

Buddhist Counseling: Implications for Mental Health Professionals

Over the course of its long history, Buddhism has served as a healing technique for various mental health problems in many different countries (Bodhi, 1999). Buddhism can be perceived as a religion, philosophy, psychology, and morality due to its spiritual pursuit, comprehensive belief of reality, theory of human mind and behaviors, remedies to alleviate suffering, and recommended set of ethical behaviors. In particular, the Buddha specifically addressed conceptualizations of and methods to reduce suffering. For example, Buddhist psychology, derived from Abhidhamma and Yogacara, has delineated hundreds of mental activities, such as hatred, ill-will and enmity, and provided respective treatments for each mental disturbance, such as practicing compassion and meditation, and following the Five Precepts. Therefore, Buddhism can intrinsically be a form of counseling and it continues to be a choice of healing in contemporary society.

Over the past few decades in the field of psychology, there has been significant progress in the development of evidence-based treatments informed by Buddhism, such as Trauma-Focus Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for various forms of psychological problems; many of them incorporate mindfulness interventions as an important treatment component (Simiola, Neilson, Thompson, & Cook, 2015). These third wave cognitive behavioral therapies with mindfulness have shown high efficacy in many clinical studies, and mindfulness has become a mainstream treatment component in most of the contemporary interventions. Although these Buddhism-based psychotherapies are empirically supported as effective treatment programs for addressing an array of psychological symptoms, these psychotherapies possess limitations in regards to their incorporations of Buddhist principles. In general, many researchers and professionals equate mindfulness and Buddhism, thereby neglecting many other components in Buddhism and potentially diluting the

benefits of the practice (Farb, 2014). Some Buddhist experts expressed concerns of such applications and described them as McMindfulness, a marketing of mindfulness as a product which may inadequately adapt traditional Buddhist mindfulness practices and result in ineffective or even harmful consequences (Farb, 2014). As the current psychotherapies focus primarily on awareness techniques, they are failing to expose their clients to the other benefits that could be derived from proper practice.

Other criticisms argue that western mindfulness interventions deviate from the Buddhist practice of *sila* by simply extracting one component of Buddhism out of its context. This solitary practice of mindfulness does not constitute any Buddhist ethics which can potentially facilitate people to mindfully cause harm to oneself and others (Dunkley & Loewenthal, 2013). Without the compensation of other spiritual practices in Buddhism, mindfulness practice may result in cognitive and perceptual aberrations for some individuals with severe emotional disturbances and consequently generate greater impaired functioning.

To address these concerns, this project aims to examine components of traditional Buddhist counseling in order to reveal the possible missing components of Western applications of mindfulness to psychotherapy. By investigating the process of Buddhist counseling, mental health professionals can increase their cultural sensitivity to Buddhism, which is practiced by more than 500 million individuals across the globe (Pew Research Center, 2012), and use interventions and concepts from Buddhist counseling to help clients who identify as Buddhists or have interest in Buddhist philosophy. In this project, we use the term *mental health professional* (MHP) to refer to psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers, chaplains, case managers, and other professionals in the counseling profession, and the term *client* to describe individuals who seek psychological or Buddhist counseling.

**Brief History of Buddhism**

About 2,500 years ago in ancient India along the Himalayan foothills of present day Nepal, a young prince named Siddhartha Gautama (563-483 B.C.) was born (Mabbett, 2002). Prior to his birth, it was prophesized that Prince Siddhartha would either flourish into a great ruler or holy man. In order to prevent the latter, Prince Siddhartha's parents immersed him with all the luxuries and comfort he could desire to discourage him from leaving the palace walls (Mabbett, 2002). This, however, did not stop Prince Siddhartha from leaving the palace to explore the world outside his sheltered life.

Upon entering the outside world, Prince Siddhartha witnessed the prevalence of suffering and the realities of old age, illness, and death (Warren, 2012). Intrigued by the sight of a mendicant who possessed no property and depended on charity, yet demonstrated tranquility and contentment, Prince Siddhartha wondered why some suffered while others did not (Batchelor, 1999). Inspired to attain the wisdom behind the source of and path to extinguishing suffering, Prince Siddhartha gave up his throne, escaped from his empire and embarked on a long journey of ascetic practices, meditation, and contemplation (Harvey, 1990).

After six years of exploration and experimentation with self-mortification and rigorous fasting, Prince Siddhartha realized that the path to achieving nirvana (i.e. final and complete cessation of suffering) lay in the practice of peaceful meditation (Mabbett, 2002). One night, while meditating under the Bodhi tree, he attained enlightenment and became the Buddha, which means the "Enlightened One" (Harvey, 1990, p. 1). He realized that although suffering is inevitable under certain circumstances, people can still manage suffering with what he founded as the Four Noble Truths (Warren, 2012).

In the final 49 years of his life, the Buddha traveled to different places while disseminating such insights and teachings to others. The core teachings of the Buddha emphasize the elimination of human suffering with detailed explanations for the nature and causes of, and pragmatic approaches to cease suffering. The Buddha was a lay person that was awakened and became a spiritual teacher to guide others to enlightenment. Hence, contrary to other religions, the Buddha is not viewed as a powerful divinity that must be worshipped in order to achieve liberation.

**The Four Noble Truths.** The Buddha has presented the Four Noble Truths to explain the nature and origins of *dukkha*, a Pali term that is often translated as suffering or dissatisfaction (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011). The First Noble Truth states that *dukkha* is inevitable since the unavoidable conditions of life, such as birth, aging, disease and death, are fraught with suffering (Aich, 2013). The Second Noble Truth asserts that *dukkha* is caused by *tanhā*, which is a Pali term that is described as craving and insatiable thirst (Teasdale & Chaskalson, 2011). The Third Noble Truth claims that *dukkha* can be eliminated through the cessation of *tanhā*, and the Fourth Noble Truth postulates that *tanhā* can be extinguished by following the Eightfold Path. Some traditional Buddhist teachings further categorize craving as the three poisons: Clinging – an uncontrolled desire to grasp onto objects of satisfaction, Aversion – reactions to resist any experience of dissatisfaction, and Ignorance – lack of awareness of the laws of cause and effect, especially the associations between one’s actions and suffering.

