



Selflessness: a Key to Wisdom

Stories of How Long-Serving Samaritan Befriender
Volunteers in Hong Kong Were Developed



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Acknowledgements

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Foreword

*by Robert Wong,
Chairman of The Samaritan Befrienders
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First of all, I wish to congratulate Dr. Vincent Kan on completion of his doctor degree and on his research about SBHK. Apart from sharing the joy of Vincent's academic achievement, I am particularly grateful for his devotion as being a hotline volunteer who spent the past six years studying about the phenomenon of SBHK. His consistent wish to make contribution to the organization is unique and much appreciated. During my years of getting involved with many voluntary organizations, I cannot recall any volunteer who made similar contribution to an organization.

SBHK was established in 1960. With a history of nearly six decades, the volunteers have always been the driving force behind its development. We are grateful to have volunteers who have been serving the organization for almost forty years. SBHK is not unique in the area of providing suicide prevention service in Hong Kong, but having such an enormous number of long-term volunteers in our hotline service is definitely one-of-a-kind in Hong Kong and also the world at large. SBHK supports Vincent's effort to promulgate his theories on longevity of volunteers. Perhaps voluntary organizations all over the world could pick up some useful tips from this book on how to let volunteers stick to the service for as long as they can.

I have known Vincent for more than twenty years. We have been working closely at SBHK, not only on the development of hotline service but also on life education and suicide crisis intervention services. Vincent's

philosophy of life has been evolving in parallel with his devotion to suicide prevention works in Hong Kong.

All authors would carefully choose the title of their book and Vincent is no exception. Vincent wrote this book not only for the benefit of the organization – to let volunteers stay in the service, he also detailed and highlighted his findings on the importance of 'selflessness'. The book gives readers some good advice on how to equip themselves wisely in order to prevent them from facing any pre-suicide dilemma.

In a nutshell, the book gives examples and advocates 'selflessness' as a key component for human beings to achieve certain wisdom of life. Through his personal life experience and related literatures, Vincent provides references on academic literatures and significant people to support his theories. He intends to stimulate our thoughts in an area that we normally may not spend too much time on. I agree with him that this book is also a suicide prevention life educational material, perhaps at tertiary level.

I sincerely hope that his argument can be listened to and more people are able to experience the joy, wisdom and fulfillment in life.

I wish him every success in this book.

 **Preface**

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong (SBHK) was established in 1960. It was the first of its kind: a suicide prevention hotline service in Asia. In 2010, being one of the Hotline volunteers and having served for more than twenty-seven years, I started to think about writing this book. My intention was to research the longevity of some of the long-serving volunteers of the SBHK and to record properly the stories of how they became the pillars of this non-governmental organization for half a century, and to provide a reference to similar organizations on how long-serving counselling volunteers can be chosen and nourished.

Over the years, the Hotline centre of SBHK did produce some publications of its own. There were annual reports or publications appealing to citizens to encourage them in challenging seriously negative emotions, and an information handbook guiding Form 5 graduates (i.e. GCE 'O' Level) on further studies and career choices immediately before and after their Hong Kong School Certificate Examination results is announced. The information handbook was part of the special summer hotline service. In addition, there were two series of very small booklets (《沒有白過的日子》) in Chinese, containing stories of our volunteers and some celebrities in Hong Kong. The booklets depicted how they lived a fruitful life. However, up till now there are no publications depicting the lives of the volunteers told by them. Neither is there any publication of the same kind in any other country.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the SBHK, I began to think about writing a book dedicated to our volunteers.

The volunteers of the SBHK, just like volunteers in other parts of the world, were recruited from all walks of life. We are ordinary people who are compassionate, wishing to help people on the verge of suicide or people with suicidal tendencies. In fact, none of the eleven volunteers mentioned in the book are professional social workers, psychiatrists or counsellors. We began our service by learning on the job and by having empathy. Most of us lacked confidence when we first started serving. However, we found our own ways to enhance our knowledge and skills in the counselling field in order to help our clients, whose issues have changed over time. We have to keep up with the shifting influences of modern society on beliefs, in hope for the future and more and more coping mechanisms that many people turn to today that were not available in the past. One coping mechanism that seems to be more prevalent when in despair is suicide, when an individual comes to believe that the best way of coping with hopeless life is to exit from it.

The regular exposure of volunteers to such critical situations and deeply traumatic stories has affected our lives in different ways. In this book, the eleven volunteers present their own stories of what had inspired and sustained them while serving at SBHK.

The respective stories of volunteers and our shared values have enriched our lives personally and as a group. This contributes to what defines us and the organization, and what helps us to go on reflecting on our practice, as every person who contacts us in distress is also contributing to our knowledge and understanding, and we honour that, too. Listening to our clients and my colleagues has let me hear my own voice more clearly. I have come to see the implicit and explicit reflection that goes on as we do our work as a form of resilience against trauma and despair when regularly serving the people who are suicidal. It challenges one's own concept of what existence means.

I wish to add that this book is part of the thesis of my doctoral research project, which focuses on my personal and professional experience of volunteering as a suicide hotline worker. The study took an autoethnographic approach to examine the narratives of ten volunteers alongside my own life-transcending experience.

The layout of this book is simple. It begins with an introduction of myself, Vincent Kan, the author, and a brief account of the history and recent development of SBHK. Chapter 1 to 11 are presented in an expressionistic, narrative format, focusing on the volunteers' inner feelings, emotions and thoughts. They present their personal or cultural experience from a completely personal perspective.

Chapter 12 is a summary of my research findings on long service of the volunteers. I present the conclusion of my research with cross-references to both the narratives and literature. I explain that there are four explicit groups of reasons and one tacit reason that may be relevant to their long service.

The explicit reasons are how personal prerequisites, namely childhood experience and character strengths, affect their passion to serve; their motives, satisfaction and the perceived meaningfulness of the task; how volunteers play their roles among themselves to encourage other volunteers to stay in the service; and, lastly, how the policy and management style of the organization facilitate retention. I hope that this chapter provides some useful tips for voluntary organizations on how to retain volunteers.

However, the tacit reason may involve the testimony of the ancient Greek philosophy of *eudaimonia*. This is that an engagement in virtue, such as exercising empathy in counselling work, represents a journey whereby people achieve intrinsic goodness, as an end (*praxis*) or as a process (*poiesis*), to reach the highest state of happiness of mankind. It may be difficult to understand the tacit reason that I propose in Chapter 12, so in this book I have added Part II which comprises Chapter 13 and 14. In these two chapters, I try to provide more information about this tacit reason by explaining how it is related to wisdom and also particularly important to organizations that offer psychological support to people.

In Chapter 13, I reflect on prerequisite knowledge and the aftermath effect, and explore the knowledge of my transcendental peak experience. This explains how I construed that selflessness is an important gateway leading to transcendence and the wisdom of life. The chapter is structured to reflect Western thought on wisdom, which is based on knowledge and reflection.

Chapter 14 is structured according to the Eastern concept of wisdom, which is based on reflective understanding and affection. In this

final chapter, I explain how affection may be an automatic outcome of knowledge and reflection. Topics about suffering, empathy, grief and death are explored. I conclude that, in a tacit manner, volunteers' regular practice of empathy at SBHK promotes their intrinsic drive towards a search for wisdom. Before I finished writing the book, I tried to include a module on affection to explain how humans are affected by the 'deficiency of needs' cognition, and how it could be remedied by using a 'being' cognition. I also provide my hypothesis on the possible development of a true human psyche for ultimate wisdom in life.

I have provided a number of citations to support my views in these final four chapters. This is not a display of erudition. It is because I need solid academic theories and references to help me convey my message or reinforce what I want to say. These chapters take a conceptualistic approach, using my own story as a mechanism for conveying and critiquing cultural experiences. I hope that this highly reflexive content will give readers another level of insight. I have to emphasize here that I am not trying to teach through my writing, but simply wish to share my thoughts with readers according to my own character.

I think that this sharing is of particular importance to my fellow volunteers in SBHK, because we have undergone similar training, practice and experience. Much of the knowledge we acquire is in common, but some knowledge is that we get from our own experience. The sharing of such personal knowledge, which I think has shaped my current state of mind, is inevitably necessary. I also feel that academic references would assist readers who are interested in to pursue a similar journey to verify the relevance of this book to their own lives. It can also help voluntary organizations to find useful and suitable references and assist in volunteer retention management.

Apart from an apology for my poor standard of English, I also hope that you will, with an open mind, understand the content, and not only enjoy reading this book with its collection of true life stories of volunteers of Samaritan Befrienders as well as my philosophy of life, but also the change to a more academic style of writing in the latter part of the book.

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Who is Vincent Kan? (by the author)

I was born in Hong Kong on the second day of 1961, which is not too difficult to remember. Chronologically, I rank sixth in a family of seven members: parents, one elder brother, two elder sisters and a younger sister. I went to kindergarten and tertiary institution in Hong Kong. Right after I graduated from my matriculation course, I was not admitted to any university as the competition for such places in the 1980s was absolutely keen. My public examination result was not satisfactory enough to let me study at a university.

At the age of twenty, when I left school, I started to work at a ground handling company, Jardine Airport Services Limited, at the old Kai Tak Airport. Since then I embarked on my career in the aviation industry. I joined the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong as a Hotline volunteer in 1983 as I was not able to find any part-time work, that was what I intended to do at that time. However, deeper reflection revealed the reasons for my joining SBHK, as may be found in Chapter 11. Having joined SBHK at a young age, I have never thought that I would continue serving at the organization until this day, without interruption. At present, apart from my role as a frontline hotline volunteer, I have served as a member of the executive committee of SBHK over the last decade. In 1988, I joined another voluntary service, the then Royal Hong Kong Auxiliary Air Force, as a voluntary traffic controller. I provided air traffic information to local light aircraft flying over Hong Kong Territories. I am

still a serving member now. It had been renamed Government Flying Service in 1993, in preparation for the change of sovereignty of Hong Kong in 1997.

I got married in 1990 and had two children. In 1991, I took a part-time LLB course at the University of London through the extramural division of Hong Kong University. I had studied the course for four years and graduated in 1995. In January 1997, I left the company that I had been working for fifteen years and joined the Civil Aviation Department of the Hong Kong Government. My aviation career continued in parallel with my voluntary service.

