

A Study on the Ethical Practices of Buddhist Counsellors

Ven. Gomila Gunalankara

Abstract

Buddhist Counselling and Psychotherapy (BCP) is an effectively used approach from ancient times which traced back to the date of the Lord Buddha. Words such as *Bhisakkho* and *Sallakatto* included in the *tipitaka* shows the counselling and psychotherapeutic work of the Buddha. BCP is defined as the application of Buddhist teachings and techniques in a psychological basis to help the people with problems in their lives to resolve them, and to have a healthy worldly life, to strive for a better next birth, and further to attain *Nibbāna*, the ultimate realization of the truth of the world. To help the clients to achieve and attain these goals, the Buddhist counsellor needs to practice counselling and psychotherapy under highly strict ethical principles. Counselling approaches and associations in the western psychology like ACA, APA and BACP have established code of ethics for their practitioners and they are bound to be controlled over it. That is an important point for the effectiveness of a professional humane service. As the BCP is a current trend and is still developing as a psychological service, there is no commonly agreed code of ethics in practice presently. Therefore, this study was done to analyze the code

of ethics of Buddhist Counsellors. The study was mainly based on textual studies and data were analyzed under the content analysis method. Analyzing the facts gathered from the *tipitaka* and the stories of Buddhist Counselling from ancient practice, it was probable to determine ethical principles needed in practicing the BCP. In concluding, the ethical principles of Buddhist Counsellors can be categorized basically under five main sections with sub sections. Establishing a code of ethics of Buddhist counsellors is a significant point to gain recognition in the scholarly world and for a standard practice.

Keywords: Counselling, Psychotherapy, Buddhist counsellors, Ethical principles

Introduction

Counselling is a professional service that helps individuals and groups to resolve problems in their life, and to have personal growth and psychological well-being. According to the definitions of Western Psychologists, "Counselling is the skilled and principled use of relationship to facilitate self-knowledge, emotional acceptance and growth and the optimal development of personal resources. The overall aim is to provide an opportunity to work towards living more satisfyingly and resourcefully. Counselling relationships will vary according to need but may be concerned with developmental issues, addressing and resolving specific problems, making decisions, coping with crisis, developing personal insights and knowledge, working through feelings of inner conflict or improving relationships with others. The counsellor's role is to facilitate the clients work in ways that respect the client's values, personal resources and capacity for self-determination." (Gladding, 2004; Jones, 2001)

BCP is an approach which traced back to the dates of the Lord Buddha, 06th century BC. It is today developing increasingly with introducing new techniques, models, methods through researches conducted by psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors and other scholars. Therefore, it is getting popular in the world today. Buddhist Counselling and Psychotherapy is defined as “the application of Buddhist teachings and techniques in a psychological basis to help the people with problems in their lives to resolve them, and to have healthy worldly life, strive for a better next birth, and further to attain *Nibbāna*, the ultimate realization of the truth of the world.” To help the clients to achieve and attain these goals, the Buddhist Counsellor needs to practice counselling and psychotherapy under highly strict ethical principles.

As a professional involving with human's problems and needs, the counsellor is supposed to come to an understanding and work on ethical principles that are important in a professional service. Also, such a code of ethics is vital in numerous ways to reduce possible issues, to maintain the trustworthiness of the counsellor client relationship, and to provide more effective service. Counselling associations such as ACA, APA, BACP and Counselling Approaches like Psychoanalysis have developed their own code of ethics for the standardization of their practice in the counselling setting.

The BCP as a professional service is yet to establish a well-developed and standardized code of ethics since this is a novel approach to the field of psychology. However, the individuals who practiced the Buddha's teachings and techniques for counselling and psychotherapeutic purposes from ancient times were controlled with highly strict moral and ethical principles. Therefore, The objective of this study is to determine ethical considerations in practicing BCP today.

Research problem

What are the ethical principles in Buddhist Counselling and Psychotherapy?

Objectives

The objectives of the research are;

- to explore the ethics that should be practiced by Buddhist counsellors.
- to identify the practical issues that underline with such ethical principles.

Methodology

This was a library research and mainly based on textual studies. Pali texts of Buddhist teachings in the *tipiṭaka*, documentary sources of Western Psychology and Counselling and electronic sources such as official websites were used as materials for data collection. The findings and results were analyzed under the content analysis method and relevant conclusions were presented.

