Buddhist Approach: The Causes of Social Conflict and its Solution

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Introduction

“Happy indeed we live without hate among the hateful.
We live free from hatred amidst hateful men”¹

The present world faces conflicts, catastrophes, worries and anxieties all over the place. The risk of economic, environmental, geopolitical, social and technological problems are high everywhere. In society, different people may have different opinions towards the same problem. Actually, individual problems are gradually becoming a common issue in our community. Naturally, humans are emotional, self-interested and subjective beings; thus, man-made catastrophes ruin our world. Nevertheless, any crisis that humanity encounters originates from our mind. A hateful mind really causes argument and conflict. Everyone wants to live without hatred; everyone desires happiness – but first of all, we must reduce hate from our mind.

Since humanity’s Stone Age, people grouped together according to their similar characteristics; then, together with the development of agriculture: cities and states began to develop - as civilizations arose, the culture and traditions began to take root in each specific region. Later on, the world underwent major social changes: social problems among people would become visible among every race, tribe or country. Even though humanity was capable of creating great empires, such as the Han, Roman or other empires, they eventually collapsed and gradually broke up into many different states. It is an obvious historical event that Roman Empire came to decline by the rising influence of Germanic tribes. After the Emperor Alexander Severus was murdered by his own troops, generals of the Roman army fought each other for control of the Empire. By 258, the Roman Empire broke up into three competing states.² During the period of the Han dynasty’s last Emperor, Xian: the institutions of the Han Empire were destroyed by the warlord Dong Zhuo, and fractured into regional regimes ruled by various warlords.³

Having traced those historical crises, most started from opposing-powers of either political or religious problems. Mostly, whenever there would be a strong bias in a community, one’s behavior would become dishonest and disagreeable to others; thereafter, they made decisions through prejudice. Consequently, biased relations turned toward the social problem. It is noticeable that individual social problem comes up and then that would turn into major conflict to spoil the harmonious community. The civilized world should put up with justice. There might be multitudinous views on social conflict.

The Most Venerable Dr. Nyāṇissara Thera (Sītagū Sayadaw) said that “Poverty is the main cause of conflict”. It is totally true. Government in many countries, including the United Nations, tries to implement poverty-alleviation schemes. Poverty does not mean only the lack of physical needs, but also the lack of education and spiritual strength. Lacking or having insufficient intellectual knowledge, we can’t do anything to solve any current world crisis. However, country and nationality, religion and belief, race and

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¹ Dhp. 197
² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decline_of_the_Roman_Empire
³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_of_the_Han_dynasty
ethnicity, language and colors differ from each other; in this globalization age, people live together in the different regions on the earth. Among the challenges of the world today, social conflicts may be the most possible mainspring of global-crisis. In solving these conflicts, we should have a common platform among different religions and various races; yet, every problem has a final solution: it must be an acceptable answer for all. Understanding the cause of a problem is an applicable way to find out the solution; therefore, a proper response to world crisis is to follow religious teachings.

As Buddhism is designated as a peaceful religion, we, Buddhists, prefer peaceful ways to eliminate social conflict. Some may think Buddhism emphasizes only liberation from the round of rebirth. Indeed, Buddhism explores the nature of the world. The Buddha’s teachings encourage human beings to create a social order conducive to the benefit and welfare of all mankind. It gives truly perfect techniques to get harmonious relationship in a community for the sake of shunting conflict.

**What is Social Conflict?**

According to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, conflict is meant for a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument. Opposing power creates conflict. People who live together in a community are in competition for power, wealth, fame, and so forth. For instance, parents try to dominate their children in a family; alternatively, children want to be free from under the influence of parents. This is the power challenging a family.

“Social conflict is struggling for power in society. Social conflict occurs when two or more actors oppose each other in social interaction, reciprocally exerting social power in an effort to attain scarce or incompatible goals and prevent the opponent from attaining them. It is a social relationship wherein the action is oriented intentionally for carrying out the actor’s own will against the resistance of other party or parties.”

In other words, inequality is one of the origins of social conflict. Any discrimination between race, sex, class, and age is regarded as social inequality. A social conflict usually is a dominant group versus a minority group, having a tense or poor-relationship, escalating into some mental and physical turmoil. Karl Marx (1818-1883), a German philosopher, a father of social conflict theory, offered a theory of capitalism based on social class, created by the tension between the proletariat (workers) and the bourgeoisie (owners). Human beings are basically productive - in order to survive, people have to work. The clash between the owners and workers is at the heart of Marx’s thinking. At the heart of Marx’s thinking is social conflict, which is the struggle between groups in society over scarce resources.

