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How is Buddhism Relevant to Career Counselling in an International High School in Hong Kong? A Counsellor's Reflection

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Abstract

This paper reflects upon the relevance of Buddhism to career guidance and counselling by discussing a program implemented at an international school in Hong Kong. The authors provide an analysis of the pertinent literature related to relevant concepts within Buddhism. This topic has not yet been adequately researched and, therefore, the paper helps to fill a gap in our awareness of how Buddhism or any other religion can contribute to career counselling in high schools.

[77 words]

Keywords Buddhism. Career guidance. Counselling. International schools. Hong Kong

Introduction

Almost all religions have a set of beliefs and practices that are relevant, both directly and indirectly, to the lives, behaviours and careers of its followers. Often these beliefs and practices share many characteristics with basic counselling principles used to help guide individuals in their behaviour and the choices they make in life. Buddhism is one such religion, and it is pertinent to explore how principles and concepts underpinning Buddhism might contribute to general counselling, and particularly to career counselling in schools. This paper reflects upon this issue by focusing on a program at an international school in Hong Kong. Two areas are considered: the application of Buddhism to general counselling; and the links between Buddhism and career counselling. A case study approach has been adopted because this enables a close examination of a situation and can provide unique insights into a focus issue (Yin, 1994).

It is necessary first to give some background information on the case school, and an overview of its counselling program.

Background

Established in 2002, School A is a private, non-profit international school providing continuous education for students aged 3 to 18. There are about 800 students enrolled in the 2013-2014 academic year. The student body includes seven nationalities, with the majority of students being of Chinese ethnic origin. The school has no religious affiliation.

The school prepares students for the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) in Years 10 and 11, followed by the International Baccalaureate (IB) in Years 12 and 13. School A graduated its first cohort of IB

Diploma students in 2009, and has so far attained an almost 100% university placement. University counselling is compulsory for all IB students.

Comprehensive school counselling program

The counselling program at School A is intended to help students adjust to their changing needs while progressing through adolescence into young adulthood. The program covers three key areas: personal counselling, academic support, and education planning. The latter includes career education and pre-university counseling. Three websites are accessible to students, teachers, and parents via an Intranet – personal counselling, Personal, Social, Health Education (PSHE), and university counselling. There is a deliberate interconnectedness among these guidance and counseling areas.

PSHE (an established component in the National Curriculum in the UK, and adopted in some international schools) is strategically linked to career guidance and counselling. A large part of career education in the school is integrated into the PSHE program for Year 7 to Year 11 students, and the content is developmentally matched to this age range (xx – xx). In Years 12 and 13, pre-university counselling is considered a preparation for IB students to help them make informed decisions for their futures. The PSHE program is planned and coordinated by the school counsellor, delivered by homeroom teachers, and at times also involves invited speakers.

Counselling approach

School counsellors must address the diverse needs of a broad base of clients (students, parents and teachers) and must tackle a wide range of counselling areas (personal, social, academic). It is necessary, therefore, to turn to a variety of sources to find the right approach and the best technique to apply in a given situation. Sharf (2002) has noted that diversity among individuals and their various needs can best be responded to

by eclecticism. This eclectic approach gives the counsellor flexibility to draw on a range of established theories and strategies. This fits well with the non-dogmatic, non-prescriptive, and supportive nature of Buddhism.

What can Buddhism contribute? A brief literature review

Conceptual aspects

The pragmatic ethic of Buddhism provides a framework for counseling those who are afflicted by day-to-day problems of living, such as grief, disappointment, anger, fear and jealousy. The Buddha taught that all people have duties, rights, social and personal obligations, and should lead a life conducive to the well-being and life happiness of themselves *and others*. In terms of helping others, for example, Buddhist monks are considered able to take a detached and objective view of issues and problems, and (like school counsellors) are often turned to for advice and support. It has been noted already that there is a tradition of providing informal counselling and support in Buddhist communities (Srichannil & Prior, 2013).

