

**A MIND TO FIGHT: CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND BUDDHIST PRACTICES**

Ray Parchelo, MSW, RSW

Social Worker, Whitewater Bromley Community Health Centre

20 Robertson Dr., Beachburg, ON, KoJ 1Co

Tel: 613-582-3685

e-mail to: [rparchelo@wbchc.on.ca](mailto:rparchelo@wbchc.on.ca)

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## Abstract

*Whoever has the mind to fight has already broken his connection with the Universe -*

*Daniel Goleman*

Social workers deal with interpersonal, intrapsychic and community conflict. Models of resolving conflict (CR) originate with many secular and spiritual sources. Contemporary approaches emphasize relationship building and common interest. Buddhist teaching begins with an affirmation of an inseparability of all beings and a commitment to non-harm. It constructs all conflict as a mis-perception, one which contributes to the suffering experienced by all. Hence it seeks resolution through awakening to the shared experiences and purposes of all parties. This paper proposes a model grounded in Buddhist psychology, ethics and practice and suggests several Buddhist practices as methods which can be adapted for clinical situations, especially family or marital work.

## Biography

Ray Parchelo (MSW, RSW) has 20 years of individual, marital, family and group experience in private and rural community mental health practice in rural Eastern Ontario which has led him to the Whitewater Bromley CHC. He has been a Buddhist practitioner since 1975. He founded and is dharma instructor of the *Red Maple Buddhist Sangha*.

## A Mind to Fight: Conflict Resolution and Buddhist Practices

### I. CR Principles

#### 1. Introduction

How often do therapists become referees or umpires in battles of one kind or another? Parent and teen, student and teacher, boyfriend and girlfriend, husband and wife. Our profession is seen as skilled in processes of resolution, finding ways through conflict which allow those in conflict to discover openings, to move through conflict in health, and even grow from such apparent oppositions. The processes we bring to conflict situations are ones which have evolved over years and have their origins in varied places. Some come from the experiences of the peace movement, some rely on applications of laws or admonitions in scripture; some arose from feminist and other gender-directed movements. This paper presents another tradition and perspective on dealing with conflict, that of Buddha-dharma - the teachings of Buddhism.

Often called "quietist", where individual efforts achieve a private experience called "nirvana", we might wonder what such a tradition could have to offer to modern day situations of social interface, of social and cultural complexity? In this paper we will begin by reflecting on some of the contemporary popular forms of conflict resolution. Then, we will present principles of Buddhist teaching that bear on situations of conflict, followed by a consideration of four traditional practices, *naikan* (a process of 'inner reflection' that re-aligns our perception of the past), *metta bhavana* (the cultivation of loving kindness), *vipassana* (insight mindfulness meditation) and "sangha circles", which could respond to conflict. These techniques are not free-floating "tricks" or tools, usable in any context. They represent a set of long-standing and practical applications of the core principles of Buddha-dharma. We are, therefore, not simply describing Buddhist techniques, but considering a Buddhist perspective and these practices as a new process for our own theoretical consideration.

#### 2. Contemporary CR Principles

As Furlong points out in *The Conflict Resolution Toolbox*: "There is no magic formula that resolves all disputes. ...we are not looking for a single model that will make sense in every conflict in the world.

Rather we need to be comfortable with a wide range of models that will help us in diagnosing different problems in vastly different circumstances, with different people” (p. 11). He then goes on to outline eight models, which include the more popular models in use today. How might we then understand the principles of these approaches so that we can contrast that to a Buddhist model?

## 2.1 Nature of conflict

Conflict theory begins with the assumption that there are unique and discreet parties or sides to a conflict. Whether it is two or a hundred, each is identifiable and differentiated as possessing some position, interests, views, claims or concerns that are not included with others. These differences are real, valid and able to be substantiated. Conflict, then, is best seen as a quality of the relationship between discreet individuals or a temporary condition of difference open to manipulation or reduction. Individuals are seen as, in some way, unique. Conflict is the parts of two or more individuals that don't coincide. CR is a process for "re-solving", literally to blend, melt or reduce differences.

