Buddhist Ethics as a Foundation for Philosophical Counselling (PC) in the Indian Context

Abstract

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This work elucidates how Buddhist ethics can enrich the practice of PC in the Indian cultural milieu. PC strengthens individuals to contemplate, think clearly, and gain a better self - realization. It leads social actors to perceive meaning in their encounters/perceptions through self-reflection and open dialogue. Rather than giving prompt response, it directs intention on developing rational insight, emotional balance, and moral understanding differing from this, Buddhism facilitates a practical and ethical mode of life rooted in the principles of Śīla (moral discipline), Samādhi (mental discipline), and Paññā (wisdom). Through these three trainings, qualities such as kindness, mindfulness, and inner awareness are honed, guiding individuals toward the cohesion of thought and action. When these Buddhist insights are blended with PC, they confer a profound ethical and spiritual underpinning for counselling individuals toward self-awareness, peace of mind, and balanced living.

The framework utilized in this paper is chiefly analytical and interpretative. It entails a comparative examination of Buddhist ethical concepts and the reflective framework of PC. Pertinent philosophical texts and Buddhist precepts have been reviewed to uncover their universal concerns about human suffering, moral growth, and self-knowledge. The paper deciphers these ideas in the light of the Indian cultural and spiritual background to show their practical relevance for counselling practices today.

In essence, the study advocates that both Buddhist ethics and PC endeavor to empower individuals exist reflectively, ethically, and purposefully. In today's mutable world, such an approach can offer prudent guidance to those seeking moral clarity, emotional stability, and purposeful living.

Keywords: PC, Buddhist Ethics, Śīla, Samādhi, Paññā, Self-awareness.

SPELL-I

BUDDHIST ETHICS AS A FOUNDATION FOR PHILOSOPHICAL COUNSELLING (PC) IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

1. Introduction: Purpose and Background

Each era introduces its own kind of restlessness. In the present-day context, people often feel confused, anxious, or divorced from purpose/meaning. This burgeoning perception of inner struggle shows that while we have made progress in science and technology, we still struggle to understand our identity and our role in the world. This is where philosophy, counselling, and ethics coalesce in a deeply human way.

Philosophy contributes to us thinking clearly about life, its purpose, and the values that guide our actions. It is not limited to abstract theories; it is a way of looking inward and asking questions that matter most — Who am I? What should I do? What kind of life is worth living? (philos-sophia= love of **wisdom**; which means opening oneself up to the horizon of meanings or ideas that are at the foundation of one's world or a personal way of comporting oneself towards the world [Lahav 1996 p.270 & 277])

Counselling on the other hand, is a process of dialogue (not gossiping or imparting information to each other, but in a meaningful dialogue one person opens himself in front of another and there is no commitment between the speaker and hearer) and listening that helps a person face life's difficulties with understanding and strength. In today's world, counselling is often associated with psychology, where the focus is on emotional healing and behaviour. But **PC** offers something different — it invites reflection, reasoning, and self-examination. It is about finding meaning rather than merely coping with emotions. As Lahav (1996) states, PC is an approach for addressing the dilemmas, predicaments, and life-issues of the person in the street through philosophical self examination (p. 259)

Ethics, the system of moral principles that guide our actions and decisions provides the moral foundation for this process. Ethics shapes the direction of such reflection, guiding thought into

action. Without ethics, reflection can remain empty. It is ethics that shape our thoughts into actions, helping us maintain harmonious relations with ourselves and others.

Buddhism [a philosophical tradition that originated in India around the 5th century BCE, founded by Siddhārtha Gautama, known as the Buddha; the Enlightened One) functions as a unique intersection for these ideas. It enables the development of self knowledge by means of moral discipline (*Śīla*), mental discipline (*Samādhi*), and wisdom (*Paññā*) (Rahula 1959, p. 46). These values are not meant for monks alone; they speak to every person who seeks peace and clarity in daily life.

Counselling, in various modalities, arises from a human need — the need to be understood, to find purpose, and to make sense of suffering. While **psychological counselling** (according to British Association for counseling and Psychotherapy; counseling takes place when a counselor sees a client in a private and confidential setting to explore a difficulty the client is having, distress they may be experiencing or perhaps their dissatisfaction with life or loss of a sense of direction and purpose. It is always at the request of the client as no one can properly be 'sent' for counseling Dryden 2006, p. 12-13) commonly focuses on symptomatic expressions, **PC** goes a step deeper: it asks what these experiences mean. It encourages individuals to see their difficulties as opportunities for self-discovery.

