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## The heart of the matter: perspectives on resolving conflict from the Buddhist tradition

**Ajahn Thanasanti**

The Buddhist tradition is one that recognises conflict as a common part of the human predicament and has developed both spiritual and practical guidelines to assist in resolving issues. This begins with the understanding that before one can work at resolving a conflict, one should identify and examine the source of the problem. Often the source of the problem is obscured, preventing clarity about the real issue in question. *Buddhism teaches that at the core of suffering is ignorance.* This is often the root of conflict. It follows that in order to address a dispute one must have an understanding of the various causes that underlie the difficulty.

From a Buddhist perspective, pleasure, pain and discomfort are all natural experiences, which we overlay with our own meanings and responses. Suffering is the result of the meanings and emotions we attach to the conditions we experience, not the direct experience itself. Pleasant and unpleasant experiences are part of the human predicament — while frustration, anger and fear are responses to individual situations. Often the worst part of the litigation process is derived from the emotions which each party brings to the table rather than anything to do with the matter itself. So separating the response to the situation from the situation itself allows our needs as a human being to be addressed and acknowledged separately from the problem at hand.

Understanding what lies at the core of various problems is achieved through skillful reflection. The awareness achieved through reflection, and skillful means developed in meditation, provide ways of acknowledging and releasing the emotion around a particular situation. The aim here is to see where the suffering is created and allow it to end both in oneself and in relationship with

the other. As one's personal part of the experience is understood and transformed, the other party in the dispute ceases to be the enemy and can be related to as a human being with similar desires for happiness and for not suffering. Meditation is not an intellectual process but a training in how to identify the emotions we attach to a situation, and to observe, acknowledge and release them to allow one to listen with an open heart to the truth of the situation. This enables one to listen to what another has to say. For if one fails to get to the root of the suffering, then it clouds one's ability to relate skillfully to others, to make good decisions or to communicate in a clear and effective way.

Awareness encompasses exploring not only one's own emotions and perspectives but also those of the other parties in the dispute. Acknowledging and respecting the anxiety, fears and concerns of another quite frequently alters the dynamic of a particular situation so that options that would never previously have been considered become possible. When understanding and ending suffering becomes the prime objective, the human ability to relate to others in as wise and compassionate a way as possible becomes the predominant experience. In this context, skillful action is decided, rather than holding on to one's opinion about what is correct and pushing through without regard for the consequences to others.

There is a particular meditative practice called 'giving and receiving' where one imagines breathing in the suffering of another person and breathing out whatever goodness, joy and resources one has which one cherishes. It is often a natural inclination to hold on to everything that we love and want to get rid of everything that we ➤



➤ don't like as fast as possible. However, when we are in the presence of someone who is suffering, if we consciously imagine taking on board their suffering and giving them everything that we cherish, sometimes it can be the catalyst for very profound change in ways that we could never logically figure out. One result is that it cuts through the natural resistance to pain and to that which is unwanted. On whatever level someone feels that degree of human connection, things can shift in dramatic ways and this is not something anyone can plan.

The Buddha provided many useful instructions as to how conflict should be handled. The Vinaya (monastic discipline) comprises several volumes and concerns not only moral integrity but also gives guidance for how people can live together harmoniously. Among the guidelines for addressing a conflict within the community, speaking with a heart of kindness is the most important. This compassion is an essential part of the process of creating the conditions necessary to explore the many aspects of a dispute. (The other conditions include speaking at the right time, speaking the truth about the situation, speaking gently, not harshly, and determining to speak in ways that foster the end of suffering.)

Within the Buddhist monastic discipline four common areas are stipulated which often give rise to conflict: disputes about what is the correct interpretation of the Buddhist law; accusations about someone's unskilful behaviour; offenses against the discipline; and duties and responsibilities. There are seven different formally accepted ways to settle conflicts. These include:

- all concerned parties meeting together to decide what is the proper course;
- a verdict of innocence based on a person's clarity and good character;
- a verdict of innocence because of being insane when committing the offense;
- action done in accordance with what is admitted;
- a majority vote;
- questioning concerned parties until they are able to see and acknowledge their fault; and
- 'covering over with grass' whereby both parties realise that the damage done by

going ahead with the dispute outweighs the possible gains and agree to drop it.

In situations where parties cannot agree to a solution initially, these different processes are applied in some situations progressively, until resolution is achieved. This does not preclude creative solutions from being explored at the same time but provides an accepted process, able to give perspective to the often turbulent emotions characteristic of disputes, in order to help facilitate dialogue.

Buddhist thought sees the world as comprising different realities. One reality is the conventional world of rules and responsibilities, of the ethically correct way of behaving, and of right and wrong. This is in balance with the ability to be aware of the present moment, to see things just as they are, and to take personal responsibility for the suffering that one is creating by the overlay of emotional response to any given situation without needing to categorise things into good and bad, right and wrong. It is impossible to live in only one reality. Knowledge and skill in both are required. While there is a need to keep the conventions correctly, to learn how to use the Vinaya skillfully, each individual also has a responsibility to address their own emotional response as a part of their regular meditative practice. If one is to translate this into the broader community, an understanding of the two realities within a conflict means ensuring that these two worlds are understood and not confused so that litigation is not used inappropriately as a means of resolving one's emotions and feelings.

What Buddhism offers the field of conflict resolution is another perspective and way of moving through the dispute to a place of reconciliation. A path of inquiry encourages the individuals to each recognise their contribution whenever there is a conflict, both in terms of the immediate emotional world they are creating around them as well as their ways of resolving it. This approach encourages all parties to maintain their self-respect, to be treated with kindness and compassion and to create rich conditions to explore possible solutions that result in action based in wisdom. ●

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