

# Buddhist Perspective on Conflict-Resolution

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## 1. Introduction

What is Conflict? "Conflict" comes from the Latin language "Confligere" which connotes fighting, warfare, incompatibility and opposition. Conflict is used to describe both people and groups who have beliefs, attitudes, needs and benefits that are absolutely different, so that they debate, dispute, and even kill each other.<sup>1</sup>

In Pāli literature, various terms such as *kalaha* (quarrel, dispute, fight), *vivāda* (dispute, quarrel, contention), *virodha* (obstruction, hindrance, opposition, enmity), *viggaha* (dispute, quarrel), *ghattana* (striking, insulting), *yuddha* (war, battle, fight), etc., are used by the Buddha to indicate existing conflict and also signify various types of conflict.

According to the US Military Dictionary, "Conflict is an armed struggle or clash between organized parties within a nation, or between nations in order to achieve limited political or military objectives. Although regular forces are often involved, irregular forces frequently predominate. Conflict often is protracted, confined to a restricted geographic area, and constrained in weaponry and level of violence. Within this state, military power in response to threats may be exercised in an indirect manner, while supportive of other instruments of national power. Limited objectives may be achieved by the short, focused, and direct application of force."<sup>2</sup>

In psychological terms, conflict is a psychic struggle, often unconscious, resulting from incompatible or opposing needs, drives, desires, tendencies wishes, or demands. It refers to the existence of that clash. In political terms, "conflict" can refer to wars, revolutions or other struggles, which may involve the use of force as in the term "armed conflict".

From the above explanations, we can simply say that conflict is a clash or contest between opposing individuals or parties with opposing or incompatible needs and selfish desires.

Conflict can assume a variety of forms, such as community conflict, diplomatic conflict, environmental resources conflict, ideological conflict, religious conflict, interpersonal conflict, intrastate conflict (such as civil wars or election

campaigns), organizational conflict, workplace conflict, family conflict, etc.

## 2. Causes of Conflict

In the present world, with its diversity of cultures, languages and religions, it is very easy for conflict to arise between two people or two groups. Since earliest times, human beings and societies have always had conflict; in fact, it has been unavoidable since they were born in different social environments.

There are many reasons for social conflict. Generally, conflict results because of a negative attitude towards the other party or a misunderstanding between people with regard to their needs, ideas, beliefs, goals, or values. For our understanding, the following issues can be regarded as the causes of political conflict:

**Power and Control:** Control over political power ambitions can lead individuals or political parties into social conflict. For example, the attempts by a country to expand their territory with force lead to social conflict.

**Ethnic and Religious Causes:** In some countries, ethnicity and religion have altered the shape of ongoing social conflict. It is to be mentioned that most social conflicts today are due to this category as we see between Israel and Palestine, etc.

**Economic Causes:** Social conflict is often generated to get control of, or access of desired resources such as oil, water, etc. Also, promoting one's own self interest in order to achieve material gain can create social conflict such as global warming. Again, lack of socio-economic development in developing countries is also a cause of such conflicts.

**Ideological and Value Differences:** Ideological and general value differences are one of the driving forces of social conflict.

**Social Causes:** Social discrimination, denial of access to basic human needs, including identity and security, are also causes of social conflict. Social conflict also arises in various countries on the grounds of race, language, culture, color, etc.

### 3. Understanding Causes of Conflict under the Light of Buddhist Doctrine

Under the light of the Buddhist doctrine, it is definitely true that misunderstanding, fear, anger and hatred are the roots of conflicts. The Lord Buddha has pointed out to us that sense desires are the root-causes of quarrels, contentions, disputes, and wars – the “relatives” of conflicts. Another root cause of quarrels and disputes is the distinction between oneself and others, considering them to be equal, or superior, or inferior to one. From a Buddhist perspective, the causes of conflict are multiple. They include desire, arrogance, and delusion:

1) Desire refers to acquisitiveness and aspirations. Acquisitiveness includes the need to ‘possess’ material goods and also people. Whereas aspirations concern the wish for status, power and position. Furthermore, the world’s natural resources are sufficient for the entire world’s people, but greedy people always want more. Materialistic capitalist societies do not have unlimited raw materials, therefore, they will go to great lengths to obtain all the available resources, even though this means depriving other groups.

