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Opening in Awareness: Exploring how Mindfulness and Meditation can Enhance the Mediation Experience

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Abstract

Given the over 2,500 year-long tradition of Buddhism, which is based upon the Buddha's teachings on suffering and its eradication and on an unbroken period of wide-ranging practical applications, the Buddhist framework continues to offer profound insights into the workings of the human mind and heart as it relates to the emergence and transformation of conflict. Embedded in the authors' practical experience and theoretical knowledge as mediators, trainers, and students of meditation, this paper will explore Buddhism's contribution to conflict transformation, particularly in mediation settings, by examining how Buddhist understandings of the human conditioned mind and its capacity for transformation through meditative awareness can complement traditional Western approaches to mediation and conflict. Inherent in this approach is the thesis that conflict transformation need not only center on altering systems and structures, but also on emphasizing and empowering the individual to understand the processes of the human mind that may lead to the construction of divisions leading to destructive conflict, and how these constructions may dissipate, personally and interpersonally, to yield transformative occasions (Spears, 1997). This paper, then, explores the Buddhist linkage between destructive conflicts and the human mind's construction of divisions that create psychological isolation, insecurity, and dissatisfaction, divisions that manifest suffering. It also explores how this suffering may be eased or eliminated through mindfulness and meditation practices that yield awareness of our true nature as fundamentally interconnected and interdependent beings. When the view of the self as standing apart from and against others (as experienced during destructive conflict) loses its hold, conflict is seen from a different angle and real transformation in relationships and in our ways of addressing problems are possible. Based on time-tested Buddhist principles, in this paper we will explore: (1) what Buddhism views as the source of our human experience of personal dissatisfaction and destructive disagreement; (2) what Buddhism suggests in dealing with our tendency to separate ourselves from our own conditions and from others; and (3) how the practice of tapping into and expanding awareness may help us in our interpersonal relations to see disagreement and its source differently.

Keywords: Buddhism, conflict, suffering, conflict transformation, awareness, mediation, meditation, vipassana

Setting the Stage: A Buddhist Perspective of Conflict and Peace

To frame a Buddhist perspective, we may start by defining traditional Western understandings of both conflict and peace. Typically, conflict is understood as a contradiction or set of contradictions between parties. Other authors further emphasize the interpersonal and interconnected nature that underlies conflict, defining it as an "interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organization, etc.)" (Rahim, 2001, p. 25), or as "the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals and interference from each other in achieving those goals" (Folger et al., 1997, p. 5). Peace is defined as "nonviolent and creative conflict transformation" by Johan Galtung (1996, p. 9), one of the leading peace researchers of modern times, whereby conflict transformation is understood to be "the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships" (Lederach, 2003, p. 14).

The Four Noble Truths: Life as "cease-able" suffering

In Buddhism, the quest for the causes of and peaceful solutions to conflict goes deeper than a simple investigation of particular conflicts and their resolutions. In order to contextualize the Buddhist approach to conflict transformation, one must first examine the basic orientation of Buddhism, succinctly set forth in *The Four Noble Truths*: (1) Our human existence is pervaded by suffering (in Pali, *dukkha)*; (2) There is a root cause for our suffering; (3) Suffering can be ended; (4) through a prescribed path. From the Buddhist perspective, the notion of suffering is not understood as conveying an inherently negative worldview. Rather it is intended as a "pragmatic perspective that deals with the world as it is, and attempts to rectify it" ("Basics of Buddhism", 2000). *Dukkha* literally means 'incapable of satisfying'. It signals a fundamental 'dissatisfaction' or 'dis-ease' arising with the impermanence of things, where there essentially is nothing lasting or unchanging to rely on. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000):

> The origin [of *dukkha*] [the Buddha] locates within ourselves, in a fundamental malady that permeates our being, causing disorder in our minds and vitiating our relationships with others and with the world. The sign of this malady can be seen in our proclivity to certain unwholesome mental states […] The most basic defilements are greed, aversion and delusion. Greed is […] self-centered desire: the desire for pleasure and possessions, the drive for survival, the urge to bolster the sense of ego with power, status and prestige. Aversion […] signifies the response of negation, expressed as rejection, irritation, condemnation, hatred, enmity, anger, and violence. Delusion […] means mental darkness: the thick coat of insensitivity which blocks out clear understanding. (pp. 8-9)

