

From the perspective of Chinese Buddhism, a practice of more than 244 million individuals in the world (PEW Research Center, 2012), complications in life including physical illnesses, accidents, and mental health problems are direct results of negative karma (業障) or the consequence of one's negative actions in the past. Repentance is one of the most powerful ways to cleanse one's negative karma, purify one's mind, and ultimately attain Buddhist wisdom (Ting & Ng, 2012). Because of this reason, repentance has been an extremely prevalent form of practice in Chinese Buddhists from the beginning of Mahayana Buddhism to contemporary society.

Linguistically, the word *Repentance* (懺悔 chàn huǐ) has a deep meaning in Chinese Buddhism. The Chinese word 懺 can be closely translated to the term “confess”. The iconographic structure of 懺 encompasses the characters 從心 (from the bottom of the heart), 非 (wrongdoing), 戈 (dagger/ cut), and 雙人 (two people). The combination of these meanings becomes “one person sincerely cutting off the wrongdoings to another person.” 悔 can be translated as remorse and its iconographic structure includes 從心 (from the bottom of the heart) and 每 (every). It means the remorse is a constant reminder in everyday life so that one will not repeat the same mistake. Repentance is not about burdening oneself with shame or guilt—rather, it is about breaking the habitual patterns that produce negative karma and using Buddhist wisdom to guide future actions.

The Buddhist perception of repentance is to sincerely feel remorse for the wrongdoings in the past and to change future actions (Thubten, 2001). At the origin of Buddhism, the Buddha used repentance (Vinaya) to help his disciples manage transgressions, especially when Buddhist precepts were broken (Hong, 2014). A bhikkhu (monk) who broke a precept would need to

confess to the Buddha and the fellow disciples, and may need to receive punishment. Through the repentance and punishment, the transgressions would be absolved and the bhikkhu would vow to refrain from breaching any precept again. After the Buddha's death, repentance remains an important practice across different Buddhist traditions and manifested into different repentance scriptures as well as rituals when it entered ancient China.

From a modern Buddhist practitioner's perspective, a basic level of repentance is to confess one's own physical and mental misdeeds and to repent toward people whom one has mistreated (Thubten, 2001). Such confessions purify the practitioner's mind by freeing the individual from his or her sense of sin. A higher level of practice will progress to repenting for all sins one ever committed toward the Buddha including sins committed with or without awareness. By thoroughly studying the Buddhist teachings and meditating on Buddhist doctrines, a practitioner learns to examine oneself as an imperfect being. This introspection will lead to the revelation of one's Buddha-nature. Similar to polishing a hidden gem of all the grime on the surface of the stone, repenting cleanses the Buddha-nature of any hindrances. The highest level of Buddhist repentance moves beyond the focus on personal transgressions to the understanding of emptiness. In other words, when the mind understands there is no mind, the transgression and merit have no owner, and the wrongdoing is by itself empty. It is a dualistic understanding that all wrongdoings are merely the effect of various causes and conditions. Hence, the wrongdoing itself is hollow, yet one still repents for the wrongdoing and commits to not cause harm to others again. This insight of emptiness is one of the highest attainments in Buddhist teachings.

From a psychological perspective, repentance may be defined as an elaborative apology from a transgressor who admits responsibility of the transgression and expresses remorse towards the target of transgression (Eaton & Struthers, 2006). Although the relationship between

repentance and mental health does not receive enough research attention, Rana, Rana, Herzberg, and Krause (2015) conducted a cross-sectional study with 78 Buddhists, 77 Catholics, 89 Protestants and 79 Muslims to study how repentance practices associate with their psychological well-being. According to the participants' responses to the brief symptom inventory, Buddhist and Protestant participants had lower scores for paranoid ideations and overall symptom severity in comparison with Catholic and Muslim participants. One of the possible psychological effects of repentance to account for the therapeutic effect is self-forgiveness, which helps to resolve intrinsic conflicts within one's ego (Vitz & Meade, 2011). The failure to forgive oneself after a transgression can result in overwhelming feelings of guilt, self-hatred, and shame, which can be detrimental to one's moral and psychological well-being (Szabloinski, 2012). Previous studies have shown that repentance towards the victim of transgression can facilitate forgiveness, promote prosocial behaviors of the transgressor, and reduce psychological aggression of the victim (Eaton & Struthers, 2006). When repenting to the victim is impossible or difficult, the cultivation of self-forgiveness in religious rituals can be effective in reducing psychological suffering. Through sincere repentance in many religious rituals, a third party such as a priest, rabbi, or a monk, as well as the scriptures would assure that the offence is forgivable, which may contribute to self-forgiveness to alleviate one's emotional pain. Due to these very reasons, it is important to consider religiosity and possibly individuals' repentance practices and confession in psychotherapy (Rana, Rana, Herzberg, & Krause, 2015).

