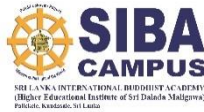


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***Conflict Resolution: The Buddhist Way***

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## Conflict Resolution: The Buddhist Way

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Psychologists who focus attention on conflict state that **conflicts arise when one individual or group perceives that another individual or group has caused or will cause harm**. It can be caused by a variety of factors. Limit of resources – territorial, material, political etc. - is one major factor identified. Poor or ineffective communication is another commonly occurring reason behind many conflicts. Social psychologists and others who are actively involved in working for reducing destructive conflicts are trying to develop successful conflict management techniques. Experiments and research and even courses to train conflict resolution managers are in progress in many countries. **In general, religions are also expected to help, at least conceptually, in conflict resolution processes, even though they are often found culprits of causing conflicts themselves.**

The Buddha lived in an era of political and social conflicts. Even within the Buddhist monastic community occasions of conflicts arose. Once there was a conflict between *Dharmadhara* monks and *Vinayadhara* monks over a minor rule. When negotiation did not resolve the problem, the Buddha left them to argue and retired to forest. He did so as a way to make them feel the repercussions of conflict and it was effective to bring harmony again. However, he made a pungent comment saying that those who quarrel do not know that they are mortals. He also used the term ‘pare’ to quarrelsome ones to indicate that conflict makers are not considered by his as insiders of Sasana. **The Buddha, in no uncertain terms, has affirmed that he was against conflicts and committed to peace.** This characteristic of the Buddha was so well known that at the point when some kings were to about to fight for his relics, a Brahmin called Drona brought peace and understanding to them by reminding them of the Buddha’s commitment to peace. He said ‘Listen to me, Sirs; just allow me to utter one sentence. Our Master was a peace-person (*santivādo*).’ And that small reminder made everyone agree that there should not be war in relation to the relics of the Buddha.

There even were occasions when the Buddha was made to present his views about conflicts on request. One such enlightening dialogue is reported in the *Sakkapañha Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. In that Sutta, Sakka, the lord of gods, informs the Buddha that all peoples wish to live without hate, harming, hostility or malignity, and in peace. In spite of this, he says, that they actually live in hate, harming one another, hostile and malign. Sakka asks the Buddha the reason why this is so.<sup>1</sup> **The Buddha’s reply traces the cause of conflict and hostility to the fetters of jealousy and avarice, thence to likes and dislikes, desire, and finally to what is called *papañca*, proliferation of greed, conceit and strong views, which may be taken as flawed perception.** This analysis of the Buddha reveals the deeper psychological roots of conflicts. Even though conflicts find expression in various external ways the real deep roots are psychological. Elsewhere the Buddha has given a similar psychological explanation of disputes, quarrels and conflicts. There he has used the term ‘*Saññā*’ to mean subjective perception which can be wrong or

flawed.<sup>2</sup> People create wrong ideologies, slogan oriented dogmatic thinking and consequentially get attached to conventional notions like cast, race, etc. as if they are absolutes and look at others with prejudice. These unrealistic views cause conflicts and disharmony among groups and even individuals. The Brahmins during the time of the Buddha provided good examples. When one is a member of a group, he is exposed to group ideologies and prone to grasp them strongly so that his value system will be conditioned by that environment. In the Buddhist analysis, this is explained as unconscious conditioning of our minds owing to exposure to them for a long time.<sup>3</sup> Then without much analytical thinking people get provoked into conflicting scenarios.

**The Buddha has also seen how people get into conflicts owing to craving, hatred and conceit.**<sup>4</sup> It is a general fact that the nature cannot meet the demands made by human greed. The Buddha has seen that sensual desires of men as insatiable. Even if everything in the world is achieved the greed of man is never satiated. Yet, as men have to engage in competition with equally greedy others – not only men but animals as well- to find satisfaction from the limited resources they die in dissatisfaction without reaching their target. **In fact, it is not only the greed for things that make people aggressive but also their greed for power is seen as a strong factor causing conflicts among people.** The Buddha highlights the ideas like ‘I have power’ (*balavāṃhi*) and “I want power” (*Balattho*). This is, perhaps, the reason behind the UN statement that wars arise in the minds of people. Greed is especially destructive when it comes to hunger for political power. Buddhist literature abounds with stories depicting the insatiability of desire for power and wealth. The story of Maha Mandhātu, the King who wanted to become the sole ruler of the Universe is an eloquent example. The Buddha explains in *Sutta Nipata* how people, when one desire is fulfilled, generate another in unending sequence. Desire, it is said, grows like horns of a young bull.

