

An Exploration of Buddhist Principles on Conflict Resolution and Peace-building as Presented in the Pali discourses

Ven. Dr. Rathmale Punnarathana

Former Senior lecturer

Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany

Head of the institute, Sri Lanka Buddhist and Pali University in Germany

Chief Saṅgha-nāyaka of Germany

Abstract

This exploration delves into Buddhist teachings on conflict resolution and peace-building as presented in the Pali discourses. Conflict, an inevitable aspect of human society, is examined from both its destructive and positive aspects, with the aim to transform violent conflicts into peaceful processes through understanding and addressing their root causes. Buddhism identifies three primary causes of conflict—craving, hatred, and ignorance—and advocates for their transformation through the development of non-craving, non-hatred, and non-illusion. Buddhist conflict resolution is rooted in the principles of causality and the Four Noble Truths, offering a comprehensive theory that can be applied both spiritually and socially. The *Mahānidāna-sutta* and other texts illustrate the psychological and social dynamics that fuel conflict, emphasizing internal transformation as the foundation for resolving external disputes. The Buddha's teachings stress the importance of cultivating inner peace through morality, mental concentration, and wisdom, with the goal of fostering peace within oneself to bring about societal harmony. Furthermore, Buddhism highlights poverty, social inequalities, and other environmental factors as root causes of conflicts. Through practices like loving-kindness (*mettā*) and non-cruelty, Buddhism proposes a path to peaceful coexistence, not only for individuals but for all living beings. The Buddha's approach to peace-building involves ethical living, compassion, and mindfulness, and serves as a practical model for reducing conflicts and promoting long-term peace.

Keyword- Conflicts, Resolution, Peace-building, Buddhism

Objective

This research seeks to investigate the doctrinal foundations within Buddhism that relate to conflict resolution and peace-building. It aims to understand how Buddhist principles can be applied in contemporary society, especially in areas afflicted by violence, to promote peaceful transformation and social harmony. The research will examine core Buddhist teachings-such as compassion, non-violence, mindfulness, and forgiveness-and analyze their potential to guide conflict resolution strategies. Ultimately, the goal is to explore how Buddhist values and practices can contribute to addressing the root causes of violence and help create a peaceful environment in societies impacted by conflict.

Methodology

The study utilized both primary and secondary sources to gather relevant data. Primary sources include Buddhist texts, scriptures, and teachings, while secondary sources comprise scholarly articles, books, and research papers related to the application of Buddhism in conflict resolution. Data collection was done through libraries, e-libraries, and scholarly discussions. Furthermore, the research method employed was primarily comparative in nature, allowing the researcher to compare Buddhist teachings with other conflict resolution theories, particularly from Western philosophies. This comparative approach helps in understanding the unique contributions of Buddhism to peace-building and how these teachings can be integrated into modern-day conflict resolution processes.

Research Problem

Are there Buddhist teachings relevant to conflict resolution and peace? This question examines whether Buddhist philosophy offers specific insights or practices that can be applied to resolve conflicts, foster reconciliation, and promote lasting peace in societies struggling with violence.

If such teachings exist, how can they be implemented in a society that is deeply rooted in violence to foster peace and reconciliation? This question explores the practical application of Buddhist teachings in conflict-ridden societies. It seeks to understand how principles such as forgiveness, compassion, and the interdependence of all beings can be applied in modern-day social and political contexts to help transform violent behaviors and promote peaceful coexistence.

Discussion

Diversity is indeed a natural circumstance in the world, and the rise of conflict is also an inevitable fact in society. Conflicts are not always entirely negative, there are also positive aspects in conflicts; for example, the today common conflict over water (the lack of drinkable water) promotes positive attitudes among people toward the preservation of water resources and the environment. The positive aspect of this conflict is the preservation of water and environment. The negative aspect of the conflict on water is that it would be a cause for world war in the future.

