

## Why we suffer by Piya Tan

In all my 40 years of Buddhist counselling, I notice that all my counselees come to me saying that they are suffering some kind of emotional pain. The Buddhist dynamics of counselling or mind-healing is simple, compassionate and effective. Let me briefly talk about how and why Buddhist counseling works.

First, have the client define what the pain really is about and not to make it bigger than what it really is. (Never tell the client “It’s all right!” If so, he would not come for counselling!) The client will be telling me a lot about himself or herself, some relevant, some not so relevant. The idea is to look for signs and patterns in the forest of words for the tree of truth. We work together to identify the real or main issue.

Second, help the client discover the causes of his pain, which means he needs to examine some deeper, even unconscious, aspects of his life. The purpose is to bring the client into a mindful awareness and acceptance of these causes as they are. We can prepare and protect ourselves better when we know and see the “enemy.”

It is also at this stage, the client is taught the Buddhist teachings of “non-ownership of pain” (that is, not clinging on to the victim mentality, as stated in Dh 3-4), and of “dealing with the problem, not person” (as taught in the Arana,vibhanga Sutta, M 139).

Third, I would facilitate the client to work out various alternatives or possibilities of solutions. At this point, knowing the issues and client better, I will be able to clarify why certain strategies would work better than others.

This is when I would teach the client some lovingkindness, which essentially is unconditional self-acceptance of oneself and of others, of forgiving, of opening the doors of the heart. In some cases, the problem is powerfully rooted in a sense of self-guilt; so, he is now able to free himself from all notions of sin, lack of self-worth and fear.

In the fourth and last stage, the client is briefed, by way of summary and reinforcement, the roots of the issue, its manifestations, the client’s helpless reactions to such stimuli, and most importantly, how now to wisely work with them.

It is at this point, too, the client can be given the teaching of the “present moment.” A simple definition of “problem” is something about the past or future that we feel powerless over. The client is taught how to spend more time, if not all the time, in the present moment, where true reality is. And to empower himself to live and enjoy the present moment.

Buddhism has many tools to help us live the present moment effectively, happily and creatively. Often, the client would be taught some simple guided meditation, or better, to attend a full course of beginner’s meditation. They are also encouraged to attend a course on Buddhist psychology and similar courses that explain how the mind and meditation works. In this way, they have a fuller theoretical and practical grasp of

self-empowerment, self-help and self-healing, which Buddhist counseling is really about.

Notice that so far, I have never used the word “advice,” as counsellors are not advisors. The reason for this is simple and important: we only have a limited window of time with the client (say an hour or so), and this is too short to give any advice which might affect the client indefinitely.

We are more effective counsellors by facilitating or refereeing the client in learning how he should look at issues and situations more objectively and wisely. The special power of Buddhist counselling is that it blesses us with self-empowerment. We do not need to rely on any “other” power, be it someone else (like someone to blame or to emotionally depend on) or something else (like a God-idea or demons).

Our problems arise in our minds, and they are best corrected there, and by ourselves. We initially suffer because we know something is wrong, we know that we can be better than this. Buddhist counselling tells you how. It makes you a self-counsellor: Buddhism tells you that you are the best person to know yourself. Otherwise, you may need to examine your beliefs and values—and start with Buddhist counselling.

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