In 2007, together with ten Hotline volunteers, I worked for my first Master's degree of Art in Work Based Learning (Counselling Studies) course and obtained my Master's degree in 2009. It was during this Master's course that I realized I was interested in counselling and human growth. I started to read intensively, tracking the relevant literature through references and bibliographies in order to understand more about what the source writers were advocating in various subject areas. 'Fond of learning' has suddenly become one of my top five character strengths.

Although I finished the Master's degree course in 2009, I maintained my reading habits. Maybe because of this reason, I started to think about further academic advancement. Since 2010 was the fiftieth anniversary of SBHK, I suddenly came up with an idea of carrying out research on the reasons for the longevity of the long-serving volunteers of Samaritan Befrienders to commemorate this anniversary. Perhaps I was also thinking about how this might reveal why I would stay there for so long. As I joined the executive committee of SBHK in 1995,

first as the secretary and later in 1999 as the vice-chairman up to now (2014), I thought more on how to sustain the service of this volunteer-oriented NGO and its good customs and practice. I started to see such research as a way to increase exposure for its good work and working for a doctoral degree as helping me to develop an appropriate research methodology. It has done so much more than that.

Interestingly, I have never received any formal training in psychology or Maslow's theories, but these theories have become the foundation of my thinking and helped me to position my own experiences and those of others. I only read about who he was and what he did. His work resonated deeply with working at the existential edge of life. The importance of meaning-making was reframed for me by the work of the Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl. It was, in a sense, like meeting people from my planet, allowing me to be more courageous and explicit about my humanistic, existential and phenomenological notions of reality and truth. They helped me to articulate what I had not been able to understand about myself, my colleagues, the work that we do and why, in an environment of fast-moving economic change and its impact on science, values, notions of truth, existential meanings and ways of being. Many of the people whom we talk to on the Hotline speak of meaninglessness, seeing the world through a different lens from the one that is now culturally dominant, of not wanting to be a part of it because it would mean not living to the full, or contributing something that is no longer valued. I hope that this book will be some small contribution to keeping a window open on life through listening to the voices of those who help such people every day, both in Hong Kong and across the world.



Introduction

(The volunteering with the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong)

The Samaritans is an organization that was set up in the United Kingdom in 1953 by a priest, Chad Varah, who dedicated his life to serving people with suicidal ideation. Through conversational support, it provided a service to prevent people from committing suicide (Varah, 1973). The news reports of three suicide cases in Greater London on a summer's day in 1953 triggered Varah to set up the first Samaritans in the United Kingdom. Varah was impulsive and began to offer his personal help by making it known to the press on 2nd November 1953 that people contemplating suicide were invited to telephone him at MANSion House 9000. His service was later assisted by some other kind-hearted laymen. He then came to realize a befriending service was so important that it could complement other professional counselling or psychiatric treatments (ibid.).

His service started to draw attention within the United Kingdom and other parts of the world. Starting from early 1954, he received inquiries from Greece, Switzerland, West Germany and Denmark, even as far as Havana in Cuba, about the service. Very soon, the Samaritans' hotline services were spreading into different parts of the world (ibid.).

The first four decades of Samaritans in Hong Kong

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong (SBHK) was established in 1960 under the name of 'Suicide Prevention Society'. It was registered as a society in Hong Kong in 1963, and was subsequently renamed 'The

Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong' (SBHK, 2013). It was established by Mr. Andrew Tu and Mrs. Elsie Hume Elliott Tu. They organized a group of volunteers who were mainly primary school teachers of the then Mu Kuang English School. According to one of the long-serving volunteers, Mr. Tu was once standing at an apparently dangerous position in the countryside and a woman, probably a farmer, ran towards him and waved at him to draw his attention. The lady mistakenly thought that he was trying to kill himself. She ran exceedingly fast towards him and trying to stop him. Mr. Tu was touched by the kindness of the woman. Her benevolence inspired him to set up a suicide prevention service. Mr. Tu set up the prototype of the service at his home before a centre at Lo Fu Ngam Public Estate was granted to the service. Despite just a small centre, it was formally the first suicide prevention telephone hotline service, not only in Hong Kong but in Asia as well. It provided around-the-clock telephone emotional support to clients who were in emotional distress or bearing the thought of suicide. The service was entirely carried out by volunteers who were interested in.

In the wake of a significant rise of student suicides due to setbacks in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) in 1964, SBHK launched a summer hotline service for secondary school graduates in the following year. To counteract the melancholy and sadness of perceived failure and the cultural shame accompanying a fear of academic failure, volunteers reported for extra duty to provide a top-up twenty-four hour service in the days right before and after the announcement of the examination results. More than ten extra telephone lines were provided to cope with the influx of calls from desperate graduates. In parallel with the extra hotline, a group of volunteers formed a team themselves to collect information from schools and published a special handbook for graduates. This handbook contained the latest information on the average acceptance criteria of

most of the schools in order to provide them with an easy reference. By knowing the acceptance criteria of many schools, graduates would immediately know what school they should turn to. Alternatively, they were also encouraged to seek other options such as joining vocational training schools or pursuing non-academic study, such as art. Basically, the handbook helped the graduates understand according to their examination results, what choices they could have. It also helped to reduce the stress and anxiety of the students after they received their result. This service was highly appreciated by the youth of that generation.

Some volunteers even made a phone call to major enterprises in Hong Kong and asked if they could offer any jobs to graduates. It was reported that, on one occasion, they were successful in lining up ten posts at Jardine Matheson & Company. The volunteers put up posters in the streets at night before the examination result was announced, promoting the service and offering job opportunities to the graduates later, if necessary. The extra telephone hotline and the handbook service were maintained for thirty-five years until 2000, when this pioneering work prompted other organizations to offer similar services. The service helped students to make their choices at a crossroad in their life. They no longer felt being trapped in a cul-de-sac with no way out, apart from killing themselves.

In the 1970s, SBHK offered its services in two distinct units: one in Chinese and one in English. The English service unit was once run separately at a hut on Princess Margaret Road, and then moved to Wanchai afterwards. The Chinese service remained in Lo Fu Ngam Public Estate (later renamed Lok Fu Estate). SBHK was a member of Befrienders International (Samaritans Worldwide) until 1982, when

the English service was separated from SBHK. In most of the annual reports of SBHK before 1982, the twenty principles of Samaritan Befrienders were published (SBHK 1971–1975) (see Appendix). Some of the principles remain as tacit rules of SBHK until now. Mr. and Mrs. Tu continued to carry out the English service by establishing another organization named 'The Samaritans', which has become 'The Samaritans, Multilingual Service' of today.

SBHK has changed the location of its telephone hotline centre several times. In 1985, it moved from the Lok Fu Estate to Shun Lee Estate. In 1996, an additional centre in Choi Hung Estate was in use, where the telephone service was relocated. The centre in Shun Lee Estate then became the training centre to train volunteers. In 2001, SBHK expanded its scope of service using the Shun Lee centre as the initial office for two new services (namely the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre and the Life Education Centre) until the renovation work of a new office in Pat Tin Estate had been completed. It then became the office of the two new services in 2002. In July 2014, with the demolition of the old Pat Tin Estate, the centre was moved to another location, which was a five-minute walk from the original centre.

In 1994, like many other NGOs, SBHK was incorporated as a limited company in preparation for the change of sovereignty in 1997, the time when Hong Kong was no longer a British colony. The sovereignty of Hong Kong was handed back to China and Hong Kong became the Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China since then. Since all volunteer members of SBHK were shareholders of the organization, the change of status to a limited company would limit the liability of volunteers and protect them from unnecessary loss in the event of any unforeseeable adverse circumstances in running the NGO.

SBHK is a local voluntary organization run by volunteer workers. Although non-religious in nature, it reflects the generosity and benevolence of the Good Samaritan in the Bible who gave a helping hand to people who are distressed and feeling helpless. Through giving them spiritual support and rendering emotional counselling, it helps those in need to help themselves (SBHK, 2013).

Spirit

The spirit of SBHK is to bring out benevolence in human nature and, with love, patience and compassion, to nurture the spirit of mutual aid, mutual support as well as mutual affection (ibid.).

Mission

SBHK has three missions:

1. To befriend, on humanitarian grounds, people who are facing difficulties or are lonely and depressed, by helping them to regain confidence in life;
2. To publicize and promote the spirit of their service in the community through talks, seminars, research and other means; and
3. To set up organizations with a similar nature and mission to help those in need in Southeast Asia and neighbouring regions (ibid.).

Although SBHK is not a member of the Befrienders Worldwide whose vision is to contribute to a society where suicide is understood both locally and globally, leading to fewer deaths by suicide, SBHK serves in a similar way. It supports local clients to help to set up and provide training or sharing with their counterparts in neighbouring areas, such as Macau and Mainland China.

Similar to the Befrienders Worldwide, whose mission is to be a principal resource in providing emotional support and to share research which

can lead to innovative service practices delivered by volunteers, for over half a century SBHK has committed its service to emotional support by both volunteers and professional social workers. SBHK owes the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region a deep debt of gratitude, which recognizes our vision and has allocated significant resources to allow this voluntary organization to run the Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC) with professional social workers. This is unique in Hong Kong, and it draws the special attention from the government in tackling the problem of suicide. To my knowledge, few countries can afford similar current resources of over USD1.3M per year for such a service, for a city that has a population of 7 million.

Due to limited resources for conducting research, SBHK has not spent too much resources and efforts on conducting research into volunteers' practice. From time to time, it publishes books written by volunteers, sharing their life stories and trying to advocate the importance of a positive lifestyle to readers.

Suicide is different from many other social problems. It arises from some triggering events like traumatic experience or noticeable symptoms, such as drug addiction, mental or physical health challenges, and self-harming behaviours. Clients who are suicidal are not always easily identifiable. People who, ostensibly, look successful and without a care in the world, can be at high risk, while many who have dozens of serious problems in their lives, such as redundancy, getting little support from relatives and losing their children, are at low risk. A range of health statistics can be seen to point to a high risk of depression or attempting suicide. However, it is still not easy to identify such people. It hinders us from offering preventative and timely intervention. We often have to wait for them to call us.

It is even more difficult to identify an impulsive person who attempts to commit suicide, as their suicidal thoughts may be triggered by some sudden life events, such as the break-up of a relationship or marriage, or a sudden disappointment disrupting their career. These people do not bear any thought of killing themselves in this moment does not mean they won't attempt to do it in the next moment. Once the thoughts start to take on the possibility of a rational way out of the dilemma or pressure, it is like a release. They may suddenly implement the idea that they have been thinking for a long time, with tragic consequences for themselves, their families and friends and, of course, others, for whom reading about such a suicide can act as the trigger for thoughts in them, too.