At the root of these three defilements is ignorance, which is not merely a lack of knowledge, but an active ignoring of what is actually taking place (2000). Instead of seeing reality as is, we filter out many of its aspects through the overlays of various mental categories, habits and preferences. Later Buddhists would take as central the Buddha's pointing to our problematic psychological formulations of a self that is standing in opposition to others, taking inherently fluid processes and assembling them into a seemingly isolated and unchanging self (centered now on the notions of 'I, me, and mine') that is grasping after or

pushing away objects utterly separate from itself (App, 1994; Izutsu, 1977; Newland, 2008). To eliminate suffering, the Buddha suggests developing 'wisdom' (Pali: *panna*) as it

> Helps to correct the distorting work of ignorance. It enables us to grasp things as they are in actuality, directly and immediately, free from the screen of ideas, views and assumptions our minds ordinarily set up between themselves and the real. Wisdom cannot be gained by mere learning, gathering and accumulating a battery of facts. However, the Buddha says, wisdom can be cultivated. It comes into being through a set of conditions, which we have the power to develop. These conditions are actually mental factors, components of consciousness, fitting together into a systematic structure that can be called a path in the word's essential meaning: a courseway for movement leading to a goal. The goal here is the end of suffering, and the path leading to it is the Noble Eightfold Path with its eight factors: Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right effort, right livelihood, right mindfulness and right concentration. (Bodhi, 2000, pp. 10-11)

It is important to note that by using the term 'right' the Buddha did not intend to convey a moralistic judgment but rather to indicate that a certain way of carrying oneself in life leads to the end of suffering.

In connection with a Buddhist understanding of conflict and peace

The transience of things and of conditions in our lives makes conflict an inherent and unavoidable part of our existence. We have to continually find ways together to skillfully respond to changing circumstances and there invariably are disagreements over how to best proceed. As we have seen, the Buddha saw how suffering is the result of a set of conditions that include the interplay of afflictive mental factors (such as thought, like-and-dislike, and grasping-and-aversion). The absence of such afflictive factors results in the cessation of suffering. Of course, that does not mean that there is no real-world problem to resolve (for example, the distribution of a scarce resource). It means, though, that the instant conflict will not be addressed through the hardened divisions of self-interest (expressed in strongly-held positions) that suffering entails. In this sense, conflict may be either destructive or constructive, depending on conditions and on whether or not there are afflictive mental formations impelling suffering. As Olendzki (2009) puts it: "The bulk of our difficulties, […] come not from the existential challenges themselves but from internally generated maladaptive responses activated by relentless and un-reflected pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain" (p. 40).

Likewise, our deep instincts for personal survival and security may result in greed, hatred, and delusion. Without afflictive mental formations, external events and issues would not carry the significance of narrow self-interest, too often taking others as objects for one's own self-aggrandizement or as threats. In this connection, Arai (2017) points to the unique understanding of Buddhism on conflict and its transformation: every conflict emerges out of an internal stance that eventually manifests externally and within a relationship of two or more people. Therefore, the "ultimate goal of conflict transformation is the liberation of suffering which must take place within the inner realm of people involved so it can affect relationships and society" (Arai, 2017, p. 10). In transforming the relationships amongst parties in conflict, it is essential to build awareness in each individual (and so, eventually, in the collective) in order to acknowledge "a complex web of cause and effect relationships" (Arai, 2017, p. 25). Though

it can be initiated in the individual, the cessation of suffering cannot be accomplished in individual isolation. The internal investigation of one's suffering automatically yields an acknowledgment of the same constitution in others. This interconnectivity is made clear in the Buddha's explication of the *Noble Eightfold Path*, where cultivating moral conduct, wisdom, and insight in thought, word, and deed is accomplished in the midst of relationship, and is exemplified through the virtues of loving kindness and compassion for all beings (Leighton, 2012; Sheng-yen, 2001; Aitken, 1994). For Buddhists, the internal practice of wisdom therefore has far-reaching effects on the local communities, societies, and humanity at large, since it assumes that "social structure is ultimately a mirror image and reflection of how the human mind makes sense of the world […]" (Arai, 2017, p. 21).

A Buddhist framework of conflict transformation seeks to end the closed cycle that constantly reproduces rounds of fearful insecurity and self-aggrandizement. It therefore requires the willingness of individuals to investigate and see through suffering, in the process sincerely engaging with others to build constructive relationships "that can systematically prevent human suffering" (Arai, 2017, p. 26).