**Eightfold Path.** The Eightfold Path is the “Buddhist Ethics” that guide people on how to live their lives in a way to eliminate *dukkha* and attain nirvana through eight core elements (Aich, 2013). These eight core elements are divided into three groups, which are wisdom (*prajña*), virtue (*śīla*) and meditation (*samādhi*) (Maex, 2011). Wisdom or *prajña* comprises of right view

and right thought. Right view is the clear view of life's impermanence and imperfections, and the clear understanding that *dukkha* arises from clinging, aversion and ignorance (Rhys Davids, 2003). Right thought is the cultivation and selection of good thoughts over bad thoughts. Since desires are thoughts, people are to discard such negative thoughts to reduce suffering and achieve peace.

Sila or virtue consists of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Right speech is the act of only saying what is necessary so that one does not perpetuate the habit of speaking frivolously and/or gossiping. Right action is how one should act so that one does not bring harm to others by engaging in any of the following: killing, stealing, sensuality, lying, and becoming intoxicated (Aich, 2013). Right livelihood is the practice of living in a way that is both honest and non-detrimental to oneself and/or others.

Samadhi or meditation includes right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (Aich, 2013). Right effort is the persistent determination one should have when fostering the good qualities of the mind and eliminating the bad qualities during hardships such as struggles and failures. Right mindfulness is the ability to redirect one's conscious awareness to the task at hand. Right concentration is the skill of removing unnecessary thoughts that are distracting one's focus while engaging in a task.

**Karma.** In Buddhism, karma is an essential teaching of causality which describes cause, conditions, and effect, and assumes every action produces a responsive reaction (Neale, 2011). It emphasizes the significance of one's actions, speech and mind since these factors continuously produce future events and/or experiences. The current experiences one faces are the products of one's past behaviors and intentions, and the future experiences are determinant on how one behaves and thinks in the present. In order to generate good karma and happiness, it is important

to engage in virtuous acts and thoughts that are positive for oneself and others. Engaging in non-virtuous behaviors and thoughts that bring harm to others will create suffering (Neale, 2011).

### **Process of Buddhist Counseling**

Buddhist counseling is a term used by some scholars to describe the process of a Buddhist practitioner that utilizes Buddhist teachings and interventions to help an individual reduce suffering (Rungreangkulkij & Wongtakee, 2008). This is an ancient form of counseling originated by the Buddha who consoled many individuals from everyday problems to severe emotional disturbances, such as grief and loss. Contemporary Buddhist counseling comprises of many different forms and modalities according to the practitioners' tradition, practices, and personal preferences. In the Mahayana tradition, Buddhist counseling may lack structure and consistency across practitioners (H. Dong, personal communication, March 31, 2016). Generally, the counselees are active members of a temple that seek counseling from the nuns or monks when faced with emotional disturbances. During counseling, the Buddhist practitioner first listens attentively to the counselee's concerns. Then, depending on the beliefs and practices of the Buddhist counselor, he or she may 1) provide brief counseling by giving advice based on Buddhist teachings, 2) provide long-term counseling as a Buddhist teacher or counselor by either teaching meditation, Buddhist concepts, or other interventions, or 3) recommend the counselees to enroll in Buddhism courses, meditation services, or other Buddhist rituals and/or services. The duration and frequency of the counseling interactions can vary according to many factors, such as the Buddhist counselor's evaluation of needs of the counselee, practices of the counselor, and reception of the counselee. In general, Buddhist counselors assume the role of a teacher who has a wealth of wisdom and experiences to provide advice and guidance to the counselees. In return, counselees show reverence to and follow the guidance of the Buddhist counselors who are

perceived as representations of the Dharma. Although the details and modalities of Buddhist counseling may differ, we have summarized six common components of Buddhist counseling in order to elucidate the Buddhist counseling process.

### **Components of Buddhist Counseling**

Through review of literature on classical Buddhist canons, contemporary research studies in Buddhism and psychology, and results from semi-structured interviews with experts of Buddhism who have at least three years of experience counseling traumatized individuals using only Buddhist approaches, we have summarized the common components of Buddhist counseling and the possible psychological significances. As Buddhism has diversified into different cultural forms such as Mahayana, Theravada, and Tibetan Buddhism, each school of Buddhism has developed its unique practices and beliefs. For the purpose of clarity, this article focuses primarily on Buddhist beliefs and practices of Mahayana Buddhism, which is the largest branch of Buddhism in the modern world (Pew Research Center, 2012). In this paper, Buddhist counselors refer to practitioners such as monks, nuns, Buddhist chaplains or other Buddhist experts that employ Buddhism to reduce suffering of clients who seek help from Buddhist counselors for their presenting problems.

### **Buddhist Counselors and Mental Health Professionals: Ethical Implications**

In understanding Buddhist counseling, MHPs need to be aware of a major distinction between Buddhist counselors and MHPs: Buddhist counselors have a pastoral role in the therapeutic process for clients (L. Gomez, personal communication, March 1, 2016). Pastoral counseling is a process of being with individuals during their hardships to promote psychological wellbeing and strengthening of their faiths (Rudolfsson & Tidefors, 2015). Across cultures, pastoral care is a highly common form of counseling for congregants suffering from crises, grief



and losses, traumas, emotional problems, and significant changes in family structure and health. For example, Christian pastoral counseling may include preaching, giving biblical advice, praying, and other spiritual means to help clients address their mental health problems. Similarly, the Buddhist counseling process may encompass Buddhist teachings, references to Buddhist scriptures, using Buddhist perspectives to conceptualize clients' suffering, and instill faith in the Dharma in order to empower and soothe clients. For example, a Chinese Mahayana Buddhist counselor may explain reincarnation and karma to a client suffering from PTSD after a serious car accident to conceptualize the trauma as a result of debts and wrongdoings from previous lifetimes; a Thai Theravada counselor may refer to the Buddha's original teachings of meditation to help clients understand the rationale of meditation practices; a Tibetan Mahayana Buddhist counselor may use the image of the Buddha as a visualization practice for clients to help them concentrate and cope with anxiety. The pastoral role of Buddhist counselors inherently apply the values, beliefs, and faith of the counselors to the healing process which can include Buddhist rituals, Dharma teachings, or other religious interventions.