Relevant studies in the past that link perspectives within Buddhism to counseling are mostly related to therapeutic practices. A review of theory and practice by Silva (1990) suggests that the *Suttas* (sermons of Buddha) refer to many specific strategies for behavioral change; and certain Buddhist techniques foreshadowed many cognitive and behavioral techniques that have been developed in recent decades in Western psychology and psychiatry (Silva, 1990). Silva's paper highlights several key Theravada Buddhist psychological concepts, and shows that the fundamental aspect of Buddhism is to deal with the human predicament. The aim of both secular and Buddhist counselling is to help people overcome their problems.

In a more recent paper linking counselling to a Buddhist perspective, Marma (2012) pointed out that there are different definitions of ‘counseling’, and in *Pali* (a Middle Indo-Aryan language) the equivalent terms can be *upadesa*, *anus sana*, *mantan* , *ov da*, which can also mean ‘giving instruction’. ‘Instruction’ in a Buddhist context here can be thought of as giving sound advice or counsel to others.

The ancient practice of ‘mindfulness’ (an essential element of Buddhist practice) has already blended with modern science to help individuals cope with living in the modern world. For example, since the 1970s in the West, ‘mindfulness-based cognitive therapies’ have been developed to help alleviate conditions such as stress, anxiety and depression) (Felder, Dimidjian, & Segal, 2012). These therapies aim to help an individual replace maladaptive emotional reactions by adopting more accepting and non-judgmental attitudes through counselling and meditational practices (reference?).

It is also noted that the qualities of genuineness, non-judgmental acceptance, and empathy are common to both Buddhism and to Person-centered Therapy developed by Rogers (1951). The psychotherapist O’Donoghue (2002) has discussed the application of Buddhist principles in his work in providing support and objective advice to clients, and using behavioral and cognitive strategies.

Murgatroyd (2003), a counsellor, proposed a link between Erikson's (1950) developmental stages and Buddhist spiritual needs. Murgatroyd also describes the Buddhist concept of mental health and its relationship to counseling and Western developmental theory. Concepts such as the nature of the mind, the impermanent nature of life, and the connectedness and unity of all things are discussed.

Buddhism and career counseling: Contextual aspects

There is a common misconception that practicing Buddhism means that an individual must withdraw from ‘normal’ life and work, and instead dedicate time to

study and religion. Rahula (1959), however, emphasized that Buddhism following the Noble Eightfold Path is simply a code of behaviour that can be practised by anyone while "...living among your fellow beings, helping them and being of service to them" (Rahula, 1959, p. 77). Buddha taught that in pursuing any chosen profession one should be skilled, efficient, earnest, and energetic (*utthana-sampada*: meaning accomplishment of persistent effort) (reference?). It is a way of life to be followed, practiced, and developed by each individual; it is not only about belief, prayers, worship, and ceremony. Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) shows that the teachings of the Buddha are accessible and applicable to our daily lives; and one can learn to live each moment mindfully, without having to stop pursuing a career or relationships. Buddhism puts great emphasis on the development of a moral and spiritual character for a happy, peaceful, and contented society.

The Noble Eightfold Path is regarded as the route that can lead to cessation of suffering, greed, hatred and delusion, and can result in self-awakening. It aims to promote and perfect the three essentials of Buddhist training and discipline. These aims are (reference?): ethical conduct (*Sila*), mental discipline (*Samadhi*), and wisdom (*Panna*). Ethical conduct includes right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Mental discipline includes right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Wisdom embodies right thought and right understanding. In the Buddhist sense here, the word 'right' as used above conveys the meaning of 'ideal' or 'wise'.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1999), particularly known for his devotion to right mindfulness, noted that it is the practice of mindfulness that unites the Buddha's doctrines into a comprehensive, interconnected path. Thich originated the concept of 'Engaged Buddhism', to help relieve the world's suffering through coexistence with other societies, races and religions. When Right Mindfulness is present, he wrote, "the

Four Noble Truths and the other seven elements of the Eightfold Path are also present."
(Thich Nhat Hanh, 1999, p.59)

Master Sheng Yen (1999) gave his views on career planning from a Buddhist perspective, suggesting that planning for 'life' should actually extend *beyond* the period between birth and death. Plans for the 'mortal' segment on earth must begin with the planning of one's manner of day-to-day living. Gradually an inner spirituality will emerge, reflecting one's developing character and moral qualities. These external and internal developments are mutually dependent. Master Sheng Yen stressed the importance of having a sense of direction and solid grounding.