Here, examine a few aspects of social conflict, deeper:

- **By definition, ‘social’, is intentionally taking into account others, power is a capability to produce effects, and social power is an intentionally directed capability to produce effects through another person. Social conflict is then the confrontation of social powers.**

- **Social conflict theory sees social life as a competition, and focuses on the distribution of resources, power, and inequality.**

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4 Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, Pg-319
7 [https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/TCH.CHAP27.HTM](https://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/TCH.CHAP27.HTM)
A personal trouble has been transformed into a public issue. A problem is a social condition that has negative consequences for individuals and then it affects the social-world. Social conflicts vary in accordance with situation; for example, the conflict of aging is often seen as older generations competing with the younger generations for employment.

**Origins of the Conflict**

Having examined the fundamental causes of social conflict, some following key points are noticeable.

- Competition
- Oppression
- Prejudice and Biased Relation

Generally, competition is a common aspect in any society. When we are striving to accomplish our aspirations, we have to compete with others. In such times, we might not be conscious about anything, except our own desire. Communities are constituted by people with different attitudes, pursuing their own benefits for the sake of their goals. In this case, competition could turn towards some pessimistic situation. As an illustration, when two business groups compete for a new market, they fight each other in order to implement their expected achievement. Oppression is a problematic issue of a social-'crime', that results from social, economic and political forces having opposing power of dominance and subordination like parents over children, employers over laborers, government over citizens. Prejudice is pre-judgment, or an unreasonable opinion referred to a preconceived, usually unfavorable judgment toward people or a person because of gender, political opinion, social class, age, disability, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, language, nationality, or other personal characteristics. To be biased is human’s nature. It is normal to be emotional biased. When we are aware of the existence of emotional biases within us, we should try to suppress and synchronize our biases and eliminate social disadvantages; because if one of these causes escalates, then social conflicts turn out in society. In order to harmonize the unbalanced world, people should have self-judgment rather than criticizing others.

**Buddhist Approach to Social Conflict**

For Buddhism, all human conflicts come out from three unwholesome roots: greed, hatred and delusion. Virtually every Buddhist knows that on account of these roots, humans realize that ‘nothing lasts eternally’. A person may think: ‘This is I; these are mine; all my prosperities would be forever with me…’, and so on. To grip prosperity, humans maltreat others. Conflict often arises from attachment to material things: pleasures, property, wealth, beauty and economic or political power. Thus, the Buddha expounded that when attachment to sense pleasure leads to the desire to get more and more, which causes conflict between all kinds of people. If it happens in rulers, it would become quarrelling and war. A Mahāyana poets said: ‘Wherever conflict arises among living creatures, the sense of possession is the cause’. Mostly, in Buddhism, the greedy mind is regarded as the cause of social conflict. Apart from greed, herein, the origins of social conflict are scrutinized by the other approaches.

**Buddhist Explanation of Envy (Issā)**

Envy or jealousy is a state of being envious, of being jealous on seeing others who are endowed with gain, honor, beauty, wealth, education or morality.⁹ In the Abhidhamma

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⁹ Abhi. II, p-372
point of view, it is an unwholesome mental factor (cetasika) which is associated with consciousness rooted in hatred. The eminent commentator, Buddhaghosa, identifies that issā has the characteristic of envying, of not enduring the prosperity of others; it has the function of taking no delight in such prosperity; it has the manifestation of turning one’s face from such prosperity; the proximate cause of jealousy is other’s prosperity; and it should be considered as a fetter. For instance, a jealous person could not be delighted at seeing other’s prosperity and think, “When will he decline from this prosperity and become a pauper?” If the other does decline from that prosperity for a certain reason, he would be satisfied. According to Venerable Janakābhivamsa, jealousy specially arises in persons of the same profession or social status. Some poor are envious of the rich. Ones who do not have high rank are jealous of those who are in high position. People of less power are jealous of those who have great power. There are many reasons of envy in human beings. Envy, certainly, arouses conflicts in a society.

**Buddhist Explanation of Avarice (Macchariya)**

Avarice or meanness or selfishness (macchariya) arises together with consciousness rooted in hatred. Macchariya is interpreted as “meanness, being mean, state of being mean, avarice, ignobleness, stinginess, cramped state of mind”. A mean person does not want to share his own property, wishing thus, “Let the other person think bad things about me only, and not about others.” Meanness that stands for unwillingness to share one’s own property, is subtle; whereas meanness that prevents another from giving to others, is obvious. Moreover, such a person bitterly feels awful on seeing monks. Having a lack of generosity in his mind, he shrinks from making donations, doing service to others, etc.; besides, he wishes not to give to others what belongs to himself, but wishes to take what belongs to others. It has the characteristic of hiding or seizing one’s own property, either attained or about to be attained; it has the function of not enduring the sharing of one’s property in common with others; it is manifested as shrinking from such sharing, as stinginess or as unpleasant feeling; its proximate cause is one’s own property. It should be regarded as mental ugliness.

