

# Buddhist Theory of Counselling: A comparative study with selected theories of the West

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Introduction to counseling

Counseling is a concept that has existed for a long time. People have sought through the ages to

1. Understand themselves
2. Develop each other's potential
3. Become aware of opportunities and
4. Help themselves

In most communities, there has been, and there still is, a deeply embedded conviction that, under proper conditions, people can help others with their problem through counselling: At its best, counselling should enable people to manage life situations effectively.

Counselling as a profession came to existence in 19<sup>th</sup> century. This profession developed with the aim of helping people of all ages and stages, avoid making bad

choices in life while finding meaning, direction and fulfillment in what they did. Today the profession focuses on avoidance of problems and promotion of growth as well as wellness, meaningfulness, remediation of mental disorders. Counseling can benefit people from all walks of life across in their life span.

Definitions on counseling abound in the literature. One of the most general one is by the American Psychological Association. It is as follows:

“Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individual families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, and education and career goals”.

According to this definition, there are important points to be realized. They are;

1. Counselors work in areas in which there are lot of issues that are personal and interpersonal
2. Counseling is conducted with persons individually, in groups and in families
3. Counseling is a process in which there are several stages.

The counselling helps people to get “unstuck”. Through the development of insight and increased self-awareness, people are able to gain a better understanding of their own behavior and the issues, feelings and events that motivate them. The most useful benefit of therapy is often an

improvement in health and wellbeing. This often translates into increased self-confidence, productivity and a greater sense of vitality and peace of mind. People of any age can grow and profit from the experience of counselling.

### 1.1 Steps in a Counseling Session

The counseling process is a planned, structured dialogue between a counselor and a client. It is a cooperative process in which a trained professional helps a person called the client to identify sources of difficulties or concerns that he or she is experiencing. Together they develop ways to deal with and overcome these problems so that the client new skills and increase understanding of himself or herself and others.

The following are the established steps in counseling:

1. Relationship Building
2. Problem Assessment
3. Goal Setting
4. Intervention
5. Evaluation
6. Termination

#### I. Relationship building

Relationship Building involves building a relationship between the client and the counselor and focuses on engaging clients to explore the issue that directly affect them. Empathic understanding, unconditional positive



regard, congruence, respect, immediacy are qualities that are exhibited during the process of building relationships.

## II. Problem assessment

This step involves the collection and classification of information about the client's life situation and reasons for seeking counseling

## III. Goal setting

Setting goals is very important to the success of counseling. It involves making a commitment to a set of conditions, to a course of action or an outcome

## IV. Intervention

Based on the respective theory or theories, intervention is carried out by setting goals.

## V. Evaluation

All counseling aims towards successful termination. Terminating the counseling process will have to be conducted with sensitivity with the client knowing that it will have to end

## 1.2 Theories of Counseling

With the development of counseling as a profession, theories of counseling have also been developed for centuries. The aim of these theories is to analyze the clients' issues in a systematic way and help them with the

techniques which were drawn from those theories. Although there are several such theories, following theories are discussed in detail, owing to their prominence.

1. The Client-Centered theory
2. The Psychoanalytic theory
3. Cognitive Behavior theory

### 1.2.1 The Client-Centered Theory

The perspective of Carl Rogers in Counseling is known as client-centered theory. This perspective assumes people as being active, thinking, creative, and growth-oriented ones. Helping others is partially accomplished through understanding concerns, feelings, and behavior through the eyes of the client. Therefore, counselors who follow this theory are warm and supportive individuals who do not provide any direct advice or suggestions to their clients. These professionals tend to assume that people are basically well-intentioned and that they naturally strive toward growth, love, creativity, and Self-actualization. Self-actualization helps to produce the forward movement in life toward greater growth, peace, and acceptance of self and others. In order to help client to achieve self actualization they use the following techniques:

1. Active listening
2. Empathy
3. Congruence and,
4. Unconditional Positive Regard



### 1.2.2 The Psychoanalytic theory

The psychoanalytic approach began with the work of Sigmund Freud. Freud developed an understanding of human behavior based on three mental structures that are usually in conflict. The id, developed at birth, operates on the pleasure principle and represents all of our primitive wishes, needs, and desires. The ego, developed at about age one, operates on the reality principle and represents the rational and reasonable aspects of our personality helping us to adapt to a challenging world. Finally, the superego is developed at about age 5. This represents the internalization of familial cultural and societal norms.