Findings and discussion

ACA Code of Ethics

American Counselling Association (ACA) is considered the largest counselling association in the world, representing professional counsellors in various settings. The association was established in 1952 and provides leadership, resources, knowledge and principles of counselling for standard professional practice. ACA has introduced standardized code of ethics consisting nine sections that, specially, should be

followed by ACA members. The code of ethics addresses the following areas (ACA, 2014):

- Section A: The Counseling Relationship
- Section B: Confidentiality and Privacy
- Section C: Professional Responsibility
- Section D: Relationships with Other Professionals
- Section E: Evaluation, Assessment, and Interpretation
- Section F: Supervision, Training, and Teaching
- Section G: Research and Publication
- Section H: Distance Counseling, Technology, and Social Media
- Section I: Resolving Ethical Issues

Each section of the code of ethics includes explanatory details in sub sections on what counsellors should do and refrain from. For instance, under the Section A, it describes the relationship between counselor-client as professional and the counsellor should avoid situations that are probable of any other type of relationship like romantic or sexual affair.

APsaA Code of Ethics

American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA) is a professional association based on the psychotherapeutic approach of Sigmund Freud. The particular association has introduced a framework of 'Principles and Standards of Ethics for Psychoanalysts' to guide their members in professional conduct. It was initially published in 1975 and revised in 1983. 'APsaA Code of Ethics' includes mainly ten principles as follows (APsaA, 2018):

- I. Professional Competence
- II. Respect for Persons
- III. Mutuality and Informed Consent
- IV. Confidentiality
- V. Truthfulness
- VI. Avoidance of Exploitation
- VII. Scientific Responsibility
- VIII. Protection of the Public and the Profession
- IX. Social Responsibility
- X. Personal Integrity

All the members of the APsaA should agree and work on these principles as a condition of the association.

Buddhist Counsellor's Ethical Considerations

As a humane service, the Buddhist counsellor also needs to agree and work on a code of ethics that shows the standard of the profession. However, the Buddhist Counsellors today do not have such a standardized and commonly agreed ethical framework. But, when the historical background of BCP from which traced back to the dates of the Lord Buddha in the 06th century BC is considered, it is clearly shown that personalities who work in BCP followed highly appreciated ethical principles called *tisso sikkhā; sīla, samādhi (citta)* and *paññā* (Khuddakanikāya, Nettippakaranapāli). The Buddha has preached in the discourses, in numerous places in the *tipitaka*, on how a Buddhist one should practice morality and ethics. Therefore, based on such canonical sources, it is significant to distinguish an ethical framework for Buddhist Counsellors.

According to the canonical sources, the aims and goals of BCP are very broad. It ranges from the mental, physical and social well-being of this life, a great next life/lives until attaining *Nibbāna*, the cessation of suffering and terminating the *samsāric* journey. In order to guide the clients to reach these aims and goals, the Buddhist Counsellor has to follow distinctive and identical principles. Those ethical principles can be discussed in five main sections and sub sections as follows:

1. Competence and Suitability

Predominantly, the Buddhist counsellor should be a suitable one to the profession. It means the counsellor must firstly practice and cultivate relevant qualities in his/her life before helping others. It is mentioned in the Sullekha sutta in Majjhima Nikāya that as if a person who sank in dreadful mire cannot escape others in the same state, a person who is wrapped with problems, suffering and tangles would not be able to release others from such difficulties (Priyadarshana, 2016). Therefore, the counsellor should strive to escape him/herself first, and then help others too. It is mentioned in the Dhammapada;

“Attānamewa paṭhamam – patirūpe nivesaye
athaññamanusāseyya – na kilisseyya pandito”
(Dhammapada, verse 128)

According to this verse, the wise person should first practice himself the teaching of the Buddha as a model and then will be suitable to guide others. The Buddhist counsellor needs to be a person who practices the *Dhamma*.

2. Moral goodness and Trustworthiness

Well established in the moral goodness is a very important ethical principle in the BCP, hence it makes stronger the trustworthiness of the counsellor. Under this section, there are five main principles that the counsellor follows.

- 2.1. **Abstain from harming** – Actions and words such as taking the life of other beings including humans and animals, deeds that are harmful to other beings, and insulting others etc. are not appreciated and Buddhist Counsellor must avoid them. Further, all beings that are in suffering, problems and difficulties, should be treated with compassion.
- 2.2. **Abstain from despoiling** – The Buddhist counsellor should practice not to take away anything that was not given, not to steal, and not to earn by force or cheating. S/he should respect the human's right to have properties and protect them.
- 2.3. **Abstain from misconducted or any sexual relationship** – The Buddhist counsellor must avoid any type of sexual relationship with clients through action, words and even through the mind. If the counsellor is a lay person, she/he must control his emotions and refrain from sexual misconduct or infidelity in his/her personal life also. As such, The counsellor needs to suppress greed, lust and romantic intentions and interactions when practicing counselling and psychotherapy and must avoid having such possible situations.
- 2.4. **Abstain from lying and discipline in speech** – The Buddhist Counsellor should be a person with truthful words. He is expected to refrain from malicious,

slender and waffle words, so that it is significant for the trustworthiness of the words of the counsellor. He is better to be sensitive in words and should use meaningful, effective, honest and straight words. But, it is acceptable to use imagined stories or tales on an occasion when the client can have benefit through it. At the same time, the counsellor has to show the correct situation without cheating clients with exaggerations.

