

The Case of Mr. H:

Applying Buddhism in LBT

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss how the six-steps procedure of LBT can be applied to the case of Mr. H., who believes that it is reasonable for him to feel hopeless for his future. During the practicum session, we explore his emotional reasoning, identify and refute cardinal fallacies in the premises, and identify guiding virtues according to the fallacies. Further, according to Mr. H's preference, we explore and apply the uplifting philosophy associated with the ideas of Buddhism. I conclude the paper with reflections on how both Mr. H and myself learnt from this valuable experience.

I met Mr. H. on 30th December 2017 for the practicum session. I introduced the ideas of LBT to him that his reasoning would be examined through six steps, and encouraged him to choose and apply his own philosophy. I invited him to talk freely about the issues he would like to discuss.

Mr. H. is currently in his mid-twenties and having a full-time job. He mentions that the full-time job can support his basic needs for living, such as food, drinks and a living place. But he feels hopeless for the future.

‘Can you tell me more about why you feel hopeless?’ I asked.

‘I feel like I am just surviving for my life. It is meaningless. Everyday is the same. I work 12 hours a day. My salary is just enough for basic food, drink, clothes etc. I don't have leisure activities. One reason is that I don't have much private time left after work. But the most important reason is that I don't have much money left. I think if I am rich,

then I can enjoy my own life, instead of merely survive until the end of my life.’ Mr. H. said.

‘So what you are saying is that if I don’t have private time and leisure activities, then my life is meaningless right?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’ Mr. H. said.

‘Can you explain more why you think the meaning of life is related to private time and leisure activities?’ I asked.

‘The world is absurd. I know that many people get subsidy from government. But they look happy. I see them always going to cafe to enjoy high tea and talk to their friend. When I look at myself, I am wondering why I need to work just for surviving? Why can’t I go to cafe everyday like them? Also, the housing price is very expensive in Hong Kong. Only rich people can afford a decent apartment. For poor people like me, I have to rent a flat that is small like a cage. It is not for human. I pay rent to my landlord every month. I sacrifice my time to work, and quite a large proportion of money is devoted to the landlord. The money is gone, never come back. So that's why I want to own a living place. When I own it, I devote the money to myself, rather than giving to someone else. These are totally different concepts. Now I sacrifice my time to work for money, then it is gone, and earn back again and then gone, repeated months after months. This is meaningless. Unless I win the lottery, this will be my whole life. So, you can see my life is hopeless.’ Mr. H. sighed afterwards.

Step 1: Identify Mr. H.’s emotional reasoning

E=O+R

Depression (E) = I rent instead of own a living place and thus nothing belongs to me in the future (O) + life is meaningless and hopeless (R)

(Rule) If I rent instead of own a living place and thus nothing belongs to me in the future (O), then life is meaningless and hopeless (R).

(Report) I anticipate that I rent instead of own a living place and thus nothing belongs to me in the future (O).

(Conclusion) Therefore, life is meaningless and hopeless (R).

Step 2: Check for fallacies in the premises

Pigeonholing:

Either I own a living place or nothing belongs to me in the future

I anticipate that I rent instead of own a living place throughout my life.

Therefore, nothing belongs to me in the future.

Demanding perfection and Existential damnation:

I must own a living place for my life.

If I must own a living place for my life, then if I rent instead of own a living place and thus nothing belongs to me in the future, then life is meaningless and hopeless.

So, if I rent instead of own a living place and thus nothing belongs to me in the future, then life is meaningless and hopeless.

I anticipate that I rent instead of own a living place and thus nothing belongs to me in the future.

Therefore, life is meaningless and hopeless.

Step 3: Refute fallacies in the premises

I asked Mr. H. to consider whether it is a must to own a living place in order to survive. The situation that he can rent a living place to survive reflects that it is not a must to own a living place in order to survive. Thus, 'I must own a living place for my life' can be refuted.

Further, I asked Mr. H. to consider whether it is impossible to rent a living place to live meaningfully. Specifically, there are cases that people who rent a living place find themselves meaningful when devoting themselves volunteering. It is possible to rent a living place while having a meaningful life. It follows that there are both probabilities of owning a living place while living a meaningful life, and probabilities of renting a living place while living a meaningful life. Therefore, the premise 'if I rent instead of own a living place and thus nothing belongs to me in the future, then life is meaningless and hopeless' can be refuted. Mr. H. agreed with this counterexample.

Following the logic that it is possible to live a meaningful life while renting a living place, there can be something meaningful belong to Mr. H. while renting a living place. Thus, the premise that 'Either I own a living place or nothing belong to me' can also be refuted.

I suggest to Mr. H. that since it is possible to live a meaningful life while renting a living place, his conclusion that life is meaningless and hopeless can be replaced with 'life is possible to be meaningful if I look for something meaningful to me rather than merely focusing on whether I can own a living place.'