Buddhist Remedies to Suffering and Conflict

As Bhikkhu Bodhi (1999) pointed out, since ignorance about what is actually taking place lies at the bottom of suffering, we need to cultivate a systematic path of wisdom, developing beneficial mental factors (essentially entailing the *Noble Eightfold Path*) that see through ignorance. While the individual components of the *Eightfold Path* are seen as "intertwining strands of a single cable that requires the contributions of all the strands for maximum strength" (Bodhi, 1999), the development of such an intertwining awareness usually requires sequential training in the *Noble Eightfold Path* (Kornfield, 2010; Chah, 2002). Given space constraints, however, this paper will briefly discuss only two components of the *Noble Eightfold Path*, namely 'Right View' and 'Right Mindfulness', two components that directly relate to this paper's focus on conflict transformation and the role of awareness in mediation.

Right View: Changing perspective as premise for transforming conflict

Right View sets the groundwork. As we know from our own practical experience in life and mediation, views have a wide-ranging impact, as they govern our attitudes, choices, goals, and actions. Similarly, Buddhism holds that "if we hold a wrong view, […] it will lead us towards courses of action that eventuate in suffering. […] If we adopt a right view, that view will steer us towards right action, and thereby towards freedom from suffering" (Bodhi, 1999). Since the Buddha's teachings are experiential in nature, they continuously need to be applied, tested, and fine-tuned in order to be fully realized in the framework of one's life. What is required, then, is the daily intention to investigate our strongly held opinions and assumptions and to see what is beneath that drives both internal and external frictions and conflict. By becoming aware of the root causes that underlie biases or judgments, by seeing our over-reliance on and over-identification with thoughts and feelings, and by seeing how our reductive and interpretive thought patterns ignore so much of what is taking place, one can become aware not only of the interdependence of all things but as well a larger appreciation of the causes and conditions that give rise to what is taking place.

Right Mindfulness: Opening up the field of awareness

In the contemporary sense, mindfulness is understood as the total presence of mind attending

to objects of current experience (Olendzki, 2009). Mindfulness is typically undertaken by attending to the breath on a moment-to-moment basis. A primary characteristic in mindfulness therefore is "one-pointedness," focusing the mind on a single point by placing it upon an object (such as the breath) and noticing when the mind has wandered off only to return to the object again (Olendzki, 2009). The pitfall of the common Western understanding of mindfulness, however, is that it often has been dissociated from the greater context of Buddhist ethics and its traditional use of mindfulness linked with mindful analysis of human processes as a therapeutic response to suffering (Wright, 2009; Gethin, 2001; Bodhi, 2000; Kornfield, 2010).

Along these lines and in correction Arai (2017) defines *Right Mindfulness* as "self-awareness of both mental and physical dimensions of human experience" (p. 12). In this connection, the *Vipassana, or Insight Meditation,* tradition, which has gained traction in the Western world, emphasizes the meditative practice of mindfulness of breathing. Undertaken in combination with the contemplation of impermanence as observed in continuous bodily and mental changes, one eventually gains insight into the impermanence of self (Bond, 1992). The realization that nothing has self-existence – that nothing statically exists on its own – is at the heart of non-dual awareness and expresses the true nature of reality (Nyanaponika, 1998). Hence, to fully realize the profound insights of the practice of mindfulness and to enact them with others, mindfulness needs to be placed in its traditional context in order to open up to a more holistic understanding (Olendzki, 2009). If mindfulness is purely seen as an isolated instrument to enhance one's focus, to break from mental and habitual patterns for a limited time, or to improve work productivity, it may not lead "people to behave better, [to] improve relationships or [to] make them happier" (Schwartz, 2014).

Easing the Pain: Utilizing Awareness to Address Conflict

Building awareness that is capable of perceiving the complex web of (root) causes and their effects on relationship is crucial in the interplay between self-reflection and active relationship building (Arai, 2017). Further, Arai notes "that this emphasis on simultaneity reflects the essential Buddhist worldview of non-duality, the belief that the 'subjective' experience of self cannot be differentiated from the 'objective' presence of the external environment" (p. 8). As we have seen, *Insight Meditation* offers a very practical way of enacting this understanding, precisely through the alternating interplay of focused immersion in an object of meditation and a larger contemplative awareness and analysis of what immersion bares: non-duality.

Non-dual awareness within and without as a premise to see through conflict

The Buddhist concept of *non-duality* challenges the mind's tendency to consider one's subjective reality as separate from the objective reality 'out there'. This quite common dualistic vision leads us to view ourselves in terms of the "mistaken identity" (Kelly, 2015, p. 16) of a fixed and isolated self that is standing apart from the flow of what takes place, in some basic sense able to control what takes place, and in another sense needing to protect itself from it. This dualistic stance is reinforced by habitual thought patterns tied to pleasures and pains previously experienced, to be repeatedly sought or avoided. Through these thought patterns and feelings, we form our self-images, so that we even turn ourselves into objects, endlessly dividing, comparing and judging not only others but ourselves, comparing 'what I am' to 'what

I should be', the gap between the two being our suffering. In this way, we suffer, incomplete and in dis-ease, failing to wholly and transparently realize what is here and now and our intimate connection with it.

