Summary

The main aim of the following paper is to present Buddhist paradigms that interpret conflict’s nature, its roots, and offer the possibilities for its transformation. Applications of the centuries old Buddhist teaching relevant to the causes of conflict are present in all strands of Buddhist teaching. Although Buddhist traditions have developed a number of social teachings, the major emphasis has been on the individual transformation based on the tradition of mindful observation.

The paper will present some “good practices” of Buddhist conflict transformation (the practice of Naikan, Insight meditation, Mindful meditation etc.). These approaches ensure that everyone has the possibility for understanding (and transforming) a conflict, since conflict transformation in Buddhism is not about making compromises, but rather deepening understanding to a point where all sides gain insight.

Introduction

The understanding of causes and consequences of conflict(s) remains one of the greatest challenges throughout human history. Since there is no easy solution that will make sense in every conflict situation, fresh methods and models are most welcome as a part of conflict resolution and transformation techniques. The aim of the following paper is to present some of the available methods and modes of conflict transformation, based on Buddhist understanding of conflict dynamic(s).

Buddhist Understanding of Conflict and Its Causes

There is no particular theory of conflict according to Buddhism, but there are certain discourses in the Pali canon in which the Buddha does explain conflict and its causes.

Let us look closely to the example from Dīgha Nikāya, or the Long Discourses, where we find The Great Causes Discourse, the Mahā-
nidāna Sutta, which gives an extended treatment of the teachings of dependent origination within which the Buddha describes the causal factors leading to conflict.

In this sutta, the Buddha says: “And this is the way to understand how it is that because of defensiveness various evil, unskillful phenomena come into play: the taking up of sticks and knives: conflicts, quarrels, and disputes; accusations, divisive speech, and lies”\(^1\)

It can be assumed from just said that conflicts are unskillful phenomenon, which result from defensiveness. They can be traced back through a casual linkage to feeling. The links described fully in the sutta, are:

- feeling ➔ craving ➔ seeking ➔ acquisition ➔ ascertainment ➔
- desire and passion ➔ attachment ➔ stringiness ➔ defensiveness ➔ unskillful phenomena (taking up of sticks and knives; conflicts, quarrels, and disputes; accusations, divisive speech, and lies).

Buddhist approach to conflict is based on theory of cognition, which is very different from the more standard approaches to conflict that focus on interpersonal relations, social psychology, structural theories, or group dynamics. Conflict in the Buddhist understanding is a result of defensiveness and (faulty) perceptions influenced by feelings.

Another example was presented by Gananarama (1980 p. 204), which is the case of the Sakkapañhā-sutta, recorded as a dialogue between the Buddha and Sakka, the chief god of Tāvatiṃsa heaven; conflict is to be understood as a natural phenomenon not only among men but also among other beings such as gods and semi-divine beings.

According to the discourse in question, Sakka asks the Buddha: “What is the reason that prompts the gods, men asuras, gandhabbas and other classes of beings to be hateful, harmful and envious of one another causing them to continue to live in conflict despite the fact that they wish to live all time without those evil thoughts?”

The Buddha’s answer is an psychological explanation of the casual genesis of conflicts:

- Envy (issa) and avarice (macchariya) ➔ conflicts.

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Things dear (piya) and not dear (appiya) > envy and avarice.
Desire (chanda) > things dear and not dear
Thought conception (vitakka) > desire
Concepts tinged with mind’s prolific tendency (papañcasanna sañkhāra), thought conception.

The Buddha’s explanation reveals conflict’s casual connection with the mental factors rooted in wrong attitude towards perception and this is the reason behind the importance of study the mechanism through which the “I” notion helps to generate unwholesome states. Buddhism say that these concepts can generate obsessions, victimize the person, and lead to disruption of society.