Although there can be many possible spiritual benefits of repentance from the perspectives of Chinese Buddhism, comparatively a lot less is known about its psychological significance and possible applications to professional counseling. Together with the high prevalence of Buddhism in the globe and the recommendation by the American Psychological

Association (APA) to endorse spirituality and religion in mental health practices (Ting & Ng, 2012), it is crucial for mental health professionals (MHP) to understand the meanings, components and psychological significance of repentance in order to: (1) raise cultural awareness of this practice which is done by more than ten million individuals in the world (Pew Research Center, 2012); (2) examine the therapeutic effects of this folk tradition (Sue & Sue, 2013); and (3) possibly incorporate repentance to the counseling process in a culturally congruent way to enhance treatment effectiveness, especially for clients who experience shame and guilt. It is important to note that the interventions delineated in this article primarily focus on clients who identify as Buddhists or are interested in Buddhism. All helping professionals should avoid imposing their religious values and biases on their clients while valuing clients' spirituality and religious beliefs.

### **Brief History of Buddhist Repentance in Chinese History**

The first documentation of Buddhist repentance in Chinese history can be traced back to the first century BC (Hong, 2014). Along with the Buddhist scriptures from India, repentance scriptures, such as the *Trisakanadhaka*, were brought into China and translated into Chinese. Gradually, Buddhist repentance gained public acceptance and became a spiritual means to cope with wars, diseases, and natural disasters (Bai, 2010). Repentance successfully immersed into Chinese culture and became an important ritual of Chinese Buddhism due to its alignment with the Confucius view of self-examination and its solution to purification of one's transgressions and eradication of unwholesome karma (Hong, 2014). This purification of transgression was perceived as important because violation of a precept without confessing and repenting could harm or even destroy the 'precept essence,' an essence inherent in the body of a recipient of the precepts, which is crucial for higher meditative attainments (Greene, 2012). Damage to this

essence could thwart practitioners from achieving *Jhāna*, the ultimate state of consciousness. However, if the practitioner confesses and repents for their wrongdoing, and performs the repentance ritual, their potential for achieving *Jhāna* would be restored.

Repentance rituals in China were performed either in isolation or with a group liturgy (Williams, 2002). Since repentance rituals in historical China were perceived as processes to attaining liberation in the current life and reaching the Pure Land upon death, new approaches to liturgical and social organizations were created. From the late fifth and sixth century, large liturgies of repentance proliferated, which were mainly held and attended by the socially elite. Eventually, repentance was generalized to lay Buddhist practitioners as well.

Repentance in Buddhism is important not only because it guides people to confess their wrongs and feel regretful of their actions and motivates them to vow to never enact that same transgression, but also because it helps people become more mindful of their thoughts and senses (Cho, 2013). Developing awareness of oneself can help people monitor their behaviors and decrease incidences of behaving habitually and committing a wrongdoing in order to enhance the fundamental Buddhist practices of discipline (*sila*), concentration (*samatha*) and wisdom (*prajñā*). Buddhist repentance is also believed to purify bad karma, eradicate past transgressions, and cultivate more compassion and empathy for all beings. Furthermore, Buddhist scriptures documented that the Buddha described repentance as an ultimate way to avoid being reborn as hell-dwellers, animals, or hungry ghosts, as well as the way to achieve enlightenment (Strauchi, 2010). Due to these very reasons, repentance is an essential practice, which is required for all Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns.