However, in my view, desire in this case covers the need for power, too. Power in itself is neither good nor bad, but in this case, ‘power’ refers to politics, money and social control. These kinds of power tend to corrupt the mind; the love of power leads to the desire for even more power and control. When everyone wants power, conflict arises, because nobody wants to be subjected to the power or authority of anyone else.

2) Arrogance refers to human beings’ preference for showing themselves that they are better than other people in term of status, personality, property, education, work or knowledge. As a result, somebody who has been insulted sometimes disputes, quarrels and even kills. In this case, the Buddha said that anyone who really likes to say and think that he is better than other people, is highly likely to conflict within his society.

3) Delusion is a form of ignorance, which can be compared to a shadow over the mind that prevents us from seeing things as they really are. Thus, good and evil can become confused; advantages can be perceived as disadvantages and vice versa.

The Buddha said, “Whoever holds extreme opinions quarrels very easily and has difficulty avoiding disputes”. On another occasion, Mahakaccayana asked the Buddha, what the cause of conflict between monks were? The Buddha replied that, whenever monks refuse to accept different views from their own, cling to material things or are sexually aroused or controlled by desire, conflict arises, easily.

To sum up, most conflict arises from desire, arrogance and delusion, all of which the Buddha counseled against, because they prevent clear thinking and impede effective social and professional relationships. Whenever a human being can be brought to understand this, inner peace becomes possible, and this is the basis for true happiness in human society.

### 4. The Lord Buddha’s Teachings toward Resolving Conflict in Society

The Lord Buddha’s attitude toward quarrels and disputes is very clear. He has no quarrel with the world. The only purpose of his preaching of the *Dharmas* is to show the way to put an end to suffering. He never claims that his *Dharma* is the only truth or that everything else is false. He just makes it clear to everyone to come, to see, and to judge by oneself.

The best way to avoid quarrels and disputes, the Lord Buddha advises, is not to uphold any fancy perceptions or false views likely to arouse disputes. Even in the case that these fancy perceptions or wrong views do arise, the best way to deal with them is not to take delight in them, not to welcome them, not to take hold of them. Such an attitude will put an end to quarrels, disputes, wars and all demeritorious *dharma* (actions). Any war, if breaking out, will bring in its trails, untold suffering. “Victory engenders hatred and defeat brings up suffering.”<sup>3</sup> So the best way is not to resort to wars to solve disputes, but to explore peaceful means to settle differences and conflicts.

The sages who are homeless do not make new ties where they go. They cut off any quarrel likely to happen with anybody:

“O Bhikkhus, with sense desires as cause, with sense desires as motives, kings are fighting with kings, *khattiyaa* are fighting with *khattiyaa*, *brāhmanas* are fighting with *brāhmanas*, householders are fighting with householders, mother is fighting with son, son is fighting with mother, father is fighting with brother, brother is fighting with sister, sister is fighting with brother, friend is fighting with friend. When they engage themselves in fighting, in quarrels, in disputes, they attack each other with hands, they attack each other with stones, they attack each other with sticks, and they attack each other with swords. Thus they are going to death, or to suffering like death.”<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, to uproot conflict, we need to begin by looking in the hearts of human beings. We do not need to destroy each other, either physically or psychologically. With compassion and communication, conflict can be identified and transformed into love.<sup>5</sup>

From a Buddhist perspective, there is an interconnectedness and interdependence of all existence, but people are hardly aware of this. Awakening to this reality becomes critical if humankind wants to move from a passive and negative stance of tolerance to an active and creative appreciation of difference.

To resolve conflict in society, we must cultivate mindfulness and practice loving-kindness and compassion. It is easier to do so in quiet, peaceful surroundings. We should pick a suitable time and find a secluded place where we can devote ourselves to practicing meditation, without interruption. During meditation, when anger (or some other emotion) arises, we know that anger has arisen. Meditation on the breath of loving kindness is as simple as this. We cultivate patience and joy, and we do not discriminate between what we desire and what we wish to avoid. We accept each thing as it comes, and then we let it go.<sup>6</sup>

Then we embark on the development of *mettā*, to dissolve all hatred and acquire the virtue of patience as a foundational stone upon which to build spiritual strength. The Buddha offered us many hints concerning how to maintain the proper attitude for meditation:

In those who harbor such thoughts as, “He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me,” hatred never ceases.

