# Early Buddhist Teachings

*A Foundation for Counseling*

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# Preface

*Ye keci osadhā loke vijjanti vividhā bahū,*
*dhammosadhasamaṁ natthi; etaṁ pivatha bhikkhavo.*

(*Anumānapañho*, *Milindapañha*)

"Of the many kinds of medicines in the world, none is greater when compared to the medicine of the Dhamma. Drink this, O monks."

This book presents our humble interpretations of Early Buddhist Teachings in the form of a theoretical framework for Buddhist counseling. In so doing, our ultimate aim is to invite scholars, mental health professionals, students, and other interested individuals to explore and embody the wise and compassionate teachings of the Buddha, leading to the use of skillful means for alleviating suffering in the world.

We thank you for opening this book and walking this path with us. Together, let us navigate the teachings and insights within as we seek to cultivate wisdom and compassion in ourselves and others.

*In the shadows of our minds*,
*Where doubts and fears reside*,
*The ancient teachings of the Buddha*,
*Are a beacon of light to guide*.
*Buddhist counseling is a means*,
*To spread this light in modern times*,
*To expose the Dhamma's wisdom*,
*To those who seek to find*.

# 1

# Introduction

Early Buddhist teachings, consisting of the fundamental insights and theories revealed by the historical Buddha as documented in the Pāli *Nikāya*s, Chinese *Āgama*s, and *Gandhāran* texts, provide the key principles and practices required in attaining liberation from suffering. This wisdom from more than 2,500 years ago has been adapted over the centuries in numerous ways, one recent form being the secularization and inclusion of Buddhist mindfulness into psychological techniques for counseling purposes. Regardless of the success and popularity of mindfulness, however, there have been increasing criticisms and doubts expressed regarding the secularization of mindfulness in particular and Buddhism in general. In response, a number of scholars and practitioners in psychology and Buddhism started to examine whether Buddhism can work alone as a counseling method to alleviate suffering in the contemporary world, thereby giving rise to new Buddhist-teaching based interventions, such as the Awareness Training Program (Wu et al. 2019) and Cognitively-Based Compassion Training (Negi et al. 2014). However, even these interventions did not address the essence of an archetypal counseling model: a valid and comprehensive theoretical orientation with which to understand different presenting problems and intervene in a specialized and individual manner for a given client and their particular situation. The aim of this book therefore is to integrate Early Buddhist teachings into the development of a theoretical counseling orientation, with the present introductory chapter providing the reader with an overview of the entire therapeutic journey by introducing the background, methodology, and summary of all the chapters of the text.

## 1.1 Background and Rationale of the Study

In recent times, professional psychology has experienced heated controversy over secularized Buddhist-derived interventions, especially mindfulness-based ones (Lee et al., 2017, 113). Buddhist-derived interventions are an attempt to

extract certain components of Buddhist-inspired theories and practices in order to apply them to a secular mental health treatment model. Noteworthy progress has been made in the development of evidence-based treatments that incorporate Buddhist concepts and practices—including mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT)—for various psychological disorders (Lee et al. 2017, 113–15). Neurological, quantitative, and qualitative research findings have also provided promising evidence showing the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions for a variety of mental health disturbances (e.g. Fix and Fix 2013; Luders, Cherbuin, and Gaser 2016). However, critics of these partial applications of Buddhist practice have noted several challenges in doing so: the danger of dissociating mindfulness practice from the Buddhist ethical framework (Harrington and Dunne 2015, 621), the oversimplification of original Buddhist practice (Sun 2014, 395–96), the possibility of causing harm to clients through improper guidance and practice (Shonin, Van Gordon, and Griffiths 2013, 131), and the dilution of treatment effects (Neale 2011, 2–3). For example, Dobkin, Irving, and Amar (2012, 46) conducted a literature review on MBSR, the most common secular mindfulness intervention, and demonstrated such possible adverse effects as increased anxiety, depressed mood, and perceived stress after the MBSR program. These voices at each pole of the discussion have created significant ambiguity in the application of Buddhism to mental health treatments.