Due to the pastoral role of Buddhist counselors, there are several precautions for Buddhist counselors in understanding and applying Buddhist interventions. First, Buddhist counselors in psychology who practice Buddhism need to be aware of their values and eliminate the effect of their religiosity to their non-Buddhist clients. According to the American Psychological Association Ethical Principle of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2010), psychologists should avoid imposing their religious values and biases on their clients while valuing clients' spirituality and religious beliefs. It is imperative for MHPs to maintain their objectivity and to provide psychological services to clients in their best interest. In fact, good Buddhist practitioners refrain from strictly holding onto their Buddhist

beliefs in counseling and practice a selfless approach to connecting and attuning with their clients (L. Gomez, personal communication, March 1, 2016). One may even “forget” their Buddhist background and focus merely on establishing a close and empathic bond to provide a safe and nonjudgmental environment for clients.

Second, when counseling Buddhist clients, MHPs may apply some of the Buddhist teachings and interventions in order to align with clients’ Buddhist belief, build rapport, and generate alternative perspectives to the clients’ struggles if the professionals have competency in using such spiritual interventions. With the development of the central importance of the multicultural competence in counseling, religion and spirituality have received increased attention in the past decade (Curry & Simpson, 2011). A client’s spiritual journey can be a requisite for more deeply understanding a client’s cultural background as well as a potential tool to enhance the effectiveness of counseling. However, MHPs should only do so within the scope of their competence which is based on their education, training, and professional experiences (American Psychological Association, 2010). In particular, some Buddhist interventions such as advanced meditation skills, should only be taught by seasoned Buddhist counselors because unskillful teachers can cause potential harm to clients (W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016; B. Thanissaro, personal communication, April 4, 2016). Therefore, MHPs should have ongoing efforts to develop and maintain competence by receiving training, supervision, and consultation when they consider using Buddhist interventions. Whenever considering using Buddhist interventions, MHPs should ask for the client’s permission. For example, a MHP has a client that is a Buddhist mother whom easily becomes agitated by her defiant and oppositional son, thus loses self-control by yelling at and blaming her son. The MHP may ask for permission to share Buddhist conceptualizations of anger to help the mother explore

an alternative perspective to see her anger as a deep-seated discontentment of her mind, an afflictive emotional state which hurts both her and her son, and a temporary emotional state that she can learn to cope with more skillfully (Tsering, 2006).

Third, even when MHPs and clients both identify as Buddhists, it is of utmost importance to understand clients' idiosyncratic views of Buddhism and refrain from overgeneralizing the professionals' beliefs and imposing their values, especially since there are many different forms of Buddhism and cultural practices and beliefs. MHPs need to gain a thorough understanding of clients' beliefs and practices before applying Buddhist interventions. In general, MHPs need to ensure the integration of Buddhism into the practice is therapeutically relevant and ethically appropriate and in the best interest of the client rather than the counselor. Ignoring the client's religious perspective can be culturally insensitive or even unethical while imposing counselors' religious or spiritual values can also be unethical. Ethical MHPs should continuously self-monitor their motivation, ensure their competency in the integration, and make ongoing ethical decisions for the client's best interest.

### **Self-cultivation of Buddhist Counselors**

The self-cultivation of a Buddhist counselor is a critical component for effective counseling (W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). Self-cultivation in Buddhism is an ongoing effort to rectify and perfect one's mind until one reaches nirvana (Aich, 2013). Buddhism is a form of devoted training to tame one's mind through constant introspection and self-correction (G. Tenzin, personal communication, March 5, 2016). It assumes that all emotional and behavioral problems arise from an unsteady mind which cannot stop the pursuit of impermanent and transient satisfaction. Cultivation is the way to calm one's mind and remove mental afflictions from the Buddha nature in order to reach nirvana.

In the process of practicing Buddhism, a general assumption is that the efficacy of a Buddhist counselor is directly proportionate to one's level of self-cultivation (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015; D. Hong, personal communication, November 12, 2015; W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). Although there is not a standardized and objective measure of a practitioner's level of self-cultivation, a practitioner's level of *jhanas*, or meditative absorption, can be a reference (Shankman, 2012). According to the Abhidhama, meditators can reach four qualitatively different states of consciousness named as the four jhanas. In short, by reaching the first jhana, practitioners can experience six mental factors including: (1) Movement of the mind onto the object, (2) Retention of the mind onto the object, (3) Joy, (4) Happiness, (5) Equanimity, and (6) One-Pointedness. In successive jhanas, factors are abandoned and the meditative absorption deepens until only one-pointedness and equanimity remains. It takes tremendous effort for practitioners to reach the first jhana and one develops skillful means to attain and maintain calmness, mindfulness of the present moment, absence of emotional disturbances, and insights along the way. However, cultivation is not limited to meditation and it can include a variety of practices such as reading sutras, chanting, repenting, reciting mantra, or doing good deeds. More detailed descriptions of cultivation and jhanas can be found in Abhidhammic literature.

According to several Buddhist experts, the primary component of Buddhist counseling is for counselors to cultivate the mind through Buddhist practices to enhance their skillful qualities of mind (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015; D. Hong, personal communication, November 12, 2015; H. Dong, personal communication, March 31, 2016; W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). In Buddhist counseling, counselors use their skillful qualities to help clients learn to rectify their own skillful qualities. The word *skillful* is

often used in the Buddhist context as a sign of wisdom in which an individual learns to use more effective ways to act without the interference of the three poisons. Through cultivation, Buddhist counselors can nurture skillful ways to heighten awareness of their minds and bodies in positive and negative experiences, discern helpful and unhelpful qualities, and use strategies to extend and sustain the positive qualities while abandoning unhelpful qualities. For example, an individual with depression possesses numerous thoughts of self-criticism. Meditation can help this individual differentiate the thoughts and the mind, center his or her mind to see how the critical thoughts arise, maintain and vanish, and mindfully use mental strategies which eliminate the critical thoughts by focusing on the breath, visualizing caring and supportive individuals, or using self-compassion to soothe critical thoughts. The more counselors are able to benefit from these practices, the more they can utilize them to help the clients for varied reasons.