Conflict can arise at the individual level, community level, national level and global level. Whatever conflicts arise, from the individual family level to the global level, the nature of conflict is that it is inevitable and cannot be eliminated from the world. Accounts of the past 5000 years of history reveal that only 92 years have passed with no conflict or war. This fact shows that for over 98% of the past 5000 years society – in a global sense – has been affected by war.¹ This shows the inevitable nature of conflict. Hence, attempt should not be made to eradicate conflict but to transform the violent nature of conflict into a non-violent process through understanding and identifying the root causes of conflict.

Buddhism has recognized three root causes of arising conflicts at the individual level: craving (*lōbha*), hatred (*dōsa*) and ignorance (*mōha*).² These three root causes are latent in everyone's mind and are interdependent. Even though there is no destructive nature apparent in the latent state of the above three roots in one's mind, with contact with external objects they manifest as violent and destructive. The craving (*lōbha*) is an insatiable desire to acquire; the insatiable desire gives rise to covetousness (*abhijjhā visamalōbha*). This covetousness is the stage of conflict that arises due to the strong attachment to the things an individual likes. Hatred (*dōsa*) is the resentment directed toward the people and circumstances that cause the arising of ill will (*vyāpāda*). The ill will causes destructive violence in society such as killing and injuring others. The ignorance (*mōha*) is the lack of understanding and unawareness of the real circumstances. Ignorance causes a strong attachment to wrong views (*miccādiṭṭhi*). Many religious conflicts arise due to the misunderstanding of the real meaning of religion. Thus, Buddhism distinguishes

¹ Gary and Solis (2010).

² Sujato, Bhikkhu (2028) & A.10.174.

the above three mental conditions as the root causes of the arising of conflict from the individual level to the global level.

As a consequence, the Buddhist way of transforming conflict into a constructive and non-violence state depends on the development and cultivation of opposites of the above three roots. The positive counterparts of craving, hatred and illusion are non-craving (*alōbha*) non-hatred (*adōsa*) and non-illusion (*amōha*).³ The Buddha said, “Because of craving, there arise grievances or sorrow and fear. When freed from it, there is neither sorrow nor fear.”⁴ In *Sigālōvāda-sutta*, desire (*chanda*) hatred (*dōsa*) fear (*bhaya*) and ignorance (*mōha*) have been identified as the mental drives that cause harm to the individual and the society and there mentions that for the person who is freed from the above vulgar states of mind, his goodness and repute grow like the moon when waxing⁵. Buddhism emphasizes that conflict resolution should be started within man himself in reducing his or her vulgar mental drives like craving, hatred and ignorance by developing non-craving non-hatred and non-illusion. The transformation of destructive mental conditions like craving etc. into constructive positive counterparts is not a short-term process. It is a long-term gradual process based on the practical engagement of charity (*dāna*), morality (*sīla*) and meditation (*bhāvanā*).

The Buddhist interpretation of conflict and the root cause of conflicts have mostly been elaborated in terms of the central teaching of Buddhism, causality (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). According to Buddhist causality, every process of arising conflict and resolution of conflict into a non-violent stage depends on the causal theory. Buddhist conflict resolution theory depicted in the analysis of the Four Noble Truths is one of the best theories manifested in the Indian philosophical context, and relates to the theory of cause and effect. The four levels to be consistent with what follows preached by the Buddha are, 1) Conflict, 2) The cause of conflict, 3) The resolution of conflict, and 4) The way to the resolution of conflict. The first two levels are, understanding and recognizing of nature of conflict and the root causes of conflict. The third and fourth levels deal with the conflict resolution process. Prima facie, this theory appeared as a way elaborated by Buddha to attain only spiritual mental states, however, it is not only a way to

³ Mahāli Sutta, Aṅguttara-nikāya, Dasaka-nipāta Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana,(1995).

⁴ Dh.p.32.

⁵ D.III.181.

attain *Nibbāna* but it is the clearest way that can be implemented to solve any conflict condition in society.

