that authentic mindfulness arises when an individual practices mindfulness as part of seeking to transcend ego and cultivate spiritual awakening. Van Gordon et al. (2016a) argued that authentic mindfulness requires a suitably experienced teacher to impart an experiential understanding of mindfulness to a suitable student, who should be disillusioned with materialism and have an innate capacity for spiritual intelligence:

The most essential point appears to be that without the intervention of a spiritually realized teacher, and without the student being a receptive vessel, authentic spiritual transmission does not occur ... This principle (i.e., the importance of a spiritually realized teacher) applies to the teaching and learning of all aspects of Buddhist practice, including mindfulness. (Van Gordon et al., 2016a, pp.77–78)

Shonin and Van Gordon (2014) also asserted that to remain authentic, mindfulness practice should be undertaken with the practitioner seeking to remain unattached to objects, situations, concepts or experiences to enable them to remain untethered to any given time or place so that they can establish themselves in the present moment:

The way to allow things to evolve is to simply be and allow experience to unfold without clinging to it. You have to understand that the

moment you become attached to the lineage of mindfulness, it slips through your fingers and you cease being an authentic lineage holder. (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2014, p. 143).

In the absence of other models that have specifically sought to articulate what is implied by authentic mindfulness, the perspective of Van Gordon et al. (2016a) provides a useful reference point that appears to be valid from a more traditional Buddhist perspective. However, authenticity in respect of mindfulness undoubtedly means different things to different people, and while a given mindfulness approach might not directly align with a more traditional Buddhist perspective, this does not mean that it is not authentic within the context in which it is applied. For example, whereas participants who have attended an evidence-based MBI such as MBSR may not specifically use the term “authentic” to describe their experience, they invariably report that the experience was meaningful and led to improvements in various aspects of their lives (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Thus, while more research is needed to better understand how authentic mindfulness is represented, construed and deemed important in modern MBIs, it is important to acknowledge the experiential component of this construct.

### **Aims of the Present Study**

Notwithstanding the aforementioned debate relating to the authenticity of some modern MBIs, there has been limited empirical investigation regarding the extent to which MBI participants felt that they experienced authentic mindfulness as part of attending a modern MBI, including whether they felt authenticity was linked to any beneficial or adverse outcomes which they may have experienced. To address this research gap, the following overriding research question was formulated and used to define the aims of the present study: What is the experience of MBI participants in relation to the perceived authenticity of the mindfulness technique they have learned?

In order to address all aspects of this research question, the specific aims of the present study were to:

- Explore modern MBI participants’ perspectives of authentic mindfulness.
- Understand modern MBI participants’ perspectives in terms of the extent to which they felt that authentic mindfulness was represented in the MBI they attended.
- Explore any beneficial and negative experiences that modern MBI participants felt were linked to authentic mindfulness in respect of the MBI they attended.

### **Methods**

A qualitative study using semi-structured interviews administered on a one-to-one basis was conducted. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to capture participants’ in-depth perspective and experiences of authentic mindfulness, including understanding the meaning and importance they assign to this construct. Furthermore, given that there does not exist a widely-accepted definition of what is implied by authentic mindfulness, it was deemed appropriate not to pre-empt or limit participants’ responses according to any assumptions that might be present in psychometric tests or other quantitative assessment means.

### **Participants**

To be considered eligible for the study, participants were required to confirm that they: (a) currently lived in the UK; (b) could speak and read English; (c) were not currently diagnosed with a serious psychiatric illness; (d) were available and willing to attend an audio-recorded online individual interview lasting up to 60 minutes; and (e) had completed face-to-face training in a recognized MBI in the UK within the last 36 months involving at least 12 hours of instructor-led facilitation. For the purposes of this study, a recognized MBI was deemed to be an MBI that has been the subject of at least three original research studies published in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention, etc.).

Participants were excluded from the study if they (a) had completed MBI training online or via a software application; (b) had attended an MBI taster session rather than a full course; (c)



had delivered MBI training themselves (i.e., as an instructor); and (d) were aged under 18 years. If participants had attended more than one MBI in the last 36 months, they were requested to limit their responses during the interview to their experiences relating to the most recent MBI training received. In addition to minimizing recall bias, the reason for this was to link participant experiences to a specific MBI (e.g., MBSR, MBCT, MAT) or group of MBIs (i.e., FG-MBIs or SG-MBIs) to help identify any differences in responses pertaining to the type of MBI attended.