Cultivation can mobilize counselors' capacity for emotional strength, courage, compassion, and other inner qualities and to influence clients more effectively. According to Thanissaro (2016), the cultivation of the mind can develop (1) unlimited attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity; (2) an acute discernment of thinking patterns to stop unhealthy thoughts in order to cease unnecessary suffering; (3) an ability to avoid being overcome by pleasure or pain. Buddhist cultivation is a way of living to help practitioners reduce their dissatisfactions in life and to have more inner resources for clients (H. Dong, personal communication, March 30, 2016).

A skillful mind, which is a cultivation of good qualities, is a handy tool to utilize in identifying clients' emotional suffering and attuning with clients (W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). In fact, Buddhist counseling is a process of human connections that extend beyond verbal communication, including nonverbal expressions of

empathy and compassion through the energy of the counselor. Energy, *virīya* in Pali, is a mental factor of power which can drive the mind to accomplish wholesome or unwholesome activities (Goldstein, 2013). Energy is radiated through the way one speaks and conducts oneself to communicate with the client, and the forms of radiating positive energy such as calmness and compassion in communication can inherently be therapeutic (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015). With proper and advanced cultivation of the mind, counselors can naturally emit positive energy to clients that influence their mental and/or emotional states to become calmer and more relaxed (W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). For example, an anxious client may find the mere presence of a serene and composed counselor calming and healing.

Cultivating one's spiritual practice as a Buddhist counselor is also important because counselors can increase competency of Buddhist practices and faith by personally experiencing the teachings and truly understanding them (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015; D. Hong, personal communication, November 12, 2015; W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). In order to effectively heal someone using Buddhist practices, Buddhist counselors need to hold genuine confidence in the teachings (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015). This trust and belief can only be derived from one's own experiences from one's own continual practice, and the faith in the practices can enhance counselors' effectiveness in providing the Buddhist interventions.

A hypothetical case example is included to elucidate how a cultivated Buddhist practitioner utilized Buddhist techniques to help an individual with severe mental symptoms.

Jane was a 22-year old Japanese-American female suffering from the delusion that numerous men were in love with her and she sought help from Venerable CZ who is a

Chinese Mahayana Buddhist monk with years of experience of cultivation, such as meditating and practicing Dharma in daily life. Jane would purchase flowers for herself and tell others that they were gifts from her admirers while firmly believing in that fantasy. She felt overwhelmingly insecure and scared around men. Through his own practice, Venerable CZ has gained awareness of his subtle energy, sexual desire, and situations in which he was propelled by a sense of hunger to seek satisfaction in the wrong places, such as feeling pride by the love of girls. The cultivation helped Venerable CZ nourish a sense of serenity, gladness, and an ability to discern deeper needs beneath behaviors and consequences of inappropriate ways to satisfy desires. By attentively listening to Jane, Venerable CZ used his equanimity to bring Jane to momentary states of sanity and serenity. He then saw beyond her struggles and felt her need for a sense of belonging and self-worth and recognized Jane's lack of social skills and socially isolated lifestyle. Venerable CZ also noticed Jane's delusion was rooted from her craving of being liked so he started counseling by asking whether she would like assistance in becoming a more likeable individual. Once consented, he encouraged her to participate in more social settings and partake roles and responsibilities in a community so that she can attain and experience a sense of self-worth and belonging. In addition, he taught her mindfulness skills to let her observe her mind and perceive her thoughts as simply thoughts or internal chatter. By creating this distance between herself and her thoughts through mindfulness training, she felt less compelled to act on them. Through continuous practice of mindfulness and guidance from the Venerable, Jane slowly disengaged from her delusions and returned to reality since her deprivation from social interactions was gradually being fulfilled and her desires were being satiated in a healthy fashion.

### **Application of Self-cultivation to Mental Health Professionals**

Cultivation of character and virtue can enhance the efficacy of MHPs in counseling while it is not a primary focus in most of the training programs (Russell, 2009). Although most of the MHPs are governed by professional ethics and receive extensive training on self-awareness of personal biases and stereotypes, the training in professional psychology usually does not dwell into character development, spirituality, or other personal developmental domains. The Buddhist emphasis on self-cultivation can be a direction for MHPs to advance awareness of one's emotional changes through recognition of one's bodily sensations and personal development in order to cope with personal problems, and facilitate a composed and confident therapeutic presence for clients. Although energy is not a scientific subject in psychological science, recent neuroscience research has provided evidence for our ability to vicariously experience pain, reward, joy, and other feelings by being empathic to others (Coutinho, Silva, & Decety, 2014). Evidence from neuroimaging studies have shown that when therapists empathically connect with clients, the same neural networks are activated and in turn therapists can experience clients' psychological pain. When being attuned with clients who are emotionally aroused, therapists can biologically modulate their automatic response in order to soothe clients' autonomic levels of sympathetic arousal and calm the clients.

Psychologically, Buddhist practices can be used in self-care and prevent burnout for MHPs. Many studies on mindfulness have shown that mindfulness training for therapists can strengthen tolerance for physical and emotional pain, heighten energy level, enhance the ability to relax, increase self-compassion, and decrease perceived stress (Dorian & Killebrew, 2014). Buddhist meditation can restore awareness, compassion, and tranquility for therapists who experience burnout. The Buddhist teaching to develop acceptance of pain and suffering help



MHPs maintain calmness or stillness of mind in their exposure to clients' suffering (Pembroke, 2016). From the perspectives of Buddhism and psychology, it is probable that Buddhist cultivation can be helpful for Buddhist counselors and MHPs to enhance their performance in the counseling process.