The *Mahānidāna-sutta* is one of the suttas that explains the causal conditionality of origin conflict and social problems. Here, it explains the causal relativity of conflict in the following way. "Feeling conditions craving, craving conditions seeking, seeking condition acquisition, acquisition conditions decision making, decision making conditions lustful desire, lustful desire conditions attachment, attachment conditions appropriation, appropriation conditions avarice, avarice condition girding, girding conditions taking up stick and sword, then, there arise quarrels, disputes, argument, strife, abuse, lying and other evil unskilled states."⁶ It should not be misunderstood here that the feeling (*vedanā*) or craving (*taṇhā*) is the first cause of arising conflicts because all the above links are interrelated to each other and process relatively with the contact of external objects through internal faculties of the individual. One of the famous suttas, which explain the method of contacting external objects with internal faculties, is *Madhupiṇḍika-sutta*. For example, here it explains how an individual contact forms through the eyes "Through the contact of eye and forms, there arise eye-consciousness, the coming together of three is sense impression, sense-impression is conditional feeling, feeling is conditioned perception and so on"⁷ Other sense organs also operate in a similar way on contact with respective external objects. This psychological process causes to arise various conflicts in the external society. For example, the above characterization of causal relativity of the *Mahānidāna-sutta* clearly shows how the internal mental process of the individual gives rise to destructive behaviour in society. Thus, according to the Buddhist explanation of causes of conflict, all the conflicts arise in man himself. Therefore, the conflict resolution process should be started within man himself rather than finding outer solutions through the external world. Once a certain deity, asked the Buddha, "A tangle inside, a tangle outside, this generation is entangled in a tangle, I ask you this, *Gotama* who can disentangle this tangle." The Buddha replied to him: "A man established on virtue, wise, developing the mind and wisdom, a *Bhikkhu* ardent and discreet, he can disentangle this tangle."⁸ The deity asked the solution for the internal and external conflicts that entangled with each other. The Buddha presented a solution addressing three levels that should be implemented by the person himself. They are, 1) Behavioural or moral transformation (*sīla*), 2) mental

⁶ D.II.58.

⁷ M.I.111.

⁸ S.I.13.

transformation (*samādhi*) and 3) Cognitive transformation (*pañña*). Morality means the protection of precepts preached by the Buddha. Mental transformation means the development of mental concentration and cognitive transformation is the understanding real nature of the world or the capacity to see things, as they are. The person who has developed and cultivated the above three levels is completely free from all types of internal and external conflicts. He is called *Arahat*. He neither causes harm to himself nor causes to arising of external conflict. Even though it is difficult to reach such a state (*arahat*) for people in modern society, this theory enables development to an extent effective to reduce conflicts in day-to-day life.

Buddhism does not recognize only psychological calamities as the only causes of arising conflicts but it distinguishes some social issues and interactions as root causes of arising conflicts. Poverty is one of such root causes cognized by the Buddha. In the *Cakkavattisīhanāda sutta*, the Buddha mentioned “not giving of property to the needy, poverty become rife, from the growth of poverty, taking of what was not giving is increased, from the increasing of theft, use of weapons increased, from the increasing use of weapons taking of life increased and from the increasing in taking of life, peoples life span decreased.”⁹ Modern sociologists also recognize poverty as a root cause of many social problems and conflicts. The poverty is caused by the unconstructive economic system of the country. The interpersonal conflict between the rich and the poor always arises due to the unfair distribution of the limited wealth among the people. The conflict between the rich and the poor can never be solved without reducing the gap between poor and rich. In the *Kuṭadanta sutta*, it mentions that the king should distribute grain and fodder to those who engage in cultivation, should give capital to those who engage in trade and should give wages and food to those who engage in government service.¹⁰ Buddhism has recognized poverty as suffering and points out that it is impossible to implement a reconciliation process or peace-building programme without eliminating the poverty. The above discourses give ample account of how Buddha has explained the conflict resolution theories while understanding the root causes of social conflicts.

Apart from the above factors, there are some other social impacts, which cause conflicts and problems to arise in society. In the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*¹¹ it is mentioned that various types of

⁹ D.III.67.

¹⁰ D.I.134.

¹¹ A.I.110.

mental suffering and conflict arise due to social or environmental causes. Fire, flood, terrorism as well as fear and suffering arising due to ageing decay and death cause mental suffering and conflict in the individual. The *Kalahavivāda-sutta*¹² reveals that conflicts arise due to debate and argument between people.

