

## Juliana Klinkert

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### BIOGRAPHY

Juliana Klinkert is a Colombian life coach and Buddhist practitioner currently living in Thailand. She holds a degree in Advertisement and spent five years working in the field, before fully immersing herself into Buddhism. In 2007, she moved to Nepal to enroll at the Kagyu Institute for Buddhist studies. After her return to Colombia in 2009, she received her Certificate in Life Coaching and began incorporating Buddhist principles and practices into her coaching technique.

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## The Impact of Combining Coaching and Buddhist Ethics for Improving People's Lives

### ABSTRACT

We human beings spend a lot of time seeking happiness; everybody wants to be happy, but not everybody listens, reflects, and practices how to uncover true happiness. This need for increased contentment drives many people to find a coach and explore from their own life experiences how to achieve a greater sense of peace, satisfaction, and equanimity to be transferred into daily life.

As a life coach and Buddhist practitioner, my paper will describe the experience during the coaching process of four different women from Colombia. We met almost every week for individual, online sessions lasting two hours each during 6 months. All women struggle with a lack of fulfillment due to the disconnection between what they want and what they were doing in life. This dissatisfaction has inspired them to seek changes in their way of relating to their emotions, in hopes of finding greater happiness and harmony.

We will look at these women as case studies and explore what is the benefit of them connecting with me, a Colombian life coach and Buddhist practitioner. I will discuss how I co-create a relationship with them through a communication based in open questions and how I discuss with them, according to their present life, how to apply Buddhist ethics, Buddhist philosophy and calm abiding meditation. I also share how I help them develop love, kindness and compassion towards themselves and others.

# The Impact of Combining Coaching and Buddhist Ethics for Improving People's Lives

To understand the origins of the word coaching, we must start at the Hungarian town of *Kocs*. In the 1500s, the townspeople created a new style of carriage to transport people between Vienna and Budapest. The vehicle was named after the town, a *Kocsi*, or in English, a *coach*.

Coach first referred to a person during the 1830s at Oxford University. It became slang for a tutor 'carrying' a student through studies. By the 1860s it was being used in athletics.

The first person to transform coaching away from sports was Timothy Gallwey, a Harvard University tennis coach in the 1970s. As his career progressed, he found himself instructing more business people than sports professionals. In the 1990s coaching entered the corporate environment. As businesses grew and downsized, coaching became more relevant for team building and leadership development.

With this growth came the need for an authoritative system to regulate the coaching profession, accredit learning institutions and certify practitioners. In 1995, the non-profit International Coach Federation (ICF) was established. They define coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential,"<sup>1</sup> and promote two main tools for coaching: listening and asking powerful questions. Like the original carriage of Hungary, this methodology helps transfer people from where they are to where they want to be.

## **Traditional Life Coaching (TLC) vs Buddhist Life Coaching (BLC)**

Traditional life coaching and Buddhist life coaching work well together to help clients accomplish their goals. TLC helps individuals define what they want to achieve by asking thought-provoking questions. (Coaches do not give direct advice.) BLC supports the process by providing tools and knowledge.

This interaction is best utilized in helping client's cope with their emotions. In between coaching sessions, it is common for fears to arise. When this happens, clients may revert to old, familiar habits as a source of comfort rather than dealing

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.coachfederation.org/about/>

with new, unknown action plans. This can stall progress, trigger ruminations or even cause a client to revert.

When discomfort occurs, BLC provides clients with a secure place to deal with emotions. They learn to observe and accept thoughts and feelings, plus sights, sounds, smells, taste and touch without judgement. Meditation helps them clear their mind of overshadowing, confusing or repetitive thoughts. It gives them space to understand they are not their emotion, it's only a momentary part of them. These tools teach how to be with the fear and not let it drive any actions. It increases the client's patience and confidence, providing an added layer of security to help reinforce the desired change.

This example helps explain the complimentary relationship between TLC and BLC:

Kate is struggling to speak with her father about an important issue. When she goes to talk with him, she is overwhelmed by fear and is unable to have the conversation.

In a strict TLC process, Kate brings her fear to the next coaching session to discuss it with her TLC. The TLC asks Kate a series of questions to help Kate understand what stopped her from having the conversation. Kate provides some insight, relying on her own intuition, and together they build a strategy for the next attempted conversation.