**The Buddha has also focused on conceit (*māna*) as leading to conflicts among people.** They mostly pride their birth on a caste, race, country and even inheriting a particular language and religion as factors that make them unique. Some pride on their learning, skills, beauty and good looks etc. and look down upon others. This results in snobbish behaviour, ill-treatment, debate and violence. People are too proud to allow others to excel and wish to be on the top of the world at the expense of others. Accompanied with jealousy (*macchariya*), conceit makes people aggressively pursue power and wealth whole not allowing others to enjoy their due. Even some religious concepts may generate such disastrous attitudes in the minds of people. And all these are results of wrong perceptions.

**However, Buddhism does not adopt the pessimistic view that human beings are hard-wired to fight.** The Buddha has provided much insight for managing conflicts both theoretically and practically. The tracing of psychological reasons behind conflicts implies the possibility of creating a mindset of avoiding conflicts. Changing minds of beings is a very difficult process but not an impossible one. In fact, the whole of Buddhism is an enterprise to transform man from what he is to what he ought to be.<sup>5</sup> Radhakrishnan, admirably, says that “The greatness of the

Buddha lies in giving man confidence in his own capacity to reform himself, and showing that the human nature can be perfected. **The aim of the Buddha was through these means to achieve the goal of a world free from conflict, suffering, and sorrow**".<sup>6</sup> Aṅgulimāla, the serial killer is an example of one who underwent a sudden change of heart. Usually however, there are no such short cuts, only a systematic, long-term programme of moral education.<sup>7</sup> It is for such change in society that the Buddha gave his discourses and founded the *Saṅgha*.

**The Buddha's teaching is a message of peace and non-violence. It is not only a philosophy of life, but a doctrine of progressive reconstruction of society.** Buddhism is a path of enlightenment aiming at the root of all conflicts. It is an answer for the problems which prevailed in the Buddha's time in India. But the validity of his message is universal. Therefore, his philosophy of peace is relevant even to the problems of contemporary world. That is why Buddhists all over the world keep on meditating, "Let all being be happy, let all beings live without fear, let all beings enjoy peace and happiness, and be free from all sorrows and troubles".<sup>8</sup> Learning and practicing of the values of sharing, loving and equality amounts to creating a mindset conducive for living a conflict free life.

**The Buddha created his Saṅgha to be an exemplary society where unity and peace prevail all the time.** He used to advice Saṅgha to stay united and to refrain from having conflict. King Ajatasattu, when he visited Saṅgha for the first time after his break from the Devadatta group, wished that the peacefulness of Saṅgha could be imbibed in his son also. The Buddha did not wish to lead or live with a split *Saṅgha* and when he found, at one juncture, the monks were failing to resolve an argument in relation to a minor *Vinaya* rule, he left the crowd and spent a rainy season all alone in the forest.

**The Buddha described himself as a reconciler of those at variance and an encourager of those already united, rejoicing in peace, loving peace, delighting in peace, speaking in favour of peace.** In describing the Buddhist precept of refraining from *pisunāvācā*, words causing disharmony (telling what you heard from one to another to cause misunderstanding between the parties), the Buddha insists that one should, instead, try to make those who have broken their friendship friendly again (*bhinnānaṃvāsandhātā*). He added that the Buddhists should become lovers of unity (*samaggaratā*), and should be joyous over unity (*samagganandī*).

**There are reports in the Tipiṭaka of several occasions that the Buddha functioned as a mediator in resolving conflicts.** For instance, the Buddha personally intervened when Sākyaans and Koliyans were about to enter into war over a dispute on the water of Rohini river. He pointed out to them that it was foolish and dreadful to destroy invaluable human life over a trivial matter.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, when *Vidūdabha* went to massacre Sākyaans, in spite of his own ill health, the Buddha intervened on three occasions to prevent the attack. And, two out of the three visits he is believed to have made to Sri Lanka were also for making peace between rival factions. In the ninth month of his enlightenment he is reported to have visited Sri Lanka for the first time to prevent two *yaksa* groups from fighting. His second visit

was in the fifth year of enlightenment and it was to pacify two *Naga* kings who were ready to fight over a jewelled seat.