According to the *Aggañña-sutta*¹³ conflicts arise in the world at the very first beginning of the universe due to the craving (*tanhā*) of man. It is true that even today many conflicts and wars arise because of insatiability. Therefore, Buddhism emphasizes that man as is always lacking, unsatisfied and a slave to craving. The dissatisfaction of the individual gives rise to all conflicts from family level to global war. In the *Rattapāla-sutta*¹⁴ it is mentioned that because of his insatiability, a king who conquered all the land as far as the ocean was still not content. Therefore, he fought to conquer the overseas territories too. Thus, Buddhism recognizes insatiability as the major cause for the arising of conflicts.

Regarding conflict transformation, Buddhism reveals three stages in the unfolding of a conflict. They are: 1) The stage of transgression (*vītikkama*); in this final stage, physically or verbally the individual engages in the action or conflict, therefore, this is the stage of engaging in violence; 2) the stage of manifestation (*pariyutthāna*); this is the preceding stage of the emotional stimulus process in the mind. In this stage, the mental preparation for the violence is started; 3) latent disposition (*anusaya*); in this stage, mental cankers and defilements are submerged as latent dispositions.¹⁵ At the same time, Buddhism explains three corresponding stages of resolving the conflict: 1) temporary solution (*tadaṅgapahāna*) 2) short-term solution (*vikkhambhanapahāna*) 3) stable solution (*samucchedapahāna*).¹⁶ These three stages can be understood through the following example. In a war, a cease-fire is the temporary solution, the holding of peace talks is the short-term solution and complete eradication of war is the stable solution. The stable solution mentioned here is not a solution achieved by only ending hostilities. It is, however, the stable solution achieved after a successful reconciliation process and after healing all the wounds of the parties involved. Therefore, the immediate post-conflict period belongs to the second of the above stages.

¹²Sn. 862-877.

¹³D.3.III.79.

¹⁴M. II.54.

¹⁵D.III.254.

¹⁶Khuddakanikāye Paṭisambhidāmagga-aṭṭhakathā, Chaṭṭha Saṅgāyana Tipiṭaka (1995).

Peace building

Peace is the central theme discussed by many societies as it is essential to human survival on the planet. The peaceful atmosphere of society degenerates due to conflicts that originate through differences in religious, political, cultural, and ethnic and other such backgrounds. As mentioned earlier, conflict is an inevitable fact of human society. Therefore, establishing-peace is also vital to society. In relation to the process of building peace, there are some important Buddhist discourses, which provide a considerable amount of theoretical and practical subject matter. The main admonishment given by the Buddha to his first sixty disciples was “Travel in the tour for the well-being and happiness of mankind as a whole.” Thus, the sole purpose of the Buddha and his disciples was to establish peace and happiness in society. Therefore, the Buddha is said to be born for the goodness and happiness of the human world, “*manussalōka hita sukhatāya jāto*”¹⁷ He is attributed with “Highest Compassion” (*mahā kāruṇika*). At the same time, He was known as the “*santi-rājā*” or the “Prince of Peace.”¹⁸ He attained this stable peaceful position by himself after understanding the reality of the world. He said, “There arose in me vision, knowledge, wisdom, comprehension and light regarding things unheard of before.”¹⁹ He was such a great human being that He never mentally, verbally or physically caused the least harm to Himself or the outer world. Every word expressed by Him was directed toward establishing peace in society.

People in modern society seek peace in the outer world through organizing different types of programs and conferences to discuss the matter of peacebuilding and protecting human rights. However, whatever program is organized on the matter of peace-building; it is ineffective without highlighting the necessity of building inner peace. Before establishing peace in the outer world one should establish inner peace. Once Buddha said “It is not possible, Cunda for him who is stuck in the mud to pull out another who is stuck in the mud. But Cunda, it is possible for one who is himself not stuck in the mud to pull out another who is stuck in the mud. In the same way, the person who did not establish discipline and peace himself cannot bring peace to others but the person who himself established inner peace and can lead others to peace.”²⁰ The Buddha is the greatest example who first of all, developed and cultivated peace himself and leads others to

¹⁷Sn.683.