Despite the environmental difficulties which SBHK has been facing over the years in identifying possible suicide risks, volunteers have built up a reputable hotline service with their own experiences. They have developed their own selection and training requirements for volunteers. Within the limitations of a telephone hotline with clients with emotional or suicidal problems to support them at that critical time, patience, a non-judgmental attitude and empathic listening skills are all essential elements of being a good befriender. These are based on the attributes identified by Carl Rogers, the American psychologist and one of the founders of humanistic psychology. Through his observations, he directed practitioners away from a purely scientific/medical approach to a people-oriented one when working with vulnerable people. He wanted neither to psychologize nor to diagnose them. He wanted practitioners to be 'human' in their interactions with vulnerable people and had shown in his own practice how effective such a people-oriented approach could be. Stability in emotion and overall maturity of the volunteers appear to be key factors in their sustained and sustaining presence in the service.

Similar to other hotline services, nuisance or sex callers are inevitable. These are an extra pressure to volunteers, who are there to support people with suicidal thoughts. Female volunteers are understandably targeted more often in this aspect, and the development of resilience over time, the support of experienced volunteers and relevant training are essential components to tackle this problem.

Significant developments after 2001

The usual twenty-four hour hotline service of SBHK and its forerunner, the summer hotline service, became well known to the Hong Kong citizens in terms of suicide prevention work over the last four decades. However, the volunteers of SBHK came to believe that it would be of help if the service can be extended, so that they can contact clients in person for longer periods in the form of crisis counselling, on the one hand, and suicide prevention community education, on the other.

In 1994, SBHK established a Caring Fund for the purpose of financing a project – 'Starting a Caring World with Listening'. The aim of the project was to arouse awareness of the importance of listening and embracing your life. With the support of the fund, SBHK expanded its community work to a professional education level and, in February 2006, it launched the first professional certificate programme in Counseling and Suicide Prevention. The objective of the programme was to equip participants with knowledge and skills in counselling and suicide prevention, in order to help and support those who are in emotional and psychological crisis, so as to prevent them from taking action as early as possible. In 2014, SBHK organized the twenty-fifth course. Although the course was organized by volunteers, it was widely recognized. Schools, the police and hospital authorities, etc., all recognized the course and regarded it as one of the curricula for continuing professional development.

Following the financial turmoil of 1997, there was a downturn in the economy and growing pressure for suicide intervention. There were some shocking news reports about mothers committing suicide and took the life of their young children as well, and this stirred up emotions in our society. SBHK was aware that, on its own, the Hotline service might not be able to meet the growing demand.

There were then two major developments of SBHK. With the active support of the Social Welfare Department (SWD) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (HKSARG) and the subsidy granted by the Lotteries Fund, SBHK embarked on a project in March 2002 for a new Suicide Crisis Intervention Centre (SCIC). This was a three-year pilot scheme with the purpose of providing a more comprehensive suicide intervention service run by trained social workers for the community. With three years of proven contribution to filling a service gap in society, SCIC became a subvention service under the SWD in May 2005. This allowed the SCIC to receive regular funding from the HKSARG to continue its service until now (SBHK, 2014).

In parallel with the development of SCIC, SBHK considered the need to promote life education at an earlier stage, together with the support from the community to fight against the negative impact of the economic downturn. In 2002, SBHK successfully secured funding from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust (HKJC) for a three-year pilot scheme to set up a Life Education Centre (LEC). Upon completion of the pilot project, the LEC continued to receive support from the HKJC to carry out its mission as a suicide prevention education project. At present, the LEC mainly focuses on delivering talks to schoolchildren on treasuring life and how to face adversity. The LEC also provides training for life ambassadors, the volunteers who assist SBHK in promoting suicide prevention in areas other than the Hotline service. They organize

community education activities, visit the underprivileged and provide aftercare to clients of SCIC, who have completed their treatment with social workers of the centre.

In view of the change of global culture on communication patterns with the emergence of internet, SBHK launched a service known as 'Suicide Prevention On internet' (SPOT) in 2008. This is a collaboration between the volunteers of the Hotline and the LEC to search for keywords regarding suicide indication, such as 'suicide', 'being very depressed', 'want to die', 'want to sleep forever', 'no point in living' and similar negative wordings found in social media and instant messenger such as blogs, Facebook or QQ (a web-based discussion forum in mainland China), and to try to locate the people who wrote them. After identifying the one who wrote the message, the SPOT volunteers try to engage in a dialogue with them with the aim of encouraging them to seek help. In 2013, the SPOT team had found over 144,000 related blogs and cumulatively referred up to 290 netizens to the Hotline for follow-up action (SBHK, 2014).

Another service provided by SBHK on the internet is 'help4suicide'. This is a website (www.help4suicide.org.hk) that contains a number of articles and videos that centre on the negative effects of suicide. SBHK believes that, when pondering suicide, a large number of people will search for information on the internet, such as the best way to take your own life or the meaning of life. While some of the websites are negative in nature or to promote merely the most comfortable way of committing suicide, 'help4suicide' provides a platform for such netizens to obtain positive information at the time when they are seriously considering whether to kill themselves or not. Again, it provides a means for netizens to directly communicate with the social workers of SCIC.

In 2004, SCIC set up a support group in Hong Kong for suicide survivors, which was later renamed the 'Live out the Rainbow' group. In May 2014, the Rainbow group had already gathered over 135 members who had close relatives or friends who had attempted suicide. The members receive individual and group therapy at SCIC to overcome this traumatic experience. They have eventually become another group of volunteers in SBHK who, being the suicide survivors themselves, visit and befriend new survivors to provide emotional support and consolation to those with similar problems (SBHK, 2014).

Role of Hotline volunteers

In operating the twenty-four hour Hotline, SBHK uses exclusively volunteers to listen to calls. In the 1960s, all volunteers were teachers at Mu Kuang English School. According to one of the most senior members of SBHK, the organization initially had no intention to recruit more volunteers, as it even did not have resources to train the recruits. However, one of the staff members, 'Uncle Chao', willing to give up his salary in order to let the management reallocate funding to commence a recruitment strategy. Initially, three training classes were provided in 1965 for the public to join SBHK. It was only after the 1970s that SBHK started to recruit volunteers more regularly. In fact, less and less people staffed the Hotline; in the 1980s, the centre only had one centre-in-charge plus 'Uncle Chao', who had become the resident watchman at the centre. The centre-in-charge could be a social worker or from another discipline, and its role was to carry out administrative work to support the volunteers.

In this half century, Hotline volunteers have been the soul of SBHK. They receive in-house training organized by more experienced and veteran volunteers. At the frontline, volunteers man the suicide

prevention telephone hotline continuously. They offer their care and concern, and listen to desperate people from all walks of life calling to the hotline. They apply what they had learned in the in-house training to respond to clients. They try to help people to vent their grievance, anger, and also express their sadness and hopelessness that were caused by different situations. They wish only for these clients to quit thinking about suicide and regain energy to get back on track.

In order to maintain the consistency of the service, experienced volunteers will act as the mentors of the new volunteers. Volunteers are taught active listening skills and how to demonstrate empathy towards clients. Volunteers will elect among themselves executive committee members (or directors, under Company Ordinance) to form the executive committee (Exco) to monitor the overall functioning and development of SBHK.

Before 2002, Exco generally consisted of a chairman, vice-chairman (optional), treasurer, secretary and committee members. They undertook the work of training, membership, public relations, publishing and recreational activities. Since the setting up of two new centres in 2002, namely the SCIC and Life Education Center (LEC), plus the number of full-time staff on the Hotline continues to grow, new posts have been introduced from time to time for committee members to supervise in each centre. However, nearly all the roles related to the Hotline service, such as committee members for recreational activities, training and membership, have been merged into the post of committee member.

In the past, most of the Hotline's daily routine was run by Exco. These included case screening and supervision, recruitment and training for new volunteers, publications such as the annual report and the

handbook for the secondary school graduates, handling complaints, organizing gatherings for volunteers, formulating policy and acting as the spokesperson of the organization. With the emergence of the new centres, which the staff members are mainly social workers, the role of the voluntary committee members has changed to become the supervisor for the centre-in-charge and thus indirectly responsible for the running of each centre and managing its staff members. In May 2014, the number of full-time staff members of SBHK was 33. They were mainly social workers, programme workers, public relations officers and administrators.

Recruitment and training for Hotline volunteers

According to Jason (Chiu Kor), the interviewee in Chapter 1 of this book and the most senior serving member, he was unaware of any special criteria for the selection of volunteers in the early stage of SBHK. The Hotline did not run as systematically as of today. Volunteers basically reported for duty whenever they were available. The training sessions were mostly talks delivered by lawyers, doctors or other professionals on some specific topics, such as the legal proceedings of divorce or handling people with mental illness. Sometimes, tours would be organized to visit some special organizations such as police stations or social welfare agencies.

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the prototype for recruitment and training was developed. In the mid-1980s, applicants were required to take a written test and attend a face-to-face interview with experienced volunteers. Successful applicants were allowed to attend a training course that lasted for 30 hours and they had to attend for ten consecutive weeks. The content of the course included lectures on empathy, counselling and active listening skills, and more importantly,

role-play among trainees. After the training course and a qualifying practical test, suitable trainees would be selected and appointed.

The committee member responsible for training has been reviewing and modifying the training policy over the years. A snapshot published in 2012 indicated that the format of training had been further modified. A group interview has replaced a personal interview. The training course is now separated into two halves. The first half consists of an initial five sessions and a day camp. At the end of the day camp, trainees are required to take a qualifying practical test. Only those who have passed the test are qualified to attend the second half of the course. The syllabus of the second half of the course focuses on special handling skills for callers who are suicidal, manipulative clients or nuisance sex callers.

After completing the course, trainees are allowed to take live calls under the supervision of experienced volunteers. In the event that if the experienced volunteer finds that the trainee is not appropriate to become a Hotline volunteer, they will terminate the trainee membership immediately. Hence, on average, the process of training, from group interview to final qualification, lasts from nine to twelve months.

Commitment of volunteers

Although volunteers at early stage could report for duty whenever they were available and there was no appraisal system, in general they served the community wholeheartedly. They contributed as much spare time as they could.