How much the Buddha disliked war could be clearly seen in the prohibition he made against monks gossiping over wars. Such gossip was condemned as low and uncivilized discussions (*tiracchānakathā*). The monks were asked not to engage in such chatter. The Buddha's condemnation of trading in weapons as a living for laymen also echoes his dislike of war. "One can clearly see here that Buddhism strongly opposed to any kind of war" observes Rahula, "when it lays down that trade in arms and lethal weapons is an evil and unjust means of livelihood."<sup>10</sup>

**The Buddha has used didactic stories in creating a non-conflicting mind set and conditioning people with it.** Thus, in one Jātaka story a lion who was challenged by a pig for a fight, realizing the strength of the evil craze of the enemy in claiming the victory and the ill-effects of fighting, declares: "My friend, enjoy victory. I admit defeat". Stories like *Khantivādi-jātaka* are good examples of idealizing non-confrontational attitude. The Cakkavatti ideal presented in the *Cakkavattisihanāda-sutta* portrays a king who united the entire world without resorting to violence or armed war. The message he wanted to put across was that true glory and victory should be achieved neither by scourge, nor by weapon and force, nor by violence and aggressiveness, but through righteousness.<sup>11</sup>

**The Buddha clearly explained that violent conquest engenders endless hate. The conquered live in misery, while the conqueror has generated hatred.**<sup>12</sup> Neither the conqueror nor the conquered lives in peace since hatred is not over; instead it keeps on getting aggravated. When two parties get heated up in hate the result will be the disastrous for the both parties. When two dry sticks rub against each other the resulting fire will burn both the sticks. The same way when two human groups are in conflict the both parties will experience destruction. The Buddha says that hatred never ceases by hatred but ceases only by loving kindness.<sup>13</sup> According to him, one should conquer enmity with amity, evil with good, meanness with charity, and falsehood with truth. The slayer gets a slayer in turn, the abuser an abuser, and the annoyer an annoyer.<sup>14</sup> So the Buddha advises his followers to refrain from tit-for-tat action (*sarambha*). When one retains the thoughts like he abused me, hit me, defeated me or caused loss for me the hatred increases. One should never let such thought pervade one's mind if he wishes to live happy. (*Dhammapada*) The Buddha strongly advocated non-violence and tolerance. Even when he was abused he did not get angry and remained calm. The Buddhist scripture has it "Having seen contention as a danger and harmony as peace, abide in unity and kindness; this is the teaching of the Buddha."<sup>15</sup>

**When the roots of conflict are diagnosed, it is easy for people to cultivate peace within and without.** If hatred keeps generating more hatred only and if it is not possible to have any happiness in life when we are surrounded with enemies who wish to destroy us, the only way to avoid conflict and achieve peace of mind and society is to control our greed, hatred and conceit with the cultivation of good moral qualities. If a ruler, aggressive, greedy and hateful, wishes to engage in a course of conflict using all what he has to gain his personal interests even at the cost of others,

the inevitable consequences will be dispute, quarrel and warfare. The great root cause behind the rulers set against rulers, citizens against citizens, children against parents, brothers against brothers, friends against friends is Kāma (desire for sensual pleasures). ‘If the ruler would cease to fight and live in peace with his subjects and follows the principle of righteousness by conquering his selfishness how happily and peacefully would all his subjects live!’<sup>16</sup>

**The question might arise here whether it would be possible to live without conflicts and wars. Buddhism would not agree if somebody would say it is not possible.** It should be encouraged, at least in principle. To encourage such an ideal, we can refer to a story presented in the *Samyutta-nikāya*. There it is said that Sakka, the lord of gods, who defeats his adversary Vepacitti, the Asura leader, in battle, does not retaliate even verbally when Vepacitti insults him in the presence of his subordinates.<sup>17</sup> This is not because he is afraid or weak, but because, being a wise person, he knows that one who does not react in hate towards a hater wins a victory hard to win.

Paliawadana states: “That it is possible for individuals to achieve, and abide in, peace and sanity is, of course, the message of Buddhism”<sup>18</sup> And the fact that peace mentality could be ‘infectious’ in a positive manner is also implied in the Buddha’s teachings. On the other hand, the Buddha did not even pursue the noble doubt that arose in him once, as to whether it would be possible to run a state righteously, without killing, conquering, or creating grief to self and others. The *cakkavatti* ideal portrays the possibility of uniting many states under the banner of Dhamma, without firing a single arrow. However, Buddhism found it impossible, even under the best of circumstances, to visualize a state that functions without the backing of an army as it is essential for defensive purposes. It, however, is not to be misunderstood as an endorsement of war. Even after establishing Dharmavijaya, for instance, Ashoka maintained a powerful army, yet never thought of invading another province.