2.5. Abstain from intoxicants - The Buddhist counsellor must refrain from taking any type of intoxicants, including alcohol and smoking. It is a primary factor to become a conscious and mindful person.

3. No greed in worldly gains

The Buddhist counsellor should know the limitations of profits from clients. Specially, she/he should not be greedy for profits and must avoid despoiling clients. From ancient times, the Buddhist counselling was a non-profitable humane service. Especially, The Buddha advised the *Bhikkhu*, “the path that leads to worldly gain is one, and the path that leads to the *Nibbāna* is another; understanding this, the *Bhikkhu*, the disciple of the Buddha, should not rejoice in worldly favours, but cultivate detachment” (Dhammapada, verse 75). But, today, it is acceptable to get a fair charge for the service, if the counsellor wishes.

4. Adequate knowledge, training and skillful practice

The Buddhist Counsellor should acquire sufficient knowledge on the theoretical base and training on the techniques of the Buddhist counselling, studying the canonical discourses and techniques of the Buddha. Further, the

counselling practitioners are responsible for updating their knowledge and skills through scientific researches as well. Sangīti Sutta in *Dīghanikāya* annotates seven qualities related to the skillful practice, namely, *Dhammaññu*, *Atthaññu*, *Attaññu*, *Mattaññu*, *Kālaññu*, *Parisaññu*, *Puggalaññu*. *Dhammaññu* means having the perfect knowledge of *Damma*, the teaching of the Buddha and refers to know the accuracy of the meaning of those teachings.

5. Confidentiality

Confidentiality and Privacy is an obligatory ethical principle in the counselling relationship. The Buddhist counselling practitioner is also responsible for the particular principle. The Buddha preached the King Kosala that “trustworthiness is the best relationship, the best kinsmen” (Dhammapada, Verse 204). This is the foundation of counsellor client relationship in the counselling process. According to the *tipiṭak*, the Buddha has emphasized in number of places about that fact. Especially, it is mentioned as a great quality that strengthens the relationship between friends (*Kalyānamitta*); protecting the secrets of the friend (*sigalasutta*, *Dīghanikāya*).

Conclusions

Counselling approaches and associations in the western psychology have established code of ethics for their practitioners and they are bound to be controlled over it. That is an important point for the effectiveness of a professional humane service. As the Buddhist approach to counselling and psychotherapy is a new trend in the field of psychology and is still developing, there is no commonly accepted code of ethics in practice. But, examining the Buddhist teachings and

practice from ancient times, it is possible to determine ethical principles needed in the BCP practice. They can be categorized basically under five sections; 1. competence and suitability, 2. moral goodness and trustworthiness, 3. no greed in worldly gains, 4. adequate knowledge, training and skillful practice and 5. Confidentiality, and further explanations are also included. Establishing ethical principles of Buddhist counsellors is a significant point to gain recognition in the scholarly world.

References

- American Counseling Association (ACA). (2014). *Code of Ethics*. Extracted on 10/10/2018 from <https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf>
- American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA). *Principles and Standards of Ethics for Psychoanalysts*. Extracted on 10/10/2018 from <http://www.apsa.org/code-of-ethics>
- American Psychological Association (APA). *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*. Extracted on 10/10/2018 from <https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/>
- Dighanikāya III - Sangiti Sutta*. (printed in 2006). Buddha jayanti Tripitaka Granthamala, Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre.
- Gladding, S.T. (2004). *Counseling: A Comprehensive Profession* (5th edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall. extracted from <http://www.pearson.ch/1471/9780132941778/Counseling>
- Jones, N. R., (2001), *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Theory* (3rd ed.), New York: Continuum Publishers.
- The Dhammapada*. Narada. (Trans.). (1993). Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation.
- Khuddakanikāya, Nettippakaranapāl*. (printed in 2006). Buddhajayanthi tripitaka Granthamala, Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre.
- Priyadarshana, P.R.W. (2016). *Upadeshana Acharadharmā ha Prarambhaka Kusalata (Ethics and Primary Skills in Counselling)*. Niwanmaga 47 Volume. (Edit.). H.M. Gunatilake. Colombo: Buddhist Association of Department of Government Printing Sri Lanka.