Integration of religion and spirituality into treatment has been increasingly important in recent years (Pearce et. al. 2015). Applying spirituality to counseling can help MHPs understand and address clients' core values, the inner factors of clients' thoughts and behaviors, and instill hope based on faith. Understanding clients' spirituality can also expand related resources such as social support from members of their religious or spiritual groups, guidance from religious leaders, community service opportunities, and financial resources from religious groups. Moreover, spiritual solutions can be effective interventions for grief and loss, terminal illness, and death related psychological disturbances. Due to these very reasons, cultivation of MHPs' spirituality may effectively help them attune with spiritual clients, empathize with their beliefs and practices, and increase the breadth of interventions.

### **Application of Buddhist Teachings**

"Buddhist is the best psychologist because he is the only person in known history to successfully eradicate sufferings for self and others" (H. Hung, personal communication, March 25, 2016). One important role of Buddhist counselors is to use the Dharma to guide and advise clients in order to help them gain new insights to their existing problems. Unlike psychotherapists, Buddhist counselors often give advice and guidance with reference to Buddhist scriptures and the counselors' practice. Buddhist counselors may be similar to a teacher who uses didactic way to educate clients on Buddhist beliefs to help clients gain new perspectives and motivate behavioral changes. Some of the main teachings used in Mahayana Buddhist

counseling include karma, the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the three proofs of existences, and the derived concepts from these core teachings.

**Karma.** Understanding karma can help clients raise awareness of cause, conditions, and effect of all events in life (H. Dong, personal communication, March 31, 2016; D. Hong, personal communication, November 12, 2015). Buddhist psychology highly emphasizes karma, which is a habituated pattern of thoughts and actions. The assumption of karma depicts dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors as products of our habituated and dysfunctional patterns which are rooted in the negative karma from previous life times. This habituated pattern governs our mental fabrication of the world and leads us to react to stimulus automatically. Taking angry outbursts as an example, an angry person may have a habituated pattern of actively seeking triggers for anger, interpreting neutral stimuli as anger-provoking, allowing agitation and irritability to arise and holding onto such feelings, and reacting in aggressive or hostile ways to seek resolutions.

By understanding karma, individuals can become empowered to actively cultivate positive qualities and instill a sense of responsibility for their actions. According to the Mahayana tradition, negative karma can also result in illness, tragedies, accidents, and traumas. If Buddhist clients believe in karma, they would accept how their negative karma have shaped their personalities and emotional disturbances and in turn make changes from the current moment. Buddhism places emphasis on the practitioner as an active agent to change—one can immediately cease the causes for bad karma and flourish the cultivation of good karma through Buddhist practices such as mindfulness, compassion, repentance, and good deeds. This belief helps clients understand their ability to differentiate their karmic force and their agent to pause and choose. Using the angry person as an example, one can stop bad karma by learning to

recognize triggers for angry thoughts, notice aggravation of negative thoughts and feelings, evaluate both positive and negative outcomes, confess to self and others, and make a commitment to avoid wrongdoings. More importantly, believing in karma helps to plant the seeds by motivating clients to focus on correcting and improving themselves.

**The Three Pillars of Practice.** The practice of Buddhism is a transformative process focusing on self-cultivation and intrapersonal wisdom. The Noble Eightfold Path is categorized into three aggregates consisting of discipline (sila), concentration (samatha) and wisdom (prajñā) that are used to counter the three roots of evil in human beings, which are greed, aversion, and ignorance. Many Buddhist counselors use these three paradigms to help clients cope with the challenges in life by improving the inner qualities in clients (H. Dong, personal communication, March 30, 2016).

*Discipline.* Discipline can be understood as a Buddhist precept which is designed to protect the followers from committing negative karma. Across Buddhist traditions, there are three ultimate ways to counter the three fundamental roots of human suffering: precepts for clinging, concentration for aversion, and wisdom for ignorance. There are five basic precepts for Buddhists: refrain from killing living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and use of intoxicating substances. The goal of following the precept is never to avoid punishment by a higher power or being; instead, observance to precepts is a sign of wisdom to avoid the commitment of negative karma because one understands how the five wrongdoings will result in negative karmic force to hurt oneself. The intention to follow precepts should come from the Buddhist insights of the nature of existence, karmic rules, and the delusions of self. For example, when we use violent means to satisfy one's needs, we are actively initiating negative causes such as anger, hatred and destruction, and we will reciprocally receive the same karmic effect to hurt

ourselves in return. That is, following the precepts prevent us from planting negative causes and consequently save us from undesirable consequences.

Clinging is an unskillful way to enjoy transient satisfaction for unlimited desire which will eventually lead to more suffering. For example, enjoying a steak does not cause any problem from the standpoint of clinging. Problems only arise when one craves a steak and believes one has to eat a good steak to be satisfied and pleased. Human beings have a natural tendency of habituation that the level of satisfaction reduces along with each satisfaction of needs. In other words, one may lose interest in a regular T-Bone steak over time and start to enjoy Filet Mignon, and then become dissatisfied with Filet Mignon and develop a need for Kobe Beef instead. This deepening of desire is applicable to other objects of attachment such as alcohol or drugs. Hence, precepts offer an immediate abandonment of the desire which can be liberating.

Buddhist counselors do not necessarily ask clients to follow the Five Precepts but the precepts are important ways for clients to understand the causes and effects of their actions and to learn to take responsibilities for their decisions and behaviors (H. Dong, personal communication, March 30, 2016). For example, when clients complain about their coworkers for being hostile and rejecting, Buddhist counselors may have the clients self-examine their intention and actions, avoid having hostility and rejection towards their coworkers, and practice tolerance as well as compassion to these aversive experiences. Buddhist counselors may use Buddhist teachings as references to guide clients to understand the active and reactive forces of karma in which initiation of hostility will result in responsive hostility from others. On the other hand, radiating compassion to the coworkers will also reactively elicit compassionate responses.