### **Common components in Repentance Rituals**

Repentance can be practiced in many different forms ranging from a single chanting of sutras to a seven-day ritual, such as The Emperor Liang Repentance. The modality of practice depends on the tradition of the practitioner's Buddhist school as well as the practitioner's preferred mode of cultivation. However, several components are common across all repentance rituals including reverential bowing, chanting sutras, listening to Dharma talks, and sending compassion and blessings to participants' important ones and/or victims of transgression (回向).

*Reverential Bowing.* The acts of prostrations and bowing in repentance rites help the practitioner become humble and sincere, so as to fully admit all the mistakes he or she has done (Hong, 2011). Prostrations and bowing are active gestures of taking an inferior position to revere a higher being. The experience of giving up self-importance helps to weaken the attachment to or even let go of the illusion of self, and each bow places the human body in a form of submission which helps to undermine the pride and arrogance of one's ego. Bowing is also a meditative practice which centers the mind from wandering and assists in mental concentration (Sure, 2010). Similar to walking meditation, one needs to be mindful of their movements during each bow. Along with bowing, one should repent and reflect on the Buddhist sutras, thereby deepening their understanding of the Buddhist texts.

Repentance rituals usually involve tens to hundreds of bows depending on the subculture of each temple and the practitioner's utmost sincerity is highly emphasized because such sincerity would help the practitioner be received and responded to by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (Hong, 2011). In repentance rituals, prostration is composed of three-step consecutive postures while reciting narratives. After a full prostration, the practitioner kneels on the ground with the right knee and vows to attain enlightenment and bring about all sentient beings to achieve Buddhahood. Then the practitioner presses both knees and hands against the

ground. By doing this, he would realize that after people become aware of their fallacious ways of life in the past, they would turn to repentance. With both hands and knees on the ground and supposedly having the mind touching the ground, the practitioner makes vows to transfer the merits of a Buddha and lead all human beings to attain great enlightenment.

*Confession.* Confession is a crucial component of the repentance rituals. According to Chinese Buddhist scriptures, human beings have to recognize their own faults, confess them, accept total responsibility for the mistakes they made, and rectify them on their own (Hong, 2011). For example, one of the most influential repentance sutras in the history of Chinese Buddhism, *Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance*, states that all human beings are impure and have massive amounts of transgressions (Shi, 2012). Practitioners have to sincerely confess their previous and current life's transgressions, which are usually caused by wrong body actions, speech, and evil thought. The more the practitioners can be aware of the effect of their transgression, the more they can prevent themselves from relapsing into their vicious cycle. Furthermore, confession was an important practice in a monastic community in early Indian Buddhism (Hong, 2011). At that time, when a monk purposely broke a precept, he would be required to confess his transgression in front of the community. Then he only could return to the monastic community after he received the penalty. Attwood (2008) claimed "the people confessing are experiencing remorse and make a resolve not to repeat the same action" (p. 292) and can produce "a return to health" (p. 292). This means that the confession brings people back before they deviate from their track and allows people to return to the state of purity (Attwood, 2008).

The practitioner would confess in front of the Buddha and/or Bodhisattvas statues, and the content of confession encompasses all transgressions from this lifetime, past lifetimes,

transgressions from the three karmic sources: body, speech, and the mind, transgressions from incorrect practices of the Six Paramitas (invaluable qualities), and transgressions from improperly practicing the Thirty-Seven Factors of Enlightenment (Hong, 2011). Through sincere and repetitive repentance, this practice will eventually eradicate one's transgressions from this lifetime and assist one in achieving enlightenment.

*Chanting Repentance Sutras.* Chanting plays an important role in the spiritual practice. Chanting can induce a peaceful mind and concentrated attention on a sutra (Telles et al, 1995). Lin et al., (2006) addressed that chanting can reduce intrusive thoughts and negative emotions, and enhance tranquility of mind, empathy, and focused attention. Chanting is a public medium to assist practitioners in memorizing the Buddha's teachings (Davies, 1994). In other words, the sacred scriptures are learned, memorized and corrected through chanting (Davies, 1994; Harvey, 1994). In all Buddhist schools, chanting a passage is also used to protect practitioners from danger or to cure illnesses (Davies, 1994). Many Mahayana Buddhist temples or centers provide regular ceremonies that allow fellow practitioners to chant sutras. As a result, chanting not only serves as a religious purpose but also as a function to strengthen social bonds.