In Buddhism, a ‘person’s is made up out of five factors of personality, “groups of grasping” (upādāna-khandha’s): rūpa, ‘material shape’ or ‘form’, vedanā or ‘feeling’, saññā, ‘cognition’, which processes sensory and mental objects, so as to classify and label them (recognition and interpretation of objects), sañkhāra’s or ‘constructing activities’ – a number of states which initiate action or direct, mould and give shape to character (the most characteristic ‘constructing activity’ is cetanā, ‘will’ or volition which is identified with karma), and viññāṇa, (discriminative) consciousness.²

Yet all of these above mentioned phenomena are transitory, since ‘three marks’ of all conditioned phenomena are that they are impermanent (aniccaṃ) unsatisfactory (dukkhaṃ), and non-self (anattā).

“Because they are impermanent and unsatisfactory, they are to be seen as non-self: not a permanent, self-secure, happy, independent self or I. They are ‘empty’ (suññatā) or such a self, or anything pertaining to such a self” (Harvey 1990, p.53).

Here comes the nourishment (origin or cause of dukkha: the craving (taṇhā). One’s sense of ‘self’ springs from delusion and out of faulty reasoning based on the failure to perceive the world as it actually is.

The “I” notion fed and generated by taṇhā, is therefore central to the theme of violence in the thoughts and actions of human beings.

² This includes both the basic awareness of a sensory or mental object, and the discrimination of its basic aspects or parts, which are actually recognized by saññā. It is of six types according to whether it is conditioned by ear, eye, nose, tongue, body or mind-organ.
It springs out of desire to identify and claim some part or parts of the universe as one’s possession, as ‘this is mine, I am this, and this is my self’, as opposed to yours. The desire to construct my ‘self’ our personal identity leads inevitably to selfish concerns. Caroline Brazier said: “When I feel that what I regard as my self, that what I regard as by rights, mine is in danger of being taken from me, I become angry, frustrated, and fearful; I may even be driven to violence and kill. And yet disease, old age and death for sure will take from me all that I have regarded as mine-body feelings, ideas, volitions, and mind.” (Brazier 2003, p. 147).

Conflict(s) stem from the felt need to defend what is seen to be one’s own or to grasp personal gain: a person can become the victim of obsessive actions, thoughts and inclinations: war and struggle are caused by the conflict of ideas, ideologies and concepts.

Since Buddha attributes conflict to faulty interpretations of reality, he conceives ‘conflict transformation’ as a learning process. The root of suffering and hence conflict, is ignorance or delusion (avijjā) and its solution is a gradual cultivation of wisdom or insight (paññā).

A key concept in Buddhist conflict resolution/ transformation is the understanding of the doctrine of dependent origination (paṭicca samuppāda). It is the understanding that everything is part of limitless web of interconnections and undergoes a continual process of transformation and relatedness. In this way we can talk about the fundamental social nature of conflicts.

Since the resolution of disputes has to start with individual transformation, the Buddhist approach has focused primarily on the sphere of intra-psychic, rather than interpersonal change. However, in history Buddhism has presented several ethical virtues that can assist Buddhist conflict transformation process/strategies. Some of them are mettā (friendliness), prajñā (wisdom), upāya (appropriate means). To these four sangaha vatthuni, grounds of kindness, as the social application of the Buddhist ethical ideals can be add. These four principles of group behavior include dāna (generosity), peyyavaja (kindly speech), athacariyā (useful work), and samānattā (equality).

Yet the Buddhist approach has focused primarily in the sphere of intra-psychic, rather than interpersonal, change. The resolution of disputes has to start with individual transformation.
A key component to the Buddhist conflict transformation is the understanding of three characteristics of reality (aniccam, dukkham, anattā). Without this understanding, the whole process collapses, since the attachment to the identity or/and identification to specific situation is so strong that cause the conflict. How much are mentioned practices able to apply the above mention wisdom to their daily practices and what are their methods? How much are these methods applicable to the non-Buddhist environment?

There are preventable methods mentioned in the Buddhist texts, the first one would be a gradual training. The stress on a gradual process of change and training, beginning with moral habit, stretches like a thread across the Buddhist texts. There is a firm belief that discipline, education and the taking of one step at a time can lead people from a stage of relative ignorance to greater wisdom. Are these practices still in use today? Are they modified and in what way? What kind of methods should we apply? How applicable are they and for what kind of conflicts are they used?