## 2.2 Sources

The key concept in conventional CR is “interests” or “concerns”, which Furlong describes as: “underpinning the entire field of CR and negotiation...(as derived from ...) the original works of Fisher and Ury at the Project on Negotiation at Harvard University, specifically in their books *Getting to Yes* and *Getting Past No*”

Beneath this source is the further assumption that individuals can and should have differing interests. This is a fundamental belief of Western psychology that individuals hold and express their uniqueness through self-interests, be those trivial, like the pursuit of celebrity, or exalted, like becoming a political or corporate or spiritual leader for the betterment of one's fellows. The source of conflict lies in the entirely "natural" evolution of individual selfhood. In an idealistic way, CR becomes a kind of lubricant for a noble and human process - self-fulfillment.

### 2.3. Guiding Ethics

CR as mediation, negotiation or social work therapy is something that has taken on a professionalism and, with that structure, comes a set of ethical guidelines or standards. Each sub-specialty has its own set of guidelines. American attorney, David A. Hoffman, has proposed a set of ten common features. Most of these are common to all professions and include: voluntariness of clients, confidentiality, the dictum - "do no harm", informed consent, honesty, and professional role boundaries. These are all quite self-evident for professionals. Others, Hoffman says, are exclusive and central to CR work, namely: conflict of interest (mediators can have no personal or business interests in the situation they advise); impartiality (duty to remain impartial throughout the mediation); self-determination (parties find their own answers); and duties to third parties (avoiding solutions that result in another level of conflict or disadvantage).

### 3. Buddhist CR Principles

There is no such thing as a treatise or study of conflict or its principles in Buddhist literature, but we can piece together what such a thing might look like from the extensive body of literature that makes up the Buddhist tradition.

#### 3.1 Nature of conflict

The central teaching of Buddhism is that humans experience suffering because of their tendency to cling to two mistaken perceptions - one, that there might be some unique eternal essence to individual lives, what we might call a unitary self or soul, and, two, that satisfaction can be attained, at any level, by seeking permanence anywhere in experience, be that an emotion, wealth, health, power or any other aspect of life, including selfhood. The Buddha taught an interconnection of all beings and that no one being itself could stand apart from any other. We are all the context and the conditions of each others' existence. Self is a process, not an entity.

From this perspective, conflict is likewise grounded in a mistaken understanding of life. To perceive oneself and another as separated, with different and unique needs or aspirations must be met with what

Buddhism calls "right understanding" - that is, an understanding of the non-duality of beings. CR for Buddhists, then, is never about building bridges, improved communication or sensitivity or making compromises, but rather about deepening understanding, to a point where all sides gain insight that their needs and purposes are not-different. A Buddhist approach becomes restorative, illuminating, transformative.

Buddhist CR, grounded in the intention of the Great Vow to save all beings reaches for a higher purpose than resolution, beyond any temporary agreement or consolation, to an opening up to the fundamental truth that can clarify perceptions about life. Conflict is not to be resolved. Instead, the apprehension of conflict must be met with a breakthrough in understanding which will transform purpose and choice, on all sides. To borrow an ancient metaphor, conflict is the muddiness that arises on the surface of a pond when it becomes agitated. There is no difference or opposition within the pond, nothing to be resolved. The Buddhists task is to work with that muddiness in ways which foster a settling of the mud, a re-emergence of the fundamental transparency.

### 3.2 Sources

How does the Buddhist teaching understand the origins of this mistaken perception, that is, what is the source or cause of conflict? As we have seen, for Buddhism, there is no "between". All beings are interconnected, so even the concept of conflict is questionable. What we call conflict is part of the process of ignorance or fruitless understanding that condemns us to an unending cycle of suffering. Buddhist theory asserts that there are three forms of this ignorance that permeate all human activity - sometimes called The Three Fetters, since they bind us to suffering. These three are: passion, aggression and dullness or stupidity.

Passion includes all forms of acquisitiveness, greed and a persistent search for sensual and mental gratification. Aggression is sometimes called hatred, and is driven by the process of "antithetical bonding", the affirmation of selfhood by the defining and demonizing of the Other. Stupidity is sometimes called dullness, since it includes a disinterest in or numbing of experience. In any conflict, as in any human behaviour, these fetters are the active motivations for conflict and its resolution. We want OR

don't want OR don't care. When these define us, we experience ourselves as different from the Other.

### 3.3 Guiding Ethics

Buddhist theory asserts these certain ways of understanding the nature of suffering, its causes and the relationship between us and them. The history of Buddhist practice has illuminated several key ethical virtues that form the backbone of any Buddhist CR formulation. These are friendliness, wisdom, appropriate means and "the Higher Third".