There are a number of repentance sutras for repentance rituals including The Compassionate Samadhi Water Repentance Sutra, The Heart Sutra, The Amitabha Sutra, The Eighty Eight Buddha's Repentance, Emperor Liang Repentance Sutra, The Medicine Buddha Sutra, and The Diamond Sutra. While each sutra has unique contents and themes, all sutras convey core Buddhist teachings such as repenting for transgressions induced by the three poisons (Clinging, Aversion, and Ignorance), consequences of wrongdoings, confessing for all the sins, vowing to refrain from committing the same transgression, and vowing to follow Buddhist precepts and cultivate good deeds. Moreover, the sutras usually end with having practitioners



make vows to turn the merit of repentance to all sentient beings and eradicate all unwholesome deeds for all sentient beings. This concept is based on the bodhisattva vow that as a practitioner vows to become a Buddha, he or she would help all beings to become a Buddha. Taken together, chanting repentance sutras is a process of learning and contemplating Buddhist teachings as well as reflecting on personal transgressions and making active changes.

*Music.* Chinese Buddhism believes that sutras sung as hymns and other Buddhist sacred songs and music praising the virtues of the Buddhas and Bodhisattva can attract and help purify the hearts of countless followers (Mabbett, 2013). Because of this reason, formal repentance ceremonies such as The Great Compassion Repentance ceremony or The Emperor Liang Repentance ceremony are filled with singing sutras, hymning, and playing Buddhist music using a number of Dharma instruments such as the gong, large bell, large drum, wooden fish, small cymbals, large cymbals, and Chinese tambourine. Many participants will sing and/or hymn along with the leading monks and nuns. Buddhist practices make use of instrumental music to preach Buddhist laws for both lay and monastic adherents. According to a study on the function of Tibetan Buddhism Musical Ritual, Cupchik (2015) found that the melodies and rhythms in music performance enhance the meditation process by eliciting specific emotions that aid the practitioner in experiencing transformative insights. Moreover, Buddhist music is used to capture participants' attention, connect with them deeply, and tug at their heartstrings to convey Buddhist teachings and compassion.

### **Psychological Significance of Chinese Buddhist Repentance**

Human beings have the need to behave in manners that do not induce feelings of shame or guilt. Guilt is commonly elucidated as condemnation of a particular behavior or action, whereas shame is described as condemnation of the whole self (Faiver, O'Brian, & Ingersoll,

2000). Previous studies have shown that feelings of shame and guilt can result in negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, depression, problematic alcohol use, drug use, and suicide (Young, Neighbors, DiBello, Traylor, & Tomkins, 2016). Although people attempt to avoid behaving in ways generative of such feelings, experiencing guilt, shame or regret at least once in a lifetime is inevitable. From a psychological perspective, repentance appears to help individuals alleviate such feelings through the expression of their guilt, regret or shame, commitment to take responsibilities for their actions, increased self-awareness of their intrapsychic, cultivation of self-forgiveness, and instilled hope for future positive actions.

As repentance rituals permit participants to confess, it provides opportunities to mourn for the loss of loved ones and find a sense of equanimity in critical self-blaming. Similar to group therapy, repentance rituals create a supportive environment in which participants normalize one another's feelings and the sutras affirm participants that their sins can be cleansed through genuine repentance. This process not only alleviates suffering triggered by guilt or shame, but also enhances one's awareness of one's faults and shortcomings. In order to break free from a cycle of habitual mistakes generated by that particular fault, it is important to set vows never to repeat that action. In this sense, vows in repentance rituals are similar to committed actions in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which encourages clients to set goals consistent with their value systems (Hayes, 1999). Setting vows is important because it helps people avoid repeating the same mistakes, and further motivating people to commit more wholesome deeds and consequently cultivate more positive qualities.

Repentance also serves as an important means to reduce psychological suffering in those with tendencies to burden themselves with self-blame and self-condemnation. During repentance, practitioners engage in the present moment to use that clarity and objectivity to observe the past.