In fact, the aforementioned causes, competition, oppression and prejudice are mainly rooted in envy (issā) and avarice (macchariya) which arise together with hatred or anger (dosa). Due to envy, someone or a certain group wishes to have the things such as power, wealth, beauty, what one does not possess, and consequently: tries to get what is desired by means of competition, oppression, or prejudice. By this way, competition in a negative sense, brings about conflict. On the other hand, avarice or meanness is also a source of conflict from the Buddhist perspective. Since one does not want to share their prosperity to others, he wants to firmly grasp his possessions; anger appears in his mind and conflict is initiated.

**The Buddhist Way to Social Conflict Solution**

The best way to solve conflict, purposefully, from the Buddhist perspective, is to reduce the unwholesome states of issā and macchariya, and to cultivate tolerance (khantī) and appreciative joy (muditā).

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11 Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw, Sallekha Sutta, p-257  
12 Abhi. II, p-372  
13 Abhi. I. A, p-299: ‘Taṁ laddhānaṁ vā labhitabbānaṁ vā attano sampattīnaṁ nigūhanalakānaṁ, tāsāmyeva parehi sādharānabhāvaakkhamanarasam, saṅkocanapaccupatiṁhānām kāṭukaṅkukatāpaccupatiṁhānām vā, attasampattipadaṭṭhānām.’
Tolerance (*Khantī*)

Tolerance (*khantī*) is a kind of mental quality that is necessary for everyone in daily life; and if people didn’t engage with tolerance or lacked tolerance, then there would be many problems concerning society, politics and religion, etc. Nowadays, people encounter crisis; but, they are not aware of the causes of these conflicts, and do not know how to handle them. The whole world has enough material development; however there is no well-establishing for peace. The respond is lack of contentment and patience. If one has no contentment, he would pursue sensual pleasure more and more. Likewise, if one has no patience, he would argue with others and give rise to so many conflicts in his environment.

There are many kinds of conflict: racial, political, economic, even religious conflicts and almost all of them are due to a lack of patience. Problems probably arise when we respond to events with a negative mind. Everyone may have problems, and they may think that their problems are unsolvable. In fact, nothing is beyond any solution — everything requires some patience. Therefore, if people learn to know how to control their own mind and learn how to be more patient, they can overcome any difficult situation; besides, he could suppress jealousy whenever he faces another’s victory. That is why, I would like to point out the tolerance is a remedy for arising envy. The Buddha encourages his followers to develop mettā (loving kindness) and patience in order to get more peace and happiness.

The best quality of patience is forbearance. When we feel mistreated, we may respond impartially from a place of aversion. Controlling oneself is important before we react. At least, we should pause before responding to any unpleasant circumstance that we may face. Patience is beneficial for oneself as well as for others. Before we speak and act, we should pause and think judiciously. When we come across the origins of conflict, we must be forbearing to avoid the upcoming bad condition. Unless we have patience, we would promptly reply with anger and lean towards conflict. That is why: being patient is the best way to prevent social conflict.

Appreciative Joy (*Muditā*)

In Pāli, muditā, is a variance of: ‘sympathetic joy’, ‘appreciative joy’, or ‘altruistic joy’. The definite interpretation is appreciation of, or congratulation upon or delight in the success of others. Seeing someone well and happy, successful; prosperous - we should have the mental attitude of being ‘happy’, when we see someone in that condition. For instance, as a patient is getting better and better, doctors, nurses, attendants become delighted. This mental state could be said to be muditā. It is a component within the Four Sublime States (*Brahmavihāra*), and muditā is one of the six element making for deliverance (*nissaranīya-dhātu*).

A monk might say: “I have developed the emancipation of the heart through sympathetic joy (muditā) and yet aversion (arati) still grips my heart.”

Developing sympathetic joy is easier said than done. Mostly, we can be compassionate towards others who are inferior or poorer than us. It is difficult to appreciate or congratulate others who are higher. This is because of jealousy (*issā*) and meanness (*macchariyya*). People do not want to share their wealth, fame and victory. This is human’s nature, jealousy comes out upon seeing another’s success, and also stinginess is not to congratulate. Here, stinginess what I mean is not stinginess for material sharing; it is meant

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16 Maurice Walshe, The Long Discourse of the Buddha, p. 249
17 Ibid.
for spiritual encouraging. If one delights in other’s gain, he can lighten issā and macchariya in his mind and then lessen hatred.

When our present condition is not favorable or when we are in competition, we may imagine spoiling another’s prosperous status because of our jealousy. When we are oppressed by superiors, hatred comes out in our mind and we may wish to end their power. That mental situation easily turns into a cause of problems. Thus, we should cultivate to purify our mind through appreciative joy. We can delight thus: ‘according to their past virtue, they possess such a good situation; I’m happy to see the good consequence of kamma. I should do more merit’. Turning towards a good mind, bad conflicts could be avoided.