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited via dissemination of information about the study to individuals and organizations within the researchers' professional networks, as well as through liaising with mindfulness and meditation practice networks and communities in the UK (i.e., that were requested to forward details about the study to their members).

### **Procedure**

A semi-structured interview of 45–60 minutes' duration (Appendix A) was used to guide one-to-one, online discussions with participants to explore their experiences of attending the MBI. The interview was audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

### **Treatment of Data**

The transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) because it is not tied to a particular theoretical framework and affords flexibility in how to identify and interpret patterns of meaning within a given dataset (Braun et al., 2016). A degree of flexibility was deemed important in the present study given the absence of prior qualitative research specifically addressing authentic mindfulness and the fact that a consensus definition of this construct does not exist. Consequently, while an inductive analytical approach was predominantly followed (i.e., allowing the data to determine the themes), it was applied while acknowledging that use of the term "authentic" in relation to a popular Buddhist-derived mind-body practice, such as mindfulness, was likely to imply some prior assumptions on the part of participants.

In line with the approach described by Braun and Clarke (2006), in the present study the thematic

analysis process was recursive and reflexive, and adhered to six stages involving data familiarization, data coding, theme development, theme revision, theme naming, and write up. There is some flexibility in terms of sample size for thematic analysis, but Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend a minimum sample of six participants. A slightly larger number was recruited in the current study to capture a variety of perspectives."

### **Data Validation and Trustworthiness**

In order to maximize the reliability of the data analysis, the aforementioned theme identification process was repeated iteratively until a point of saturation was reached. While some uncertainty exists regarding the use of the term "saturation" in qualitative research, for the purposes of the present study, saturation was deemed to correspond to the process of Inductive Thematic Saturation (Saunders et al., 2017). This form of saturation reflects the point in the coding process where no new codes occur, and thus no new themes are likely to arise.

Furthermore, "bracketing" was employed as a means of setting aside the researchers' prior assumptions concerning the nature of authentic mindfulness in MBIs and to avoid inadvertently contaminating the analysis of participants' lifeworld from importing theories, findings or preconceived ideas (Ashworth, 2000). In the current study, the bracketing process was facilitated by forming a mind-map (Tattersall et al., 2007) to sketch all known facts and theories (i.e., relating to the notion of authenticity of mindfulness in MBIs) as well as themes the researchers anticipated would emerge from the data analysis. Thus, in the current study, bracketing via the use of mind-mapping helped identify and isolate the researchers' previous assumptions concerning authentic mindfulness (see below on Reflexive Appraisal).

To maximize the reliability and trustworthiness of the data, several other validation steps were employed, including "grounding in examples," whereby participant raw data excerpts were employed as the primary means of confirming the accuracy of analytical interpretations. A summary of the final thematic structure was also sent to participants who all confirmed agreement (Ashworth, 2000).

## Reflexive Appraisal

As part of helping to identify and minimize any biases arising from the researchers' epistemological stance, a reflexive appraisal was undertaken to situate the researchers regarding the issue under investigation. Some of the present researchers have a personal and professional interest in mindfulness and wider meditative approaches and have published on this subject. Despite the researchers' background as Buddhist practitioners with exposure to, and experience of, traditional Buddhist meditation techniques, this is not to say that the present researchers have a preference for traditional versus modern mindfulness approaches, as they recognize the value and need for both. Furthermore, the researchers are aware that even practicing mindfulness according to a traditional Buddhist model does not by default confer authenticity. Thus, the researchers had no expectations as to how participants of modern MBIs might, or should, construe authentic mindfulness and adopted an open-minded attitude in this regard.

## Ethical Considerations

The ethics protocol for this project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Essex. All participants provided informed consent and participant transcripts were anonymized to eliminate any personal details or identifying information. None of the participants received any remuneration or other incentives for their participation.

## Findings

Ten participants completed the interviews, and data from all participants were included in the analysis.