In the 1980s, an appraisal system was introduced. Volunteers were required to attend for forty weeks a year. In each week, they needed

to report for duty for two hours. For the male volunteers who were unmarried, they had to undertake one Over Night Duty (OND) per month, while female volunteers and male volunteers who had got married were exempt. However, due to the need for more people-hours coverage for the service, in the mid-1990s the two-hour per session rule was modified to become the two-and-a-half hour rule. This was a resolution after an extensive debate at the Annual General Meeting (AGM). Exemption from OND was cancelled for those joining the organization after 1996. There was a further modification of the OND requirement as time went on. An OND team had been formed to meet the requirement. In 2013, the general OND requirement was reduced to two shifts per year for non-OND team members.

At the early stage, due to the sensitive nature of the service and to protect the clients from embarrassment under certain circumstances, volunteers were recommended not to disclose their Hotline volunteer identity to anyone, apart from close family members. However, this non-disclosure rule has been gradually relaxed, as disclosure by volunteers is a chance to promote SBHK's voluntary work in public and in media interviews; furthermore, it had been changed later on that volunteers could decide themselves whether they wanted to disclose their identity as Hotline volunteer or not. Nevertheless, disclosure out of personal, commercial or marketing reasons is still forbidden.

Another issue is case commitment. Since the early 1980s, volunteers needed to listen to at least forty cases during a one-year assessment period. The system has now been changed to obtaining a score of forty points per year, where one point represents a general two-and-a-half hour session on the Hotline. This could be on non-case related duties, such as assisting in training courses or attending certain predefined training course, official meetings and activities.

In SBHK, each member is given a volunteer number. In September 2015, the latest volunteer number was 2281. Members are forbidden to tell the client their full name. At the most, members can tell clients their surname and membership number for identification. Although SBHK does not encourage clients to choose workers, volunteers are allowed to inform clients if they have a regular shift pattern, again for the purpose of identification. If a volunteer feels anxious about a situation and worries that it might get worse, the volunteer might ask for the client's consent to call the client back at a mutually agreeable time. However, under no circumstances can they give clients their personal contact details, such as a telephone number or email, for further communication.

There are other commitments, such as the obligation to attend AGMs and to follow the principle of confidentiality for casework. Having registered as a limited company, SBHK has its own Memorandum and Articles of Association (M&A). The M&A was first introduced in 1994, and was revised in 1995, 2004 and 2012. The M&A is a resolution of the AGM and contains details of regulations and procedures to serve the members of SBHK under various circumstances. It is the most important document in the corporate governance of SBHK. For instance, one of the Articles indicates that the volunteers are basically shareholders and that Exco members are the directors of the organization. The detailed structure of the organization, membership definitions, election procedures, obligations, the responsibilities of ordinary members or executive committee members, and the discipline and appeal procedures are all covered in the Articles (SBHK M&A, 2012).

Membership and numbers

It is unfortunate that SBHK had not published the number of its volunteers in its early annual reports. It was only in 1996 that SBHK included this piece of information in its annual report. Table 1 below

shows the number of volunteers in SBHK from 1996 to 2011, extracted from annual reports. It is noticeable that there were major changes between 1998 and 2002. The number soared from around 150 to over 200. The rise of the number of volunteers was probably due to the change of recruitment policy suggested by the executive committee and their effort to retain existing volunteers. However, there is little change when it comes to the ratio between male and female volunteers; over two-thirds of the volunteers are female.

Over the years, the turnover of volunteers has generally been quite high. The loss of manpower can occur during training or the working stage. Under normal situations, the pass rate of the training course is about 50 to 60 per cent. This means that, in a training class of sixty trainees,

Table 1 Numbers of volunteers from 1966 to 2013

Years	Male Volunteers	Female Volunteers	Total Number
1996	No break down	No break down	130
1997	No break down	No break down	150
1998	No break down	No break down	150
1999	No record	No record	No record
2000	No record	No record	No record
2001	No record	No record	No record
2002	78	137	215
2003	87	149	236
2004	66	152	218
2005	61	143	204
2006	67	145	212
2007	76	184	260
2008	71	134	205
2009	70	128	198
2010	77	140	217
2011	75	137	212
2012	84	140	220
2013	79	129	208

only around thirty to forty can successfully pass all the tests. There are trainees who cannot meet the standards in terms of their ability to demonstrate empathetic and active listening skills. There are others who drop out due to lack of confidence in carrying out the task after understanding their own performance during training, and there may be some who basically want only to receive the training.

After trainees have passed the test and begun to serve at SBHK, they may have different experiences when communicating with clients. Some might feel unbearable pressure when talking with people who are suicidal; some might feel they lack experience to handle when facing helpless clients; others might feel embarrassed when handling nuisance sex calls; some, who have to rely on mutual support, might feel lonely when working alone at the centre; others might find the service just completely wasting their time, as they do not frequently encounter high-risk cases. Sometimes, volunteers quit when they do not agree with management policy; the author recalled a volunteer resigned in protest against the management policy of not allowing a walk-in client to use the centre's washroom!

Before the early 2000s, SBHK recruited volunteers once a year. While there might be a hundred trainees attending the training course, the number that actually performing the task and listening to live calls could reduce to about forty. Owing to their different experiences in the service, as described above, many volunteers left for their own reasons. As a result, only a small number of volunteers consistently remain in the service. Therefore, the average annual increment of the volunteers is not high, despite the fact that training is organized on a yearly basis.

Since the late 2000s, SBHK has conducted three recruitment activities in every two years. Since this will involve a large number of experienced

volunteers with role-play sessions and day camps, it undoubtedly affects the number of service hours. The goal is to increase the headcount by 50 per cent each year and to secure a minimum impact for the service. Notwithstanding the difficulties in fulfilling the training needs and requirements, SBHK still aims to select the appropriate volunteers for the service. Suicide may be a split-second life or death decision. Listening to people with suicidal thought needs patience and special skills. SBHK prefers quality to quantity, therefore insists on selecting the volunteers carefully to protect the clients from unnecessary provocation and, at the same time, to protect its volunteers from burn-out.

Although there are numerous factors that hinder volunteers from staying, surprisingly, there are still a certain number of volunteers who stay in the service for ten to even thirty years. The information in Table 2 is extracted from the annual report of 2013. This indicates the profile of the years of service by volunteers, as at 2013. It should be noted that there are seventy-five volunteers who had served for more than ten years (SBHK, 2013).

In fact, there are thirty-two volunteers who had served from twenty to thirty-eight years. This book is written to explore the reasons for the long service of eleven of these volunteers. It is hoped that by understanding the reason for their longevity and the experiences which have affected them, SBHK and other similar voluntary organizations may benefit by learning what has fostered their long stay with SBHK. Hence, a tailor-made management policy to retain volunteers could be introduced to extend the service of volunteers to the full.

In the following chapters, I introduce and present the life stories that I have heard from these long-serving volunteers during my interviews with them. In general, each begins with how they joined this organization and

Table 2 Service years of Hotline volunteers (2013)

Years of Service	Male	Female
Below 1 year	17	16
2-3 years	10	26
4-5 years	9	18
6-7 years	8	12
8-9 Years	5	12
Above 10 years	30	45
Total	79	129

what they had experienced at different phases in their service. Although my area of research, which I shared with them, is to explore the reasons for their longevity in the service to help us understand how best we can do to help volunteers' training, I told them that I would like to know why they would stay in the service for so long, and that I was also sure that others would like to know too.

It quickly became apparent that these stories not only tell the rich experience that volunteers have while serving at SBHK; they are also a strong cultural account of the social development in Hong Kong over the last fifty years.

Part One

*The Experiences
of Eleven
Volunteers*



Manning the suicide prevention hotline is stressful and alarming in nature, due to the critical emotional status of the callers. Callers might be standing on the rooftop of a building, having taken hundreds of sleeping pills with alcohol, having been burning charcoal to poison themselves with carbon monoxide (a typical way to commit suicide in Hong Kong), holding a rope before hanging themselves, or they might just be crying painfully with no words can express their pain, silence being all that is left.

Volunteers at the telephone booth never know who the next caller will be. What problems will they have? How desperate are they? What dangerous situation are they in? Despite all these expected uncertainties, there are still a number of kind-hearted people who are willing to sacrifice their spare time to spend with their family and friends, watch a movie, attend social functions or even have a good sleep in a warm bed and join the service. They are prepared to put themselves in alarming and stressful situations, with the hope of helping others who are in despair to find a positive way out from their dilemma and adversity.

To manage such tasks, the entry requirements for volunteers of the Samaritan Befrienders of Hong Kong are rather simple. Any individual who is a secondary school (i.e. GCE 'O' level) graduate, above eighteen years of age and without a criminal record is welcome to apply. There is no prerequisite for any counselling, social work, clinical caring knowledge or experience. Thus, volunteers are recruited from all walks of life or even students. SBHK provides them with in-house training and assessment before they are fully qualified to work at the frontline.

I hope the stories of long-serving members will contribute to training by offering new volunteers or potential volunteers an insight that cannot be

learned from manuals, but only from the experiences of others. It is for this reason that I have added small headings to the narratives.

From Chapter 1 to 11, I give a brief introduction to each of the story of eleven volunteers (including myself) who have served SBHK for over two decades. This is followed by their own account of their lives volunteering in this organization and how they have adapted themselves to face the challenges and uncertainties into which they are drawn by people who are on the verge of death.

Chapter 1

Jason Lee, the enduring volunteer

Jason is the most senior volunteer in SBHK who is still serving nowadays. By interviewing Jason, I came to understand more about the historical practice of this first Asian suicide prevention hotline service. In the following paragraphs, Jason recalls how he has maintained his service in SBHK for nearly forty years...

Joining SBHK easily and group coincidentally

In fact, I joined SBHK by chance in July 1976. It was after my graduation from secondary school that I started my career in the construction industry. I worked from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. on a shift basis. One day, I saw an advertisement from a newspaper and thought that the location of service of the then SBHK, which was at a resettlement housing estate in Lo Foo Ngam (*now known as Lok Fu*), was quite convenient for me. It was en route from my home to my workplace. I could be joining the service by taking a bus from my workplace. I made a phone call to the centre and asked for some preliminary information about what volunteers are supposed to do at SBHK. I had the impression that I did not need to spend too much time there, and in fact I didn't have much leisure time. It was about one hour a week, and it was flexible about when that hour could be.