Empirical research: Buddhism applied to career counseling

Some evidence of the contributions that Buddhism can make to counselling is to be found in a paper dealing with counselling in Thailand (Tuicomepee, Romano, & Pokaeo, 2012). The authors covered historical and current accounts of the counseling profession, including the influences of Buddhism on counselor training and practices. The authors showed how Buddhist teachings, and other Eastern philosophies, complement Western theories such as humanistic and cognitive behavioral counseling. Buddhist psychological notions, such as *Tanha* (craving or desire), and *Dukka* (dissatisfaction), have been introduced as topics by some Thai universities for years. The Noble Eightfold Path is considered the way to enhance personal growth and development and have been blended into counselor training and practices. Although there is no strong professional counseling infrastructure in Thailand, the authors believe that the situation could be improved if counseling was integrated with religious philosophies, teachings and practices that are deeply embedded throughout that country.

A view from Sri Lanka examined the role of Buddhism in highly skilled women workers' careers (Weerahannadige & Cohen, 2013). While Buddhism helped women's

career development by giving them strength to cope with difficult situations, it also seemed to limit their career advancement to some extent. The authors pointed out that Max Weber (Weber, 1916-17; Weber et al., 2000) who was among the first scholars to look at Buddhism in the context of work, argued that Buddhism is inconsistent with capitalist development, and that in pursuing Nirvana, the concept of Karma led Buddhists to accept their fate and not to seek changes. This prevents the social interactions needed for economic development. On the other hand, some scholars argue that reaching Nirvana is not the sole purpose of people living in Buddhist societies because they have other aspirations and thus are not all detached from material desires (Obeyesekere, 1963).

Spirituality is a core element in Buddhism as it obviously is in many religions. Dobmeier (2011) regards 'religion' as a set of shared beliefs and practices of a group, whereas 'spirituality' is an individual's search for meaning. In reference to counseling in schools it is relevant to note that while some authorities recommend incorporating 'spirituality' as a resource for young people, many school counselors remain hesitant to do so. In a school context, Dobmeier wrote about the need to build character, competencies, and spirituality. Three states are required to achieve this, and these states are relevant to this case study. They are: *a positive view of the future*, (identifying goals and hopes); *purpose* (work, meaning, citizenship); and *service to others*.

A theory of spirituality and career development was proposed by Bloch (2004) to show the connectedness (or 'nested inseparability') that encompasses all systems and all living beings. A career can only be based on such connectedness; and spirituality in work reflects unity as expressed in religions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism. Bloch (2004) used two Buddhist stories to illustrate issues in career counseling from the students' perspective. The first issue is concerned with changes that students encounter, such as the transition from high school to college, or college to employment.

The second is about how to remain connected during this change, such as leaving a high school that one is familiar with and needing to adapt to a new environment (university or employment). A school counsellor's role is to help students understand connectedness in the life-span, and accept and adjust to all changes that will occur, without losing one's spirituality.

Stloukd and Wickman, (2011) have pointed out that the relationship between education and religion has followed a varied course throughout U.S. history. The importance of spirituality in the field of counselling, including school counselling, has been highlighted by a special issue of the journal *Professional School Counseling* (Bloch, 2004) devoted entirely to spirituality and school counselling. The authors examined the role of spirituality and religion in schools in the 21st century. They stressed that professional school counsellors must be careful not to impose their own beliefs on those they serve.

It is important that school counsellors with particular spiritual or religious beliefs conduct their counselling roles in ways that demonstrate their trustworthiness. Educators must have the integrity to honor the trust given by parents, and not to abuse their position (Stloukd & Wickman, 2011).

