The Buddha taught conflict resolution to monks, nuns, and lay practitioners for 45 years. Twenty-five hundred years later, his teachings remain relevant for conflict resolution practitioners. Unlike teachers in other religious traditions, he never suggested belief in his teachings, instead urging practice and reliance on experience to evaluate effectiveness. As a result of my decades of practice as a Buddhist, I consistently experience connections between my clarity and presence as a neutral, when mindful, and the challenges of conflict when I am not. My direct experience has instilled confidence that practicing the Buddha’s teachings has helped me develop the theories, skills, and personal qualities required to master conflict resolution.1

Two young teachers with two different styles

Several years ago a senior Buddhist teacher asked me, as a member of the board and the Ethics and Reconciliation Council of a Vipassana retreat center, to mediate a dispute between two young teachers. Buddhist scholars regard Vipassana (or Insight) teachings as the oldest suttas (sermons) of Gautama Buddha, who taught in northern India approximately 3,000 years ago.2 The two young teachers were both dedicated practitioners, with significant silent retreat practice. They were both charismatic, highly regarded by younger, diverse practitioners.

Dawa was a second-generation Tibetan immigrant whose family included generations of lay Buddhist practitioners. She was
dedicated to preserving ancient teachings and practices. Renaldo, an immigrant from a Central American family, was introduced to a secular approach while obtaining a master’s in social work before sitting a traditional Vipassana retreat. Renaldo thereafter pursued silent retreat practice. Both were chosen for Vipassana teacher training. Renaldo incorporated his Western psychological training, believing this approach would give mindfulness greater acceptance in the West.

Traditional Vipassana retreats include hours of silent practice with occasional short teacher interviews. Each evening, teachers rotate giving talks. While Dawa and Renaldo were junior teachers on a month-long retreat at a Vipassana center in Hawaii, Dawa obliquely criticized Renaldo’s talks, contending mindfulness arises only through traditional teachings, to avoid diluting the potential for true awakening. Renaldo’s next talk again connected psychological principles with traditional teachings.

Looking back centuries: The Six Roots of Conflict

One Buddha sutta tells of the time when Cunda, one of the Buddha’s attendants, and Ananda, the Buddha’s cousin and personal attendant, told the Buddha about the death of Nataputta, a famous Jain teacher, and about the ensuing feuding among Nataputta’s disciples. Their description included images such as the disciples stabbing each other with “verbal daggers” and essentially used the language of conflict we all hear so often: “Your way is wrong. My way is right.”

When Ananda expressed concern about conflict arising among the Buddha’s students after his death, the Buddha described the Six Roots of Conflict:

1. Anger
2. Contempt
3. Greed
4. Deceit
5. Wrong view
6. Clinging to our views

In my mediation with Dawa and Renaldo, they were both angry, each believing the other was expressing contempt for his or her approach. Dawa believed Renaldo was greedy and that his eagerness to advance his career led to being deceitful about his motivations and to teaching wrong views. Renaldo also accused Dawa of being greedy, eager to expand opportunities for her traditional teachings, and of being deceitful about her motivation, which, he asserted, was not to support ancient teachings but to deny the psychological aspects of the Buddha’s original teachings (which, Renaldo believed, were consistent with modern psychology). Renaldo and Dawa both stuck to their stances, refusing to acknowledge the other’s perspective, making their dispute one with all six roots. And both were ignoring the Buddha’s warning that anger has a “poisoned root and honeyed tip.”

The Four Noble Truths

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avoiding conflict is good. The Buddha never taught that dukkha is wrong or that we could or should resist it; he taught us to train our minds to know dukkha mindfully as it arises in each moment.7

Practicing mindfulness generates this knowing, including awareness of any internal doubts or resistance.8 We train our minds to note silently whenever we experience conflict: “The experience of conflict is like this,” enabling us to be present and mindfully know each moment’s experience.

I silently reminded myself of this practice as we began the mediation with Dawa and Renaldo. It was—and is—essential that I not separate myself, as a mediator, from the parties’ experience and always to begin by reminding myself how often I fall into this same trap. Otherwise, I risk being right about the participants’ being wrong and losing mindfulness of my personal experience. Helping them remember required my humanity, to know myself as a practitioner, not a mediator. I connected with their failure to know their contribution to their conflict by silently noting “Conflict feels like this. Blame and projection are arising.”

2) Know clinging as the source of conflict, as dukkha

The Buddha’s Second Noble Truth presents the underlying cause of all mental suffering. We experience dukkha because our untrained minds react to life’s constant changes, such as conflicts and miscommunications, by clinging to our likes and resisting our dislikes. He never taught that clinging to what we like is wrong, an important distinction from Western traditions that focus on right and wrong and “sin.” We experience life only through our senses, and our untrained minds cling to sense pleasures. If such experiences are wrong, then life is wrong. Rather, the Buddha taught that tanha, thirst—uncontrolled desire for our wants—is the source of dukkha, “… all the troubles and strife in the world, from little personal quarrels in families to great wars between nations and countries…”9

Desire, according to the Buddha, includes its opposite, aversion. Aversion to any sense experience is simply thirst for its opposite. We cling to futile efforts to avoid conflicts and have life the way we prefer, producing conflicts, violence, and wars plaguing humanity on every level—personal, family, community, nation, and world. We also cling to “becoming,” which the Buddha defined as our existence, status, or self-identity and to “non-becoming,” wanting something or someone to disappear, not to be experienced.