#### 3.3.1. *metta*, friendliness

The Dalai Lama was once asked about forms of Buddhist practice. He replied that practices can be difficult to understand or perform, so, he said, "If all you can do is act out of friendliness for all beings, that is all we need". A sustained awareness of the shared being of all beings suggests that all of our deepest wishes and needs are held in common. This implies to us that all our lives overlap, or as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, they "inter-are". As such, all our interests are common ones and so we find that feeling for each other - com-*passion*, is the most natural emotion and motivation for us. When we may find ourselves in conflict, we can turn to this sense of shared need and purpose to search for paths of resolution.

#### 3.3.2. *prajna*, wisdom

There is an old Buddhist saying that the Way of Truth is like a cart with two wheels. Without both wheels, the cart crashes to a halt. For Buddhists, the one wheel is compassion, the other is wisdom. And, like the cart, too much compassion crashes into sentimentality. It needs the balance of wisdom or insight, particularly insight into the true nature of our interconnectedness. Of course, too much wisdom can collapse as abstraction, so compassion is its balancing virtue. Any situation of conflict needs the presence of insight about the nature of the various parties, but this also suggests the value of information, that is, relevant information.

### 3.3.3. *upaya*, appropriate means

A third value which permeates all Buddhist scripture and teaching is that of appropriate means, sometimes called skillful means. This is drawn from the teaching model of the Buddha himself. He explains in numerous texts, that he uses whatever means will result in the awakening of beings. Some of these may seem crazy or out of place, but the measuring stick is whether they produce the insight of awakening.

Those who are familiar with Solution-Focused Therapy will understand this virtue. We are not so much concerned with what is right or proper or popular or based in rulebooks or scriptures. We are concerned with what actions will produce the desired change. We are not concerned with analyzing cause and effect; we are concerned with implementing steps which are "differences that make a difference", as Steve deShazer says.

### 3.3.4. The Ideal of "The Higher Third"

In his excellent book, *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, British Buddhist activist, Ken Jones offers the idea of "The Higher Third" as a fundamental of Buddhist conflict theory and, more broadly, Buddhist social activism. By "higher third" he means a stance which surmounts traditional interest-based theory, the approach of one party versus another. We should be less attentive to the interests or concerns of any party and more concerned with how the parties share in common being and purpose. We should "transcend any dualistic perspective or identification with a side or position alive and empathetic to what drives all parties (we must be....) ...free to examine all sides of an issue, not constrained by extremes or polarities... (and...) remain sensitive to power dynamics, historical oppression without identifying with the oppressed, removed from ideology or identity, no bias on how to view a situation, (full of..) ...equanimity about the conflict and its resolution, no ego-investment, (be one who...) ...exemplifies the paradox of impartial observer and passionate advocate"

## II. Applications

Now that we have some understanding of the approaches of conventional CR in Western contexts

and what might be the theoretical position of Buddhist CR, we can consider whether Buddhist practice has existing practices which might be available to us therapists in CR situations. And we can consider what use they might be. Again, Buddhism never set out to articulate CR theory or practice as such. We must search within the large collection of meditative, ritual and monastic practices for examples.

## 1. NAIKAN

What is it? Greg Krech, one of the foremost Western teachers of this technique describes *naikan* thus: "*Naikan* is a Japanese word which means 'inside looking' or 'introspection'. A more poetic translation is 'seeing oneself with the mind's eye'. It is a structured method of self-reflection that helps us to understand ourselves, our relationships and the fundamental nature of human existence."

The practice is remarkably simple and, at the same time, potent in its results. *Naikan* practitioners select from a set of familiar family relationships and engage in an intensive recollection of the facts and details of their experience of that relationship. The relationships would usually begin with parents, then move on to siblings, grandparents and so on.

The reflection is structured in two ways. First, one does *naikan* in solitude, without distractions and without any written record. There is an instructor to whom one reports periodically during the time, but their role is simply to hear the reflection, suggest ways to make it more effective and provide support for the effort. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, *naikan* is structured by the three questions used in the reflection. These, in this order are:

1. What have I received from the target person?
2. What have I contributed to them?
3. What troubles and difficulties have I caused in their life?

The first question focuses on what we received in the relationship, the second what we contributed. This pair illustrates further how there is seldom any equality in relationships. We have received so much from those whom we can never repay. Rather than becoming obsessed with a one-to-one balance, we are pushed beyond that absurdity to understand that our task is to sustain this process of generosity beyond our petty set of interests.