I thought that if I did not join SBHK, I might spend my leisure time at the football pitch, or join the Civil Aid Services or the Royal Hong Kong

Regiment. They were both auxiliary disciplined services that young people loved to join after work as volunteers. However, I was not too sure about why I would have this thought. Perhaps this was a normal course of action for youth during that period in Hong Kong.

In the 1970s, SBHK was not very systematic when it came to selecting volunteers. Anyone who were interested could easily join the service. As a matter of fact, the early years of SBHK was mainly manned by teachers from the Mu Kuang English School and some other volunteers. Three to four schoolteachers would report for duty after 4 p.m. and I usually covered the hours after 6 p.m.. Very few people were available to do mornings or during school hours. However, some nurses who worked shifts could occasionally provide a service in the daytime.

Since there were always insufficient people to staff the centre, I took up three to four shifts a week during weekdays. Very often, I was the only volunteer at the centre for most of the day. In the evenings, apart from listening to calls, I and other volunteers would be busy taking part in many different activities such as writing articles, editing monthly bulletins or other publications. Very often we stayed at the centre until 11 p.m. to catch the last bus home.

Learning beyond our own professional knowledge

I found it special to work at SBHK. As I worked in the construction industry, I seldom encountered any problematic life issues if not answering the Hotline. There was not much pre-service training provided for volunteers, but some on-the-job training sessions were given. These trainings included talks given by professionals invited from other organizations such as the Society for the Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention Hong Kong. Also, the Family Planning Association taught us how to handle certain kinds of people, such as ex-prisoners or

psychiatric patients. SBHK also invited psychiatrists or general medical practitioners to give us lectures. Lawyers were invited to brief volunteers on the procedure for divorce or criminal proceedings. Sometimes, we would go out to visit other organizations.

Although there was no formal training, this kind of briefing did let me and other volunteers have more knowledge beyond our own expertise. I thought that what I learned from these briefings had enriched my life a great deal. A teacher normally would not know how to handle an ex-prisoner or how divorce proceedings were carried out. Not a single professional could provide information on so many aspects for staff to learn. SBHK provided me with knowledge other than my own expertise. Similar to its present practice, SBHK organized many visits to other organizations. Such visits let the volunteers understand more about social resources and how other organizations operated. It also helped the personal growth of volunteers.

Good internal cohesion built friendship

During that period, I recall that the phones were not ringing all the time. Very often, even half the time, volunteers were waiting for calls. While we were waiting, we initiated much casual discussion among ourselves. We might sit in a circle and discuss certain government policies or some serious topics like 'what is love?', or explore the topics to be covered in the monthly bulletin. Sometimes, we introduced our professions to other volunteers and even disclosed our own problems that troubled us. In this way, all the volunteers had formed a very strong bond and were able to support one another. As there were only about forty to fifty volunteers, we knew each of the volunteers very well and became very good friends. We reported for duty regularly; we basically getting to know one another more and more.

Friendship was a by-product while serving SBHK. I have many fond memories and shared passions with this group of volunteers. We knew one another since we were young. We had no conflict of interest, and we were not competing with one another. It was quite different from the relationships with your colleagues. You might lose contact with them soon after they had left the company, even though we had worked together for five to six years.

Due to the nature of the service, the volunteers shared a common goal – to serve people in need. We could share our personal life and support others. This was a kind of friendship that money cannot buy. SBHK provided a platform for me to nurture such kinds of friendship with a group of people as a by-product of its service. It was very similar to the situation in a church, where Christians came to know each other under the name of serving God, while in SBHK the common goal is to help other people.

It was only in SBHK that I could maintain friendships with my peers. None of my classmates from primary and secondary school or my colleagues reached this level of close contact. In the past, we went hiking and camping, and had meals together. We even went to provide a regular service at St. Christopher's Home for Children, to play with underprivileged children every Saturday, for about two to three years. Now, after thirty years, although some of the volunteers have quitted the service, the cohesion is still there. The same group of up to about fifteen people continues to meet up or even to go travelling overseas together. Our friendship has lasted for a long time. It is just like the Taiwanese film, *You Are the Apple of my Eye*: people got connected since youth had become good friends.

Exercise discretion in handling clients

I witnessed the early stages of SBHK, which was not very systematic. There were not many rules for volunteers to follow. Volunteers often needed to exercise their own judgment. A certain number of cases were, in fact, referred from hospitals or police stations. Very often, a police officer would bring clients to the centre. Apart from some walk-in cases, there was once an occasion that a police officer brought a client to the centre at 11 p.m., and I needed to talk to the client until 3 a.m..

I had experienced many challenges during my service. On one Chinese New Year's Eve, some twenty years ago, a client, who was suffering from homesickness and suicidal, was brought to SBHK by a police officer. At 4 a.m., I finished the casework, but I had to call off my yearly ritual of visiting the Chinese New Year floral market with my family, as the market had already closed. It was fortunate that I had the understanding of my family members about skipping this annual activity.

I also recall an occasion when I lent \$20 to a client to buy food. There was no rule at SBHK to regulate this practice in the early stages, but other volunteers and Uncle Chao, who was the watchman residing at the centre, had some opinions on what I did. Without regret, I lent the money to the client. He kept his promise and returned \$20 to SBHK the following week. It was, in fact, a very difficult decision for me. I trusted the client and, at that moment, I thought that I could really help the client, although I knew that the management of SBHK might not agree. The management did not want money be involved between volunteers and clients. However, the client was hungry and penniless, I really thought that the money could help him solve his urgent need.

The client returned the money to the centre without saying anything. I did not really care about the money. The client put down the money and

left. I was very pleased to prove my judgment over the creditability of that client, and concluded that not everyone was as deceitful as we conceive. From my standpoint, it was important to satisfy the urgent need of the client. There were other volunteers who noticed that I gave money to clients. As soon as the client left, we did have a short discussion and I basically said that the client's problem was solved. We then continued to staff the centre as usual.

It was after this incident that a small amount of petty cash was being kept at the centre in case there was an emergency. On the same grounds, SBHK sometimes paid for accommodation fee of guest houses in Yau Ma Tei if volunteers encountered homeless clients who were in desperate need of shelter. The fact is that survival and shelter are basic needs of human beings, according to Abraham H. Maslow (1954), and it was important for me to solve any difficulties of the client on the spot.

Teamwork for outreaching case

In the 1970s and 1980s, there were times when I had to work with the police to trace the call in order to save a client who attempted to commit suicide. Much teamwork was required for this sort of action. While I kept talking with the client, other volunteers contacted the police to explain the situation. Very often, when the volunteers arrived on the scene, the client had already been taken to the hospital. Volunteers would then follow up the case with the client's family members. The teamwork in those days was relatively simple and straightforward. However, this practice has changed. There are rules and regulations volunteers ought to follow under such circumstances. Now, volunteers would not normally follow up the case immediately, as the social resources are a whole lot different in Hong Kong nowadays, comparing with the 1960s.

Stay calm under stress

In fact, all the challenges I encountered at SBHK have trained me to be calmer when it came to handling crisis in an emergency. Nowadays, I do not panic if clients threaten to take his or her own life. It is not unusual for clients to say that they are about to kill themselves, going to die or similar potentially manipulative words, but I will remain calm. Having had more experience, I became more mature and emotionally stable. I recall that my office caught on fire some ten years ago. While other colleagues panicked and did not know what to do, I calmly picked up a fire extinguisher and put out the fire. I attributed my calm reaction to my experience in SBHK. I was pleased to see this development in myself.

Mysterious service

Another challenge that I recall, in particular, was the requirement to keep case information confidential due to the unique nature of this suicide prevention hotline service; that is, the mysterious nature of the service in the eyes of the public. Since volunteers had an obligation not to disclose the content of the conversation and personal data of clients to the public, the service was deemed secretive. In earlier years, members were not allowed to disclose their volunteer identity to their friends and relatives. You could imagine how secretive the service was and how the volunteers were trained to comply with the confidential rules in order to protect the privacy of clients. Nevertheless, the identity rule has been relaxed nowadays and volunteers are no longer forbidden to disclose their membership identity, provided that this is not for commercial use. However, the need to keep case information confidential still remains unchanged. I have followed the confidential principle strictly over the years. I have never disclosed any details of the cases that I have handled, even in this interview!

Chance to explore on knowledge

In retrospect, I think that the challenges that I encountered have strengthened my determination to stay in the service. However, it was not about talking with clients that made me consolidate this idea. In fact, it was during group discussions, when volunteers were sitting together to explore topics or discuss the handling of certain cases, that I realized the benefits of staying in SBHK, and how valuable the knowledge and experience that I gained from serving there. During a normal day, I did not think about what I had learned from the service. Perhaps those topics of discussion were common or interesting to any young man, and such discussion could be in depth. Since volunteers at SBHK were free to have any kinds of discussions, it made serving at SBHK a whole lot different from working at other organizations; in a business or commercial setting, it just would not happen. During that period, the topics people generally talked about in a workplace were horse racing or gambling. They seldom discussed some serious topics.

In fact, the consolidation of knowledge helped me to look at things from more than one perspective. As time goes by, I noticed that I have changed. I would no longer be too insistent on my initial view. When there were different opinions, I would step back and listen. Then I would give a little thought to what others said and decided whether to accept their opinions or not. In general, I found myself able to think more clearly and have a better overall understanding.

Never thought of leaving

I have never thought of leaving SBHK, as it is part of my life. My family fully support of what I am doing at SBHK. I still have a great passion for serving there. In the 1960s, there was no appraisal system for volunteers. I just reported for duty for three to four evenings, from

Monday to Friday, based on when I was available. I normally asked my family not to save food for me on weekday evenings. After I got married, I reduced this frequency to one to two sessions a week, especially after my children were born. Unlike in the very old days, an appraisal system has been used by SBHK to monitor the attendance of volunteers over the last decade. I am still happy being able to fulfil the minimum requirements for attendance to maintain my membership and to help others .

It was fortunate that I had a rather stable life. My habit of reporting for duty has become kind of like going to church on Sunday. I report for duty regularly, and my parents have no problem with that, even though I occasionally worked until 1 to 2 a.m.. I had the understanding of my family. My family knew that I was serving at SBHK, but I did not tell them about what I was doing in detail. I kept quiet instead of telling them what I did. There were some occasions that I left the centre at 2 a.m., and needed to leave my home and go to work at 6 to 7 a.m.. Fortunately, this did not happen very often. In most of the cases, I took the last bus at 11 p.m. and returned home by midnight. Luckily, my family members were all very supportive.