Through that process, practitioners are able to accurately discern the cause and effect of their actions and perceive the situation in a more objective light. This objective evaluation can alleviate some of the initial shame and guilt the practitioner experienced and help establish a degree of self-compassion. Practitioners can further cultivate self-compassion in repentance rituals by taking refuge in the Buddha and/or Bodhisattvas. Self-compassion can then help people learn to forgive themselves, which instills a sense of renewal and hope for a better future (Kimball, 1993).

Chinese Buddhist Repentance has cultural significance in Chinese culture in which shame and guilt are crucial concepts in the social norm. In Chinese societies, one's behaviors are constantly evaluated by others and maintaining one's pride as well as one's family's pride is an important duty to observe in this collectivistic cultural norm (Fang & Wark, 1998). In this cultural framework, face (臉) plays a highly important role in daily life and it refers to one's pride, dignity, self-respect, and ability to maintain one's obligation as a good citizen in front of others. Face is a social product of one's achievements and others' evaluations, and losing face means one or one's family is not living up to social standards or values which can bring a lot of shame to both the individual and his or her family. Because of the concern of face, admitting one's wrongdoing can be extremely difficult in Chinese culture. Especially, admitting one's transgression to others is even more difficult to Chinese elders with power because the Confucian emphasis on respecting elders who are supposed to be the exemplars of fulfilling social obligations. By performing repentance rituals, practitioners openly confess their wrongdoings to the Buddha and Bodhisattvas and their negative karma will be erased by their sincere effort to repent. This ritual grants practitioners a sense of renewal, a hope of purifying their transgression, and a feeling of forgiveness.

Many specific components of repentance rituals may have unique therapeutic effects. For example, in a study measuring the effects of Om Chanting, which is a type of meditation that requires attending to the breath and chanting, on alpha EEG and galvanic skin response in 20 participants, it was found that Om chanting significantly decreased stress and increased relaxation (Anand, 2014). In another study, "Om" chanting was found to play a role in anger management and relaxation (Ranta, 2009) and chanting and humming helped children express emotions and connect with their peers (Lysaker, Wheat, & Benson, 2010). From a neuroscientific perspective, chanting can increase interpersonal synchrony by activating the caudate nucleus in the basal ganglia (Kokal, Engel, Kirschner, & Keysers, 2011). Some researchers suggested that religious chanting can cultivate a sense of interpersonal synchrony among the participants and transform this synchrony into a reward signal which stimulates prosocial and cooperative behaviors. However, different forms of chanting can result in very different effects. Football players' excited chanting, including clapping, arm waving, rhythmic tones, or even dirty words, before football games can increase their level of aggression and hostility during their games (Bensimon & Bodner, 2011). Therefore, chanting seems to be a powerful tool to increase collaboration in a group and intensify the shared feelings.

Similar to the effects of chanting, bowing is also a mindfulness practice that cultivates concentration skills by focusing on the present moment (Sure, 2010). In a study analyzing the effects of daily Muslim prayers also known as Salah, which include physical acts similar to Buddhist prostrations, on alpha brain activity, it was found that the prayers increased activity in the parietal and occipital regions of the brain (Doufesh, Faisal, Lim, & Ibrahim, 2012). These results suggest an elevation in the parasympathetic nervous system, which suggests an increased state of relaxation. Prostrations in repentance are also important since the act of positioning the

body in a posture symbolic of humility and vulnerability weakens one's feeling of pride and arrogance (Sure, 2010). As one's ego weakens, one is able to acknowledge and admit one's mistakes, and further accept that change may be necessary (Lundberg, 2010). Only through this realization and acceptance will the practitioner consider making a commitment to change so that he or she does not repeat past transgressions. Although these components of repentance appear to simply highlight the more immediate effects, such as tranquility and lessened feelings of guilt and/or shame, they also serve greater long-term benefits of forgiveness or self-forgiveness.

Forgiveness in the literature is described as the art of attention to bring about interpersonal transgressions to end, a feeling of relief, and cessation of urge to avoid transgressors or seek revenge (Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008). Forgiveness of others generally occurs within context of a relationship between two people (i.e., the forgiving victim and the forgiven perpetrator). However, seeking forgiveness from the victims may not always be possible and in turn regretful transgressors may experience a tumult of unresolved feelings such as guilt, shame, self-condemnation, self-anger, and self-hatred.