In those who do not harbor such thoughts as “He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me,” hatred will cease.

Hatred never ceases through hatred in this world; only through non-violence it comes to an end.

Some do not think that all of us here one day will die; if they did, their dissension would cease at once.

One should give up anger, and renounce pride.<sup>7</sup>

Let a man overcome anger by loving kindness; let him overcome evil by good; let him overcome miserliness with generosity; let him overcome lies with truth.

One should speak the truth, not succumbing to anger. There is none in the world who is blameless. One should guard oneself against misdeeds caused by speech. Let him practice restraint of speech. Let him practice virtue with his mind. The wise who control their body, speech, and mind are indeed well-controlled. Once we feel content and peaceful, we can spread our loving kindness towards others:

“May all beings be happy and secure;

May their hearts be wholesome.

Whatever living beings there may be,

Feeble or strong, tall, fat, or medium,

Short, small, or large, without exception,

Seen or unseen,

Those dwelling far or near,

Those who are born or who are to be born,

May all beings be happy.”<sup>8</sup>

However, conflict can also open avenues of change and provide challenges. Conflict resolution skills do not guarantee a solution every time, but they can turn conflict into an opportunity for learning more about oneself and others. Violence and heated arguments, where people hurl abuse and become overwhelmed by their feelings, are sure signs of crisis. During crisis, normal behavior is forgotten. Extreme gestures are contemplated and sometimes carried out. These are obvious clues that something is wrong.<sup>9</sup>

Conflicts can be positive or negative, constructive or destructive, depending on what we make of them. Buddhists know that everything is impermanent, everything is changing; but in many conflict situations, we forget and become attached to our views, refusing to let them go. We tend to blame the other side alone for our problem.

Insight into impermanence can allow us to alter the course of events simply by viewing them differently. We can turn our fights into fun. Transforming conflicts in this way is an art, requiring special skills. The key Buddhist term, skillful means (*upaya*), refers to just this kind of process.<sup>10</sup> We must try to develop skillful means to understand conflict. We must remember that crisis, tension, misunderstanding, and discomfort, including our fights and personal differences, are part of life. It is a mistake to expect to avoid conflict all the time. The best we can do is to make conflicts less painful by learning to anticipate them and to manage them constructively. Conflict resolution depends on awareness, and there are clues that can give us ideas for how to deal with it.

The first step in the art of conflict resolution is to regard conflict as an opportunity and to look for means to apply appropriately. Generally, when people think about conflict, they believe that there are only three possible outcomes: victory, defeat, or compromise. From the Buddhist point of view, the end result is less important than the way we work with it. There are many stories from the life of the Buddha that illustrate how he dealt with situations of conflict.<sup>11</sup> Now we will review two of them.

The first incident arose from a difference of opinion between two monks on a minor point of the monastic rules. Because these monks happened to be experts in different fields of study and each had a large following, their conflict escalated, and more people became involved. After a time, the two groups' minds became polluted, and each felt that the other was wrong. The Buddha went to their monastery and told them both to let go of their position and ask forgiveness from the other, so that they could live harmoniously together. He told them several stories to illustrate how conflicts can grow from small misunderstandings into serious crises. One story was about a king and queen who were attacked by another ruler. As they lay dying, they asked their small son to be patient and forgive the enemy. The son eventually joined the enemy's service and became his royal page. Once, alone in the jungle with his parents' killer, the page drew his dagger, but his parents' words of caution came to his mind, and he could not commit the act. Seeing the drawn dagger in the hand of his page, the enemy king learned the whole story. All was forgiven and the page ended up marrying the king's daughter and succeeding to the throne.<sup>12</sup>

Stories like this are often told in Buddhist countries to encourage us to solve conflicts in nonviolent ways. But when the Buddha told it to the quarreling monks, it had no impact. The Buddha saw no alternative but to leave them and stay by himself in the forest. Soon after, the lay community found out about the conflict, and they refused to give alms to the monks. After being hungry for many days, the monks came to their senses. They went to pay respect to the Buddha and ask for forgiveness. They let go of their views and opinions and were willing to accept each other.<sup>13</sup>

Another incident from the time of the Buddha deals directly with armed conflict. The King of Kosala wanted to become a relative of the Buddha, so he asked for a Sakya princess to be his queen. The Sakya clan was very caste-conscious and always refused marriages with outsiders. So instead of the princess, they sent the king of Kosala the daughter of a slave girl to be his queen.