Alternatively, Kate meets with her BLC who shares the Buddhist understanding of fear and how it influences her and those around her. The BLC also teaches her meditation. Kate begins a daily training to calm her thoughts and cope with the fear, so she can avoid acting on it, or running from it, when she next meets with her father.

The distinguishing factor between these approaches is how disturbing emotions are dealt with. While TLC client's bring their emotions to the sessions as they arise, BLC anticipates them from the start and incorporates them into the process.

It's important to note that BLC clients don't need to be or become Buddhist. BLC simply uses Buddhist practices and teachings to help clients train their mind in a more positive way.

## **My BLC Approach**

When I start a new BLC process with a client, it means that a new fixed-term relationship has begun. During a three to six month process, we work through the coaching cycle which includes uncovering inhibiting behaviors, defining goals, strategies and commitments.

The ICF definition of coaching fits with my practice. To **partner with my clients** it is necessary to create a trusting relationship where the client feels comfortable sharing her feelings. She must understand I remain neutral and won't judge her thoughts and emotions. This type of partnering happens only when both of us are mindful and aware, and not judging.

After we create a secure relationship, we begin establishing a **thought-provoking and creative process**. I do this by asking powerful, open-ended questions. These are questions that inspire my clients to search themselves rather than judge themselves, and to imagine a desirable future. The questions also help clients understand how their present emotions, behaviors, thoughts, and beliefs are hindering the life they want to live. At this point, I introduce clients to Buddhist teachings and meditation as a way to train their mind. It is the combination of all these practices; questions, self-reflection, teachings and meditation that I call Buddhist life coaching.

Buddhism also compliments and reinforces coaching through its teaching that each person has a Buddha nature which simply needs to be uncovered. My process helps clients do this by acting as a thinking partner and recognizing they already have the internal capacity **to maximize their personal and professional potential** as the ICF states.

## CASE STUDIES

To illustrate my work, I will share the experiences of four female clients from Colombia (South America) who participated in my program. To maintain confidentiality, I have replaced the women's names with letters;

- **A** is a 41 year old woman feeling uncomfortable with an ending work contract and break up of a long-term relationship.
- **B** is a 28 year old women who resigned from her job in Colombia and moved to Spain to study her masters leaving her sick mother behind.
- **C** is a 29 year old woman with a successful job in Colombia who desired more from life and left for an 8 month solo trip through South East Asia to explore self-growth.
- **D** is a 29 year old woman finishing a nine year medical course looking to balance happiness against daily interactions with death.

Women A and B commenced a 3 month program (6 coaching sessions, 14 meditation and Buddhist teaching), while C and D enrolled in a 6 month program (14 coaching sessions, 18 meditation and Buddhist teaching.)

While the conditions that brought suffering to each woman was different, each felt similar self-doubts and uncertainties about why they were feeling as they were. They also shared the following desires:

1. To connect with their own inner potential and receive external guidance.
2. To end their suffering quickly
3. For self-growth through Buddhist practices, including meditation and taming their minds

In regards to Colombian clients, I have found that Buddhism can be a particularly useful tool to enhance spiritual growth. Buddhism offers the Catholic country an expanded layer for personal development. It provides people with additional tools and techniques to deal with and relate to different situations in life.

### **CASE STUDY A: 41 year old Female, 3 Month session**

“A” began her journey after several life changes, including heart-break and the end of a work contract. She initially registered for a 10 day Mahayana Buddhist retreat in Dharamsala, India to learn the fundamentals of the practice. Her intention was to better understand the purpose of life. After registering, she was inspired to go beyond the initial retreat and work with a coach to learn, search, meditate and understand life from different perspectives. She knew that real happiness could not be attained by relying on the outside world or relationships and wanted to find someone to help her work on this.

“A” decided to visit Bangkok before and after her trip to India allowing us to work face to face during her time in Thailand. We began her program before she left Colombia doing online studying and meditations. While in Bangkok, we met weekly for coaching sessions and meditated at local temples.

“A” wanted to understand Buddhist teachings and history in order to live a more virtuous life. I focused on having her learn the four noble truths; the ten virtuous and non-virtuous actions of body, speech and mind; the six sense faculties and the six paramitas. While classes advanced, her curiosity grew. Sometimes we repeated the same topics in different classes with various approaches to help aid her understanding. We also explored how she could apply them to her daily life.