Unmarried men took overnight duties once a month

For OND, I used to report for duty with my peer group. Since I worked on a shift basis, I could undertake an OND on weekdays and have a proper rest the following day, when I returned home at 9 to 10 a.m.. I did not report for OND after I got married. Traditionally, only men who were single needed to undertake one OND per month, and women and men who got married were not required to do any OND. This rule had been changed in the 1990s. From then on all newly recruited members had

to undertake OND. Only some very long-time volunteers were exempted from undertaking OND.

Volunteers with more passion with minimal management system

In the past, SBHK was not so systematic when it came to managing volunteers. While at present, there are many rules and regulations for volunteers to follow. Being a long-time volunteer who has been serving at SBHK for several decades, I have experienced both periods. Comparing with the volunteers nowadays, I think volunteers in early years had made more contributions.

It was not about the management or appraisal system that retained the members in the service or kept the turnover rate down. More and more minimum requirements set for volunteers, less and less volunteers are able to contribute more than these requirements. There is always 'give and take' in setting up a policy, yet I recognize that under very little management in the past, there were more volunteers with passion. At exit interviews, volunteers who quitted the service may not honestly tell the real reasons for their leaving. Normally, they are quite polite, and say that they are no longer available. Whether they are upset by the management or the real reason that made them leave are something that can never be found out.

Too demanding on present volunteer selection

In fact, there are many organizations other than SBHK that people can serve as volunteers. With so many rules and regulations as well as requirements for volunteers to follow and meet, it is understandable that why they do not want to stay in this organization. Besides, I noticed that some trainers for volunteers are too harsh and demanding. During

the training and evaluation process, volunteers need to meet strict requirements in order to be qualified. This might upset volunteers. For me, trainers should give volunteers a great deal of patience and chances to help them nurture their skills. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that there are cultural differences among people living in different eras.

Benefited from learning communication skill

In terms of character, I admit that I am, by nature, a loyal person. I am a stable person and not into changing. This could be one of the reasons why I have been able to stay in SBHK for so long. Unlike some people who got fed up with doing the same thing again and again, I seldom have this feeling. To give you an example, my first job in the construction industry had lasted for twenty years, with some promotion. It was fortunate that there were not many difficult times in my career and life that made me change my job. I also consider serving at SBHK actually beneficial to my career, as I worked alongside colleagues all the time and, as a team leader, my communication skills had greatly improved from serving at SBHK. Although the nature of my service at SBHK did not call for the same sort of qualifications as in other disciplines, it did not have a negative impact on my personality or the image of manhood that society expected of me. In fact, the communication skills I learned from serving at SBHK could apply in my job as well.

Just like serving in a family

Serving at SBHK is part of my life. Apart from having a passion for helping people in need and my keenness to face challenge and treasure my special group of friends in SBHK, I was also highly interested in the infrastructure of SBHK. As I had been working in the construction industry while serving at SBHK, I offered my professional knowledge when various centres were needed to renovate.

I remember on one occasion that I responded to an appeal from the management to clean up the centre. I was among a group of volunteers who gathered together to renovate the oldest Lo Fu Ngam Center. It was just like family members coming together to clean the house. The sense of family life was unique to SBHK. We also decided to change the floor tiles by ourselves. We approached a construction material company to seek sponsorship for the tiles. It ended up that the company donated the tiles to SBHK and even sent two workers to help us replace them. For me, it was absolutely touching to see people from different walks of life supporting the work of SBHK. Later on, I was involved in the renovation work and design when SBHK was moved to Shun Lee Center, the present Choi Hung Center and the Pat Tin Center. I hope the professional knowledge of construction that I contributed was able to make the renovation work at these centres proceed smoothly. Every single tile at the centres means a lot to me. SBHK is part of my life, and is part of my personal growth and development.

Being a group leader was never an easy role

I have been a group leader and an executive committee (Exco) member. Being a group leader in the past was never as easy as at present. Normally, group leaders needed to stay for four to five hours at the centre. They were required to pay attention to any group member who did not show up for duty for two to three weeks. In this case, the group leader would then contact the member and try to find out what happened. Having been an Exco member for two terms, I had to formulate a policy for SBHK. However, I was aware that it would be a slow process for Exco to conclude it, as I recalled that meetings always seemed to be never-ending when discussing about how to implement a policy.

Not under pressure to leave

I really have been serving for a very long time at SBHK. However, as I have already got used to everything in the organization, I am sort of stress-free to carry on the service. I declined to disclose any details of clients as this is a commitment I made to SBHK. Under no circumstances would I violate this rule. It is for this reason that the service of SBHK seems to be mysterious, as volunteers do not discuss about the cases they handled in public. Perhaps it is this mysterious nature that attracts people to join the service.

On the whole, I think I am no different from any other citizens. I started working after graduating from school, and I am in search of a simple life. Even nowadays, if people do not go to happy hours or karaoke after work, their life would go back to a simple form. It is a matter of how people react at different stages in their life. I mentioned earlier that I might have chosen to join one of the forces such as the Royal Hong Kong Regiment or the Civil Aid Services. However, before I saw SBHK's advertisement, I did not see theirs. It was just a coincidence that I joined SBHK, despite the fact that such a coincidence has lasted for so long.

Chapter 2

Han, the lifetime teacher

Han joined the Hotline service in 1990, when she changed her career from working for the government to teaching at a special school for children with intellectual disabilities. Since her school finished at 4 p.m., she thought that she was able to spend some time in undertaking social service. In the following paragraphs, Suk Han tells us how her leisure time is occupied by serving at SBHK and teaching...

Do not know the reason for joining social service, but SBHK was suggested by a friend

I had no idea what kind of social service I should join at first. However, I have a friend who served as a volunteer at SBHK Hotline before. The friend suggested SBHK to me. Without thinking too much, I applied to become a volunteer. Frankly, if I had not joined SBHK, I would have joined another organization instead.

It seems to me that carrying out some kind of social service in my spare time is something simple and straightforward. It is not influenced by any friends or any incidents that I have involved in.

I did not have much experience of being a volunteer when I was in primary and secondary school, or even when I studied at a higher education institution. I only did one-off service during summer school. My schoolmates preferred part-time jobs to social service because they

want to earn money. None of my family members did any social service except my father, who served on the neighbourhood committee of the housing estate that we lived. I guess that it was the social atmosphere that prompted me to do social service in my spare time. However, I cannot recall a particular social event that triggered this thought.

I have a rather uneventful life. Nothing bothers me and I have no particular goal in my life. I developed a reading habit in secondary school. In particular, I love to read books on Chinese history.

Solitary environment on Saturday discouraged my commitment

Soon after I had completed my training as a volunteer, I reported for duty. I initially chose to report for duty on every Saturday. However, my confidence dropped below zero right after I reported for duty. The environment that I was used to in training, that a number of mentors or group leaders were around, was all gone. I found that I was the only one who reported for duty. I was overwhelmed with the feeling of helplessness, and at some point I even thought of quitting volunteering. Everytime I reported for duty, it felt like a difficult mission to me. I was uncomfortable with the absolutely quiet working environment. Since there was no one to share experience or to discuss how I should handle the cases or how others could have handled similar cases, I felt that I'd got no chance to reflect or improve. I started to question my ability to handle clients. This feeling was particularly strong after I handled clients with extreme personality, such as those who were manipulative or mentally disordered.

The difficulties and obstacles that I encountered made me become indifferent. I was reluctant to report for regular service. To me, a volunteer should be happy and feels comfortable with the service she

provides. In my first year of serving on SBHK, I was overwhelmed with the sense of difficulty. However, I did not quit and successfully found my way out of this adversity.

Incidentally, I noticed that having other volunteers around would boost my confidence to handle cases. I might be incompetent and was led on by a client, on some occasions, and when this happened I felt defeated (by the client). However, even if I felt like that, if I could discuss the situation with fellow volunteers, and about my handling of cases and my feelings, I could still bounce back. With that in mind, I decided to change group.

Regained confidence after changing group

I decided to report for duty on Fridays instead of Saturdays. There were more volunteers on Friday evenings. With the Friday team, I was able to share my feelings after listening to calls. Nothing is better than having someone to share your feelings with. With the support of other team members, I gradually rebuilt my confidence. I discussed with other volunteers and found out that there are many different ways to handle a case; no single way is considered to be absolutely perfect. I was more relaxed when listening to calls. I had regained my confidence.

I concluded that to let volunteers serving alone on the Hotline is not a good practice. It would be better if volunteers had got the chance to share their experience and feelings after listening to calls. Such sharing among volunteers encourages them to voice out their problems and think about what improvements they could make. This is a constructive evaluation of one's performance. It also helps the volunteer reorganize what happened during the process. Without the support of other volunteers, I would be ending up feeling miserable, couldn't help blaming myself and kept questioning my own ability.

Handling dramatic clients

Some responses from clients were quite dramatic. You could never predict how clients would respond to the volunteer's questions. Manipulative clients might try to criticize what the volunteer said from time to time, trying to establish their leading role in the conversation. Clients with mental problems might totally ignore what the volunteers said and kept talking about their own problem. Volunteers with less experience would feel defeated by handling these kinds of extreme and dramatic cases. Thus, it is important for volunteers with no experience to get more support when it came to handling these kinds of clients.

During the time I stayed with the Friday team, my volunteering at SBHK was quite stable. In fact, I had been the group leader for two to three years. Since good culture had been established among group members, it was easy for me to strengthen the bond among them. What I needed to do was to arrange proper occasions for team members to meet up and share experience. Even when I organized recreational activities for the group, I would still manage to introduce an element of group discussion during activities to allow messages from the Exco to be passed down to members and for members giving feedback on various service-or membership-related issues.

It was not only my idea, but some of my group members also thought the same way. They claimed that they could have gathered together purely for recreational activities with their own friends. Therefore, it was not necessary for us to provide this kind of activity for them. Instead, discussing issues about the Hotline could foster and improve volunteers' sense of belonging. Members who were enthusiastic would be more willing to sacrifice their time for this kind of gathering.