## Participant Demographics

The mean age of participants was 39 years ( $SD = 9.92$ ), and 60% were female. Slightly more participants ( $n=6$ ) self-funded their mindfulness training compared to those whose training was employer-funded ( $n=4$ ). Participants' ethnicity was reasonably varied, with the highest proportion of White-British ethnicity (40%), and the next highest of Black-African (20%) and Asian-Other ethnicity (20%). Four identified as Christian, two as Buddhist, two as Muslim, one as Hindu and one as Jewish. All attended either MBSR (70%) or

MBCT (30%), or a derivative of one of these MBIs, and there was an equal split between participants who underwent mindfulness training for the purposes of personal versus professional development. Participant demographic and MBI attendance characteristics are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participant demographic and MBI attendance characteristics

Demographic characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	4	40
Female	6	60
<b>Age (years)</b>		
20-30	3	30
30-40	1	10
40-50	4	40
50-60	2	20
<b>Funding means</b>		
Employer	4	40
Self	6	60
<b>Religious affiliation</b>		
Christian	4	40
Buddhist	2	20
Muslim	2	20
Jewish	1	10
Hindu	1	10
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Asian (Indian)	1	10
White (British)	4	40
Asian (Other)	2	20
Black (African)	2	20
Black (Caribbean)	1	10
<b>MBI type<sup>a</sup></b>		
MBSR	7	70
MBCT	3	30
<b>Purpose</b>		
Personal	5	50
Professional	5	50

Note.  $N=10$ . <sup>a</sup>MBI course attended: MBSR = mindfulness-based stress reduction (or derivative); MBCT mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (or derivative)

## Thematic Analysis

The analysis of participants' transcripts generated four master themes that each comprised two subordinate themes (Table 2), and an account of each theme, accompanied by illustrative data extracts, follows.

### Master Theme 1:

#### **Authentic Mindfulness as a Construct**

This master theme related to participants' understanding of authentic mindfulness and how much importance they placed on this construct.

**1a. Conceptualization of authentic mindfulness.** Participants reported a reasonably good degree of congruence in their conceptualization of authentic mindfulness. All felt that in order to be considered authentic, there should be an obvious link to traditional mindfulness practice techniques. In this context, six participants used the term "traditional," followed by four who said it should be "linked [to tradition]" and another four who said it should be "real." Three used the words "genuine" and another three "legitimate." Furthermore, four participants specifically stated that the presence of a "spiritual" component is fundamental in terms of conferring authenticity to mindfulness. For example, Participant 7 stated that "To me, authentic mindfulness means it's spiritual and connects you with your spiritual side," and Participant 10 felt that "if it's not spiritual, it's not, you know, the real deal."

Four participants made direct reference to "Buddhism" or "Buddhist" in this context and felt

that authentic mindfulness needs in some way to be based on the original Buddhist teachings. Participant 2 stated that "It's from Buddhism so should be similar to how [Buddhists] do it." And Participant 10 explained that "I knew the course wasn't Buddhism but I wanted to know the teaching, like, the link to what the Buddha said [about mindfulness]."

Participants also explained that they felt the mindfulness instructor played an important role in making mindfulness authentic. More specifically, all but one participant directly acknowledged the role of the instructor in this context and conveyed this understanding using terms such as "it comes down to the teacher," "the teacher has got to really know what they're doing," and "it's got to be the teacher who makes you feel you're getting real training."

I can learn [mindfulness] from the internet but I wanted to connect with an expert to get guidance and [be] inspired ... That's what authentic is—it's connecting, that's right, connecting with someone who really knows their stuff, you know, and who lives by what they say ... It isn't worth it otherwise. (Participant 8)

Thus, in terms of their understanding of authentic mindfulness, participants felt that to be authentic, contemporary mindfulness approaches should embody traditional practice principles. For most participants, this meant that there should be an obvious spiritual component and/or that Buddhist mindfulness techniques should be employed. Participants also felt that to be authentic, the instructor needs to be able to teach and connect with participants from an experiential standpoint.

#### **1b. Importance of Authentic Mindfulness.**

To different degrees, all participants acknowledged the importance of authenticity in mindfulness and explained that it influenced their estimation regarding the quality of the MBI they received. This appeared to be more the case for those who self-funded their MBI training versus those whose employer funded their training. This difference is perhaps best exemplified by Participants 1 (employer-funded) and 6 (self-funded), the latter of whom stated that "I signed up for it cos [sic] it's a really ancient technique that's backed by science 1," and the former stated as follows:

Master Theme	Subordinate Theme
1. Authentic mindfulness as a construct	1a. Conceptualization of authentic mindfulness 1b. Importance of authentic mindfulness
2. Positive aspects of the training	2a. Professionally delivered 2b. A beneficial technique
3. Something missing	3a. Lack of depth 3b. Confusion
4. Recommendations for authenticity	4a. The teacher's presence 4b. Need for greater transparency