The king and his new queen had a son, Vidhudhabha. Neither he nor his father knew that the queen was an outcaste. When the young prince went to visit his relatives among the Sakya, he found that they all looked down upon him because his maternal grandmother had been a slave. So the young prince vowed to kill all members of the Sakya clan in revenge.

When Vidhudhabha succeeded his father to the throne of Kosala, he marched his army northward. The Buddha heard of the situation and went to sit at the border of the two kingdoms to stop

the warlike King. But three times he was unable to convince the King to get rid of his hatred and vengefulness, and finally the King did kill almost all of the Sakyans. On his return home, Vidhudhabha and his troops were drowned in the river.

We can draw many conclusions from this story. Although the Sakyan clan produced a wonderful person who eventually became the Buddha, who preached that people should get rid of caste and class barriers, they continued to hold their views of caste in contradiction to his teachings. They deceived the king of Kosala, who was much mightier than them, and they paid for it. As for Vidhudhabha, his negative thoughts drove him to a terrible act, and his life ended tragically.<sup>14</sup>

Those who claim to be Buddhists but want to solve conflicts by violent means are no different from Vidhudhabha and the Sakyans who honored the Buddha and listened to his sermons, but thought, spoke, and acted violently. On the other hand, there are many non-Buddhists who are compassionate and filled with forgiveness towards others. To solve the complex problems of today's world, we need Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Marxists all to face the situation mindfully in order to understand the structural violence and to avoid blaming anyone. With means and patience, we can solve the world's conflicts nonviolently.<sup>15</sup>

## 5. Nourishing Peace in the Mind of Everyone

Violence is a chronic disease of the world. It is contracted in not one or two days. For curing it, we need a long-term method in our daily lives, in every person, in every heart as well as in every simple action of living. In another way of speaking, each of us should deeply cultivate the seeds of peace and non-violence into and from our subconscious base. If day by day, we are always hard working in our life-work of nourishing peace; then who would be a terrorist? The world is healthy when each person in the world has a wholesome living, and the connection between a body and its cells is the same. The Buddha spoke about the path of emancipation in terms of consumption. If every day we are aware of what we are consuming and understand its nature, we can transform the suffering inside us and around us. According to Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, "consuming with awareness is essential to ending terrorism".<sup>16</sup>

The first kind of nutrient the Buddha spoke about is the food we eat. He advised us to eat mindfully so that compassion can be maintained in our heart. The foods we eat can bring poison into our body that can destroy our compassion. They can cause suffering in our body, our mind, and in the world around us. Therefore, we have to know what

we are eating and whether the food we eat is destroying us and destroying our planet.

We have the chance to stop the killing of animals and find more non-violent ways to produce our food. Food can be delicious without using the flesh of animals. When we eat mindfully, we maintain awareness of our interdependence with other beings and this awareness helps us maintain compassion in our heart. When we eat with compassion, happiness arises.

The second kind of food that the Buddha spoke about is sensory impressions. We eat with our six sense organs: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. A television program is food; a conversation is food; music is food; art is food; billboards are food.

There is good music and there are good magazine articles and television programs that nourish understanding and compassion in us. We should enjoy them. But many kinds of music, television programs and magazines contain craving, despair and violence. The television and advertisements you are forced to watch are the food of sense impressions. Their whole purpose is to make you crave the products they want to sell and arouse your desire. We consume these poisons and we allow our children to consume them also, causing fear and hatred in us to grow every day. It is not a problem of consuming less or more, but of right consumption, mindful consumption.<sup>17</sup>

The third kind of food is volition, our deepest desire. We have to ask ourselves, "What is my deepest desire in this life?" Our desire can take us in the direction of happiness or in the direction of suffering. Desire is a kind of food that nourishes us and gives us energy. If you have a healthy desire, such as a wish to protect life, to protect the environment, or live a simple life with time to take care of yourself and beloved ones, your desire will bring you to happiness. If you run after power, wealth, sex and fame, thinking that they will bring you happiness, you are consuming a very dangerous kind of food and it will bring you a lot of suffering. You can see this is true by looking around you.