The psychoanalytic perspective maintains certain assumptions about human behavior and psychological problems. First, this perspective holds that human behavior is influenced by unconscious mind. Second, various adaptive and maladaptive ego defense mechanisms are used to deal with unresolved conflicts, needs, wishes, and fantasies that contribute to both normal and abnormal behavior. Third, early experiences and relationships such as the relationship between children and their parents play a critical and enduring role in psychological development and adult behavior. Fourth, insight into these mostly unconscious influences combined with working through them help to improve psychological functioning and behavior. For this they use the following techniques:

1. Free association
2. Hypnotherapy
3. Dream analysis and,
4. Transference

### 1.2.3. Cognitive Behavior Theory

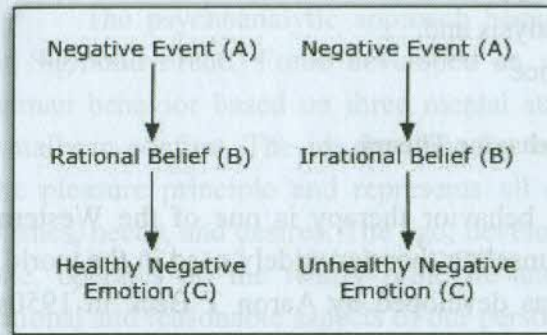
Cognitive behavior therapy is one of the Western psychological counseling theories widely used in the world. This approach was developed by Aaron T Beck in 1950s based on the teachings of behavioral Psychology and Cognitive Psychology. This theory focuses on the notion that people's core belief, thoughts and behavior are all interconnected and assumes that people get mentally ill because of faulty patterns of thinking. Therefore, clients are introduced to intervention strategies that assist in changing thinking patterns consequently changing behavior. Beck has introduced a cognitive triangle to explain this phenomenon.

#### *Figure 1- the cognitive triangle*

This triangle explains the interconnection of people's thoughts, feeling and behavior. Beck's theory further explains how people get mentally ill. Following figure illustrates this notion of cognitive behavior therapy. It is called ABC theory.



Figure 2- ABC theory



According to this notion when a person faces a negative event, if he thinks irrationally, then he gets mentally ill. On the other hand, if he thinks rationally he remains mentally healthier. There are several such irrational thinking patterns which are common to all. They are called cognitive distortions. Some of them are listed below:

1. All-or-nothing thinking: seeing things in black and white categories
2. Overgeneralization: Seeing a single negative event as a never-ending pattern of defeat
3. Disqualifying the positive: rejecting positive experiences by insisting they "don't count" for some reason or other
4. Jumping to conclusions: making a negative interpretation even though there are no definite facts that convincingly support conclusion

5. Mind reading: arbitrarily concluding that someone is reacting negatively to someone and not bothering to check it out.

The aim of cognitive behavior therapy is to help client to change their irrational patterns of thinking into rational patterns. For this purpose they use following methods

1. Coping self- statement
2. Cost benefit analysis
3. Psycho-educational method

This method follows the following steps

- Step 1 – identifying the client’s automatic negative thinking
- Step 2 – evaluate the client’s automatic negative thoughts
- Step 3- apply strategies to modify client’s thinking Pattern

## 2. BUDDHIST COUNSELING THEORY

### 2.0 Buddhist Spiritual Development

The Buddhist way of spiritual development was discovered by the Buddha who lived in India in 6 B.C. Its ultimate goal is to attain Nibbana which means the cessation of sansaric journey. Samsara is a pali and Sanskrit word which means the cycle of birth, living, death and returning to birth again and so forth. The cycle of birth, living and death or samsara exists because of Karma.



Karma means the law of action. It explains bad rebirths and all suffering which are the result of negative actions done in the past. Good rebirths and all happiness are the result of positive actions done in the past. Karma is done because of craving, hatred and ignorance. These are roots in our mind.

Through the process of spiritual development, people must try to weaken the intensity of these roots and ultimately abolish all these roots from our mind. There are four stages of spiritual development based on the extent to which those roots are weakened and abolished. They are: stream winner (Sotapanna), once Returner (Sakurdagami), None Returner, (Anagami), Worthy one (Arahath).

The way of weakening and abolishing these roots is related to four noble truths. The first truth should be accepted, the second noble truth should be understood, the third noble truth should be achieved and fourth noble truth should be practised to achieve the third one. Therefore, Buddhist spiritual development happens with the realization of four noble truths. The ones who discovered and realized four noble truths and revealed to the mankind are called, Samma Sambuddha, the ones who realized four noble truths by themselves are called Pase Buddha, the ones who realized the four noble truths with the help of the teaching of Samma Sambudda are called Arahath.