I wanted to [learn] this technique to help me be a better team leader and work better [under] stress. Some of my colleagues did it and found it good ... I didn't really think about authenticity [sic] before, but when I was doing this, I started thinking, you know, about how much this mindfulness was the same as in Buddhism ... It's good if its linked [to Buddhism]. (Participant 1)

Six participants recounted that they were aware of anecdotal or media reports relating to the commercialization of mindfulness and the fact that it had undergone a rapid growth in popularity. As captured by the following responses from Participant 5, this awareness appeared to inform participants' original choice of whether to enroll in the MBI training: "I heard it called something like McMindfulness. It was a while ago now. Have you heard that? It's like, you know, fast-food mindfulness ... I didn't want that and I made sure before." Similarly, Participant 8 stated that "Everyone's doing it now. They do a course and teach it, isn't it? But how do you know if it's good or if they even know what they're saying ... That's why I checked if there [had been] science done."

This sub-theme demonstrates that participants placed value on authentic mindfulness both before and whilst attending the MBI. It also captures the view held by most participants that it was important that the MBI they attended had not been negatively influenced by a wider commercialization of mindfulness.

### **Master Theme 2:**

#### **Positive Aspects of the Training**

This master theme captured participants views relating to aspects of the training they felt were particularly positive, including any direct benefits they experienced.

**2a. Professionally delivered.** In terms of the overall quality of the MBI delivery, all participants reported that the training program had met most of their expectations. Furthermore, regardless of whether they self-funded their training, participants felt that they had received reasonably good value for money in respect of their learning achievements. The view of all participants in this respect is captured by Participant 7, who stated that "It kind of met my

expectations, overall." A further example is provided by Participant 6 who stated that "It was reasonable value for money compared to other courses like this. Yeah, that's fair, I think. I got something [from it] and it was worthwhile." This view was shared by Participant 3, who explained that "I couldn't complain really. It was structured and things were explained reasonably clearly. There was a plan for each session and it was followed. And there were exercises for doing at home ... it was decent enough I would say."

All participants indicated that they felt the training was professionally delivered, and four participants specifically commented on this, using terms such as "professional," "professionally done," and "professionalism was fine." Participants attributed this professionalism to a range of factors but placed emphasis on the course content, structure, support materials, instructor, and other course delegates. For example, Participant 4 stated that "The materials were easy to read [and the] meditations were easy to follow ... The group was good and the teacher was professional," and Participant 9 experienced that "Everyone took it seriously ... What [the teacher] said made sense too. The resources are quite good ... [the teacher] had time for everyone."

**2b. A beneficial technique.** All participants reported experiencing some form of benefit from the mindfulness training they received. In general, these benefits related to improvements in health, wellbeing and stress, which participants attributed to the relaxation properties of mindfulness. Seven participants contextualized this, using terms such as "useful for stress," "less stressed," "good for destressing," "coping better" and "more chilled." Three participants also reported better sleep quality as well as better work-related decision-making skills: "It's good for stress. It definitely helps ... You focus on your breath and on what's happening now. It works ... it helps me think better and make better choices at work" (Participant 10).

Eight participants also attributed some of the benefits they derived to the group-based nature of the MBI, which they felt provided them with motivation, a sense of group belonging, and a means of normalizing their experiences. For example, Participant 4 stated that "I made some new friends

and there was a sense of being on a journey together ... that's what really made it for me." Similarly, Participant 6 explained that "You gel together as a group. I'm still in touch with some of them. It was like, a really strong sense of, you know, doing something together. That was one of the main strong points."

Although participants placed importance on these benefits, they did not appear to consider them a product of authentic mindfulness. In other words, the benefits elicited from the MBI appeared to constitute a meaningful experience for participants, but when asked to expand on this point, none attributed this to the authenticity of the mindfulness technique *per se*.

**Master Theme 3:  
Something Missing**

This master theme relates to areas where participants felt there was scope for the training to be more authentic, including any concerns or confusion they may have experienced.