*Concentration.* The second paradigm is concentration and the basic practice is to tranquilize the mind to achieve equanimity. This is the main step of cultivation for our minds to

learn skillful means to interact with internal and external stimuli, understand our attachments to self and others, discern our wholesome and unwholesome thought processes, increase our sensitivity to joy, and reduce our mental fabrication of suffering. Through meditation and other practices, one can learn to remain calm and undisturbed in difficult situations and recover from emotional traumas (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015). For example, traumatized individuals are often immersed in their tragic experiences and heightened emotional states. Buddhist counselors may use single-breath meditation to help clients focus on the tip of their noses and take deep breaths. By inhaling and exhaling slowly and directing attention to a single point, clients experience a natural reward of joy through breathing which divert them from their traumatic memories to the present moment.

*Wisdom.* In a general sense, wisdom in Buddhism is the insight to the true nature of reality which includes the Three Basic Facts of Existence: impermanence (anicca), suffering (dukkha), and non-self (anattā). Impermanence is the realization of non-existence of those qualities in oneself and any phenomenon that has the ability to arise, it has the ability to disappear. In other words, all raptures or emotional disturbances, owning or losing of important ones, and success or failure are transient. Accepting the impermanent nature of life can facilitate perspective changes. Taking grief and loss as an example, Buddhist counselors may use Buddhist teachings of impermanence to help clients understand that death and life are inescapable truths of existence and everything is in constant change.

Buddhist counselors may help clients apply Buddhism in daily life. The initial step is to teach clients to raise awareness of the self that human beings have the intrinsic nature to examine the world through the visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile sensations and evaluate them in terms of the three roots of evil. Buddhist counselors usually help clients understand the

nature of the mind that interacts with external objects and internal experiences to label different events, which then results in different thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. When clients start to acknowledge their mental processes merely as reactions to the internal and external environment, they will gradually understand how they construct reality through their mental fabrications or their idiosyncratic perceptions of the world. This awareness leads clients to gain insights of the differences between their thoughts and their selves, thereby realizing their possible active choices in how to interpret an event. A wise mind is a clear and discerning agent to make interpretation with accuracy so that one sees phenomena as they are and this concept is often referred to as *vipassana* (Tsering, 2006). In order to increase clarity and awareness of mind, Buddhist counselors may teach clients to be more mindful in their daily life by observing their thoughts during mundane activities such as eating, driving, or walking. Counselors may also teach clients to acknowledge bodily feelings and mind reactions in order to discern skillful qualities (e.g. calmness, mindfulness, and compassion) and unskillful qualities (e.g. anger, greed, and lust), which counselors will then teach clients to abandon.

From a contemporary Mahayana Buddhism perspective, Humanistic Buddhism stresses that the most important way to practice Buddhism is to apply Buddhism in every moment in life (H. Dong, personal communication, March 31, 2016). Buddhist counselors in this tradition may lead clients to cultivate wisdom by applying Buddhist teachings to work, interpersonal relationships, or solitary activities such as practicing compassion by giving joy and fostering growth of others, reflecting on negative thoughts and assumptions in daily interactions, and shifting perspectives from seeing hostile workers as Bodhisattvas who give us opportunities to cultivate patience and endurance. Furthermore, the three pillars are interrelated in ways which one practice reinforces another: practicing meditation can enhance clarify the mind to

acknowledge unskillful qualities, observing precepts can strengthen compassion to living beings, and wisdom can deepen the cultivation of meditation. Therefore, Buddhist counselors may teach clients the concepts of the Three Pillars, facilitate clients to practice them in daily life, and address their questions and concerns in practice.

### **Application of Buddhist Teachings to counseling**

One intersection of the Psychological and Buddhist approaches is to help clients gain insights to the existing problems. The concepts of Karma and the Three Pillars of Practices can be applicable to counseling in secular ways to offer new perspectives through cognitive and experiential exploration. Gathering feedback from professional counselors who apply Buddhism in counseling, we have summarized several ways to incorporate Buddhist teachings in secular ways:

- MHPs can translate the Buddhist teachings into psychological terms such as depicting mental fabrication as beliefs in inaccurate apprehension of reality and discernment of unskillful qualities as investigations of the sources of stress.
- The precept of no killing surpasses its literal meaning that one should refrain from causing harm to other beings as well as fostering their growth which can become behavioral interventions to develop empathy. For clients who suffer from uncontrollable anger, a MHP can collaborate with the client to practice flourishing plants and avoid killing insects for a week and to process the client's thoughts and feelings in offering compassion.
- For coping with grief and loss, MHPs may use Buddhist stories as a storying-telling technique to normalize clients' feelings and explore alternative perspectives. For example, there was a story of a mother who could not bear the death of her only child. Weeping

and groaning, she carried the dead child to the Buddha and told him of her sad story.

After listening to her, the Buddha advised her to find five mustard seeds from any family in which there has never been a death. The mother was filled with hope and set to find such a household. Very soon she discovered that every family had experienced death of at least one person and she gradually understood suffering as a part of life and the inevitability of death.

- Some MHPs use psychoeducation informed by Buddhism to help clients understand that doing good deeds immediately produce positive feelings in oneself while holding onto anger immediately brings burning feelings to oneself. They may also use inspirational quotes such as “holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned first,” “you will not be punished for your anger; you will be punished by your anger,” and “holding onto anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”

For Buddhist clients, the Buddhist MHPs also suggested different ways to incorporate Buddhist teachings into the counseling process:

- For Buddhist clients, MHPs may provide psychoeducation to explain Karma as an equal and opposite reaction for every action which portrays the reciprocity of human interactions. In counseling individuals with relationship problems, MHPs can explore clients’ intention and behaviors in the conflictual situations and have clients’ raise awareness between the connections of their behaviors and the reactive behaviors of their spouses. Clients can experiment how they contribute to the conflicts by purposefully using positive intention to initiate positive gestures such as praising, sending gifts, or not



reacting to hostility. Through observing the dynamics of trying new behaviors, clients may gain insights to reduce conflicts in relationships.