The present study focuses on **PC**. It aims to explore how Buddhist ethics can guide and enrich this practice in the Indian context, where philosophy has always been seen as a way of living and not merely a system of thought. This study seeks to understand how moral awareness and reflective dialogue can help individuals live more meaningfully, with balance, compassion, and insight.

2. PC: Concept and Relevance

PC, in its simplest sense, means using philosophy as a guide for living. It helps people think clearly about their problems, question their beliefs, and understand the meaning of their experiences. Instead of focusing only on emotions or behaviour, as in psychological counselling, it encourages reflection through dialogue and reason.

In the **Western tradition**, the modern form of PC commenced with **Dr. Gerd Achenbach** in Germany in the early 1980s. He believed that philosophy should return to its original role — as a way of life and not merely an academic subject. Achenbach opened the first practice of PC in 1981, offering conversations that were free from fixed methods or medical models. Later, philosophers such as **Lou Marinoff**, through his book *Plato, Not Prozac!*, and **Peter Raabe** further developed this practice, showing how philosophical dialogue could help people face ethical and existential questions without reducing them to clinical issues (additional details can be found in Peter B. Raabe's PC resources). In the **Eastern or Indian context**, the idea of using philosophy for self-understanding is not new. Ancient Indian gurus, from the **Upaniṣadic seers** to the **Buddha**, acted as counsellors in the truest sense. Their dialogues were aimed at awakening self-knowledge (*ātma-jñāna*) and right understanding (*sammā diṭṭhi*). The conversations between **Nachiketa and Yama** in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, or the dialogue between **Lord Krishna and Arjuna** in the *Srimad Bhagavad Gītā*, and the **Buddha's dialogues with monks and laypersons** in the *Nikāyas* can be seen as early forms of PC — moments where confusion was clarified through wisdom, reflection, and moral insight.

Contemporary philosophical counseling in India has roots in ancient Indian wisdom traditions like the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, but its modern, professional movement began with the founding of the Society for Philosophical Praxis, Counselling, and Spiritual Healing (SPPCSH) by Professor K.L. Sharma in Jaipur in 2000 (Philosophy News in India). The contemporary Indian practice combines its ancient philosophical heritage with modern therapeutic tools, as seen in the SPPCSH's curriculum which includes Indian philosophical concepts alongside Western techniques like Socratic dialogue and REBT (Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy).

The pertinence of philosophical councelling today is even stronger. In a world typified by stress, uncertainty, and loss of meaning — especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, many people felt isolated, anxious, and disconnected from their sense of purpose. Traditional therapies helped people cope, but they could not always answer the deeper questions: *Why am I suffering? What gives life meaning? How do I live with awareness and balance?* Similarly, recent concurrent natural disasters in Himachal Pradesh — floods/cloud burst, landslides, and widespread destruction — have intensified emotional and existential distress. People have not only lost

homes and livelihoods but also their sense of stability and belonging. In such situations, PC becomes deeply relevant as it helps individuals reflect, find resilience, and reconstruct meaning in the face of suffering. It does not regard the individual as a patient but as a rational thinking being capable of insight, acceptance, and growth.

This makes PC deeply human and timeless. It draws our intention that healing is not only about managing pain but also about rediscovering meaning. When combined with the ethical and compassionate wisdom of Buddhism, this approach becomes even more relevant for the Indian setting — helping individuals find clarity, peace, and moral direction in times of change and uncertainty.

3. Buddhist Ethical Framework: Śīla, *Samādhi*, and Paññā

Buddhist ethics does not function as a codified system of commandments or dogmas. It is a reflective approach of understanding human experience and responding to it with awareness. It begins with the axiomatic truth that our thoughts, words, and actions shape not only our own lives but also the world around us. The intention is not to legislate external rules, but to nurture a manner of living that brings inner calm and harmony with others. In this sense, Buddhist ethics and PC reach a consensus. Both look for self-understanding through critical reflection rather than observance. While PC advocates questioning, reasoning, and awareness, Buddhist ethics calls for the same inward gaze — to perceive clearly why we act, how our life choices or decisions create suffering or peace, and how cognitive insight can lead to inner evolution. Both emphasize clarity without judgement and awareness without attachment. Buddhist moral life is grounded in three intricately connected principles: **Śīla (moral conduct)**, **Samādhi** (**mental discipline)**, and **Paññā (wisdom)**. These are not separate disciplines, but aspects of one living path — balancing behaviour, feeling, and understanding. Together, they illuminate the counsellor's and the seeker's journey toward cognitive self-appraisal and affective equilibrium.