**3a. Lack of depth.** Although all participants reported that they felt the MBI was professionally delivered and that they derived benefits from the training, they also all experienced that the training lacked depth. Five participants used terms such as "something missing," "didn't go deep enough," and "lack of depth" to explain this. However, as shown by the following example excerpts, four participants expressed difficulty articulating their meaning in this context:

I know it was an introductory course and I wanted to start from the beginning ... But something, there was something missing. It's difficult to put my finger on it. Like, you know, I suppose it seemed a bit dry. A bit technical, do you know what I mean? I mean, it was good, but it didn't go deep enough. It's difficult to explain. (Participant 1)

I kept waiting for the main point to come. The main practice to come. Something deeper. Something I could really feel and connect with. But it never came. I'm not sure if what I'm saying makes any sense. I'm trying to find the right words. (Participant 5)

However, six participants had less difficulty in expressing their view and reported that they felt the lack of depth they experienced was due to the

MBI "not being spiritual," "lacking spirituality," or having "become too disconnected from Buddhism." More specifically, Participant 2 stated that "[The MBI] was good but it wasn't spiritual. That was a shame and something was missing in my view," and Participant 7 felt that "There wasn't depth. You were left with a sense that this had been watered down and that something spiritual has been kind of lost along the way." Participant 9 also explained that "It's become too disconnected from Buddhism ... Something's been lost, you know?"

Participants' experiences relating to a lack of depth and the MBI being disconnected from Buddhism and/or insufficiently spiritual did not appear to be linked to participants' religious affiliation.

**3b. Confusion.** None of the participants reported any direct or major adverse health consequences as a result of attending an MBI. However, all reported experiencing a sense of confusion regarding (a) contradictory messages regarding the MBI's affinity to Buddhism and/or spirituality, and (b) whether the MBI was intended to be a psychological or spiritual technique. Most participants felt that their attempts to clarify this confusion were not adequately addressed by the MBI instructors, who, in some cases, were apparently uncomfortable with responding to such questions. For example, Participant 3 stated that "[The instructor] seemed to side-step these types of questions. I felt they didn't want to go there. It's either Buddhist or it's not and it's spiritual or it isn't. But it was a bit vague." Participant 4 held similar views and stated that "It was Buddhist when they wanted it to be but at other times that was played down and it was more of a psychology technique ... I got confused."

For eight participants, this confusion became a cause of mild frustration or distress, which prompted them to seek clarification or support from sources external to the MBI facilitator or organization. Participants explained this using terms such as "had to look elsewhere," "went elsewhere," and "needed more than they could offer." Two participants specifically stated that they required "less ambiguity" or a "less confusing approach" in order to meet all of their needs. Examples of some of the external means

of support reported by participants included reading books, using online resources, attending online mindfulness or meditation networks, participating in group mindfulness or meditation classes, and talking to mindfulness or meditation teachers.

#### **Master Theme 4:**

##### **Recommendations for Authenticity**

This master theme captured participants' views around how to improve the authenticity of the mindfulness training experience.

**4a. The teacher's presence.** Four participants reported that their perspective in terms of what constitutes an authentic mindfulness teacher had been influenced through seeking further clarification (e.g., reading) after completing the MBI. Nevertheless, all participants expressed a view that in respect of the MBI training they completed, the primary target of any modifications to improve authenticity should be the instructor. Participants felt that authenticity should be available via—and apparent as part of—the practice and presence of the MBI instructor. Participants appeared to believe that authenticity was not something that could be taught within the course content itself but was a somewhat nuanced quality that the teacher should embody in a natural way. Participant 4 explained this as follows: “They need [to have] a kind of gentleness and awakesness [*sic*], which was missing when I did it ... it's kind of something you feel rather than something you see.” This was consistent with Participant 9's view, who stated “You can't teach mindfulness. Not really. Not properly anyway ... You have to be introduced to it by someone who's really in touch with it. That's what's lacking in these courses.” Participant 2 provided a further example as follows:

It's not really about what [the MBI instructor] says it's what sits behind it. Or perhaps, yeah perhaps I should say it's [about] what's inside them. People are looking at how [the instructor] sits in meditation or how they do mindful walking. But it's something more than that, you know? (Participant 2)

**4b. Need for greater transparency.** Eight participants also recommended that the MBI should be more informative in terms of (a) how mindfulness was taught in traditional Buddhist settings; (b) how the MBI had deviated from the traditional

perspective; and (c) the instructor's knowledge and familiarity with traditional mindfulness techniques. Terms such as “more clarity,” “greater awareness,” “better understanding,” and “more transparent” were used in this respect. For example, Participant 7 stated that “A bit more clarity would have been welcomed about the differences between [the MBI] and Buddhist mindfulness ... and where it's been changed it would be good to know why ... Kind of, why reinvent the wheel?” Participant 10 shared a similar view and explained that “it comes down to being more transparent, more open really. You want to know what's changed ... you want to know what training [the teacher's] done with traditional methods.”