- Some MHPs guide clients to substitute negative thoughts with positive religious statements such as replacing “Why am I the only one suffering” with “Suffering is a nature in life” and “My life is miserable and I am nothing but a failure” with “I happily rejoice in the virtue of all sentient beings, which relieves the suffering of the miserable states of existence. May those who suffer dwell in happiness” (H. Hung, personal communication, March 25, 2016). MHPs can provide clients statements of the religious statements and process them with the clients and have clients practice reading them or reciting them on a daily basis.
- For Buddhist clients who practice mindfulness, MHPs can help clients understand mindfulness as a way to increase clients’ sensitivity to happiness (W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). Some core exercises include noticing beauty in the environment, mindfully and slowly tasting the flavor of food during each meal, and taking deep breaths and noticing the refreshing feelings every day. Some MHPs encourage clients to write journals to reflect and process these feelings.

Regardless of the religious beliefs of clients, good Buddhist MHPs are able to apply Buddhist interventions in a way that clients understand, accept, and resonate without values impositions or coercion. For instance, the concept of Karma does not necessarily relate to previous lifetimes and it is far more important to focus on Karma in the present moment and diligently cultivate oneself (W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). Therefore, focusing on the mystical components of Buddhism is not the goal of practice and good Buddhists

should have flexibility and adaptability in applying the Buddhist teachings to self and others to facilitate the maximum level of positive changes.

### **Mindfulness and Meditation**

Mindfulness and meditation are crucial interventions in Buddhist counseling (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015; W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). However, mindfulness and meditation are two distinctive concepts with overlapping areas. According to the Anapanasati-sutta, a historical scripture which documents Buddha's discourse of the details of meditation, mindfulness, clear comprehension and ardency are the three main mental qualities to cultivate in the practice of meditation (W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). In other words, mindfulness is a component of meditation and it is a process of paying attention in a certain way to raise awareness of the self in the present moment (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015). It also includes gaining awareness of the body and mind, making positive changes and adjustments in the thought processes, and freeing from bondage and certain mental states. The healing power of mindfulness practice comes from a natural rewarding response in our body that each mindful state provides a feeling of ease and peace. Even for individuals who are intensely traumatized and under severe emotional disturbances, they are capable of enjoying a sense of ease for a short period of time through mindful breathing (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015; W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016).

In treating traumatized individuals, mindfulness does not erase traumatic memories; instead, mindfulness changes the meaning and perception of the traumatic experiences (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015). Through the practice of staying in the present moment, individuals cultivate the ability to observe the traumatic experiences with lessened

emotional reactivity and acceptance of the suffering. If one goes beyond mindfulness and practice deep meditation, one can investigate his or her mind objectively and experience loving-kindness, forgiveness, and letting go of the traumatic memories. However, the practice of meditation requires strong commitment, devotion, and the ability to overcome multiple hindrances, such as impatience, boredom, and frustration during practice (W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). Moreover, meditation practices can occur in many different forms such as visualizing positive role models, discerning internal experiences, reciting self-compassion messages during guided meditation, and focusing on joy and equanimity in single breath meditation. Although there are various different types of meditation practices, it is essential to first begin practicing Samatha meditation. This is a focused meditative practice that fosters concentration and helps people delve deeper into their points of focus, whether it be a thought or feeling. Because the mind is so easily distracted, Samatha meditation must first be practiced and established as a foundation to progress to higher stages of practice in order to attain wisdom and special insight.

From a Buddhist perspective, mindfulness practice alone can alleviate traumatic symptoms but the practice will be much more effective in combination with Buddhist teachings (A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015; W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). For example, understanding and accepting that everything is impermanent including pain and joy, the attachment to self, craving for transient events in life, and sending compassion to others are some significant concepts to combine with meditation. Practice of Buddhism is a comprehensive and transformative cultivation of the mind. Taking a reductionist approach to selective practice components of Buddhism is highly likely to limit its efficacy. In addition, mindfulness without Buddhist Ethics can be dangerous for people can engage in

anything mindfully, including killing (D. Hong, personal communication, November 12, 2015). Buddhist ethics guide people to abstain from these negative actions, which in itself produces happiness, and cultivate compassion.

According to their counseling experiences, a number of Buddhist practitioners reported that meditation can be effective in alleviating symptoms of many mental health problems (A. Geoff, personal communication, April 4, 2016; A. Seeda, personal communication, October 26, 2015; D. Hong, personal communication, November 12, 2015; W. Chu, personal communication, February 16, 2016). For example, traumatized clients who experience flashbacks of intrusive memories, agitation, and hypervigilance can learn to regain a sense of control and safety by grounding themselves to their breaths. It is important to note that every person has his or her unique fit with a particular breathing intervention and hence Buddhist practitioners always try to find out each client's most helpful way of mindful breathing. There are a number of forms of mindful breathing such as breathing slowly and deeply, rapidly and shallowly, and breathing in using the left nostril and breathing out with the right nostril. Then the Buddhist counselor will help clients ground their attention to a single point and ignore the intrusive thoughts and images in order to attain an internal sense of safety and tranquility.

As little is known about how Buddhist counselors provide treatment, a hypothetical case study summarized with realistic counseling experiences from the experts is included in order to vividly illustrate the therapeutic process:

Huo Ma is a 41-year-old Chinese woman who developed PTSD after losing her husband in a tragic accident. Before seeking Buddhist counseling, Huo Ma was suffering from a severe level of depression and posttraumatic stress that she would cry for about an hour or two each day, feel devastated when visiting any places that reminded her of her

husband, and she was unable to soothe herself. The Buddhist counselor started by listening to her pain and suffering, and empathizing with her feelings. After the establishment of rapport, the counselor taught her Samatha meditation (single fixed point meditation using mindful breathing) and meditated with her using a mindful single breath technique. At the beginning, she would cry when she started to meditate so the counselor directed her to focus on the sensation and feeling of the single breath. In particular, the counselor prompted her to notice the brief sense of relief during each breath, helped her remain in the present moment, becoming aware of her feelings and thoughts, and let go of the feelings. After practicing for about a month, the counselor then guided her into deeper meditative practices which let Huo Ma explore her traumatic memory while helping her return to the present moment if she needed a break. He also accompanied her to the sites that reminded her of her husband so that she can reenter those spaces with mindfulness. Through these practices, she was able to slowly heal.