To rectify this flawed standpoint, the many strands of Buddhism offer a number of meditative approaches. Some, like *Insight Meditation*, stress attention and concentration (such as one-pointed focus on an object) set in an encompassing awareness to carefully analyze the processes that make up human experience, baring the fixed and isolated self as a phantom. Others open up meditation from the narrow attention on a particular object to simply resting in an inclusive awareness that is itself both the expression of non-duality and the cessation of clinging to division, comparison, preference and judgment (Seng-T'san, 2001; Leighton, 2000; Norbu & Shane, 1996; Adamek, 2011). In coming to inclusive awareness, for example, one may ask: "What is this 'I' that I attach onto everything I sense?" (Thompson, 2016). As Loch Kelly (2017), himself trained in *Insight Meditation* as well as in many of these other 'inclusive' practices (those not focusing on a specific object), frames this alternate approach: "Effortless mindfulness" empowers us with the natural capability to be with our thoughts and emotions, without obsessive monitoring. "From effortless mindfulness, we have the ability to experience the arising of thoughts, feelings, emotions, and even sub-personalities from within and all around – without needing to identify with them, deny them, or project them onto others."

In the *Mahayana* strand of Buddhism, the metaphoric image of *Indra's Net* is used to express the pervasive Buddhist teaching that no thing has an existence on its own, but always comes into existence in dependence upon other things. All phenomena are empty of 'substance' or 'essence' because they are dependently co-arisen (Kalupahana, 1994). In the words of the late Alan Watts (n.d.): "Imagine a multidimensional spider's web in the early morning covered with dew drops. And every dew drop contains the reflection of all the other dew drops. And, in each reflected dew drop, the reflections of all the other dew drops in that reflection […]." The image of *Indra's Net* also speaks to our involvement in suffering. Because of our deep interdependence our hurt and self-centeredness perpetuate hurt and self-centeredness. While not excusing unskillful behavior, we realize what underlies afflictive emotions and fixed thoughts that build and maintain both personal and inter-personal conflicts: each person's suffering, and each person's sense of hurt, isolation, incompletion and self-contradiction.

By accessing what Kelly frames "spacious awareness" (2015, p. 57), which allows us to be simultaneously aware of our 'inner' aliveness (physical sensations, thoughts and feelings) as well as of the outer environment of stimuli, the fluidity between ourselves and all things is manifested. In fact, the spacious awareness embracing all may itself come to the fore, so that there is a shift of focus from the forms of awareness to awareness itself. Seeing out of awareness itself, no one and nothing is excluded, so that the aware person can act in wisdom in the midst of human relationships (Mumon, 2004).

Enacting awareness in everyday life: Mediating (with) awareness – an experiential exploration

Spacious awareness can enlighten conflict in a number of distinct ways. It: (1) sets the conflict within the widened context of the inextricable intimacy of those in conflict here and now; (2) sees each person from multiple perspectives, as more than a two-dimensional position; (3) dissolves the psychological gap between self and other, which involves recognizing one another's humanity, dignity, and values; and (4) stays with 'what is' (i.e., open to all the aspects of the conflict, its causes and setting) as the ground for exploring 'what could be' (i.e., a co-creative resolution).

In the authors' experience as conflict mediators who practice open awareness in conflict settings,

the very acknowledgment and presence of that awareness in a room changes the way conflict is approached and understood. A calm, open, and non-reactive space can be initially accessed by introducing a brief meditation on the breath at the beginning of the conversation. In this way, the parties involved might gain a first insight into their current mental and emotional processes - by simply having a person attend to an easily accessible 'spacious' object like the breath, thereby opening up a calm, inclusive awareness, where a person is not caught by the force of sensations, thoughts and emotions, but can instead in that spaciousness note and reflect upon the internal and external workings of the moment just as they occur. Calm and insight may also be introduced in the mediator's willingness and capacity to approach the conflict from the standpoint of awareness of 'what is'; an inclusive space that allows the mediator's own inner processes and those of the parties at the table to appear without habitual reaction to them.

