

Chapter 14

Buddhist Approaches to Counselling and Psychotherapy: Exploratory Discussions From Different Traditions

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ABSTRACT

Three authors from differing Buddhist backgrounds share their approaches to using Buddhism in psychotherapy. The authors argue that Buddhism itself is fundamentally a psychotherapy approach because it is essentially a prescription to end discontent and misery. This chapter provides basic points on how Buddhism can be used in counselling by discussing how different Buddhist traditions might approach counselling. This chapter also brings up reflections on how practice may differ according to experience in the fields of counselling and clinical psychology. Overall, the chapter is subdivided into six parts: (1) introduction; (2) basic tenets of Buddhism relevant to psychotherapy; (3) case study illustrations of applied Buddhism in counselling and psychotherapy; (4) discussion on reconciling differing Buddhist schools of thought in the practice of counselling and psychotherapy; (5) discussion on compatibility of Buddhist principles with applied Western philosophies and therapeutic approaches; and (6) suggestions of future directions given the current research literature patterns.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the application of Buddhist principles within the practice of counselling and psychotherapy. The three authors who contributed this chapter are mental health workers with different backgrounds and approaches to Buddhist practice as well as upbringing. The main angle of this paper is to discuss the applications of Buddhist principles in the helping professions of counselling and psychotherapy by exploring and discussing illustrated examples from each individual author's journey as mental health workers.

The chapter begins with a general introduction to the chapter coupled with personal introductions of the three authors as a primer for the later discussion of case studies using Buddhist approaches to counselling. These introductions aim to provide some familiarity to the reader concerning the authors' backgrounds to be able to relate better to the case studies being brought up in the middle of the chapter. This introduction also touches on how religious aspects of psychotherapy has the potential for a wider reach into the larger community, especially for lower socio-economic status groups who tend to have less access and exposure to professional mental health providers.

The introduction would then lead to a brief discussion of basic Buddhism that underlies the use of its principles within the practice of counselling and psychotherapy. Given the presence of both Theravada and Mahayana traditions in this chapter, Pali, and Sanskrit terms will be used to explain certain Buddhist concepts. A short background into the spiritual development triad (*Silā-Samādhi-Pañña* / Morality-Mind Cultivation-Wisdom) within Buddhism sets the stage for concepts discussed in this section. Main concepts to be introduced are the Four Noble Truths which includes the Eightfold Noble Path; the Five Precepts of lay Buddhist practice; the concept of the Four *Brahma Viharas* (Divine Dwellings), the concept of the Three Evils – *Lobha, Dosa, Moha* (Greed, Hatred and Delusion) and lastly, the concept of *Paticca Samupada* (Dependent Origination). These Buddhist concepts are central to the practice of Buddhism that are, in turn, applied directly in attitude, behavior and observation for the improvement of individual well-being through conduct, reflection and meditation practice, regardless of cultural traditions. The mechanisms of how these concepts help with gaining insight and wisdom for better well-being will be summarized.

The brief introduction into the tenets of Buddhism will be followed by a note on Buddhism in Malaysia, describing a short history and context to which this chapter can be better understood, especially with regards to the very diverse understanding and practice of Buddhism in the country (i.e. cultural, linguistic, historical and education level). References to articles of interest will be given so as to maintain the scope of this chapter without having to digress to other discussions on the development and practice of Buddhism in Malaysia.

Following from the description of Buddhist concepts are three case studies using Buddhist principles within counselling and psychotherapeutic practice by the three authors respectively. Given their diverse backgrounds and Buddhist practice, the authors will discuss their approaches from the Buddhist traditions of Mahayana, Vajrayana and the Theravada schools of thought. These cases that are discussed come from each authors' personal experiences and are based on multiple cases combined to mask any identifiable information to protect the identity of the clients.

After the case studies, the chapter compares Buddhist principles to similar concepts within Western philosophy such as Stoicism, and contemporary applied therapeutic practices such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Reality Therapy (RT) and Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).

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