The aim of this spiritual development is to achieve cessation of the rebirth. This theory can be used to alleviate day today problems of mankind. This can be achieved through the practicing of noble eight-fold path. To the

extent of practicing eight-fold paths in his or her daily life he or she will get the benefits. In other words, those who lead a life based on the eight-fold path may have fewer problems mentally and socially, on the other hand, the ones whose lives are away from this path may experience more problems in their lives. The Buddhist psychological counseling theory is founded on this notion.

### 2.1 The counseling Theory Based on Buddhist Teachings

Buddhist theory of counseling is based on the core teachings of Buddhism. The aim of Buddhism is to pave the way to people to overcome all the suffering in the life and attain the liberation of all kind of suffering. Although it is the ultimate goal this theory can be allied to people those who have mental stress and depression, relation problems etc. And also it can be practised in a systematic counseling setting.

#### Goal of Buddhist counseling theory

1. To make understand the client of his or her present problem
2. To help client understand the causes of his problems and mental distress
3. To guide the client to choose ways of overcoming those problems
4. Give suggestions to lead a peaceful life

Buddhist theory of counseling assumes that people face mental distresses and problems because of not



understanding the reality and being away from skillful life strategies. If a person leads a life which is based on eight fold path they can spend satisfactory and peaceful life. Firstly, people should understand the reality of life. For this purpose, first noble truth will help. First noble truth explains the reality of living beings in this life. They all should accept this reality whether they like or not. With the accepting of this reality, they can find the causes of their problems. Causes may be two types: one is their ill mentality which is full of greed, craving, clinging, ignorance and hatred. The other one is being away from the righteous life skills. Buddhist Counselor helps the client to understand these factors. Once they have understood these factors they can start new life which has been recommended in Buddhist teachings.

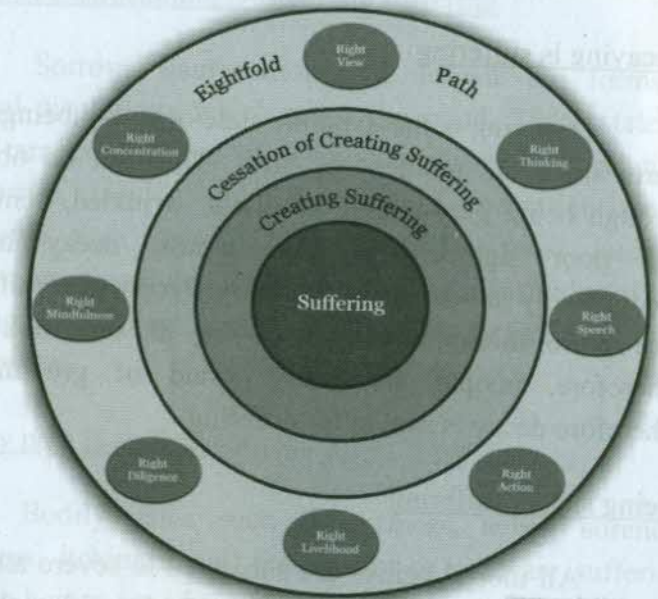
Buddha realized the Truth in this world when He attained Supreme Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, India. It is called four noble truths. They are truths because they are real and form an incontrovertible fact of life. Whether Buddhas rise or not they exist in the world. It is the Buddhas who reveal them to mankind.

They are:

1. The noble truth of suffering
2. The noble truth of causes of suffering
3. The noble truth of cessation of suffering
4. The noble truth of ways of cessation of suffering

These four truths can be presented in a brief from in the following figure.

Figure 3- the diagram of eight fold path



### 2.1.1. The noble truth of suffering

#### Birth is suffering

There are three features associated with every living being in the world during from their birth to death; they are birth, dynamism and death. When applying this into human beings birth is a state of arising a new mind and a body after



death of old existence. Of course, at the first moment of birth there would not be suffering. But, this new birth serves as the basis of other sufferings which will be discussed later in this chapter. Therefore, birth is considered as suffering.

Decaying is suffering

Decaying is the dynamic state of living beings. This starts since the moment of birth. This can be observed through being grey-haired, toothless, wrinkled, bent, deaf, and poor sighted. In other words, decay happens recognizably in both mind and body. People generally don't like these things and want to be fit and look good. Therefore, people are really afraid of growing old. Therefore decay is said to be suffering.

Being sick is suffering

All mortal beings are subjected to severe attacks of disease and illness which rack the body with unbearable pain. Living beings can't avoid this but they don't like it. They always wish to be healthy and strong, they fear to get ill.