In situations that transgressors cannot seek forgiveness, self-forgiveness may be an effective therapeutic tool (Kim & Enright, 2014). Self-forgiveness does not excuse behaviors nor should it be mistaken for guiltlessness or narcissism. Indeed, self-forgiveness involves accepting one's responsibility and pain in the process of processing feelings of remorse (Wohl, Deshea, & Wahkinney, 2008). If an individual shifts blame for a given transgression onto another party, there is no basis for self-forgiveness (McCullough et al., 2000). Likewise, Burton-Nelson (2000) stated that self-forgiveness is the act of generosity and kindness toward the self-following and self-perceived inappropriate action. Those who see no wrongdoing in their specific wrongful actions would have nothing for which to forgive themselves and may be highly

anti-social, whereas those who could never forgive themselves for their errors may see little but their errors and become stuck in self-condemnation without a chance for healing. However, once people begin to accept responsibility that their behavior has led them to their current situation, self-forgiveness becomes more relevant to the individual (Wohl & Thompson, 2006).

Although no literature to date has studied the relationship between repentance and self-forgiveness, it is possible for transgressors to experience self-forgiveness by repenting their transgressions to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, radiating compassion to victims, and committing to follow Buddhist precepts and avoid the same transgressions in Chinese Buddhist repentance. During the repentance rituals, sincere transgressors would receive the acceptance and compassion from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and they would have a space to express all negative emotions associated with the transgressions. The vows of returning good deeds to the victims at the end of the repentance rituals also instill hope in transgressors and provide a feeling of healing victims' wounds. Thus, these Buddhist practices and beliefs may alleviate the guilt of transgressors and cultivate self-forgiveness.

### **Implications for Helping Professionals**

Some suggestions for incorporating components of Buddhist repentance into therapy for clients experiencing guilt and/or shame include facilitating confession or expression of guilt, setting goals, chanting exercises, and reading about repentance. Due to ethical concerns with imposing religious beliefs onto clients, it is first crucial for MHPs to tailor the intervention according to the client's degree of comfort in accepting Buddhism-derived therapy. It can also be useful for MHPs to consider third wave modalities to help clients with more guidance of exploration with deeper values in their experiences and to become more mindful of their experiences.

Above all, for clients who participate in repentance rituals, MHPs can use the spiritual experiences to process clients' feelings of shame and guilt. For example, discussing the meanings of the prostrations to the Buddha as challenging the self and lowering the ego may help clients explore their possible psychological rigidity in their thought patterns and behaviors. A common repentance verse in Chinese Buddhism is written as, "all the unwholesome karma created by me; arising from beginningless greed, hatred and delusion; expressed through my body, speech, and mind; I hereby regret and repent them all." Learning and chanting these repentance verses and sutras may help clients acknowledge their wrongdoings, take responsibilities for their actions, and cultivate accurate empathy to experience the pain of the victims. For clients who have overwhelming levels of guilt and shame, it is important to consider the clients' possible misunderstanding and use of Buddhist repentance as an endless and dysfunctional self-defeating cycle. When appropriate, MHPs can explain that the true meanings of repentance are to receive compassion from Buddhas and Bodhisattva, commit to new and positive choices in life, and most importantly, let go of the transgressions. In response to transgressions and many other adversities in life, Grandmaster Sheng-Yen summarized the Buddhist method by a simple motto, "face it, accept it, deal with it, and then let it go." Using these Buddhist teachings, MHPs can facilitate clients to accept and acknowledge their shame and guilt while inhibiting these feelings from driving the clients' thoughts as well as empowering clients to let go of their wrongdoings.