In his article *A Mind to Flight: Conflict Resolution and Buddhist Perspective*, Parchelo is searching within the larger collection of meditative, ritual and monastic practices to articulate Buddhist conflict resolution theory and practice(s) (Parchelo 2008).

He presents an interesting list, not fully elaborated, yet useful for further exploration. Two of those methods on his list that might contribute to conflict resolution are *Mettā Bhāvanā* and *Vipassanā* meditation.

*Mettā Bhāvanā*, the cultivation of loving kindness might contribute to conflict transformation, since the practitioner deliberately intensifies their opening of themselves to the possibility of friendliness, compassion and kindness in themselves (and to others). Often conflict transformation break down because one person is unable or unwilling to get beyond the emotional reactions of the conflict. 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.

*Vipassanā* or *mindfulness meditation* can contribute to conflict resolution with benefits, such as:

1. Focusing 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 understanding of dependent co-arising (paṭicca samuppāda) and of ‘three marks’ of all conditional phenomena (annicāṃ, dukkhaṃ, anattā), which increase sympathy to the concerns and perspectives of others.

Parchelo’s special interest lies in Naikan, a structured method of self-reflection, presented by Greg Krech, one of the teachers of this technique (Krech, 2002). Naikan is a Japanese word which means ‘inside looking’ or ‘introspection’. It is a good example of a conflict transformation method, where intra-personal transformation happened. It is indeed opposite to conflict resolution strategies, where the conflict is not transformed and soporifically waits until conditions change.

Naikan, following the model of Buddhist psychology, places a significant responsibility on the clients, and claims that they will not be free from pain and suffering unless they themselves go to the root cause of suffering, and examine the way that they are themselves contributing to the perpetuation of their own suffering. The root cause of suffering is not to be found in external conditions, according to Buddhism, such as in other people, or in the past, but rather lies within one’s mind.

The main aim of Naikan is to bring clients to a state of mind that “accepts” reality as it is, rather than rejecting it; and appreciates what they have, such as their relationships with parents, friends, colleagues, and so on.

The reflection is structured in two ways; first one does naikan in solitude, without any written record. There is an instructor to whom one reports periodically during the time, but his/her role is simply to hear the reflection and suggest ways to make it more effective. Secondly, naikan is structured by the three questions used in the reflection.

These 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, the third asks us to consider what troubles and difficulties our relationships have brought
to others. In *naikan* that we never need to ask the missing fourth question “what troubles were caused to me?” Since the challenge to move beyond the usual self-interested model of exchange theories and consider the presence of compassion, love and selflessness. The practice of *naikan* assists therapy, especially conflict work in several ways:

1. By recognizing the pervasiveness of generosity and the relative pettiness of being over-concerned with own needs and feelings.
2. It moves conflict conversation beyond the feeling realm.
3. It suggests a re-orientation of a person’s reason for action. (Parchelo 2008, pp. 7-9).

Whereas many conflict situations devolve into questions of fairness or equality, *naikan* technique marks an important turning point, since suggests the perspective of “what needs to be done?”

The healing process of Naikan corresponds to the Buddhist understanding of ignorance, namely that suffering comes from a disconnect between the way we perceive things to be and the way they actually are, and specifically from the misconception that persons and phenomena exist in fixed, concrete and independent ways – that they are fully, objectively “real” and not at all dependent upon our perceptions of them.

Another fascinating Buddhist conflict transformation method applied to the practical process of mediation is presented by Glowacki (2011). She analyzed the work of Thich Nhat Hanh during the retreat with Israelis and Palestinians in Plum Village, France. His main strategy as a mediator was to bring ‘enemies’ together in non-threatening environments and first focus on teaching them to find peace within through mindfulness.

