

Using Buddhist Psychology in Executive Coaching

Iain McCormick and Stewart Forsyth
Executive Coaching Centre and FXC



Buddhism

- Buddhism originated in ancient India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE and has subsequently spread through much of the world
- Most Buddhist traditions share the goal of overcoming suffering
- It includes an analysis of human psychology and a range of therapeutic practices

Psychological framework

A Buddhist-inspired framework for dealing with difficult emotions (Szczygiel, 2015) suggests that four concepts are particularly helpful:

- Sitting With
- Middle Path
- Healthy Interdependency and
- Compassion



Sitting with

- *Sitting with* means that the coaching client is able to be present with his or her actual, direct, typically painful, emotional experience
- Related to mindfulness (being in the moment) and aims to overcome the reinforcing aspects of the avoidance of painful emotions
- Experiential avoidance involves trying to escape from unpleasant thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations even when doing so causes harm in the long-run



The Middle Path

- The *Middle Path* encourages the coaching client to find a balance between holding on and letting go, between rigidity and flexibility
- It challenges the client to give up false dichotomies such as good or bad, positive or negative particular with reference to both their inner emotional life and to important others, often persecutors or intimidators, in their present and past



Healthy Interdependency

- *Healthy interdependency* is the ability to find a healthy balance between being a self-determining, free individual yet to rely on the kindness, warmth and concern of others
- It involves the client accepting his or her own unique individuality while appreciating the impact others have had on their development



Compassion

- *Compassion* can be defined as the acceptance of and sensitivity towards the suffering of oneself and others
- It motivates clients to avoid emotional overwhelm and take action to help the physical, mental, or emotional pain of others and themselves

Buddhist framework and coaching

- *Sitting with* – Executive coaching is vulnerable to adopting an overly rational approach to problem-solving (to fit with the executive mindset) vs Buddhist – sitting with suffering, building up capability and self-efficacy for inevitability of suffering
- *Middle Way* – emotions often seen by clients as distractions to be managed, vs Middle Path – differentiating holding and letting go
- *Healthy interdependency* – often new managers see themselves as the sun in the middle of their own solar system – rather than as part of social network – or “inter-dependency”
- *Compassion* – some leaders see themselves as “stress carriers” – “a little bit of fear can be useful”, or “inspirers” vs providing their people with kindness and compassion.

Case Study 1

Sitting with and compassion

- Senior executive with traumatic background of family violence
- Some experience with meditation
- Used compassion mediation to help the person to both sit with own feelings and find compassion for self and the perpetrators

Case Study 2

Middle way

- Partner in professional services firm
- Long standing anxiety and fear of ‘being exited’ from the firm
- Using daily mindfulness and walking meditation to find the balance between ‘anxiety as a friend’ warning of danger and letting go of distress