For clients comfortable with Buddhism-based interventions, MHPs may use chanting as an intervention to empathize with and validate clients' feelings of guilt and shame, normalize their feelings with a non-judgmental attitude, and inspire alternative insights. For example, if the Buddhist practice is consistent with the client's culture, values, and beliefs, MHPs can take a

short part of The Great Compassion Repentance sutra as a contemplative exercise to chant with clients:

... on this day, I have great faith in the law of cause and effect. I feel shame, great fear, and remorse. I confess my faults, and I repent and reform. I put an end to my incessant thoughts and resolve upon Awakening. I will no longer do harmful things, and with body, speech, and mind, I will be diligent in doing only good. I will correct my mistakes and will always rejoice in the good works, whether great or small, of sages and ordinary people. I will always be mindful of the Buddhas in the ten directions, and I know that their wisdom and their blessings have the power to rescue me and all other beings from the seas of the two deaths to the shore of the three virtues. Since time without beginning, I have committed many harmful acts, without realizing that all things are fundamentally empty and still. But now I know that all things are empty and still, and for the sake of awakening and for the sake of living beings, I will no longer do anything harmful. But instead, I will do every possible good deed. And I pray that Guanshiyin will compassionately accept my repentance (Chuan & Rounds, 2014, p.45).

By reflecting on this sutra paragraph, clients may be empowered to confess their faults and encouraged to actively repent. The wording may provide an open space for clients to project their guilt and shame. MHPs can also guide clients to visualize the victim of their transgression and apologize to them while chanting. The content of the sutras may also cultivate faith in clients to bless the victims in the name of the Great Compassion Bodhisattva as well as refresh the clients' mind by having them commit to not inflict harms to others again. Finally, asking for acceptance for repentance may cultivate self-forgiveness to help the clients cope with guilt and shame. The MHPs can also use a Cognitive Behavioral Therapy approach to carefully help clients discover and correct the irrational thoughts behind their shameful feelings. Examples of irrational thoughts may include "I am shame", "I have never done anything good", or "I will always be cursed by my shame". Socratic questioning could be utilized to test these assumptions and help alter irrational thoughts by comparing clients' negative assumptions with the hope they see from the sutras (e.g. "I have never done anything good" vs. "I will do every possible good deed").



Repentance can be transformed into a structured behavioral intervention by having the client set a particular goal based on compassion, such as committing a particular good deed or abstaining from committing a bad deed. For example, MHPs can collaboratively set a realistic goal with clients to commit three good deeds per day. Clients can monitor their progress by having self-reflections a few times a day and to document their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors during each good deed. In addition to setting goals, clients also chant Buddhist repentance scriptures as a mindfulness practice to achieve a state of peace and strengthen one's devotion from refraining from recommitting that behavior. If the client is interested, MHPs can encourage clients to explore repentance ceremonies in the temples they attend in order to confess, listen to spiritual melodies, read Buddhist scriptures, and use prostrations to cope with their shame and guilt.

Another important application of repentance to counseling is the cultivation of self-forgiveness. Vitz and Meade (2011) suggested that individuals with intense levels of guilt may develop an inner-self with negative cycles of thinking and behaving in which their egos are fragmented into a past self with unresolved resentment and guilt conflicting with a present self with current aspirations. The fragmented egos have constant battles over the unresolved past and fail to reach resolution. From a Buddhist perspective, clinging to the self is a very fundamental source of suffering and this clinginess includes the attachment to past events and feelings of shame and guilt. In order to attain liberation from this suffering, the individual needs to develop a non-self-perspective to understand that the self is merely an effect of multiple causes. Applying this concept to counseling, MHPs can help clients differentiate their intense feelings of guilt and shame from their egos by perceiving their feelings as only activities of the mind. In fact, self-forgiveness and repentance can be an intrapsychic process to cultivate psychological, emotional,

and possibly spiritual changes within the individual. Repentance can also be a form of private investigation of how negative motives can be avoided in the future. Through repenting and committing to positive behaviors, one can practice making the private decision to let go of bitter or vengeful attitudes. MHPs can help clients understand the positive attitudes embedded in repentance which can foster self-justifications or reactions to fully accept responsibility for the transgression as well as the judgements and criticisms from others, ease the guilt and shame by sincerely confessing, and restore broken relationships and bring harmony and trust through changed attitudes and committed actions. To cultivate self-forgiveness, MHPs may use self-affirmative statements as interventions (Fisher & Exline, 2010), such as leading the client to read, “I deeply repent for my transgressions, and from now on, I will perform virtue whenever I am capable,” “I see my action as only an action and I’m not all my actions,” and “I thereby make a firm commitment to cultivate a spirit of protection and a spirit of compassion toward the world.” MHPs can also write these statements in collaboration with clients in order to affirm their commitment for positive changes.