More interest in being a reflective trainer

Unlike other group leaders, I did not want to become an Exco member. Instead, I became more active in training volunteers. I like to offer a helping hand to train new volunteers in various training courses. I would comment on their works, listen to their recorded homework and act as a facilitator to lead the role-play exercises to recruit new members. I think that getting involved in this sort of primary skill training may help the recruit and myself at the same time. By giving feedback to trainees, I can further consolidate my knowledge and experience. It is not only a revision but reflection for me as well.

Monitoring trainees receiving live calls is also beneficial for me. I need to be more analytical in conceptualizing the personality of the client. Together with the role-play exercises, it requires more acute listening skills so that I am able to clear my own mind and then comment on the performance of the trainees. Again, it lets me have more chances for self-reflection. Frankly, I might not get the chance to have such reflection if I did not take part in this training activity. You seldom reflect on yourself without a good reason. The training did stimulate me to do so. Over the past training sessions, I observed that some trainees were eager to learn. They demonstrated a high level of interest on the topics. I was quite pleased to see this, not because of my full-time teaching profession at a special school for mentally retarded children, but because I was happy to see the positive response of the trainees as well as their enthusiasm. In fact, I did not feel dissatisfied at all throughout the trainings..

Confidence in handling life crisis

In view of my life and experience in SBHK, I feel increasingly confident of handling clients with emotional problems. I have been more capable

of handling clients that are difficult to deal with. Apart from the improvement in this respect, I notice my own personal improvement when facing difficulties. The experience of serving at the Hotline centre has equipped me with the ability to face challenges and crisis more calmly. *Well-being or happiness is not guaranteed.* There are clients whose living condition is far better than many people, but are still suffering from chronic unhappiness. To put it simply, they cannot let go of the unpleasant experience and that led to their long-term unhappiness.

Letting go is one of the choices

I am not sure whether I could let go of unfortunate memories if it happened to me. However, I acknowledge the fact that, by listening to the stories of clients, I have been reminded again and again the importance of letting things go. I think that, as a human, I might not be that conscious of being able to detach myself from feeling bad if something tragic happened to me. However, I am sure that I would, after a while, be able to pick up the pieces and remind myself that I do have choices to choose. In short, my Hotline experience has enabled me to have the ability of staying positive, even something bad had happened to me. By making a rational choice, I would be able to let go of the misery and find a whole new way out.

Provide minimal service while studying

After working a whole day at my special school for mentally retarded children, I don't feel tired at all and can still manage to handle Hotline cases. The children of the school, aged between 6 and 18, are very energetic. Physical strength is all that required to look after these children. As a matter of fact, the pressure of this job in the 80s was far less than in the 90s. Society was much more simpler and the requirements of taking care of children were also simple. I only needed

to take care of their class work. Therefore, my workload after school was comparatively lighter. However, the situation changed after 1995 and 1996, when the government carried out educational reform. I needed to get a Bachelor's degree in order to keep my teaching job. With the workload of my daytime job became heavier plus the burden of studying, I was exhausted and could not retain my high percentage of attendance at the Hotline service. Nevertheless, I passed my annual appraisal with minimum attendance. It was a tough period. However, my reasonable commitment and resilience had enabled me to overcome this hurdle, and that I was still able to serve the community.

Feel satisfied of being able to help

I gained satisfaction from my service through interacting with clients and trainees. Although not every single case could provide me satisfaction, on the whole I am satisfied with my interactions with clients. It is the effect of my relationship and conversation with clients, their responses and the ability to maintain my goals in the process that made me feel satisfied. I found that I do have the ability to help others.

A typical case reflecting my ability is about a patient with mental problem. He talked to me for 45 minutes. During our conversation, he seemed to be mentally confused and unable to think clearly. He was worried and anxious. He worried that the volunteer would not give him much time to talk. I gave him confidence to speak and encouraged him to talk about his experience, and even the anxiety he felt about our telephone conversation. By giving the client enough time to talk about his worries, I felt that I was able to help him. However, I understand that there is a limit to this kind of service. If it appears that a client wishes to talk for several hours, I do not think it is appropriate to fulfil his/her request unless they are at a high risk of killing themselves.

Another satisfaction I have gained is from training volunteers. It is another kind of offering my helping hand, although the object I help this time is trainees, not the clients. Perhaps because I am a teacher at a special school, my perception of the responses of students could be different from other teachers from ordinary schools or trainers in SBHK. It feels so good to see the trainees respond well. Furthermore, when I helped other teachers to reorganize the files on their computer in a neat and tidy manner, I had to admit that it also gave me a feeling of satisfaction. It resembles the situation when I helped emotionally confused clients to reconstruct their thoughts and feelings and relief from emotional distress. Indeed, helping others gives me a great deal of satisfaction, especially to help clear up a messy situation.

Never thought of leaving SBHK

I did not get much support from SBHK in my first year of joining the service, but then things were getting better and better. After serving there for twenty years, I have never thought of leaving. As I have become more and more confident of myself, I no longer needed the same level of support from other volunteers that I used to need before! I am able to motivate myself after serving there for a while. Unless I encounter a major change in my life, such as changes in family life which would reduce my own time, I will carry on my service.

Human resilience is awesome

One of the cases that impressed me a lot was about a man calling the Hotline saying that his wife left him all of a sudden. He just went home after work and saw that she left him a note. His wife had taken all the valuable items with her and left. He did not hear from her since then. The client was depressed. He called the Hotline frequently. Losing his wife was a severe blow to him, and he was literally in shock. He used to have a good and happy family but suddenly, he seemed to have lost

everything. After a period of time, one day I picked up a call from this same client again. The client called to thank the assistance that the volunteer of SBHK gave him. He had already accepted the bad news and let go. His life was back on track. I, of course, was very happy to see the change of this client. While I was aware that tragedies do happen in this world, I was impressed by the resilience and toughness of human beings. Despite the fact that tragedy is unpredictable, how a person can recover from such a tragedy is amazing.

Leave the past aside, live in the moment

I am learning about Buddhist beliefs now. I notice that Buddhism also advocates letting go of our sadness by living in the present moment, or the concept of living here and now. I recall that, from the time I joined SBHK, I have read many books written by retired psychiatrists. They described that people are actually able to deal with their own sadness. In fact, I notice that their concepts are very close to the Buddhist concept of letting go. There are commonalities between counselling and Buddhist beliefs. The concept of living in the present moment and putting the sad experience aside is always the ultimate way to live a better and happy life.

Life is beyond our control; treasure what one gets

I remember another case about a musician who was suffering from depression. She had no financial problems, but her mental illness led her to a very unhappy life. I could feel her helplessness. Although her living conditions were quite good, in fact far better than many people, still it was useless to help her regain a happy life. I was sympathetic about her situation, but she was not able to help herself extricate from the plight. I strongly felt that there was nothing I could do to help her, and this feeling was too much for me to handle. From this case, I understand that life is always uncontrollable; we should treasure what we have

Part Two



*Wisdom
of Life*

This part of the book is an elaboration of the conclusion (Page 204-208) drawn from the research. This conclusion was primarily based on the empathetic task our long-serving suicide prevention hotline volunteers have been carrying out in listening to their clients which was a testimony of their long-term practising of selflessness

Here I provide more day-to-day examples from my observations for readers to understand what the relationship between selflessness and wisdom is. I also provide more academic referencing materials for readers who are interested in to follow through in order to fulfil their personal preference to pursue similar knowledge. It is basically not something I created. It is my understanding of the essence of the reference materials that I cited only combine them together and present them in a more understandable manner.

This tacit knowledge might support long-serving volunteering in the Suicide Prevention Hotline. Alternatively, readers might consider it as a kind of tertiary life education material. People who explore this area might find a whole different way to look at and understand life from a more positive perspective. This is also the purpose and goal of SBHK – to provide suicide prevention life education material to the public.

Chapter 13

Knowledge and reflection (Wisdom-fostering knowledge)

I have told the stories of eleven long-serving volunteers in previous chapters. Readers might appreciate the long serving of volunteers after reading their stories. What the volunteers mentioned about the reasons for them to serve at the organization for so long is in alignment with studies on long-serving volunteers across the world. There are factors concerning both personal motivation as well as the management of an organization that are explicit in nature. I have briefly mentioned that there may be one more reason behind the long staying power of the volunteers: an implicit, wisdom-related factor.

To me, an understanding of this last factor is far more important than that of the explicit factors concerning an individual or the organization. I want to elaborate on this area so that readers can understand it better and, if they are interested in, to embark on the journey of what I call the wisdom of life.

In their book *Successful Cognitive and Emotional Aging* (2010), Ardelt and Oh give an account of the theory of wisdom. It combines Western and Eastern concepts of wisdom, where the former emphasizing knowledge and reflection while the latter a reflective understanding and affection. It is important to note that reflection is regarded as a common

practice when speaking about the wisdom of both East and West. Reflection is a key component in obtaining wisdom.

Below, I wish to elaborate on my own in-depth reflection and reflexivity on what had happened to me and probably what nourished or fostered my life attitude, hence my self-transcendent experience. There was knowledge that I learned well before 2013 that might have fostered my ability to attain my peak experience, as I applied it regularly. There was other knowledge that I explored, researched and found relevant to my peak experience. One may argue that I am sharing only my own experience and views. All I can say is that I have critically reviewed my life following my unique experience. I have absolute confidence to tell the world about it as well as my discovery of the importance of selflessness and its relationship to suffering, empathy and, more importantly, the wisdom of life.

As humans, we might consider whether we are selfless or not to explain many things that happen in our lives. Keeping an open mind, we might find new insights and perspectives when we look at things in the world. On top of that, an open mind also provides new insights into why some Samaritan volunteers have served so long.

Just to remind you, the following three chapters are written in a more academic style, and a number of references and quotations are given. I think that this will provide useful information for readers who are interested in to explore relevant subjects of their own in pursuit of wisdom.

Selflessness

Being one of the storytellers and the author of this book, in my story in Chapter 11, I have highlighted my personal mystical experience that

I had reached the conclusion that selflessness is the most important endeavour in anyone's life. Although altruism, as it is commonly known, is a state of 'selflessness' that refers to a person who is willing to sacrifice oneself to help others, there are also other aspects of selflessness that worth paying attention to. According to my observations, counselling volunteers or counsellors regularly practise empathy. To exercise empathy effectively, counsellors need to be congruent with as well as having unconditional and positive regard for clients. This requires the counsellors to put aside their assumptions and judgements, and to meet another person without prejudice (Mearns and Thorne, 1988). In other words, in order to have the capability to fully understand the inscape of their clients' worlds, not like anthropologists, counsellors need to let go of their own interests in order to achieve a self-free condition or attitude. It is very important for such practitioners to go into this state of 'selflessness', which others may refer to as the suspending demands of their ego to categorize and judge. This allows them to get in touch with an intrinsic drive for deeper personal growth. This could be something, perhaps not consciously known, that nurtures their skill and ability to serve at the organization for several decades.

