

# A Yogic approach to psychotherapy

**Incorporating Yogic ideas and philosophy into psychotherapy is not new - meditation has been used for some time as a form of relaxation and a way of helping an individual understand the workings of the mind. However, meditation can be used for personal growth beyond therapy. In that perspective it is to be understood alongside mental and spiritual development. The current trend is to integrate yogic practices holistically with psychotherapy.**

Dr Belinda Siew Luan Khong, lecturer in the Department of Psychology at Macquarie University. Produced her PhD thesis titled *A Comparative Analysis of the Concept of Responsibility in Daseinsanalysis and Yogic Psychology* and received a Vice-Chancellor's Commendation that won her the Sidney M Jourard Memorial Student Award for outstanding research from the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1999.

Khong integrates Yogic psychology and philosophy in psychotherapy. She is also well-informed of Buddha's teachings. She writes: "I believe that the Buddha teaches an attitude rather than an affiliation" in a chapter of *Encountering Buddhism: Western psychology and Yogic teachings*. "This state of mind can be acquired by any individual irrespective of his or her race, culture or religious orientation."

Khong is one of a developing branch of psychotherapists worldwide that integrate Yogic teachings whenever appropriate into the counselling process and beyond. The 'beyond therapy' aspect is something she emphasises, as many of her clients say that when they finish their counselling with her they take away a general philosophy for life, a way of responding appropriately which they can apply to various situations as they arise.

"Yogic ideas and practices have been integrated in therapy for some time," she says. "However the main focus has been on the use of meditation and mindfulness as an adjunct to therapy. In my clinical work I have found these practices to be more helpful and effective when they are understood holistically in the context of the Buddha's teachings."

Khong explains that the Buddha promotes an attitude of acceptance and 'letting go' developed through personal effort and taking personal responsibility rather than through relying on an external source or orientation.

Her premise is that human qualities and emotions that Buddha encouraged such as love, charity, compassion, tolerance and patience are not sectarian; as they are neither Christian, Hindu nor Muslim. Rather, they come from developing the right attitude, not the right affiliation. The Buddha encourages insight and understanding based on direct experience, and this is emphasised in his teaching of the eightfold path. In the context of morality, mental culture, and wisdom this encompasses:

**Right understanding**  
**Right effort**

**Right concentration**  
**Right mindfulness**

**Right action**  
**Right thought**

**Right livelihood**  
**Right speech**

Khong explains that in this teaching, the Buddha is describing a set of practices rather than a set of beliefs that the individual can use to overcome his or her own emotional suffering.

"For example the Buddha recommends that each of us take the responsibility to cultivate an attitude (right understanding, right thought) of seeing what is an appropriate response (right action, right speech, right livelihood) in each situation", she says. "Most of us are familiar with the power of speech to hurt or soothe. There will be times when friendly and meaningful advice are helpful and other times when keeping 'noble silence' is appropriate".

Meditation can be distinguished today. First there is concentration or tranquility. This encourages the individual to let go of negative thoughts that impinge by concentrating on one neutral object to the exclusion of all others. This is a popular tool used in psychotherapy to help the individual to quieten down the mind and to relax. However, it is only an interim learning tool. True meditation

goes much deeper and this is insight meditation or mindfulness practice. This is the Yogic approach and goes beyond mere concentration meditation.

Once you calm down the mind you still need to deal with the feelings and emotions that come up. This is dependent on the potential reactions to past actions. Insight meditation practice encourages the person to be mindful of these potentialities and when they enter the mind to see them in light of spiritual awareness – a holistic endeavour that all is part of a Cosmic play and to let one’s mind be soaked in higher thoughts in the nature of devotional sentiment or love.

In Khong’s terms: “Mindfulness helps us to look at all the feelings and emotions as they arise, to name them, to see anger as anger and sadness as sadness without judging them or repressing them or carrying on an internal dialogue (‘Why do I feel like this’, or ‘I shouldn’t feel so angry’). The practice of mindfulness teaches the art of acceptance and letting go.” She argues these are the key elements in the attitude that the Buddha encourages. This leads a person to understand one’s reactions and emotions without allowing them to spiral.

Khong says: “When you are not mindful you react. When you are mindful, you respond. This kind of attitude is the most powerful tool my clients take away from counseling”. The distinction between responsibility and what Khong refers to as ‘respond-ability’ is an important one. Responsibility is usually associated with roles and positions, and is commonly perceived in terms of duties, obligations and accountability. Respond-ability, she explains, refers to our internal ability to respond appropriately and skillfully to what is required in each unique situation. It involves the capacity to be mindful and to see and understand things as they really are. “The idea of learning to respond appropriately lies at the heart of the Yogic approach to responsibility,” she says. Of course, responsibility is still a necessity for being an ethical person in society.

Having experienced the powerful transformation of many clients by using a combination of counselling and mindfulness practice to various psychological concerns including the prevention of the relapse of depression, managing stress, interpersonal relationships and personal growth, Khong is keen to integrate eastern philosophies into more areas of western psychology. She continues her research in this area.

One of her current research interests involves extending the work of colleagues and researchers in the US, the UK and The Netherlands who are studying the emotional and brain functioning (via functional MRI imaging) of people using mindfulness practice. Khong is looking at possible counselling applications and at ways of helping individuals improve their general sense of well-being.

“When mindfulness is practiced alongside other complementary therapeutic approaches, the result is an incisive and powerful tool for empowering clients to understand and deal with their problems with less reliance on the therapist”, Khong says.

See Khong’s article in:

## **Encountering Buddhism: Western Psychology and Buddhist Teachings**

**ISBN/SKU**

0791457354

**Author**

[Seth Robert Segall \(Edt\)](#)

**Publisher**

State Univ of New York Pr

**Publish Date**

May 2003

The Buddha Teaches an Attitude, Not an Affiliation  
by Belinda Siew Luan Khong  
page 61 (14 pages)