We focused our sessions on searching the anger, discouragement and guilt that she felt toward her ex-boyfriend. Through the process she understood that by being trapped in her anger she was unable to resolve anything, but that she could change the way she was relating to the situation. She also learned to recognize and accept the “automatic mind”, the one that is not aware of what it is doing.

Through this, she observed how her emotions weren't arising from the actions of her ex-boyfriend, but from the way she was judging the situation. She learned to simply be aware of her thoughts instead of feeding them with negativity, and to accept related emotions without attachment or rejection. Though challenging at first, she has improved and now practices better love and compassion, first with herself and second to the others.

After six months, she was able to talk to her ex-boyfriend more calmly and effectively. Being aware of her thoughts allowed her to express her feelings in a positive and skillful way. She found in Buddhism a simple, clear and logical knowledge to use every day.

Today, she is back in Colombia and continues to practice the Buddha's teachings. She has a new job, continues her meditation and remains committed to living a virtuous life.

### **CASE STUDY B: 28 year old Female, 3 Month session**

“B” came to the program with the fear of losing her sick mother while she studied abroad and a desire to approach her life in a positive manner. After the first BLC session, we decided to work on ways in which she could accept not being in control of every situation in her life.

The coaching helped her become aware of situations she was trying to control, and her responding emotions. Through meditation, she started developing mindfulness and awareness, and the Buddhist teachings taught her about the three roots of suffering (desire, attachment, ignorance). She also learned about the ten non-virtuous actions of the body (killing, stealing, sexual misconduct), speech (harsh words, lying, divisive speech, gossip) and mind (covetousness/greed, harmful thought/hatred, and holding wrong view/ignorance). She understood that these actions create suffering in herself and other people and to avoid suffering she must not engage in them. From this, she learned there is only one true way to act, a solo option that eliminated choice and therefore control. This lesson helped her start living a more positive life.

Her online BLC sessions started before her trip and ended two months into her studies in Spain. At the beginning of the process, we practiced shamatha (calm abiding meditation)<sup>2</sup>, and after a month of coaching, she began using this as a

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<sup>2</sup> A Sanskrit term: *Shamatha*; *shama* is "pacification", "the slowing or cooling down", "rest". *tha* is "to abide or remain" (*Wikipedia 2015*).

daily practice in her life. From this, she began to observe how her mind had pre-conceived notions about external conditions, and how she reacted to them almost without consideration. Meditation, therefore, gave her the space to be an observer of her own thoughts, and not react in an automatic way.

She started to utilize her daily bus rides and walks to university to train her mind and gain deeper insight into her thinking process by observing and hearing the people around her. She began to be aware of how her thoughts and judgments created imagined stories, which led to negative thoughts, expectations and comparisons, thereby resulting in attachment or rejection.

Through the coaching sessions, she noticed that her mind struggled when situations changed unpredictably and when things didn't happen the way she expected. Again, this triggered her need for control. Understanding that each situation may be observed from different perspectives: her own and others, plus Buddhist teachings regarding impermanence, also help her release control.

Her coaching program has now concluded. She has since graduated from University and is back Colombia near her mother. Through the program she learned to observe, listen, and reflect before reacting, and she still applies these principles in her life.

### **CASE STUDY C: 29YR old female, 6 month session**

“C” entered BLC as she was embarking on a big change in her life with a goal to become more independent. She was choosing to leave her well-paid job in Colombia to travel solo through South East Asia and explore self-development. This broke from the traditional Colombian social patterns that value family, a secure job, home, and car, plus annual vacations with parents and extended family.

“C” was experiencing a sense of pressure from both herself and society. Through her six months of BLC, she wanted to answer: *How do I develop confidence in my own decisions without upsetting my family?* She knew that happiness was not possible if she relied too much on other people's opinions without respecting her own wishes. She wanted a coach who would explore this with her, so she could understand her need for external approval. She also wanted to define new strategies and tools to improve the way she used advice from others.

I started by asking questions to help her clarify what she really wanted to explore. Her first words were, *I am not going to be able to travel by myself*. We then looked to understand her fear and addressed ways to transform it using positive possibilities and alternatives. With this as the goal, we based her progress on three different stages; pre, during and post-trip.

Before her departure from Colombia, we had online coaching, meditation and Buddhist teaching sessions. After each session I asked her to investigate how she experienced the world through her five senses so she could better reflect on how her mind works. This included identifying what she did and didn't like. From this, she understood the value of independently making her own choices which ensured she was planting seeds that would result in fruits she really wanted. This activity and the coaching sessions helped her observe her decision-making process; when, where and how she became stuck. Meditation provided open space in her mind to observe her thoughts, while the Buddhist teachings allowed her to reflect and develop wisdom.