### **Case Example of Applying Repentance to Counseling**

Ma Hu is a 43-year-old Chinese American Buddhist man who sought counseling due to his severe emotional disturbances related to his chronic illness. Ma has been a Buddhist for more than five years and has been attending the temple about once a month to volunteer. Ma practices a vegetarian diet for two days a month, and he constantly donates to the temple and the monks because he believes doing so will bring him good karma. However, he does not have a regular practice nor learns a lot about the core of Buddhist teachings. He is a business owner and has been financially successful for the past 15 years. He is currently married and has a daughter who is ten. Ma claimed to have “a perfect life” before developing the chronic illness.

About a year ago, he received an entrepreneur of the year award by a notable local business organization. A couple months after, he was diagnosed with Lymphoma cancer. In his 17 months of battling cancer and receiving chemotherapy, he experienced intense levels of both physical and psychological pain. He lost all his hair, and became nauseated that lead Ma to vomit from time to time. Ma also experienced feelings of a burning sensation. Ma had to sell most of his company's shares to his business associates due to his inability to work. Because of these physiological complications, he became irritable, cynical, and depressed, and he started to lose faith in Buddhism. The MHP is a licensed marriage and family therapist who is Buddhist and is trained in Buddhist-informed treatments such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. After the counselor empathically listened to Ma's pain and frustrations, he assessed Ma's spirituality and explored if it can serve as a curative factor for Ma. The counselor then asked for Ma's interest and permission to share a short article on Buddhist repentance for reflections and discussions. Upon Ma's agreement, the counselor shared a part of Repentance Sūtra in Response to Śāriputra, a classical Buddhist scripture, which documented Buddha's response to his discipline on using repentance to purify one's mind and reach enlightenment. In discussing the meaning of the Sutra, Ma acquired some insights to shift his focus from blaming others to reflecting on personal imperfections and transgressions. From initially resisting to acknowledge personal wrongdoings, he gradually became open to the mindset that everyone has harmed others intentionally and unintentionally. As Ma has a good relationship with some of the monks in his temple, the counselor strengthened his support network by exploring the option for Ma to reconnect with the temple and seek help.

When Ma approached a monk he is familiar with, the monk taught Ma a repentance practice in which Ma has to prostrate to the Buddha repeatedly and to chant one section of The

Sutra of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha's Fundamental Vows every day. Due to his physical pain, Ma initially found the prostration difficult and uncomfortable, but he also found the prostration act as an exercise to help him release some of his anger and resentment. When chanting the sutra and prostrating, Ma would gradually introspect his transgressions in life and sometimes cry. In processing his experiences with this counselor, Ma realized his arrogance, insensitivity to feelings of others, and negligence towards his wife and daughter due to his devotion to his business. For example, he cried about how he missed all of his daughter's dance performances and how he criticized his wife when he was having a bad day at work. In reaching these insights, his anger and grudges gently dissolved while guilt and shame emerged. The goal of therapy also shifted to Ma's confessions and generation of alternative perspectives such as exploring deeper values in life and having committed actions to be considerate and kind to others. The counselor also used compassion meditation and repentance meditation to help Ma ground his concentration and cultivate self-forgiveness. Through the therapeutic alliance with the counselor, spiritual practice, and psychological interventions, Ma reported to experience less psychological disturbances as well as better relationships with his important ones.

### **Conclusion**

Chinese Buddhist repentance does not delve into the past; instead, it is a mindful moment of staying in the present moment and using that clarity and objectivity to observe the past. It is a comprehensive practice with a number of meaningful components such as using prostration to challenge one's arrogance, chanting sutras to learn Buddhist teachings, contemplating on the Buddhist teachings to cultivate compassion and self-forgiveness, receiving compassion and acceptance from higher beings, and vowing to avoid transgressions as well as commit to good deeds. Repentance can be an effective spiritual solution to alleviate overwhelming guilt and

shame in clients and reset positive causes for future actions. Due to this reason, it is important for helping professionals to understand the implications and practices of repentance in order to inform their treatment with clients who affiliate with Buddhism.

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