Death is suffering

All living-beings are subjected to death. Death is the extinction of the life-principle. All mortals are in constant fear of death. it is the moment of dissolution of the life-principle of the aggregates of mind and matter. However, when death comes, one has to abandon the physical body

and leave behind one's family and friends together with one's properties. The thought of leaving the present existence and the uncertainty of the future is very frightening.

Sorrow, Lamentation, Despair are suffering

Sorrow, Lamentation and despair are forms of mental displeasure which affect the mind. These states of mind are experienced when someone loses their relatives, properties, jobs, valuables things etc. Lamentation is more intensive than sorrow, despair is the most intensive displeasure that living beings experience. Examples of such feelings are worry, anxiety, depression, dislike, hate, fear, misery etc.

Bodily pain is suffering

Bodily pains such as stiffness, aches, soreness, tiredness, itchiness, and feeling hot or cold are suffering. Human beings are afraid of physical pain.

Association with the hateful is suffering

Association with the hateful, meeting with disagreeable beings or undesirable objects leads to mental disturbance and physical discomposure. As this sort of association serves as a cause of mental and physical distress, it is said to be suffering.





### Separation from the beloved is suffering

Separation from the beloved leads to painful feelings. When separation takes place, by death or other reasons from beloved ones, mental agony occurs at once. As it promotes various mental afflictions, it is said to be suffering..

### Not getting what one desires is suffering

Not getting what one desires means someone having unfulfilled desires. These types of desires often result in great disappointment, despair, and may even lead to suicide.

#### **2.1.2 The noble truth of Cause of suffering**

Causes of Suffering are dislike and detachment, craving and clinging. Craving and clinging are accompanied by pleasure or greed; it finds ever fresh delight everywhere. Wherever in the world, there are delightful and pleasurable things, craving arises and takes root. This is called sensual craving: The desire for enjoyment of sensuous pleasures. Dislike and detachment are accompanied by displeasure and hatred. If the things are hateful to the living beings they try to avoid them and this leads to create dissatisfaction in their lives.

It can be summarized as follows:

This craving arises from six types of contacts

1. Eye contact with visible objects
2. Ear contact with sound
3. Nose contact with smell
4. Tongue contact with taste
5. Body contact with touch
6. Mind contact with ideas and concepts

By means of these contacts, six kinds of process happen in living beings. They are: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. Based on these six processes, three types of feelings arise. They are; pleasant feelings, unpleasant feelings and neutral feelings. When each of above objects is attractive and pleasurable, craving arises and takes root. In contrast, when the objects are unattractive and unpalatable, hatred arises and takes root. When the objects are neither attractive nor pleasurable, then neutral feelings arise. In addition, because ignorance (Not knowing things as they truly are) people hold erroneous perception, thoughts and views. Therefore, they consider impermanent as permanents, suffering as happiness, this also will create the mental distress in people.

#### **2.1.3. The noble truth of ways of cessation of suffering**

The fourth noble truth guides the client to develop three aspects of his life. They are; morality, Mental culture and wisdom. A client must first develop his or her morality that is their actions should bring good to other living beings. As they develop their morality their mind will become more easily controlled, enabling them to develop their powers of



concentration. Finally, with the development of concentration wisdom will prevail.

The Eight-fold path consists of the following eight factors:

*Table 1 the divisions of eight-fold path*

Right Speech Right Action Right Livelihood	Morality
Right Effort Right Mindfulness Right Concentration	Mental culture
Right Understanding Right Thoughts	Wisdom

**2.1.3.1. Aspects of Morality**

Right (Skilful) speech

Right Speech involves respect for truth and respect for the welfare of others. It means to avoid lying, to avoid backbiting or slander, to avoid harsh speech, and to avoid idle talk. There is a huge power in speech but generally, people have little control over their speech. People have

been hurt by someone's speech at some time of their life. On the other hand, they might have been encouraged by other's words. It is said that a harsh word can wound more deeply than weapons, where as a gentle word can change the heart and mind of the most hardened criminal. So to develop a harmonious life, client should cultivate and use their speech positively. They should speak words which are truthful, bring harmony, kindness and meaningfulness. Buddha once said 'pleasant speech is sweet as honey, truthful speech is beautiful like a flower, and wrong speech is unwholesome like filth.

Right (Skilful) Action

Skilful action entails respect for life, respect for property, and respect for personal relationships. They should abstain from taking a life which they themselves cannot give and they should not harm other living beings. Respect for property means that they should not take what is not given, by stealing, cheating, or force. Respect for personal relationship means that they should not commit adultery and avoid sexual misconducts.