Right now the world is burning with fear, suffering and hatred. If we want to ease our suffering, we have to return to ourselves and seek to understand why we are caught up in so much violence. What has caused terrorists to hate so much that they are willing to sacrifice their own lives and create so much suffering for other people? We see their great hatred, but what lies underneath it? Injustice. Of course we have to find a way to stop their violence; we may even need people locked in prison while their hatred burns. But the important thing is to look deeply and ask, "What responsibility do we have for the injustice in the world?"

The fourth kind of food is consciousness. In Buddhism we speak of consciousness as having two levels. The lower level is called store consciousness and the upper is called mind consciousness. When we think, calculate or dream, we are working on the level of the mind consciousness. The mind consciousness is like a living room. Underneath it is a very big basement, the store consciousness. Everything you do not like you stuff down in the basement. Store consciousness stores everything in the form of seeds. And just like in the earth, if you water those seeds, they sprout.

Fifty-one kinds of seeds, both wholesome and unwholesome, live in the store consciousness. Wholesome seeds are seeds of love, forgiveness, generosity, happiness, joy. Unwholesome seeds include hatred discrimination, and craving. According to Buddhist psychology, when these seeds manifest they are called mental formations. When it is not manifesting, we do not feel angry. But this does not mean that the seed of anger is not in us. All of us have the seed of anger lying in our basement, our store consciousness.

## 6. Conclusion

To sum up, if you nourish yourself with the four nutrients, consuming a healthy diet of edible food, sensations, desires and mental formations, then you and your beloved ones will benefit in concrete ways. Buddhism becomes not just abstract teachings, but something that can change your daily life.

The Buddha said: "Nothing can survive without food." This is a very simple and very deep truth. Love and hate are both living things. If you do not nourish your love, it will die. If you cut the source of nutrient for your violence, your violence will die. If you want your love to last, you have to give it food every day. Love cannot live without food. If you neglect your love, after a while it will die and hatred may take its place.

If we do not give hatred food, it too will die. Hatred and suffering grow greater every day because every day we nourish them, giving them more food. The way out of suffering is mindfulness of consumption, not only for ourselves but for the whole world, if we know how to water the seeds of wisdom and compassion in us, these seeds become powerful sources of energy helping us to forgive those who have hurt us. This will bring relief to our nation and to our world.

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<sup>1</sup>R.W. Mack and John Pease, *Sociology and Social Life*, (New York: D Van Nostrand Company, 1973), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup>“The Oxford Essential Dictionary of the U.S. Military.” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc. 2002.)

<sup>3</sup>Dh. 201.

<sup>4</sup>M.N. 1. 86.

<sup>5</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind*, (California: Parallax Press, 2005), p.10.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.* p. 180.

<sup>7</sup>Dh. 3, 4, 5 & 6.

<sup>8</sup>S.N. 1. 8. *Mettā Sutta*.

<sup>9</sup> D.W. Chappell, (ed.) *Buddhist Peace Work Creating Cultures of Peace*, (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999), p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Thich Minh Chau, *Some Teachings of Lord Buddha on Peace Human Dignity*, (HCM City: Vietnamese Buddhist Research Institute, 1995), p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*, in: Sri Dhammananda, (ed.), *Gem of Buddhist Wisdom*, (Kuala Lumpur: Publication of the Buddhist Missionary Society, 1996), p. 94.

<sup>12</sup> Sri Dhammananda (ed.), *Gem of Buddhist Wisdom*, (Kuala Lumpur: Publication of the Buddhist Missionary Society, 1996), p. 235.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.* 237.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1990), p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> D.R. Loy, *The Nonduality of Good and Evil: Buddhist Reflections on the New Holy War*, (Japan: Faculty of International Studies, Bunkyo University, 2001), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Calming the Fearful Mind*, (California: Parallax Press, 2005), p.48.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.* p. 82.

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