Removing the stigma related to spirituality and religion as topics in school counseling means that counselors must follow ethical guidelines, to avoid promoting their own biases and a political agenda. Sink (2004) also discussed the professional recognition of importance of spirituality to the individual as a way to maintain physical and mental health.

Analysis and Discussion

At this point it is appropriate to relate the issues summarized above to the content and delivery of the counselling program at School A. Due to the diverse nature of the school population there, the program has to address a wide variety of issues, problems and predicaments that typically face students. The school counsellor found that the best way to respond to such diversity was through a flexible and eclectic approach that draws on a number of theoretical orientations and practical strategies (Sharf, 2002). Eclecticism is in accordance with the spirit of Buddhism that discourages dogmatic acceptance of certain theories and claims. The approach adopted allows the school counsellor to build what is regarded as a personalized yet professional system.

A description of career counseling provided by Bloch (2004) helps make the relevance and application of Buddhism to career counselling clearer. Bloch observes that school counsellors witness the multitude of changes as students move through puberty, and must provide help to prepare them for the journey of their lives. The program at School A is precisely designed to work with students on their journeys, by providing personal counseling and academic support for their immediate needs, and career guidance and counselling as they reach the upper grade levels. PSHE, as a guidance program, links these two stages to help students prepare for their changing needs while progressing through adolescence into young adulthood.

Bloch (2004) suggests that perhaps the most important knowledge that school counselors can pass on is how to accept and utilize change, and how to understand and rely upon the connectedness of life to retain balance. Murgatroyd (2003) also addressed the connectedness of all things. Through the concept of “Dependent Origination” (*Pratitya-samutpada*) Buddhists teach that all life is interrelated, that nothing exists in isolation. Students need to understand that a career can only exist as part of the journey through life. Counsellors can help a teenager envision the adult he or she aspires to become in the future. The spiritual (not necessarily religious) aspect of career

counseling helps students see structure and connectedness in this otherwise random-seeming world. Buddhism is a way of life that can be practiced by individuals, to develop the mind, transform views, and improve behavior.

The framework adopted in School A was conceived by the school counsellor, with students' needs and interests in mind. It is not intended to promote any specific religious beliefs. The case school does not force any *direct* application of the concept of following the Noble Eightfold Path, rather the school counselor works closely with teachers, students and parents to help ensure that students of different abilities build essential life skills. The competencies of each individual are taken into account, together with their interests, values, and abilities. From this base, a personalized approach can be taken to guide students in their individual development plans. The expected outcome of the program is (as Dobmeier, 2011, recommended) for students to gain a positive and hopeful view of the future, identify their goals, establish a purpose in life, and a wish to serve others in the community. These are attributes, of course, that correspond with the ideals of 'ethical conduct', 'mental discipline', and 'wisdom' as the three guiding principles of the Noble Eightfold Path. In School A the application of Buddhist principles is therefore implicit, rather than explicit or overt.

There is no single model of practice suitable to all schools and for all purposes. These findings here indicate that Buddhist concepts can be applied in the career guidance and counselling program in School A in a careful and critical manner. These concepts could also be applicable in other schools.

Concluding Comments

This paper examined the relevance of Buddhism to the career guidance and counselling program within the comprehensive school counselling program

implemented in School A, where its school counsellor aims to ensure students a fulfilling education could help them make informed decisions in the future.

Buddhism embraces the notion of a productive and healthy life, psychological well-being, and the practice of mindfulness. These qualities can help students cope with modern world living, and help them prepare for their futures. The Noble Eightfold Path can be considered a way to enhance personal growth and development, and has already been blended into counsellor training and practices in Thailand. Perhaps the concepts involved should also be adopted by Hong Kong within its counselling training programs (Cheng & Tse, 2013). This may help ease mental health professionals' long-standing avoidance of spirituality when designing interventions and treatments (Tuicomepee, Romano & Pokaeo, 2012). As Dobmeier (2011) pointed out, it is important to discuss the nature of spirituality as distinct from religion, and its potential to empower children for health and well-being.

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