The third and final question asks us to consider what troubles and difficulties our relationships have brought to others. There is a saying in *naikan* that we never need to ask the missing fourth question "what troubles were caused to me?" since very few people need much practice in articulating how they feel they have been wronged or disappointed by others, especially their parents. By asking this question, we gain insight deeper into the efforts of others for our benefit. We recognize they provided for us even though it meant problems to themselves. This challenges us to move beyond the usual self-interested model of exchange theories and consider the presence of compassion, love and selflessness in our lives. We can then grow beyond cynicism, with a sense of awe in the face of generosity larger than our lives.

Novices to the technique might be tempted to try to rationalize evidence, such as saying she had this reason or was helped in this way or was grumpy while doing it. The technique insists that such qualifiers are psychological and do not challenge the fact that we received this benefit. We are always brought back to the question - "what did you receive?" - never "why?" and never with any consideration to the motives or emotions of the donor. We are always brought back to the reality of the network of helping relationships, often ignored or unknown, which make up the fabric of our lives. We are brought to an awareness of gratitude, generosity and interdependence. This is not to generate guilt but to affirm interdependence. By gaining insight into the unacknowledged web of gifts in our lives, often given by strangers, we come to understand the need for us to play our part in it. We come to release our usual tit-for-tat thinking, where we avoid asking for anything because we can't or don't want to return the favour, or where we feel we have to somehow "balance the slate" directly with the person who helped us. We understand generosity as more than an asset/debt transaction and come to see it as the pervasive modality of the world. For us to support the web by which we receive, we are called to give freely and without any tally.

How might this contribute to Conflict Resolution?

The practice of *naikan* assists therapy, especially conflict work in several ways:

1. By a grounding in the facts or reality of relationships, clients move from positions which are dominated by self-concerns. They can recognize the pervasiveness of generosity in their lives and the relative

pettiness of being over-concerned with their own needs and feelings.

2. It moves conflict conversations beyond the feeling realm. It does not dismiss or devalue emotional experience, but it breaks the either-or kind of thinking so frequently found in conflict. Participants in a conflict acquire a more multi-form understanding of the situation, seeing benefits and efforts rather than just their own feelings.

3. It suggests a re-orientation of a persons reasons for action. In place of retribution, repayment, or any other simplistic "clearing the slate" thinking, participants can take a broader perspective where actions have impacts in many more lives than previously appreciated. Whereas many conflict situations devolve into questions of fairness or equity, *naikan* suggests the perspective of "what needs to be done?". Conflict resolution is more than "zeroing out" a transaction, it can be perpetuating a web of relationships of generosity.

## 2. METTA BHAVANA

What is it? Literally this is "the cultivation of loving kindness", that is learning to contact your own capacity for friendliness and compassion, and being able, then, to re-direct that energy in the direction of another. The practitioner assumes a meditative or reflective state and calls to mind a particular target - say a friend or someone they know who is in distress. They locate the presence of friendliness and well-being in themselves and direct that experience towards the target. They sustain that focus in their meditation over a period of time, perhaps over several periods.

In '*metta bhavana*' the practitioner may use silently recited formula phrases, such as "may this person be free from suffering ... may they be happy, peaceful ..." or, if they know the person, express wishes for specific benefits for them. This is not a process of wishing for things, like a new car or a job. That is considered too trivial for this practice. Instead, it is intended to link individuals at some level and extend the power of friendliness between them.

In some forms it may involve the practitioner taking on the pain or suffering of those he/she does not know, or even individuals they know to be engaged in harmful or wicked acts.

How might this contribute to Conflict Resolution? In the most simple way, the practitioner

deliberately intensifies their opening of themselves to the presence and possibility of friendliness, compassion and kindness in themselves. It establishes a firm basis of self-assurance from which any conflict discussion can proceed. Often CR efforts break down because one person is unable or unwilling to get beyond the emotional reactions of the conflict. *Metta bhavana* re-establishes that foundation of well-being. On the other hand, in intensely emotional conflict people may become overly focused on their own suffering or disadvantage and reduce the opposing person to a kind of caricature, with less humanness. This practice encourages parties to recognize the fundamental human situation experienced by all parties.

Even in situations where the conflict is between a person and some faceless company, government or force, this practice begins to put human faces on the players. Where a CR strategy builds on a common goal of meeting the concerns or interests of both sides, the capacity to see all as human, with mixed needs and interests is an important step.