Perhaps one reason for the ambiguity is the question of how much of the Buddhist teachings a contemporary intervention model should adopt. Regardless of acceptance and integration of Buddhist concepts and practices into different treatment approaches, most of the contemporary psychotherapy models, such as MBCT, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and DBT, maintain an approach which selectively extracts relevant components of Buddhism instead of using all Buddhist tenets as the foundation for treatment. Van Gordon and Shonin (2013) termed such interventions as mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), which are secularized treatment approaches that have emerged from different Buddhist schools, although the integration of key Buddhist doctrines is limited (2–3). In addition to Edo Shonin and William Van Gordon, a number of scholars in psychology and Buddhism, such as Alan Wallace, Andreas Schmidt, Bhikkhu Bodhi, and Ron Purser have participated in an ongoing dialogue about the MBIs and their relationship to Buddhist teachings, as well as the potentiality to develop intervention models primarily based on those teachings.

Ron Purser was one of the first researchers to harshly criticize the oversimplification and overuse of mindfulness that began with the emergence of MBSR. Using the catchy term "McMindfulness," Purser criticized the secularization of mindfulness into a business product which has been decontextualized from the

original Buddhist teachings (Purser and Loy 2013, 14). The article pinpointed the difference between Right Mindfulness and wrong mindfulness by assessing whether the practice of mindfulness encompasses the quality of awareness characterized by wholesome intentions and positive mental qualities leading to optimal wellness for self and others. Such a conscious consideration contrasts with the McMindfulness applications that are mainly marketable projects without ethical concern, such as fostering one-pointedness concentration to support the violent work of terrorists or assassins. The article also implied that certain therapies could be considered part of the McMindfulness approach, thereby criticizing certain mindfulness-based interventions. Such arguments are some of the most blatant criticisms of the secularization of mindfulness to date. Furthermore, in his book *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality*, Purser (2019) shared his observation that mindfulness had been commodified, leading to a capitalization of spirituality in the world (9–13). He even made references to leading global corporates, such as Google's mindfulness program known as "Search Inside Yourself" (Purser 2019, 96), as well as the use of mindfulness by the military establishment (Purser 2019, 150) to illustrate the application of mindfulness for financial, political, or other inappropriate reasons. In addition, in a direct attack on MBSR, Purser wrote the following criticism of Jon Kabat-Zinn (Purser 2019, 177):

> Calling this (mindfulness) a theory of social change, as Kabat-Zinn does, is not only misleading, it encourages people to bury their heads in the sand.

In response, Purser proposed the solution of teaching mindfulness within the Buddhist context, thereby disillusioning people with the fairy tale of secular mindfulness and moving towards the realization of the emptiness of self (Purser 2019, 183–89). In summary, Purser's viewpoint is that mindfulness should not be treated as a solitary cure-it-all technique; rather, it was time to go beyond McMindfulness by returning to the original Buddhist teachings.

As one of the most prolific scholars in evaluating MBIs, Edo Shonin and his team criticized many applications of mindfulness as misappropriations of Buddhist teaching, which can easily misguide and confuse practitioners (Van Gordon and Shonin 2020, 1). Shonin, originally trained as a Buddhist monk as well as a chartered psychologist in the UK, developed meditation awareness training (MAT), which claims to "incorporate practices that would be traditionally followed by meditation practitioners" (Shonin, Van Gordon, and Griffiths 2013, 852–53). As a group-based intervention consisting of guided meditation, workshops, seminars, and one-on-one support sessions, MAT integrates key Buddhist concepts such as impermanence, emptiness, and compassion as part of its treatment (Shonin, Van Gordon, and Griffiths 2013, 853). Such efforts move beyond

# 8

# Early Buddhist Teachings as a Complete Model of Theoretical Orientation

The penultimate chapter of this book aims to demonstrate an application of the complete theoretical orientation of our Buddhist-inspired model of counseling. This chapter briefly summarizes the theory-informed model of Buddhist teaching and psychology and uses a case vignette to illustrate how it might be employed in practice.

## 8.1 The Complete Model

Table 8.1 briefly summarizes the five components of a theoretical orientation for Buddhist counseling discussed in this book together with suggested applications:

To further illustrate the practicality of the proposed theoretical orientation for Buddhist counseling, this chapter will focus on a hypothetical case vignette woven together using actual information from various clients. The process of counseling will follow a common three-step model consisting of assessment, conceptualization, and intervention, and this process will integrate the components of the theoretical orientation. First, let us understand the client's background.