None of the participants stated or implied that they had been intentionally misled as part of their participation in an MBI. However, this recommendation and preference for greater transparency appeared to stem from the aforementioned confusion relating to certain design features (i.e., as outlined in sub-theme 3b). Participants also recommended that MBIs include more information about the individual or individuals who founded the program, particularly regarding the founder's training in traditional Buddhist mindfulness techniques. Furthermore, participants commented that it would be beneficial to have some degree of contact with the MBI founder, even if it meant brief contact via remote video conferencing software. Participants said such measures would help attendees feel more motivated and reassured about the authenticity of the MBI. Participants' perspectives in this respect are captured by the following excerpt:

At the time, I remember thinking I really want to know more about the person who developed [the MBI]. Like, who are they? Have they done any Buddhist training? Are they an expert? I really wanted to hear this. Actually, I'd say I needed to have this [information] ... I knew the [founder] couldn't be there personally but just a five-minute live video link would have meant the world ... Just some kind of connection, you know? Just briefly. But probably I'm being a bit stupid, not being realistic. (Participant 5)

## Discussion

Findings from this study resulted in four master themes, each with two sub-themes. Master Theme 1, which relates to participants' understanding of authentic mindfulness as a construct and the importance they assigned to it, suggests that a reasonably good level of conformity exists between how some participants of modern MBIs understand authentic mindfulness and traditional Buddhist models of this construct. The fact that participants deemed authenticity to be important in this respect appears to be inconsistent with attempts by some FG-MBI advocates to distance such techniques from spiritual and/or Buddhist practice. For example, in his capacity as the founder of MBSR, Kabat-Zinn asserted that he does not deem mindfulness to be a spiritual practice (Shonin, 2015; cf., Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Such a stance may have been culturally syntonetic during the initial rollout phase of MBIs as a means of gaining acceptance amongst medical and scientific audiences. However, this approach may no longer reflect the underling needs and preferences of some individuals receiving training in MBIs. Ascertaining whether this finding taps into a wider social revival of spiritual values or affinity for spiritual practice is beyond the scope of this study, but at the very least it contributes to the validity and necessity of ongoing debate into whether modern mindfulness approaches are spiritually authentic.

Participant experiences captured under Master Theme 2 (i.e., positive and beneficial aspects of the training) are consistent with a vast body of empirical literature highlighting the beneficial effects of mindfulness on health, wellbeing, and human functioning more generally (Goldberg et al., 2018; Young, 2018). Participants in this study seemed to attribute these salutary outcomes to the relaxation effects of mindfulness. Various mechanisms of action have been proposed in this respect, including (for example) reduced autonomic activity following mindful breathing, reduced thought rumination, and increased spiritual nourishment (Shonin et al., 2014a). Furthermore, consistent with this study's findings, wellbeing following MBI attendance has also been shown to be influenced by the extent to

which participants cohere as a group (Pizarro et al., 2020). Thus, it could be argued that participation in a modern MBI can foster experiences that are meaningful and authentic from the point of view of improving health and wellbeing, even though the term "authentic" was not specifically used in this regard by the present sample.

However, for participants in this study, improvements to wellbeing alone were not deemed sufficient to classify the mindfulness techniques they were exposed to as authentic. This is reflected by Master Theme 3 that, in essence, captured participants' view that neither the MBI they attended, nor the MBI instructors, were necessarily effective at embodying authentic mindfulness. This is consistent with wider emerging concerns relating to this issue, which, as noted by some participants, have resulted in the term "McMindfulness" being disseminated. As discussed, this term appears to be the product of a commercial and fast-food approach to mindfulness and reflects a concern that the type of mindfulness used in some modern MBIs amounts to basic concentration training (Purser, 2019). Among his concerns, Purser (2019) asserted that such a superficial approach can create cliques of mindfulness teachers who do not effectively teach people how to use mindfulness to address real-world problems.