During the first few days of the retreat, Israeli and Palestinian participants did not discuss the conflict but instead focused on learning how to sit, walk, eat, speak and listen mindfully. The aim was to be stable enough to engage with the energy of the conflict. The participants also engaged in a practice Thich Nhat Hanh calls ‘Watering the Flowers,’ which is based on a Buddhist monastic practice meant to maintain community and work through conflict. The group sat together and individuals were asked to ‘water each other’s flowers’ by sharing something beautiful about the other, a practice meant to create a stable foundation of goodness in the relationship.
Upon this foundation of stability, the practice of loving speech and mindful listening were taught. At the end of the week, the Israeli and Palestinians met for “deep-listening” session. Loving speech meant to speak without blame or condemnation, and mindful listening meant to listen deeply, following the breath, and to be aware of reactions without responding verbally. The idea was for each side to open its hearts to the other side and see each other’s suffering.

A key part of this so-called Insight mediation is changing the “fight or flight” response of parties towards one of “being in dialogue”. “Mediators could also help parties get in touch with their feelings of fear and hostility through mindfulness of body and feelings, and use practices to have reduced such negative feelings” (Glowacki 2011, p.11).

Just mentioned mediation, it is interesting to know that the only possibility to study Buddhist Mediation as an academic subject is the course of ‘Buddhist Meditation’ (BM) taught at the Centre of Buddhist Studies University of Hong Kong.

The founder of the course is Helena S.Y. Yuen, who is a practicing court mediator of many years.

The theory of reframing used in the BM (Buddhist Mediation) Model is designed to enhance self-awareness as well as non-attachment to this sense of self or “I-ness”.

Yuen (2008) presents the new model of reframing with the five aggregates to be used as an intervention to interpret and hypothesizes the conflict of the disputants.

Yuen said that in mediation the importance of reframing is to detoxify, to highlight the interests and needs, and to create doubt about the mind set of the disputants regarding their positions. In the BM Model, the reframing of the disputants’ opening statements or negative remarks should be based on the five aggregates and their order:

1. Name and form - what are they seeing or hearing
2. Sensation – what are they feeling
3. Recognition – what are they thinking
4. Karmic formation – what are their needs and concerns
5. Consciousness – where is their attention and focus at this moment

Under the BM Model, the theory of the 12 links as a process of affliction and purification is applied to the process of mediation according to the three stages (Yuen 2008, pp. 28-42):
**Stage 1.** By reversing the process of the 12 links, the first two links of *ignorance* and *action* become the definition of the problem from the disputants in the first phase of the mediation process. Each party will have his story of the problem or what has happened which is governed by *ignorance* as discussed in the first link which leads to *actions* that cause the conflict. The mediator’s task is to highlight the blind spots of the parties and introduce a new perspective to their conflict by working with their obsessions or *saṅkhāra*. The eighth, ninth and tenth links, (desire, clinging and becoming) represent the karmic process of how the parties actively create more conditioned phenomena which belongs to the karmic activities under the fourth aggregate (*saṅkhāra*).

**Stage 2.** The second phase of the mediation is the redefining of the problem or retelling of the story from each of the disputants’ perspective by tracing through the third to the tenth links by reframing the observation, feeling, attitude, opinion, needs and concerns and changing the past observations (*name and form*), thinking, seeing and hearing (*sense-spheres*), interaction between the parties (*contact*) and feeling from their attachment to their own version of truth or fairness to what really is happening (*attachment, grasping, existence*).

**Stage 3.** The final stage of mediation is the solution stage where the parties will negotiate and get an outcome that they can live with and resolve the past conflict (*death and rebirth*).

Although Yuen does not present statistical results of the usage of her method, we can have no doubt about the benefits of the methods.

While going through texts and articles it can be said that Buddhism lay down a form of an exceptional mental culture to lessen the mind’s tendency to veer towards violence: the right understanding of Buddhist ideas of dependent origination and of interconnectedness of all beings and self as a process, no an entity can, be a helpful tool for conflict transformation. With the right understanding of non-duality of beings, conflict transformation for Buddhists is not about making compromises, but rather deepening understanding to a point where all sides gain insight that their need and purposes are not different. Not to use these magnificent tool would be a shame and a big loss for humanity.
References


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