During the time of the Buddha, there were many conflicts between religions in India. The religious men were competing with each other to win supporters and pupils. **The Buddha not only refrained from being a partner to that unpleasant situation but also set an example of living in harmony with other religionists by avoiding conflict.** He, as a matter of fact, set himself as an example of peaceful coexistence. He admired the positive points of other religions. For instance, he praised Mahavira’s acceptance of Karma as a strength in his religion. His communication was exemplary since it avoided unnecessary conflict with others. Sometimes, when a person representing another religion raised a conflict-prone issue the Buddha would state: “About these things there is no agreement. Put them aside. Let us discuss about the things we can agree on.”<sup>19</sup> And he was so broad minded even to instruct his followers to accept any good thing as Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> The modern theory of Nonviolent Communication developed by Dr. Marshal Rosenberg has been, according to some scholars, closely influenced by the Buddhist notions.<sup>21</sup>

**He was kind enough to give due respect to other religionists when they became his guests.** Once when a group of ascetics met the Buddha and asked him to deliver a sermon for them, the Buddha said “Better still, tell me about your teachings.” The

surprised ascetics commented “It is wonderful, truly marvelous! How great is the Samana Gotama in that he will hold back his own views and invite others to explain theirs!”<sup>22</sup> When someone asked a meaningful question leading to fruitful discussion the Buddha never failed to praise him. Bhadda, who asked such a question, was praised thus: “Well said, well said. Friend Bhadda, your understanding is excellent. Your wisdom is welcome.”<sup>23</sup> He would, very often after his midday meal, visit monasteries of other religions. They are reported to have welcomed him in great admiration and even provided him with audience to deliver sermons. When a prominent follower of another religion expressed his desire of becoming a follower of the Buddha he asked to think again of their decision. Thus, the Buddhism seems to have avoided igniting conflicts as much as possible.

However, attempting to avoid conflict in itself is not sufficient as it is inevitable that conflicts of various nature are bound to arise in society. **One might expect, with such glowing record of tolerance and peace psychology, the Buddha to apply his theory to resolve real conflicts.** As a matter of fact, the Buddha was approached by some people to get his assistance to mediate in their conflicts. Two young Brahmins called Tarukkha and Pokkharasati, once approached Buddha to resolve a conflict on their religion. And the Buddha resolved their issue by convincing what was right after a systematic and sober discussion. This was a good example of successful mediation where the both parties agreed with the conclusion.

**The Buddha has provided practical wisdom in resolving socio-political and economic conflicts in some discourses.** The Kutadanta Sutta of Digha Nikaya presents, rather mythologically in form, how a conflict between the state and people became aggravated owing to short-sightedness of advisors was resolved by applying a rational approach. It speaks of a king whose kingdom was ravaged by the riots of poor people. The king is advised by his Brahmin adviser that this situation will not be solved by executions, imprisonments or other repressive measures, for those who survive will continue to cause problems as the reason why they are against the government is not addressed. He gives the alternative of economic planning which involves granting grain and fodder to those who cultivate crops and keep cattle; granting capital to traders; and giving proper living wages to those in government service. Thus, in resolving of conflicts which are socio-political in nature, it is advised that attending to the root of the problem is necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> Walsh, *Long Discourses of the Buddha*, p.328

<sup>2</sup> *Suttanipāta*, 862 -877

<sup>3</sup> *Suttanipāta, Vāseṭṭhasutta*

<sup>4</sup> A.I.201

<sup>5</sup> Jayatilleke, K.N., *Dhamma Man and Law*, p.52

<sup>6</sup> Encyclopedia of Buddhism, Vol. 8, 1996 p, 386

<sup>7</sup> Palihavadana, Mahinda “*Theravada perspective on Causation and Resolution of Conflicts*” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* Vol.10. 2003

<sup>8</sup> *SabbeSattā Sukhīhontu – Sabbe Hontu cha Khemino SabbeBhadrāniPussantu - Ma*

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*KaṅchiDukkhaMāgamā*

- <sup>9</sup> Jātaka V.412f  
<sup>10</sup> Rahula, Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught* , p.47  
<sup>11</sup> D.III.59  
<sup>12</sup> S.I.83 *Jayaṃverampasavati - dukkhaṃsetiparājito*  
<sup>13</sup> Dhammapada. *Na hi verenaverānisammantidhakudacanaṃ*  
<sup>14</sup> S.I.85  
<sup>15</sup> *Cariyāpiṭaka* 3.15.13  
<sup>16</sup> *Jātaka* Vi.214  
<sup>17</sup> S.I.221  
<sup>18</sup> Palihavadana, Mahinda “Theravada perspective on Causation and Resolution of Conflicts”  
Journal of Buddhist Ethics, Vol.10. 2003  
<sup>19</sup> D.II.124  
<sup>20</sup> Vinaya II.10 Even Mahayana texts preserve this spirit. Adhyasayasamcudana sutra as  
referred to by Shantideva in ShikshaSamuccaya. Tr. Cecil Bendal,  
E.W.H.D.Rouse.(London 1922) p.17  
<sup>21</sup> Jason Little, “*Buddhism and Nonviolent Communication*” *Shambala Times* 31 January  
2009  
<sup>22</sup> D.III.40  
<sup>23</sup> S.V.15