### **Psychological Significance of Buddhist Meditation**

In western psychology, mindfulness-based practices aim to cultivate awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors on a moment-to-moment basis using a nonjudgmental, accepting, compassionate, and curious attitude (Possemato, Bergen-Cico, Treatman, Allen, Wade, & Pigeon, 2016). The main psychological understanding of mindfulness practices is the strengthening of self-awareness, attention control, emotion regulation, and self-regulation in order to reduce emotional distress such as depression and anxiety. However, Buddhist meditations have a very different understanding and practice of mindfulness and meditation. From a Mahayana tradition, meditation is a cultivation of calming (samatha) and insight (vipassana) in order to attain genuine wisdom and finally reach nirvana. The three main mental

qualities of meditation are mindfulness (focusing and being present), clear comprehension (being alert and mindful of all the experiences), and ardency (diligently perfecting the practice).

At the beginning of this process, Buddhist practitioners learn to raise awareness of their internal experiences, observe how mental activities arise, know their effects on thoughts, feelings, and body, and see how these experiences dissolve (W. Chu personal communication, April, 4, 2016; Goldstein, 2013). The initial phase of Buddhist meditation is similar to the western mindfulness practice but it extends the practice into carefully examining consequences of each mental activity, discerning the skillful and unskillful qualities of mind, and letting go of the unskillful qualities of mind. In other words, western mindfulness emphasizes a nonjudgmental approach to be a passive observer of experiences while Buddhist meditations require practitioners to actively discern and abandon unskillful qualities which lead to unpleasant experiences. Take anger as an example, western mindfulness-based intervention tend to increase practitioner's awareness of anger provoking thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions, be nonjudgmental of the experiences, and center attention to inhalation and exhalation until the experiences of anger dissolve. Buddhist meditation would start with this process but continue this process during meditation by exploring the nature of anger, replaying scenes of angry outburst with distance and clarity of calmness, and recollecting that suffering arises from anger and making commitment to change. Learning the differences between Buddhist and Western meditation can enrich the understanding and application of mindfulness-based interventions in counseling. Recent studies have shown the effectiveness of Buddhist meditation in reducing various psychological disturbances such as depression and aggressive behaviors (Prakhinkit, Suppakitiporn, Tanaka, & Suksom, 2014). MHPs who use western mindfulness-based practices in counseling can consider exploring Buddhist meditation in order to see if there are additional

meditative components to strengthen their practices. Learning this difference can also help MHPs refrain from the assumption that western mindfulness is equivalent to Buddhist meditation which can be a culturally insensitive assumption to some Buddhist clients.

Buddhist meditation is also a venue to contemplate Buddhist teachings such as viewing all experiences as mental fabrication, understanding impermanence of life, following the Eightfold path, practice of goodwill and compassion, and letting go of attachment. Among all these teachings, Buddhist ethics or precepts in mindfulness is highly important because there are two different forms of mindfulness—Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*) and Wrong Mindfulness (*miccha sati*) (Purser & Loy, 2013). Right Mindfulness encompasses wholesome intentions and mental characteristics that promote oneself and others to prosper and attain well-being (Purser & Loy, 2013; Rosen, 2015). Integrating ethical components into mindfulness practice is important for one's happiness since abstaining from committing any of the Ten Non-Virtues of Buddhism requires one to exercise a conscious lifestyle that enforces harmony with oneself and others (Neale, 2011). Without the consideration of Buddhist ethics, people can engage in Wrong Mindfulness by committing unethical actions mindfully, such as one of the Ten Non-Virtues (Purser & Loy, 2013). This conflicts with the Buddhist principle of non-harm, thus yielding bad karma and resulting in more suffering. Although non-Buddhist MHPs and clients may not follow Buddhist ethics, application of loving-kindness, compassion, goodwill, and appreciation to mindfulness-based practices may cultivate empathy and strengthen virtues, thereby reducing likelihood of unethical actions. MHPs can use affectionate meditation to guide clients to visualize their important ones, imagine the warmth and love radiating from client reaching out to them, and wishing them peaceful and healthy. Similarly, MHPs can use other positive qualities

such as forgiveness, hope, patience, or resilience in guided meditation to address the specific concerns of clients.

In addition to the approaches to meditation, Buddhist teachers of meditation usually have their own longstanding meditation practice, attend multiple retreats and training, and possess skillful qualities to teach and role model for students. MHPs who do not have such practice and training may encounter difficulties in helping clients using mindfulness interventions. In observance to the codes of ethics for different MHPs, we recommend MHPs to develop competency in mindfulness-based practices in order to ethically and professional apply such interventions.

### **Conclusion**

This article contributes to mental health professionals and counseling in several ways. For Buddhist MHPs working with Buddhist clients, MHPs may incorporate some of the Buddhist counseling methods into their therapeutic process. For example, certain practices and Buddhist concepts including the versatilities of meditation, radiating compassion to others, acceptance of impermanence, and certain Buddhist readings can be effective interventions in counseling. For non-Buddhist MHPs working with Buddhist clients, the Buddhist counseling components can help these MHPs increase understanding of clients' practices and beliefs. As Buddhism is the fourth largest religion in the world (Pew Research Center, 2012), the knowledge of these Buddhist counseling components prepare MHPs to enhance their multicultural sensitivity to Buddhism. For chaplains and other spiritual counselors, the psychological significance and applications of Buddhist counseling components may suggest new interventions or inspire creative ideas for pastoral care. Last but not least, many Buddhist experts describe Buddhism as a transformation for individuals because the practices can induce fundamental changes to reduce



suffering in one's life and the more one can alleviate suffering in oneself, the more one can reduce suffering in others. Besides devoting tremendous effort in alleviating suffering from others, MHPs can have the same compassion and commitment for themselves in order to diligently practice happiness. The positivity in MHPs can be a preventive measure for burnout, a resilient factor in distressful situations, and one of the most effective interventions for clients.

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