Anson Lau (pseudonym) is a 49-year-old Chinese man, born and raised in Hong Kong. He completed secondary school in Hong Kong and worked as a bank teller for a few years. Afterwards, his family supported his studies and he earned a bachelor's degree in fine art at an Australian university. He returned to Hong Kong after completing his degree and has been working as a graphic designer since then. Anson identifies himself as an atheist, but he is open to Buddhist teachings. He was self-referred to the Buddhist counseling center because he felt depressed, was lost without a direction in life, found work meaningless, and had relationship problems with his girlfriend.

Upon meeting Anson in the first session, I was struck by his handsome appearance and youthful-looking face that belied his chronological age. Even so, he was also clearly lacking in energy, had difficulty concentrating, and looked

**Table 8.1: The Proposed Theoretical Framework for a Buddhist-Inspired Counseling Model**

| Dimension | Integration of Buddhism | Proposed Applications |
|---|---|---|
| **Basic Philosophy** | Dependent co-arising is the key principle in understanding human nature and the world. | Dependent co-arising can be transformed into practical assessment tools and counseling techniques to raise clients' awareness of the multiple causes and conditions that sustain the experience of suffering. |
| **Central Theoretical Constructs of Human Nature and Human Motivation** | Under the law of dependent co-arising, the self does not possess an inherently existing nature. Driven by craving and ignorance, the human mind clings on to the notion of self through subjective configurations, which is the core cause of suffering. Thus, attaining the realization of non-self can cause suffering to cease. | Based on the teaching of non-self, the overarching treatment goal for Buddhist counseling is the realization of non-self, or the liberation from clinging to the notion of self. |
| **Theory of Human Development** | Mundane human growth, maturation, and development are not the primary concerns of Buddhism; rather, it is liberation from suffering. With this as an end goal, the Buddhist understanding of human development can be considered as a process of mind cultivation towards non-self. | To gauge a client's advancement in mental cultivation, use evaluation scales to measure particular domains and attainments. |

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# EARLY BUDDHIST TEACHINGS

## *A Foundation for Counseling*

"This book draws on the Pāli canon to demonstrate the practical application of early Buddhist teachings in counseling and psychotherapy. It integrates Buddhist principles with Western psychological counseling, addressing a notable gap in contemporary counseling approaches and offering a valuable interdisciplinary resource."

—**Henry C.H. Shiu**, The University of Toronto

"This seminal work masterfully bridges the timeless wisdom of the Buddha with the pressing needs of modern mental health care. The book's dialogue with Western psychology enriches therapeutic practice and honors the cultural roots of millions connected to Buddhism. A vital resource for scholars and practitioners seeking to integrate authentic Dharma principles into healing. Truly, a significant step toward establishing Buddhist counseling as a credible and recognized treatment model for alleviating suffering in today's fragmented world."

—**Ven. Sik Hin Hung**, The University of Hong Kong

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Mindfulness and meditation, practices that are rooted in Buddhism, have become mainstream treatments in counseling and psychotherapy that provide evidence of successful outcomes among secular clients. However, for clients from non-Western backgrounds, dissociating mindfulness practice from the core Buddhist teachings can dilute the transformative power of these practices, causing cultural confusion and lowering the effectiveness of treatment.

This book is the first to present Early Buddhist Teachings as a theoretical orientation for the millions of individuals affiliated with Buddhism to create a culturally congruent counseling model. Using original sources in Pāli, it explores key Buddhist concepts such as dependent co-arising, non-self, impermanence, and many others. The authors then compare them with Western psychological concepts, furthering ongoing dialogue between Buddhism and psychotherapy and fostering powerful integrations.

This volume also demonstrates how to use the Buddhist counseling model through practical assessment scales, sample dialogues, and detailed descriptions of interventions designed for mental health professionals. It is a valuable resource for mental health professionals, scholars, and psychology students seeking to explore the intersection of Buddhism and counseling psychology.

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