Right (Skilful) Livelihood

Right Livelihood means that people should earn a living without violating principles of moral conduct. Buddhists are discouraged from being engaged in the following five kinds of livelihood: trading of human beings, trading of weapons, trading of flesh, trading of intoxicating drinks and drugs, and trading of poison.



### 2.1.3.2. Aspects of mental Development

#### Right (Skillful) efforts

Right Effort means that people cultivate a positive attitude and have enthusiasm in the things they do, whether in their career, in their study, or in their practice of morality. With such a sustained enthusiasm and cheerful determination, they can succeed in the things they do. There are four aspects of Right Effort, two of which refer to evil and the other two to good. First, is the effort to reject evil that has already arisen; and second, the effort to prevent the arising of evil; third, is the effort to develop good which is not arisen yet, and fourth, the effort to maintain the good which has arisen. By applying Right Effort in their lives, people can reduce and eventually eliminate the number of unwholesome mental states and increase and firmly establish wholesome thoughts as a natural part of their mind

#### Right concentration and right mindfulness

These two are related to meditation in Buddhism. Concentration and mindfulness can be developed by being constantly aware of four particular aspects. These are the application of mindfulness with regard to the body (body postures, breathing so forth), feelings (whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral); mind (whether the mind is greedy or not, angry, dispersed or deluded or not); and mind objects (whether there are mental hindrances to concentration, the

Four Noble Truths, and so on). Mindfulness can be practised even in daily life in which people act in full awareness of their actions, feelings and thoughts as well as that of their environment. The mind should always be clear and attentive rather than distracted and clouded

### 2.1.3.3. Aspects of Wisdom

#### Right understanding

Right understanding is having the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. In other words, it is the understanding of things as they really are. Right Understanding also means that one understands the nature of what wholesome kamma (merits) are and unwholesome kamma (demerits), and how they may be performed with the body, speech and mind. By understanding kamma, a person will learn to avoid evil and do good, thereby creating favorable outcomes in his life. When a person has Right Understanding, he also understands the Three Characteristics of Life (that all compounded things are impermanent, subject to suffering, and without self) a person with complete Right Understanding is one who is free from ignorance, and by the nature of that enlightenment removes the roots of evil from his mind and becomes liberated.

#### Right thoughts

It refers to the mental state which eliminates wrong ideas or notions. This factor serves a double purpose of eliminating evil thoughts and developing pure thoughts.



There are three aspects to Right Thought. First, a person should maintain an attitude of detachment from worldly pleasures rather than being selfishly attached to them. He should be selfless in his thoughts and think of the welfare of others. Second, he should maintain loving-kindness, goodwill and benevolence in his mind, which is opposed to hatred, ill-will or aversion. Third, he should act with thoughts of harmlessness or compassion to all beings, which is opposed to cruelty and lack of consideration for others. As a person progresses along the spiritual path, his thoughts will become increasingly benevolent, harmless, selfless, and filled with love and compassion.

### 3. INTERVENTION

#### 3.0. Case presentation

JSR is a 28 year-old married female. She has a very demanding, high stress job as a second year medical resident in a large hospital. Jessica has always been a high achiever. She graduated with top honors in both college and medical school. She has very high standards for herself and can be very self-critical when she fails to meet them. Lately, she has struggled with significant feelings of worthlessness and shame due to her inability to perform as well as she always has in the past.

For the past few weeks Jessica has felt unusually fatigued and found it increasingly difficult to concentrate at

work. Her coworkers have noticed that she is often irritable and withdrawn, which is quite different from her typically upbeat and friendly disposition. She has called in sick on several occasions, which is completely unlike her. On those days she stays in bed all day, watching TV or sleeping.

At home, Jessica's husband has noticed changes as well. She has shown little interest in sex and has had difficulties falling asleep at night. Her insomnia has been keeping him awake as she tosses and turns for an hour or two after they go to bed. He's overheard her having frequent tearful phone conversations with her closest friend, which have him worried. When he tries to get her to open up about what's bothering her, she pushes him away with an abrupt "everything's fine".

Although she hasn't ever considered suicide, Jessica has found herself increasingly dissatisfied with her life. She's been having frequent thoughts of wishing she was dead. She gets frustrated with herself because she feels like she has every reason to be happy, yet can't seem to shake the sense of doom and gloom that has been clouding each day as of late.