Śīla – Ethical Conduct / Discipline

Śīla is understood as living with honesty, restraint, and respect for all forms of life. True freedom, the Buddha teaches, does not come from doing whatever one wishes but from understanding what is right. "Avoid all evil, cultivate good, purify your mind: this sups up the

teaching of Buddhas" (Easwaran 1986, p. 132). This lone verse, often called the heart of Buddhist ethics, captures the essence of right conduct. Eknath Easwaran notes that Śīla is not blind obedience but "the training of the heart," a discipline that develops serenity and self-mastery. In PC, Śīla represents ethical responsibility — truthfulness, confidentiality, and respect in dialogue. Just as a counsellor must create a safe space built on trust, moral discipline provides the foundation for all meaningful communication and personal transformation.

Samādhi - Mental Discipline

Samādhi refers to mental discipline — the capacity to steady, concentrates, and purifies the mind. It takes shape from training attention, calming inner restlessness, and cultivating a focused awareness that sees things clearly. When the mind is disciplined, reactions soften, clarity deepens, and one responds with balance rather than impulse. "Hard it is to train the mind, which goes where it likes and does what it wants. But a trained mind brings health and happiness. The wise can direct their thoughts, subtle and elusive, wherever they choose: a trained mind brings health and happiness" (Easwaran 1986, p. 87). These verses bring attention to the pragmatic orientation of Samādhi. It is not mere silence or withdrawal but an active mental practice that transforms perception and behaviour. Eknath Easwaran describes Samādhi as "training the mind to become a reliable instrument," a discipline that restores inner harmony and strengthens emotional stability.

Paññā – Wisdom / Insight

Paññā, or wisdom, is the light of clear awareness. It is not intellectual knowledge but the deep insight that sees things as they truly are. Wisdom begins with mindfulness (*appamāda*), the attentive presence that prevents confusion and carelessness. "Be vigilant and go beyond death. If you lack vigilance, you cannot escape death. Those who strive earnestly will go beyond death; those who do not can ever come to life. The wise understand this, and rejoice in the wisdom of the noble ones (Easwaran 1986, p. 81). "All the effort must be made by you; Buddhas only show the way. Follow this path and practice meditation; go beyond the power of Mara" (Easwaran 1986, p. 162). These verses remind us that no one can walk the path for another. The Buddha offers direction, but each person must make the effort to awaken. Paññā in counselling reflects

this same principle: the counsellor does not give conventional answers but helps the seeker find understanding within.

Śīla, Samādhi, and Paññā together form a complete path of ethical living, mental clarity, and true understanding. In PC, Śīla builds trust and honesty, Samādhi supports calm reflection, and Paññā guides the seeker toward their own insight.

4. Intersections: Ethics and Counselling as Paths of Self-Understanding

Both **Buddhist ethics** and **PC** begin with the same question — *How can we understand ourselves and live wisely?* Neither aims at correcting others, but at awakening awareness within. In Buddhist discipline, the cognitive concentration is on understanding the causes of suffering (*dukkha*) and finding freedom through mindfulness, compassion, and right understanding. In PC, the emphasis lies on dialogue, reflection, and personal meaning. When brought together, these two approaches enrich one another — creating a shared path where ethical living and reflective conversation become tools for self-realization.

As Ran Lahav (1995) describes, PC is not merely about solving problems but about *interpreting one's worldview* — learning to see the world and oneself more clearly. Similarly, Buddhist ethics encourages each person to examine their inner motives, habits, and intentions with honesty and measured mildness. Steven Segal (1995) in his discussion of *Meaning Crisis*, points out those modern individuals often suffer not from lack of comfort or security but from loss of purpose. In times like the COVID-19 pandemic, many felt isolated and uncertain, questioning their place in life. PC, when guided by Buddhist ethics, can address this crisis of meaning by helping individuals rediscover purpose through self-awareness, mental steadiness, and mindful action.