Conflict in the Buddha’s time

We can borrow an illustration from the Great Chronicle of the Buddha: a social conflict almost turned into a war between the Sākyan and Koliyan countries during the time of the Buddha. A dam was constructed across a small river, Rohinī, which divide those two countries. The people on both sides used the water for agriculture. Once, in drought-season, a fierce quarrel arose between the two peoples for the use of the water. A battle was imminent, and on knowing it, the Buddha appeared in the sky over the opposing forces in the middle of the river and convinced them not to kill each other for the sake of a little water. Lord Buddha delivered a sermon of peace to the warring parties; he brought about a peaceful settlement of dispute between the two kingdoms. After the sermon, two hundred and fifty young men from each tribe of the Sākyans and the Koliyans were ordained under the Buddha. In this story, people on both sides are unwilling to share water because of stinginess as well as not delighting in the others’ using of water from the Rohinī River. This was happening on accounts of envy and meanness. In addition, the fundamental problem of war between the two countries was lack of patience and no development of spiritual powers through sympathetic joy.

Contemporary Conflicts

Most of the urgent problems in today’s world combat the majority of diseases, the need to eliminate hunger and poverty, reduce the amount of industrial waste, and replace destructive fossil fuels by renewable sources or clean energy. These problems might be an economical or technological issue; their deepest sources lie inside human behavior. Apart from these, the problems of terrorism, unemployment, human trafficking and global warming are involved in the present crisis.

We are witness to all of the previously mentioned problems as evil consequences of hatred and lack of patience; hence, untold human miseries and a great number of international conflicts happen every moment in the world. As daily problems, we can see many conflicts between parents and children, teachers and pupils, religious leaders and lay persons, government and citizen, husband and wife, brothers and sisters, and so forth. The practice of patience can bring peace of mind to one at the personal level. It can also resolve problems at the national level and strengthen world peace at the international level.

Practical Approach

If there is a community, there will be a conflict. There might not be a society without problems; but we should find out ways to create a peaceful society among various diversities. In Myanmar, there are many different ethics, beliefs, and tribes – and among them, Buddhism involves most population. Thus, the problem between minority groups and the majority is doubt and fear. These two facts are fundamental points in the case of recent conflicts in Myanmar. In fact, Buddhism and Buddha’s Teaching never lead to problems; but when doubt and fear arise between two different groups, conflict comes out.
Herein, the role of Buddhist leaders becomes crucial in order to make followers practice and obey the Buddha’s Teachings, although the others don’t, and burn with problems. Through each and every event that venerable monks lead, they strive to reconcile opposing groups. Mostly, based on positive attitude and loving-kindness, monks can handle many cases well. There might be a lot of hearsay about conflict, but learned monks can critically think about the cause of the problem; besides, some may think the majority, Buddhists, afflict the minority. In reality, it is not totally true. Most of Buddhists in Myanmar are familiar with the practice of tolerance and obey the admonishments of the monks. Buddhist leaders and other religious leaders always meet and discuss to reconcile post-conflict tensions. From the discussion, both sides realize to construct a common ground for peace. This is to mutually respect each other and demolish the barriers and boundaries in reconciliation – despite the damage and suffering that was already inflicted. This is how conflict seems to not be getting worse because they are actively seeking and building mutual understanding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as humanity is confronting varieties of crisis happening all over the modern world, people are seeking the key to handle problematic issues by different approaches, as confusing as that seems. Therefore, this paper attempted to clarify and present the solution, through the time-tested system of Buddhism. The world crisis, especially social conflict, originates from lack of awareness in spiritual development. From the Buddhist standpoint, everything has cause and effect; there is nothing happening without cause. Though the Buddha expounded that all demeritorious deeds has three root causes (greed, hatred or delusion), this is very subtle to realize deeply. In this paper, two parts are highlighted: envy (issā) and avarice (macchariya) as the causes of conflict, furthermore, tolerance (khantī) and sympathetic joy (muditā) are the keys to work out dilemmas. In addition, some historical and contemporary conflicts are approached by the way of Buddha’s Teaching. Religion plays as a crucial role in a human’s life. Hence, pious people, religious leaders and scholars should all cooperate to terminate conflict in today’s world. Undeniably, Buddhism is naturalistic; it reveals the law of nature; Buddha’s Teaching never discriminates between Buddhists and non-Buddhists – the Dhamma is for all of humanity to eliminate any and all suffering. We mentioned the Buddhist terms: issā, macchariya, khantī, and muditā - these all are mentioned as aspects within the nature of mind. Conventional usages are not vital as the ultimate truth. The most important one is to train our mind to be skillful. Only if people change their bad attitudes to be good, we could build up a harmonious world, without any conflict.
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