In fact, the very essence and structure of mediation holds a lot of practical 'hooks' for open awareness, and for a Buddhist approach to conflict transformation:

1) *Engaging in open listening* means putting the focus on empathy and non-judgment rather than on turning the mind to positions and immediately seeking solutions based on them. Awareness, since it excludes nothing, opens onto empathy, changing the quality of listening. One now comes from an inclusive, yet intimately interpersonal, sphere;
2) *Restating what is spoken and reframing it* in terms of the underlying values validates the speaker and conveys that (s)he is being heard, also helping to check the accuracy of the mediator's perceptions;
3) *In asking gentle probing questions*, the mediator can help conflict constituents to bring habitual positions and reactions to light;
4) *Listening for what is not stated* (through cues taken from body language and facial expressions, as well as from silent 'gaps' on certain topics, hinting to what may be avoided or left unsaid), the mediator can create a space for what remains unacknowledged to emerge;
5) *Through enhanced awareness*, going from 'what I want v. what you want' to 'what we together need and can do'.

In this way, the mediator may facilitate a deeply empathic, non-judgmental conversation enabling all at the table to see through the self-identity-based suffering that underlies our destructive conflicts - doing so in the context of simultaneous self-reflection and dialogue, as envisaged by Arai (2017).

Conclusion

In a world in which conflict and peace are often seen as rooted in social and cultural structures and systems, it is important to shed light on the power and responsibility of the individual to create destructive conflict, and to transform it constructively in order to generate peace. After all, no one other than each one of us together envision and establish whatever structures and systems are in place. These can be as flawed as the people who created them, as structures and systems are often made in the image of ignorance and division, of narrow self-interest and self-protection. Yet even within these hardened systems and structures, there is room for revolution: individuals can in awareness come together to see relations and problems more inclusively, perhaps calling rigid, position-based systems and structures into question.

Certainly, even conflict transformation as understood in the West allows for seeing the "ebb and flow" of life "as [a series of] life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes"

(Lederach, 2003, p. 14). And yet Buddhist understandings of suffering as a common feature of life, and of one's power to alleviate it, offer significant, though relatively little known, additions to the discourse on the influence of the human mind and its conditioning on how we see and respond to conflict. While the Western, large scale approach to conflict transformation aims at liberating people, communities, societies and humanity-at-large from violence, injustice, discrimination, and other forms of suffering, there is another dimension to how this may be accomplished. As Arai (2017) skillfully puts it, this liberation needs to happen in the "inner realm of people" so that it affects their interactions and relationships, scaling up to communities, societies, and humanity-at-large. Naturally, the work of inner reflection and the acknowledgement of its role in relationships take time and attention and so is not currently a readily available quick fix for our human conflicts and division. It is an approach that asks society at the level of its individuals to take up the long-term commitment and effort of getting to the source of alienating views, thoughts, and actions, understanding that lasting change needs to come 'from the inside out' and from the 'bottom-up'. For this understanding to widely develop, we again start with each individual, taking each one at a time, developing awareness in conflict by practicing it with those around us, sharing its efficacy in the trenches of actual conflict.

Raising awareness of the non-duality, inclusiveness, and spaciousness of our lives must indeed be an everyday and deliberate choice to meet the authentic workings of our mind and heart, to realize "the complex web of cause and effect relationships" (Arai, 2017, p. 25). Based on the authors' own experiences in breath meditation and other techniques, a consistent investigation and practice of awareness have a 'therapeutic effect' (Olendzki, 2009) on life's daily and more global sufferings. Bringing this wisdom into mediation and conflict settings, we believe that it will find various expressions, some of which include already widely-applied mediation practices that dismantle afflictive constructs and reframe how we see and relate to one another.

Here are a few concrete suggestions for how Buddhist 'psychology', meditation, and awareness practices can facilitate conflict transformation (in the interaction between self-reflection and relationship building), both on individual and communal scales:

1) *Provide meditation training to mediators*, set in the framework of the Buddhist understanding of conflict and peace, to facilitate both reflective mindfulness practices and an inclusive, non-dual awareness in the mediator, who will then be able to bring this meditative stance into conflict settings;
2) *Introduce meditation and awareness practices into mediations*, both directly and indirectly, through breath meditations (especially when there are a lot of heated emotions), active and empathic listening, attentive restating and reframing, and gentle probing questions;
3) *Train communities served in meditation* to facilitate self-reflection and relationship building skills in community members, by investigating the workings of the human mind and how we view our selves;
4) *Continuously emphasize both self-reflection and sincere, trusting and truthful dialogue* as empowering, creative, sustainable, mutually reinforcing approaches to resolving conflicts, using both meditation as well as nonviolent communication as effective tools.

While we acknowledge the long-range orientation of a Buddhist approach to conflict transformation, we are convinced that the world, our communities, and each of us, need a more sustainably humane, consistent, and flexible approach to resolving conflicts: one enacted through each individual's sustained peace, and commitment to peace – within and without.

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