Both traditions understand that suffering cannot be removed simply by changing circumstances — it must be transformed through cognitive. The counsellor, like the Buddhist, does not give answers but helps the seeker to see, to reflect, and to awaken. This shared journey is not hierarchical but participatory — what Lahav calls a "mutual search for illumination." In this way, ethical reflection (*Śīla*), mental discipline (Samādhi), and mindful wisdom (*Paññā*) become beacons for both counsellor and seeker. Each conversation becomes a small act of awakening — a moment where philosophy meets life and understanding replaces confusion.

5. Reflections and Indian Relevance

India has always regarded philosophy not as an abstract discipline, but as a **way of life** — a guide for ethical living and inner development. From the Upaniṣads to the Buddha, from Mahāvīra to Śaṅkara, the core concern of Indian philosophy has been *how to live meaningfully and with awareness*. Within this vibrant tradition, **PC** can be seen as a sustained lineage rather than a brand new idea — it renews the eternal Indian heritage ethos of *self-inquiry (ātma-vichāra)* and *ethical reflection (dharma)* in a form relevant to the modern world. The ethical and reflective approach of Buddhism — grounded in **Śīla (moral conduct)**, **Samādhi (mental discipline)**, and **Paññā (wisdom)** — provides a natural foundation for such counselling. These principles not only help individuals find personal peace but also strengthen social harmony, encouraging responsibility, tolerance, and understanding.

In the Indian context, where mental health challenges are often associated with social and moral cognitive disarray rather than purely psychological causes, this integration becomes deeply meaningful. Counselling rooted in Buddhist ethics can help people reflect on their choices, relationships, and values rather than simply seeking emotional relief. It provides a **moral compass** — not as a set of rules, but as a guide to self-awareness and balance. The experience of the **COVID-19 pandemic** made this even more evident. During isolation and uncertainty, many turned inward, seeking not medical treatment alone, but meaning and calmness. In such moments, PC — enriched with Buddhist insight — can offer a bridge between **thought and healing**, between **reflection and resilience**. It reminds us that clarity, compassion, and wisdom are not extrinsic remedies but inner strengths that can be cultivated through reflection.

For educators, philosophers, and counsellors in India, this framework can also strengthen the **value-based dimension of education**. When students are championed to think critically (able to judge or discern), reflect ethically, and act compassionately, education itself becomes transformative — echoing the same ideal that underlies both Buddhist teaching and philosophical practice. Thus, the amalgamation of Buddhist ethics and PC can contribute not only to individual well-being but also to the **larger ethical consciousness of society**. It brings together the contemplative wisdom of the East and the dialogical clarity of modern thought — a combination that can enrich both the individual and the collective spirit.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

The study of **Buddhist ethics as a foundation for PC** unveils a universal truth — that the deepest form of healing begins not with external treatment, but with **inner understanding**. Both PC and Buddhist thought share the belief that awareness, dialogue, and ethical reflection can transform suffering into insight and confusion into clarity. Through the principles of **Śīla (moral conduct)**, **Samādhi (mental discipline)**, and **Paññā (wisdom)**, Buddhist ethics offer a path that is as practical as it is profound. These values nurture integrity in action, steadiness in mind, and mindfulness in thought — qualities that are essential not only for counsellors but for all who seek balance in their lives.

In the Indian environment, where philosophy has always been firmly related to self-realization and moral growth, PC ingrained in Buddhist ethics can play a central role in **reconnecting knowledge with life**. It advocates individuals to think, to reflect, and to understand — not merely to follow. As **Ran Lahav** (1995) suggests, the aim of philosophical practice is *not to fix life, but to illuminate it*. This illumination comes when we begin to see our thoughts, emotions, and actions clearly — when we live with deliberate attention instead of established tendency. **Steven Segal's** (1995) reflection on the modern "Meaning Crisis" also reminds us that people today are searching not just for comfort, but for **purpose**. Buddhist-inspired PC can help restore that sense of purpose by guiding people toward understanding, balance, and compassionate wisdom.

This **first spell** lays the foundation through study and reflection. The **second spell** will move toward *application* — inquiring how mindfulness and ethical reflection can be used in real counselling contexts. The **third spell** will aim at *synthesis* — developing an Indian paradism of PC that draws from Buddhist ethics and responds to contemporary needs.

At its core, this work hopes to validate the idea that **Philosophy is not only for thinking but for living** — a living art that can heal, guide, and awaken the human spirit.

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