¹⁸Jayatilake, K.N (2008): 2.

¹⁹ S.V.422.

²⁰ M.I.45.

peace. The person who has developed inner peace should practice effacement as, “Others will be cruel, we shall not be cruel here..., other will kill living beings, and we shall abstain from killing living beings”²¹ Moreover, His mind should be inclined (*cittam uppādetabbam*) thus, “Other will be cruel, we shall not be cruel here, and others will kill living being we shall abstain from killing living beings. Thus, those who mentally practice peace and harmony must have the ability to tolerate any kind of violent situation. For example, the Buddha said to the venerable Phaggunna, “If anyone should give you a blow with his hand, with a clod, with a stick, with a knife, you should abandon any desire and any thought based on the household life. And here in you should train thus, my mind will be unaffected and I shall utter no evil words. I shall abide compassionate for his welfare, with the mind of loving-kindness, (*mettacitto*) without inner hate”²² This is the stable and unswerving inner compassion and loving kindness that should be developed by oneself to keep the peace in the outer world. As is mentioned above, peace-building in society can never be achieved without building peace in the mind. Therefore, Buddhism always emphasizes establishing inner peace rather than peace in society. It can very easily be understood that after establishing stable inner peace man himself, there is no need to try hard to establish peace in society.

The most important doctrine that Buddha has elaborated to create a peaceful atmosphere is the cultivation of *Mettā* or loving-kindness. This single word has a very broad meaning in the context of bringing about peace and harmony, not only in the human world but also in the whole universe including even unseen beings, flora and fauna. The word *mettā* is the abstract noun from the word *mitra*, which means “friend.”²³ The friendliness or loving kindness that Buddhism emphasizes is not just friendliness but that is the friendliness should extend towards all living creatures in the human world. *Metta-sutta* explains the way of cultivating loving kindness toward all creatures as “whatsoever the living creatures there are, moving or still without exception, whatever are long or large, or middle-sized or short, small or great. Whatever is seen or unseen, whoever lives far or near, whether they already exist or are going to be, let all creatures be happy-minded. One should not humiliate another, one should not despise anyone anywhere, and one should not wish anyone misery because of anger or the notion of repugnance. Just as a mother who protects with her life her son, her only son, so one should cultivate unbounded

²¹ M.I.41.

²² M.I.123;

²³ Jayatilake, K.N. (2008): 3.

loving-kindness toward all beings, and loving kindness toward the entire world, one should cultivate unbounded love above and below and cross, without obstruction without enmity, without rivalry”²⁴ If any party involved in a conflict can transform their mental attitudes up to the level of loving-kindness while forgetting all past bad experiences and agitations, then peace is not only a concept that cannot ever be practiced.

The loving-kindness or friendliness (*mettā*) to be spread toward all creatures is also mentioned in the Four Sublime Abodes (*brahmavihāra*)²⁵ *Mettā* here means friendly feelings towards others, *Karuṇā* refers to the compassionate attitudes that arise on the occasions of others’ distress with the purpose of assisting or helping them. *Muditā* is sympathetic joy, which means the ability to rejoice without any jealousy by seeing others’ happiness and successes. *Upekkhā* means the equanimity or the ability to experience any happy or distressful condition without mental agitation.

The opposite of the angry, enmity or ill will is loving-kindness (*mettā*). Therefore, to overcome such bad attitudes the individual, must cultivate compassion or loving-kindness. Buddha said that friendliness should be cultivated to eradicate ill will “*mettā bhāvētabbā byapāda pahānāya.*”²⁶ At the same time, in the *Sallekha-sutta* the Buddha said to Cunda, “a person who practices cruelty must practice non-cruelty to abstain from it, the person who engages in killing must abstain from killing to avoid it”²⁷ According to Buddhism, it is not enough to only refrain from killing living beings, but it is also necessary to cultivate the positive quality of loving-kindness. “One refrains from killing creatures, laying aside the stick and the sword and abides conscientious, full of kindness, love and compassion towards all creatures and beings.”²⁸

To support the building of peace and harmony in society, the Buddha has recommended right livelihood (*sammā-ajīva*) for lay people, prohibiting all types of livelihoods which cause harm and the violation of peace in society. The Buddha prohibited five trades which are harmful to maintaining peace in society. They are: 1) the sale of arms, 2) the sale of human beings or animals, 3) the sale of flesh, 4) the sale of intoxicating drink, and 5) the sale of dangerous and

²⁴ Sn.24.