Because at the time I worked with Dawa and Renaldo I was mediating with experienced teachers, I began by inviting examination of their conflict through the Four Noble Truths. They quickly acknowledged how they wanted respect as teachers and were clinging to their views of appropriate teaching. Dawa acknowledged taking Renaldo’s approach as an attack on her family traditions. She acknowledged anger arising in her and a determination to “protect” her view of the Buddha’s teachings. Renaldo acknowledged his failure to respect Dawa’s views or the depth of her experience and traditions and his strong preference for modernizing the Buddha’s teachings. After some encouragement, he also acknowledged his unconscious chauvinism.

3) Know the cessation of conflict as dukkha

The Buddha’s Third Noble Truth distinguishes a solution to our ancient human dilemma, by recognizing our dysfunctional relationship with life: our attachment to suffering and the potential for the cessation of suffering. We avoid or resist conflict because we do not believe that we can deal with conflict skillfully or that it will ever end. As mediators, we work with parties who lack faith in the possibility that their conflict, their suffering, will end. They are consumed with anger, fear, projection, and blame. The source of conflict, they assert, is not their clinging, attachment, or aversion, rather it is others’ behavior. They see themselves as victims, not
actors. To assist others in resolving conflict, we have to embody this mindful knowing of the cessation of the dukkha of conflict, not just through an intellectual understanding. We must bring this personal awareness into our life – and then into our conflict rooms. Otherwise, we cannot assist parties to remember they are actors in their lives, not victims.

Without mindfulness, we miss the moments of peace and connection in conflict. We fail to recognize moments when conflict ceases and freedom arises. We remain blinded by attachment to conflict. Through consistent mindfulness practice, we experience cessation of conflict moment by moment, especially recognizing moments when our internal conflicts cease, even if external reality remains unchanged. We train our minds to awaken, silently repeating: “Conflict is like this,” and when peace and connection arise, “The cessation of conflict is like this.” With mindfulness practice, we gradually understand that the Buddha was not suggesting we accept abuse or harm but that we know that when we blame only others, without examining our own contributions, we remain dependent on others to change and disempower ourselves to name and find our way to freedom.

I invited Renaldo and Dawa to reflect on how they might resolve their differences. Renaldo acknowledged being trapped, blaming Dawa for holding rigid views of the Buddha’s teachings, struggling to know that conflict with her could possibly cease, and unskilfully attacking her traditional views.

Dawa acknowledged that her fears of Western psychology’s coopting ancient teachings caused rejection of Renaldo’s efforts to guide students to understand the parallels and differences within Buddhism and psychology, resulting in her rejection of his modernist approach.

As mediators, we must learn to train our minds to know the possibility of conflict ceasing in our own lives, in order to bring that awareness into a room. We cannot practice conflict resolution while failing to address conflict in our own lives. Whenever I mediate, I first focus on relating the parties’ conflict with my life, such as recognizing how important it can be to me (like Dawa) to be “right” and how easy it can be for me (like Renaldo) to attack someone who does not share my views. Only through knowing how conflict arises and ceases in my life can I support parties creating conditions for their conflict to cease. Only by remembering how to release my clinging to views and recognizing when the Six Roots of Conflict are not present in me, moment by moment, can I support that process in mediation.

4) Know the path leading to cessation of conflict, of dukkha
The Fourth Noble Truth outlines an Eightfold Path to cessation of conflict as dukkha, divided into three groups of mindfulness practices: Wisdom: wise view and intention; Virtue: wise speech, action, and livelihood; and Concentration: wise effort, mindfulness, and concentration.¹⁰

Wise view develops cognitive intelligence by training our minds to see distortions caused by seeing conflict as about “me,” when conflict actually arises from causes and conditions. Wise intention focuses on knowing our subtle intent before acting to help avoid conflict. Wise speech increases awareness of the impact of our words on our thoughts and actions toward ourselves and others. Wise action and livelihood increase our awareness of the impact of our words and actions on ourselves, others, and the Earth. Wise effort, mindfulness, and concentration help us become aware of the more subtle aspects of experience.

The Buddha did not offer these practices to teach us to become good but rather to develop mindfulness of our intentions, mental habits, and reactive thoughts and abandon unskillful actions while cultivating skillful approaches to life, especially resolving conflicts. Attaining mindfulness regarding the Six Roots of Conflict requires diligent practice, but results arise quickly and build slowly but consistently. Remember, the Four Noble Truths are not beliefs but a framework for training our minds.

Like a physician, the Buddha described our illness, diagnosed its underlying cause, clarified the cure, and recommended the medicine to achieve that cure.¹¹ His analysis is directly applicable to resolving conflict. By understanding and addressing our own conflict through these Four Noble Truths, we, as mediators, can more skillfully and congruently bring that personal experience into our work.

Endnotes

1. BRINGING PEACE INTO THE ROOM (G. Daniel Bowling & David Hoffman eds., 2003).
2. Vipassana teachings survived through oral tradition until they were recorded and preserved in what is now Sri Lanka. They were brought to Massachusetts in the late 1970s by Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg, cofounders of the Insight Meditation Center in Barre and then Spirit Rock Insight Meditation Center in Woodacre, California.
4. Id. Number 104.6.
5. SAMYUTTA NIKAYA: THE CONNECTED DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA, Number 2.3 (Bhikkhu Bodhi trans., 2000).
7. SAMYUTTA NIKAYA, supra note 5, Number 56.11.
8. MAJHIMA NIKAYA, supra note 3 Number 10.44.
10. MOFFITT, supra note 6.
11. Id.

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