Identifying the problems of the case of JSR

1. Feeling of worthlessness
2. Difficulty to concentrate in her work
3. Irritable and withdrawn
4. Little interest in sex
5. Difficulties falling asleep at night



6. Tearful phone conversations with her closest friend
7. Dissatisfied with her life
8. Sense of doom and gloom

### 3.1. Cognitive Behavior Theory based Intervention Plan

The intervention plan which is based on cognitive behavior theory is as follows.

#### 1. Relationship Building

Firstly, counselor should build a healthy relationship with a client. For this the following skills of the counselor are important: Warmly welcoming the client, empathy, active listening, and developing the trust on counselor.

#### 2. Problems assessment

Problem assessment is done based on the existing standard tests such as Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), Burns Depression Checklist (BDC)

#### 3. Goals setting

- Reduce negative automatic thoughts
- Modify core beliefs of need for control
- Reduce symptoms of depression
- Improve sense of worthiness
- Acquire relapse prevention skills

#### 4. Intervention

Intervention is carried out in the following steps:

- a. Making client aware of his or her problem
  - Inform client of diagnosis
  - Provide relevant, informative handouts on his/her disorder in particular and Cognitive-behavioral therapy in general
  - Teach client structure of cognitive-behavioral therapy sessions
  - Inform client of connection between thought, emotions, and behaviors
- b. Cognitive Restructuring
  - Assist client in identifying and evaluating automatic thoughts, intermediate beliefs, and core beliefs (daily thoughts record)
  - Assist client in generating alternative, more adaptive thoughts and beliefs  
positive data log, core belief worksheet
- c. Relaxation Training
  - Inform client that anxious thoughts and emotions are more likely to occur when Physiologically aroused
  - Teach relaxation techniques including progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery
  - Encourage client to engage in regular exercise



d. Marital/Family Interventions

- Teach family members to attend to, label, and reinforce positives in each other
- Teach positive assertiveness
- Teach communication skills including active listening and clarifying feelings
- Teach time-out procedures as well as self-instructions for anger

5. Termination

Termination of the session is carried out after 7 to 10 counseling sessions.

6. Evaluation

Evaluation is assessed through an outcome based research.

**3.2. Buddhist Counseling Intervention Plan**

1. Relationship building

The process of Relationship building is same as in cognitive behavior theory based intervention.

2. Problem assessment

There hasn't been developed any standard test developed in the field of Buddhist counseling field. Therefore, assessment is carried out through interviewing the client.

3. Goals setting

- Facilitate the Client to understand the real nature of the problem
- Facilitate the Client to identify the causes of problem
- Facilitate the client to implement skillful life skills
- Facilitate the client to develop positive attitudes and self confidence

4. Interventions

- Client is given opportunity to describe his or her problem
- Client is taught and made to understand about the unavoidable things in life such as decaying,
- Client is taught meditation techniques as relaxation method
- Client is taught to practice skillful life style based on virtue, concentration and wisdom

5. Termination

Termination is the same as in the Cognitive behavior theory based intervention.

6. Evaluation

Evaluation is the same as in the cognitive behavior theory based intervention.





#### 4. CONCLUSION

At present, there are rapid changes in lifestyles of people as compared to the past. People are more stressed out with their daily routines day by day. As a consequence they are getting vulnerable to experience any kind of mental illness than previous. Therefore, the necessity of helping professions like counseling is increasing at present. There are several theories of counseling which have been developed through centuries with empirical researches but most of them are derived from western philosophy and thinking.

There is big difference between eastern and western cultures. Therefore, if there is a counseling theory which is based on eastern philosophy, it will be more beneficial for the people of those eastern cultures. Eastern originated philosophies such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism have common core beliefs like reincarnation, mechanism of karma. The above discussed Buddhist theory of counseling is based on Buddhist teachings. Therefore, implications of this theory in eastern cultures can be more fruitful rather than western originated counseling theories.

Following conclusions can be drawn from the previous discussion.

1. Cognitive Behavior Theory maintains that irrational beliefs distorted attitudes towards the self the environment and the future cause depressive affects.

2. Buddhist theory of counseling maintains the notion that not realizing the real nature of life and being away from the skillful life skills causes depression.
3. The intervention based on Cognitive Behavior Theory is well established through empirical researches while intervention based on Buddhist Counseling is not yet well established, therefore future research should be carried out through analyzing the consequences of Buddhist counseling intervention.
4. Buddhism is considered as one of the religious in the world, therefore, it may be difficult to apply this method for the clients those who have other religions beliefs.

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