²⁵ D.III.196.

²⁶ Udānapali.37.

²⁷ M.I.46.

²⁸ D.I.4.

poisonous drugs. Today many human rights violations and crimes happen in the world owing to the dealing in the above trades. There is no single country or region in the world where the above trades are not to be found; each and every country engages in these trades directly or indirectly. In particular, powerful countries in the world, whilst engaging in and organizing peace talks and admonishing confronted parties to build peace, strategically sell their weapon and bullets to foolish combatants of less powerful countries. When the ruler of a country becomes unrighteous, the people of that country follow the same process. Therefore, the ruler must be an ideal to the society. The Buddhist concept of the ideal king depicted in the *Cakkavattisīhanāda-sutta* explains the role of the king in the matter of peacebuilding in a country. He is the Universal Monarch who rules his country and imposes punishments for offences, but without using a stick or sword. He is thus a good ruler who practices moral virtue and righteousness. This ideal king advises his fellow men not to kill, not to steal, not to engage in sexual misconduct, not to tell lies, not to use intoxicants.²⁹ This concept of the ideal king in Buddhism was practically employed by some Buddhist rulers like King *Dharmasōka* for the purpose of establishing peace in the society following a war.

The Buddha was an ideal leader who practically engaged in the spreading of loving-kindness and compassion towards all living beings without any discrimination. In his daily routine, a few hours were spent resting and during all the remaining periods of the day he assisted people who wanted help. A few such people he assisted were *Aṅgulimāla*, *Paṭācārā*, *Kisāgōthamī*, *Sunīta Sōpāka*, *Rādhā*, *Cullapanthaka* as well as animals like snakes and elephants. The Buddhist concept of peace has practical values as Buddhism has not fought with people to spread its doctrine and never did the Buddha recommend any holy war against any religion or any race.

Conclusion

Buddhism acknowledges that conflicts emerge from within humanity, arising from the interaction between internal faculties and external phenomena. The root causes of such conflicts lie in defilements such as craving, hatred, illusion, and ignorance. To foster a peaceful and conflict-free environment, these defilements must be overcome through the cultivation of virtuous thoughts, such as loving-kindness.

²⁹D.III.62.

In conclusion, it must be noted that the Buddha not only taught the principles of conflict resolution but also actively mediated in numerous situations to resolve conflicts without discrimination. He intervened in the disputes of royalty and commoners, guiding kings like *Pasenadi Kosala* in the resolution of their daily challenges and assisting marginalized individuals, such as *Sunīta* and *Sopāka*, in rising above their oppressive social conditions. For example, when a conflict erupted between the *Sākya* and *Kōliya* tribes over the use of the Rohini River's water, the Buddha made repeated efforts to mediate and avert violence. He also intervened in ideological disputes among monks in several times, seeking to guide them toward constructive dialogue. Even when his initial efforts proved unsuccessful, the Buddha's silence and wisdom led the opposing parties to recognize the futility of their conflict.

Thus, Buddhism presents numerous doctrinal teachings on conflict transformation, and peace-building. A central tenet of the Buddha's approach to these issues is encapsulated in the phrase: "Hatred does not cease by hatred, hatred ceases by love; this is an eternal law."³⁰ In accordance with this, Buddhism teaches that, to bring about peace, individuals must first cultivate inner peace by letting go of past grievances and forgiving those who have wronged them. When one attains inner tranquility, peace naturally extends to the surrounding environment and society.

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³⁰ Dhp. chapter 1, verse 5.

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Abbreviation

- A. *Aṅguttaranikāya*
- D. *Dīghanikāya*
- Dhp. *Dhammapada*
- M. *Majjhimanikāya*
- S. *Saṃyuttanikāya*
- Sn. *Suttanipāta*