### 3. VIPASSANA

What is it? *Vipassana* or mindfulness meditation is a common feature of social work practice today and is well documented in many places. Mindfulness skill is relatively easy to teach and most newcomers report changes in attention, increased calm and less anxiety after only a few sessions. Greater and sustained improvements come with sustained practice, but benefits are realized quickly.

Regardless of the nature of conflict, it is clear that all sides would benefit from periods of mindfulness along the process. For this enquiry we only need ask: How might this contribute to Conflict Resolution? The benefits would be:

1. A re-grounding in a present-moment process, free of emotion-driven obstacles;
2. An increased clarity of mental processes, including problem awareness, openness to solutions and flexibility;
3. An increased sympathy to the concerns and perspectives of other parties, the capacity to acknowledge others as similar to themselves in suffering;
4. An increase in recovery from the psycho-physical stresses of any resolution process.

#### 4. SANGHA OR CONFLICT CIRCLES

What are they? Unlike the preceding practices, this category is not a specific practice but more like an application of Buddhist principles to an assortment of circumstances. Its characteristic features include:

1. The commitment to the Higher Third stance in the conflict resolution;
2. Defining every participant as part of the situation, avoiding any "objective" party, any "third party", observer, or facilitator.
3. Placing the conflict in a relationship context, which implies respect for all parties, as well as an assumption of relationships outlasting the conflict of the present;
4. Placing the conflict within an historical context, where the experience of more senior members is worthy of advice, and a resolution is expected to outlive the lives of the participants;
5. Placing the conflict in a conative context, that is acknowledging the members of the conflict have some stake in the fulfillment of a purpose for their actions, a purpose which is merely self-aggrandizing or driven by acquisitiveness or aggressiveness;
6. Employing direct democratic and conversational methods, rather than third-party diplomatic ones, extended over time and place.

An example is quite topical - that of the China-Tibet conflict. H.H. the Dalai Lama has articulated an approach to the resolution of the Tibetan conflict which is described as "the Middle Way Approach". On his own website, (<http://www.dalailama.com/page.225.htm>) H.H/DL explains: "The Middle-Way Approach is proposed... to peacefully resolve the issue of Tibet and to bring about stability and co-existence, ....based on equality and mutual co-operation. It is also a policy adopted democratically ...through a series of discussions held over a long time. ....This is... a non-partisan and moderate position that safeguards the vital interests of all concerned parties - for Tibetans: the protection and preservation of their culture, religion and national identity; for the Chinese: the security and territorial integrity of the motherland; and for neighbours and other third parties: peaceful borders and international relations."

How might this contribute to Conflict Resolution? As the Dalai Lama proposes "This is a

non-partisan and moderate position that safeguards the vital interests of all concerned parties". Although he uses the languages of CR and diplomacy in calling this a "position", one might better give it a Buddhist twist and describe this as "the position of no-position", and, by that we mean, it aims at building on the reality of interconnectedness and communion of purpose.

Further, these approaches go beyond what someone called "the tyranny of immediate results". Far too often, even in therapy, CR can be derailed by the pressure of hierarchy, that a parent has the only valuable input, or can be rushed because of a sense for the therapist or the client, that time is finite, and so we must press for a quick solution. The feeling of being pushed aside or hurried often leads to behavioural interruptions in a CR process.

These approaches ensure everyone has time for their viewpoint and that none is valued more than another. Perhaps, most importantly, they begin with the expressed belief that there is a higher intention to the discussion. However imperfectly it may occur, the process is focused on the unfolding of all human potential for all participants. Even more than the implication of the usual "win-win" formulation, these approaches don't imply some equity of results, they guarantee, to use a Buddhist term, a "non-duality" of viewpoint and solution. More than "I got what you got" thinking, it asserts you and I are together in our needs and our results.

#### IV. Closing Comments

In our introduction, we heard the advice from CR guru, Gary Furlong, that: "we need to be comfortable with a wide range models that will help us in diagnosing different problems in vastly different circumstances, with different people." What we have explored here takes that a step further and suggests we need to be comfortable with a wider range of ways of understanding the nature, causes and response to conflict. At the very least, we may have the need to treat people who do not share our Western models of conflict and have different cultural origins. But even more than that, it may benefit us, especially those of us who see the value in a spirituality framework to social work, to consider how our approach to conflict and its resolution might serve those spiritual purposes.

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