We continued her sessions online while she travelled through South East Asia. We observed how she was able to successfully navigate the changing cultures which deepened her self-belief and enabled her to trust her own decisions. She realized that she didn't fear travelling by herself; she possessed good social skills and knew how to plan a trip that she would enjoy and learn from.

During her travels she was able to transform her belief of *I won't be able to do things on my own*, and a new voice arose. She now started asking herself how to say no and how to make plans without seeking the approval of loved ones. An additional challenge for her was sharing her transformed behaviors with familiar family and friends. These developments resulted in an updated goal for her coaching sessions once she was back in Colombia.

We now worked on how to incorporate her new confidence and tools into her daily life at home. Instead of asking questions to seek approval, she started to ask questions that would advance her development. When people addressed her as the person she previously was she was able to understand and accept them with patience and compassion through the Buddhist teachings.

Today, with this new-found confidence, C has created her own company training corporate employees to work to their full potential. She uses her own experience as an example, and continues to learn about Buddhism, attending talks and lessons in Colombia. She shares her knowledge with loved-ones and encourages their attendance at events.

**CASE STUDY D: 29YR Old female, 6 months, ongoing program.**

D came to BLC with fear and uncertainty about her professional and personal life. We started her process when she was three months away from graduating as an anesthesiologist. During the first coaching session, we decided to focus on understanding how to develop happiness.

D's relationship with her boyfriend ended a year ago, but she was still tying her happiness on him. Her job in the hospital was showing her the uncertainty of life, some mornings she visited a patient and by afternoon they had passed away. These two sufferings in her life, combined with a rotation at a hospital in Canada where she saw mindfulness techniques used to help patients in chronic pain, drove her to participate in a Buddhist life coaching program with me. We meet online every week; once for coaching and once for Buddhist teachings. Every session starts with a ten minute meditation.

From the coaching sessions, she discovered what was preventing her from reaching her goal. She noticed damaging thoughts including the belief she would be alone for the rest of her life. By thinking in this way, she stopped herself from discovering new things and doing what she enjoyed the most. Instead, she put all her energy into work. The sessions helped her to change her perspective and instead ask *how can I enjoy doing things by myself?* Through Buddhist teachings and meditation she is learning how to reduce repetitive negative thoughts and self-judgement. She has now graduated and began a new position working with people in chronic pain.

As this is an ongoing process we can't make any conclusions yet. Her next step is to find a balance of personal happiness and energy in the face of her patients' suffering.

## **CONCLUSION**

As these four case studies show us, each woman has benefited from the advantages of Buddhist life coaching. Clients gained deeper insight into themselves and how they related with the world.

By understanding the Buddhist teaching that things and emotions come into being, exist and then dissolve, clients realize the importance of limiting their attachment to these things or emotions - because they don't last forever. This helped them learn emotions are just passing states of mind that can be triggered by external conditions. They learned that how they responded to these conditions was a choice that impacted their different mental states. BLC helped them remain focused on exploring and reflecting on their responses and subsequent emotions.

Clients also became more aware of their rising emotions. I saw noticeable changes in their speech; instead of blaming people and/or external factors, they all started examining their internal responses. By acknowledging this internal/external relationship, clients were inspired to keep meditating and training their minds to tame the emotions.

A common challenge my clients faced was meditating regularly. Despite reporting it's useful and simplicity, clients needed more time to make it a habit due to daily demands getting in the way. Even so, the women are still committed to bridging the gap between their actions and thoughts.

All four women who participated in programs are still in contact with me. We plan to open a Virtual community where we will meet once a month to share experiences and learn from our daily lives. This will be available to all clients at the conclusion of their BLC.

At the end of each client's program, I also request they write a paper that I publish in my website and is available for visitors to read in Spanish. The paper answers the question; *How BLC improved my daily life.*

Going forward, my plan is to expand online one to one BLC within both Spanish and English speaking communities. I also hope to introduce online group sessions of three to four participants. Meanwhile, I am also searching for ways to keep former clients inspired and engaged with the practices after their sessions end.

I hope this work in BLC can help as many people as possible gain clarity and wisdom. May all be auspicious.

*Juliana Klinkert*

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