In fact, MacDonald (McHenry, 2009: 79) states that '*engagement in counselling and various kinds of psychotherapy*' is one of nine wisdom-fostering activities. Hence, we may also be able to see the connection between the concept of selflessness and wisdom:

Only as man withdraws from himself in the sense of releasing self-centered interest and attention will he gain an authentic mode of existence.

(Frankl, in *Psychotherapy and Existentialism*, 1960: 99)

'Selflessness' is the foundation of wisdom and the key to the universe. It seems to have its place in Kensho or Satori, in terms of Zen Buddhism or in Nirvana. According to Maslow, Nirvana:

...is a Buddhist word whose original meaning refers to the extinction or blowing out of a lamp or the flame of a candle. It is the highest form of consciousness, a transcendent state of freedom resulting from the extinction of desire and the blowing out of illusions, in particular, the illusion of an individual self or ego.

(Maslow, 1968: 170)

I confess that, although I was taught since my childhood that, as humans, we should not be selfish. However, I have never been taught how to be selfless! To be selfish, I think, it refers to a state of mind which one is constantly devoted to and cares only for oneself or primarily one's own interests, benefits or well-being, totally ignoring others. Being selfless, however, seems to be going further, yet includes, not being selfish. It encompasses the insignificance and non-existence of oneself. As I cited Viktor Frankl above, only as one withdraws from oneself in the sense of releasing self-centred interest and attention will one gain an authentic mode of existence. Selflessness relates to our mode of existence, and also to human potential:

It is sarcastic to mention that a human being needs to be selfless and stepping out from its 'humanness' nature of protecting themselves, in order to find its human potential.

(Maslow, 1968)

Selflessness is not only an expression of unselfishness; it is also a state of mind, in that we can step out of our own interests. In fact, Maslow (ibid: 203) also stated:

...for cognition to be complete, it must be detached, disinterested, desireless and unmotivated. Only in this state of mind humans perceive the object in its own nature with its own objective and intrinsic characteristic instead of interpreting the objects according to one's own thoughts on its usefulness or safety risk or applications.

On Macdonald's website, www.wisdompage.com, he lists three Maslow's publications (1954, 1968 and 1971) as a working bibliography for wisdom research. Maslow's thinking was also in line with the principles of 'pre-suppositionless' of phenomenology. These are to be explained later in the book, but I will come back to this possibility when I discuss mindfulness and neuroscience in latter part of this chapter, and the need to do this when we exercise empathy in Chapter 14. For a better understanding of what selflessness could mean to our lives, I try to elaborate in the following paragraphs on how 'selflessness' can be identified in relation to our past, present and future.

Past

Memories and experiences

We have a lot of memories and experiences in our mind. Whether they are good or bad memories, they stay in our mind. Very often, we dig out any portion of them from the storage part of the brain and start to savor them. In general our mind would not stop thinking about the past, present and the future. I can sit on a bus with my eyes looking out the window but my mind keeps thinking about the happy memories of me having fun with my children, dating with my girlfriend, sporting forcefully in a competition, watching TV, having a good meal with my family, etc.

Or, while I was day dreaming in my office, ruminating on my unhappy experience with my selfish father, my last quarrel with my wife, my fight with my girlfriend, an accident that was caused by my carelessness,

my poor academic results, my bad experience in a party and my mean discussion with my boss, etc.. All these bad memories belong to me and will always be with me.

Regardless of whether these memories have any positive or negative impact on my future, these are my past experiences and have become part of my memories. Such memories hinder us from living in and enjoying the present moment. People are not easy to get rid of, or forget about these memories, perhaps almost impossible to do so, and to become a selfless person without entangled with any past memories and experience.

Vegetarian

Although I am not yet to turn vegetarian, my attitude to and even my frequency of having a complete vegetarian meal changed after the mindfulness retreat camp I attended in April 2014. I consumed twelve consecutive vegetarian meals, from breakfast to dinner, during the six-day, five-night camp. The dishes prepared by the monks and nuns from Plum Village, France, were amazingly good. They were fusions of Western and oriental styles, especially style of French, Vietnamese, Chinese and Hong Kong cuisine. The experience was far better than my experience when I attended the mindfulness camp for the first time in 2000.

However, my change of attitude towards vegetarian diet not only came from my memories of the good food. It was more from my reflection. Objectively, when we look at the source of food that is available to humans around the world, we will find meat and vegetables. A number of researches have indicated the benefits of consuming less meat or only consuming vegetables. Buddhists, also, appeal to humans to

become vegetarians. In order to set a good example, they themselves have become vegetarians. But why so many people still eat meat and ignore the fact that doing so involves killing animals? Every life on earth is precious. Is there any reason why animals have to sacrifice their life for humans? And, as humans, it seems that eating meat is a habit – would it be correct to say that the taste and texture of the meat as well as the feeling of chewing it persists in our memory, and it reinforces the practice of humans to keep killing animals in order to eat them? Can humans let go of their memories of eating meat, just like we let go of other memories, and become vegetarians? Surely, it is a call to practise selflessness and is certainly easier than any of the methods to get rid of our past memories that I mentioned in the above paragraphs.

Present

Parental care

It is not difficult to find selflessness from parents. When strong wind blowing at night, parents will leave their warm beds to check whether their children sleep well or not; parents who live in poverty will give the food available to their children while ignoring their own hunger. Undoubtedly, these are selfless acts. However, if there are other children who suffer from hunger but the parents only give food to their own children, they are not selfless, as they cannot leave their attachment to their own children aside to observe, objectively, the needs of all hungry children.

Vested interest

In one respect, it may not be too difficult to achieve selflessness if there is no vested interest in a relationship or situation. However, when such a situation arises, it may be very difficult to maintain selflessness. Imagine if your children are having a fight with their schoolmates. When

you arrive at the scene to stop the fight, can you make an objective judgement and try not to take sides, remain neutral and disregard your innermost feelings that you actually want to protect your children?

Sometimes we are biased when handling a situation that involves people or things in which we have a vested interest. We might subconsciously give them benefits. They might be our children or friends, or a project, and we might be lenient with them. Regardless of any unfair outcome that it might lead to, we made biased decisions. We are then not selfless, as we cannot let go of our personal interests.

Hotline service interruption by short-term goal

Volunteers of the Samaritan Befrienders Hotline listen to calls from people in emotional distress. They spend their spare time and energy to provide a service to help other people. Serving on the Hotline is unquestionably a selfless act. However, when I was on duty at the Samaritan Befrienders Hotline, sometimes I picked up a call about an hour before I was off duty, and the caller might be so serious that I might not be able to end the conversation within an hour. If I had any appointments afterwards, a prolonged call would make me late for my next appointment. Under such circumstances, I might incline to end the call as soon as possible. This is against the principle of the service that we always place our clients first. It would negate my original intention of providing selfless service. Therefore, I seldom scheduled any appointment right after I was off duty in order to avoid such a situation from happening.

Pride and dignity

Sometimes we are not to protect others. We might just protect ourselves. We might argue for the sake of protecting what we have argued before,

and insist on our opinions even though, deep down in our hearts, we know what is better or whose opinion is better. A boss or someone with power and authority, or anyone who controls the release of information, could easily be tempted into this sort of manipulative behaviour, as that person is the only one who knows the whole truth. Chapman (2012) appeals to us not to exaggerate or understate when we speak, so that we can correctly describe something or tell the truth. Basically, if we can speak objectively without manipulating, twisting, adjusting or altering the facts for our own benefit, pride, dignity or personal image, we are on the right track to practising selflessness.

In 2013, when I was monitoring the conversation of an *ab initio* call taken by a Hotline trainee, I noticed that the trainee ended the call prematurely. It was a case about a man calling to tell us how he was having sexual relationships with both his wife and his mother-in-law. The man sounded very confused. He expressed a strong sense of guilt. Unfortunately, the trainee ended the call abruptly, without allowing the man to express his feelings and emotions properly. During the debriefing, the trainee admitted that she did not know how to handle the case. She was too panicked to carry on the conversation.

My question to her was 'what would you do if you face something that you cannot handle?' Obviously, due to the the trainee lacked experience, she chose to flee to eliminate her fear. My second question was why she did not ask for help, when knowing that I was listening on the other line? I explained to her that this was not a way to have a client-oriented conversation. It seemed that she ended the conversation to protect herself from fear, refusing to ask for help in order to maintain her dignity. Instead of taking care of the client, she chose to protect herself. This was not selfless behaviour.

Why is Selflessness a way to Wisdom?

This book is a real story, but more than that it is also a book you can for academic life education purpose.

It first contains real stories from eleven suicide prevention telephone hotline volunteers of the Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong (SBHK) who had been serving for more than 25 years. They came from all walks of life such as engineer, businessman, teacher, nurses and housewife.

There were episodes of unforgettable conversation between volunteers and clients, stories of how volunteer managed the situation when a suicide attempt was ongoing at the other end of the phone.

Volunteers talk about their engagement with different type of clients: depressive, suicidal, manipulative, shameful or even thankful clients. They also talked about themselves, including their childhood, some very important personal experiences and their expectations for the future. All these stories are, in fact, data for triangulation among each other to support the research on the attributes of these long-serving volunteers.

The second part of the book is an elaboration of the reason for the longevity of service provided by the volunteers. This is a wisdom related reason which is unknown to most people. While volunteers selflessly devote their precious time to serve their clients and regularly exercise empathy, they are unconsciously practicing undeliberate and additional 'selflessness'. This book provides a lot of literatures (with academic references) advocating the importance of selflessness for human development. There are relationships between empathy, selflessness, virtues, transcendence, wisdom and Eudaimonia (ultimate happiness) which human being should be aware of and to try to understand. This book allows interested people to trace along the literature references provided and ultimately pursue happiness. The author believes that people understand all these insights would know how to carry on their lives in a fruitful and developmental manor, regardless of their age.



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