As part of Master Theme 3, participants' emphasis on the vital role of the teacher in imparting an authentic rendering of mindfulness shares some resonance with the depiction of authentic mindfulness presented by Van Gordon et al. (2016a). In particular, both Van Gordon et al. (2016a) and participants of this study highlighted how the teacher can act as a catalyst to facilitate mindfulness practitioners becoming grounded in the present moment. Consistent with certain Buddhist teachings (Dudjom, 2005) as well as with recommendations for effective psychotherapy application in modern contexts (Geller et al., 2012), Master Theme 3 implies that effective mindfulness teaching requires more than instructors outwardly sharing knowledge or advice about the technique. More specifically, it implies that the teacher should be fully grounded in the present moment and that effective mindfulness teaching operates at exoteric and potentially also esoteric levels. Further research would be needed to

test this hypothesis, but other qualitative studies of mindfulness have also hinted at esoteric pathways of transmission between teacher and student (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015b).

Participants' recommendations on authentic mindfulness (i.e., Master Theme 4) corresponded to addressing the shortfalls identified as part of Master Theme 3. Coincidentally, some of the recommendations provided by participants have already been integrated into the design of SG-MBIs, which claim to teach mindfulness in a more authentic manner (Van Gordon et al., 2020). For example, as previously noted, some SG-MBIs employ a supervised teacher training period several years longer than that employed in some FG-MBIs (Van Gordon et al., 2015). SG-MBIs also teach mindfulness in conjunction with a much broader range of contemplative and/or spiritual techniques (Van Gordon et al., 2015).

Qualitative studies of the MAT SG-MBI indicate that the intervention has utility in terms of adding spiritual depth to the mindfulness learning experience. For example, a study exploring the experiences of participants with fibromyalgia who received MAT training reported a master theme corresponding to spiritual growth (Van Gordon et al., 2016b). Another qualitative study of the same intervention (this time delivered to managers with the intention of improving work-related wellbeing) identified a master theme of "taking responsibility for one's spiritual growth" (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015b), with participants specifically acknowledging the role of the mindfulness instructor in this respect.

However, despite such findings indicating that some SG-MBIs offer a more spiritual and perhaps a more Buddhist-congruent representation of mindfulness, it should be noted that none of these studies sought to explore directly participants' experience of authentic mindfulness. Consequently, caution should be applied before making inferences that such findings (e.g., as reported in Shonin and Van Gordon [2015b] and Van Gordon et al. [2016b]) tap into the same authenticity construct that was the focus of the present study.

No difference was identified in terms of how participants from different religious backgrounds

experienced or related to authentic mindfulness. Indeed, although two of the ten participants identified as Buddhist, the level of importance Buddhist participants assigned to authentic mindfulness—and their preference to see this better represented in MBIs—appeared to be no more or less pronounced than in non-Buddhist participants. This helps increase the reliability of the present findings, which did not appear to be confounded by selection bias in this context. This uniformity of participants' experience regardless of religious affiliation may suggest that the concept of authentic mindfulness either transcends, or is integral to, all of the religions represented by the participants of this study. Further research is required to investigate this assertion, but a take-home message appears to be that some adults attending MBIs in the UK welcome the presence of traditional spiritual principles pertaining to mindfulness practice.

### **Implications**

Findings from this study have important implications for both research and practice relating to MBIs. First, this is the first study of its kind to directly explore the first-hand experiences of MBI participants relating to how they feel MBIs embody authentic mindfulness. While findings highlight that in all cases the MBI was deemed experientially meaningful by participants, challenges were reported in terms of participants feeling that an element of spiritual depth was absent from the training. Further research is therefore warranted to better understand how authentic mindfulness is represented in MBIs in the UK and elsewhere.

Second, participants in this study expressed a preference for greater clarity in terms of the extent to which MBIs are based on Buddhist teachings. This has important ethical implications that, in the worst-case scenario, could lead some participants to feel they have been misled regarding the nature and content of modern MBIs (although it should be noted that none of the participants of the present study stated or implied that this was the case). Therefore, MBI providers should ensure that clear information is provided to participants in terms of where such interventions might deviate or align with traditional Buddhist practice, principles, and techniques.



Third, participants in this study felt that the instructor plays a key role in contributing to the authenticity of mindfulness in MBIs. However, the participants felt that in the various MBIs they attended, although the instructor's professionalism and motivation levels were good, the instructor did not always have the necessary depth of experience to teach authentic mindfulness. Consequently, researchers and MBI providers should seek to better understand what steps can be taken to enable mindfulness instructors to impart a more authentic rendering of mindfulness. This might mean finding ways to help MBI teachers become better acquainted with traditional and/or spiritual mindfulness practice principles.