Step 4: Identify guiding virtues for Mr. H.:

Demanding perfection: Metaphysical security

Existential damnation: Respect

Pigeonholing: Objectivity

Step 5: Find Mr. H.'s Uplifting philosophy

Mr. H. has heard some ideas about Buddhism. He would like to know more about it. The message he got is to let go everything and don't need to take everything seriously. I suggested to him that this idea is close to Buddha's idea that we don't need to cling to ideas. Specifically, since things are constantly changing and not permanent, there is no absolute sense of things, ideas, and even self. Therefore, if we cling to absolute things, ideas and self, then we are likely to suffer when they change. However, this doesn't mean we have to let go everything. We are free to choose whether we adopt any ideas come to mind. We don't need to obsess about whether we have to adopt any ideas.

'What do you think if you live according to this idea?' I asked.

'I am free to choose.' Mr. H. said.

'Yes. For example, since things are constantly changing and are not permanent, 'own a living place' becomes not an absolute concept. 'I must own a living place' means 'own a living place' in an absolute sense. If you change "must" to "prefer", then it becomes not an absolute sense, rather it is your own preference. 'I prefer to own a living place. So I can choose to look for the options rationally. If this fails, then it is your preference that doesn't come true, rather than to demand on the reality.' I said.

I added that ‘you mentioned life is meaningless and hopeless. Buddha suggests that we accept ourselves as we are. We are born to be perfect, so we don’t need to feel bad about ourselves. We don’t need to obsess about how good we are or how bad we are. Buddha suggests the best ways to live is to have clear thinking. When we obsess about thinking about ideas, we are likely to be disturbed by the thinking itself, rather than focus on the ideas. Clear thinking allows rational analysis of your situation.’

Step 6: Applying the uplifting philosophy

‘So what do you think you can do practically according to this idea?’ I asked.

‘I don’t need to force myself to own a living place. I am still surviving. I can think of doing something I like.’ Mr. H. said.

‘Yes. Can you tell me a bit more about what else can be meaningful to you apart from owning a living place?’ I asked.

‘I like Naturopathy. I like its idea that is different from conventional medical science. I think I am free to learn more about it. I am free to go to the bookstores to read more about it.’ Mr. H. said.

‘Okay. Anything else you find meaningful to you?’ I asked.

‘I think I can take some courses of Naturopathy if I have extra money.’ Mr. H. replied.

‘Okay. To sum up the action plan, you will go to find some books about Naturopathy to learn more about it. You will also look for some courses about Naturopathy and will take the courses when you have sufficient money for living and for paying the course fees.’ I said.

Conclusion:

What, I learn from this experience

When we began the session, I found he had a lot of things to talk to me about. I tried to bear in mind to actively listen to what he said while my mind was continuously going through the six steps of LBT. I find this is challenging because the client's responses cannot be predicted. It is a dynamic process that I have to interact with the client, rather than mechanically apply the six steps to lead the client. I have to be aware of not going too rough or too details about the suggestions. If I go through the suggestions very brief, the client may not understand. If I go into very details, then it will be easily out of the scope because not all philosophical concepts are directly relevant to the client's situation and aspiration.

Also, I need to be aware of the pace of the client and myself. Sometimes I paused a while and thought about whether I explained the suggestions clearly enough and whether they were the best suggestions for the client. I was a bit demanding perfection to hope that the client can be satisfied while going through the session.

I learned that LBT is an art that requires me to creatively make use of the learning materials, rather than just to recall the learning materials and put all the things out there for the client. It resonates with the subjective world of the client.

What I would do differently next time

I am not proficient in managing the session smoothly as I imagined. When I heard that Mr. H. likes the ideas of Buddhism I tried to locate the corresponding philosophical antidotes

and think of how I can suggest the ideas according to the client's responses. The interaction between me and Mr. H. sometimes was not as smooth as normal conversation.

When constructing Mr. H.'s reasoning, I presented the arguments and fallacies straightforward to him, rather than smoothly mentioning the ideas to him.

For the next time, I will practice my interaction with the client and present the client's reasoning and fallacies in more natural ways.

What the counselee learned

The counselee told me that he wasn't aware that he reasoned in this way. He thought that he was logical to feel depressed because the environment caused him to reason in this way. It is natural to feel depressed because I cannot get what I want.

When I presented his own arguments to him, he became aware that the subject that the premises and conclusions refer to is himself, rather than the environment. For example, he demands himself to own a living place rather than the world forces him to do this.

Also, it was the first time for him to be counselled. He used to think that counselling is about helping the weak people. He believed that he is not weak mentally, so he felt resisted to see counsellor. Also, he thought that counsellors often give useless advice, such as 'try to be positive. No need to worry because things will become better.' It is a waste of time for him because he also knows how to laugh for all the things encountered in his life. He thought it is crazy to self-deceive that the things are all good when in fact they are bad. After I introduced LBT to him, he was interested in the philosophical approach to life issues. What LBT impressed him the most was that his deductive reasoning was valid but not sound. This is consistent with his original thought that he knows what he was thinking and thus he is not weak mentally.