Finally, participants expressed a desire to make a connection, even briefly, with the founder or founders of the MBI in question. Participants suggested that a single brief online video conference (perhaps accessed simultaneously by multiple cohorts or networks of participants) would suffice in this respect, which would contribute to authenticity by helping them feel more connected to the origins of the MBI.

### **Limitations**

Although the sample size was adequate for a qualitative study of this nature (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the findings should be considered with caution in terms of their wider generalizability. Indeed, while the findings provide a valid account of the "life-world" of the ten participants recruited into the present study, they are not intended to be representative of the experiences of all participants attending MBIs in the UK or elsewhere.

In all participant-facing correspondence and interactions, efforts were made to refer to authentic mindfulness in as neutral a manner as possible, so as to capture what this term meant to participants rather than imposing any of the researchers' views on the topic. However, it cannot be ruled out that participants who felt that authenticity was an issue in MBIs were more likely to self-select to join a study of this nature. Furthermore, although participants were asked to limit their responses to the most recent MBI that they attended, it is possible that coverage of this issue by the mass media (e.g., using terms such as *McMindfulness*) may have influenced participant responses.

An attempt to mitigate any limitations arising due to recall bias was made by requiring participants to have attended the MBI within the last 36 months. A shorter cut-off period of 12 months was considered during the design phase of the present study but was discounted on the basis that it might have resulted in fewer participant numbers. Nevertheless, future qualitative studies could seek to address this limitation by reducing the time lag between MBI completion and interview attendance.

Study findings are also limited by the fact that all participant accounts are based on attendance at an FG-MBI, thus excluding SG-MBIs. The fact that no participants of SG-MBIs expressed an interest in enrolling in the study is likely to reflect the greater availability of FG-MBIs, which have been established for a longer period of time versus SG-MBIs. Exploring the experiences of participants of SG-MBIs in relation to authentic mindfulness would be useful, given that SG-MBIs have been formulated with the intention of reflecting a more authentic rendering of the technique. It should also be noted that participant responses were limited to attendance at only two different types of FG-MBI (i.e., MBCT, MBSR, or a derivative thereof) and, as such, might not be relevant to all FG-MBIs.

### **Conclusions**

To the authors' knowledge, this was the first study to directly qualitatively explore the issue of authentic mindfulness based on the experiences of a small sample of MBI participants in the UK. Participants reported that the MBI they attended was experientially meaningful and resulted in a range of health benefits, such as reductions in stress. However, although attending the MBI was deemed to be a valuable experience, participants felt that the MBI did not always reflect an authentic rendering of mindfulness. More specifically, findings show that participants' views of authentic mindfulness appear to resonate with some traditional Buddhist perspectives of this construct. In this regard, participants were aware of wider issues relating to how the commercialization of mindfulness could lead to a more superficial conceptualization of mindfulness in modern MBIs. Accordingly, participants of this study expressed a preference for a more spiritual, or tradition-connected experience,

including regarding the depth of the MBI instructor's understanding.

Further research is clearly required to replicate these findings as well as determine the extent of the authenticity issue in MBIs. In the interim, it is recommended that MBI providers ensure that the information provided to participants accurately explains the extent to which the MBI aligns with, or departs from, traditional Buddhist mindfulness practice techniques and principles.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is your understanding of authentic mindfulness?
2. Do you think practicing mindfulness in an authentic way is important? (Why? Why not?)
3. How well do you feel the MBI you attended represented authentic mindfulness? (What are the similarities? What are the differences?)
4. What do you think about your instructor's proficiency in teaching authentic mindfulness?
5. What features of the MBI worked well in terms of teaching authentic mindfulness?
6. How could authenticity have been improved?
7. Would you describe the type of mindfulness you learned as a spiritual practice? (If so, why? If not, why not?)
8. Either at the time of attending the MBI or subsequently, did you experience any positive or negative consequences that you consider as being due to the presence or absence of authenticity in the MBI? (Please explain)
9. Would you recommend any changes in terms of how the MBI you attended could improve authenticity? (If so, what?)
10. When the MBI training was complete, how equipped did you feel to continue practicing mindfulness? (and how clear were you in terms of knowing where to go to seek further support and instructions?)

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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