

Buddhist Ways of Thai Political Conflict Resolution

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Since the revolution of the Council of National Security (CNS) took place in Thailand on 19 September 2006, the national conflict has spread all over the country. Though one of the aims of the revolution was to solve the conflict of the people of the country, later on the revolution became contradictory to its aims. Yet the underlying tensions that led to the coup remain, as a traditional establishment resting on the nonelected “holy trinity” of monarchy, military, and bureaucracy confronts powerful populist currents that Thaksin and his associates more than once rode to elected office in a still-modernizing country deeply riven by an urban-versus-rural divide.¹ Although there are many groups involved in the conflict at the present time, the main groups are the yellow shirt group, including the middle class, civil society groups, the business community and the urban elites, who want to eliminate the influence of the former Prime Minister, Mr. Taksin Shinawatra, accusing him of corruption and alleged abuses of power while he was the Prime Minister. Meanwhile, the red shirt group, comprised mostly of the rural majority who support Mr. Taksin, relying on him and his policy to help the poor to have a better life. The conflict between these two main groups of the people has continued to become more and more deeply rooted. It seems that the detention of the red shirt hard core members, recently released by the court (or the government) has temporarily halted a political movement. But no one knows when a time bomb of the next conflict will be triggered.

It is said that the monks, considered as the representatives of one of the main national institutions, should not get involved in politics, but at the same time, they also should not keep silent when the nation is in crisis. Looking back on our history, we can see clearly the close relationship between Buddhism and the Thai Nation. The history of the Thai nation is also the history of Buddhism. The Thai nation originated over 2,000 year ago. Also in that same period Buddhism came

¹ Thitinan Pongsudhirak, **Journal of Democracy Volume 19**, Number 4 October 2008.

and has played important part in Thai history ever since.² The monks, in stead of supporting either group, should behave impartially and enlighten the people through the Buddha's Teaching in order to avoid conflict and violence and bring back peace to the charming nation. The charm that has earned Thailand the reputations as the "Land of Smiles" undoubtedly comes from the influence of Buddhism over her people.³

Many scholars and theorists have been trying to look for a resolution conflict in the same or different ways. It is believed that there is no any one absolute way to resolve a particular problem. As Furlong (cited in Ray Parchelo) points out in The Conflict Resolution Toolbook: "There is no magic formula that resolves all disputes. ...We are not looking for a single model that will make sense in every conflict in the world."⁴

To find the resolution of a conflict in Buddhist ways according to The Four Noble Truths, we have to know what the conflict (suffering) is. Conflict is defined as an incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other.⁵ Daniel Katz (1965), created a typology that distinguishes three main sources of conflict: economic, value, and power. Economic conflict involves competing motives to attain scarce resources. Value conflict involves incompatibility in ways of life, ideologies – the preferences, principles and practices that people believe in. Power conflict occurs when each party wishes to maintain or maximize the amount of influence that it exerts in the relationship and the social setting.

Conflict theory begins with the assumption that there are unique and discreet parties or sides to a conflict... Conflict is the parts of two or more individuals that

² Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A.Payutto), Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist world. Buddhadhamma Foundatin, Bangkok, 2001, p.14.

³ Ibid, p.14.

⁴ Ray, Parchelo, **A Mind to Fight: Conflict Resolution and Buddhist Practices**, Article presented at the Third North American Conference on Spirituality and Social Work June, 2008, p.3.

⁵ Fisher, R.J. **The Social Psychology of Intergroup and International Conflict Resolution**, New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990.

don't coincide.⁶ The current conflict in Thailand started from the individual level and extended to groups and a large number of the people in the country. Individuals or groups may have differences of opinion, but if either of the parties is unaware of these differences, conflict will not arise.

There are not only individual or group causes of the present conflict. The symbols used by one party have also become irritating to the other party, for example, red and yellow shirts. Previously, yellow shirts were worn by the people as the most popular colour showing their loyalty and devotion to the king. After this colour was used as a symbol for one party, it caused difficulty for those who did not want to take part in the conflict; they now have to beware of their shirt colour before leaving their homes.

Conflict may be considered in positive and negative ways. We can say that conflict is natural, inevitable, necessary, and normal, and that the problem is not the existence of conflict but how we handle it. If the conflict brings about some advantage to the individual, organization and society, through creative development and a compromising solution, this is positive conflict. This is in accordance with PhraDhammapitaka's view that conflict is part of human nature; but the problem is how to get the most advantage from conflict.⁷ Meanwhile, conflict is viewed in a negative way if it causes individual, organizational and social destruction, bringing about the violence.

The Second Noble Truth, knowing the causes of the problem, is also important. Buddhism holds the view that nothing can originate abstractly, or without a cause. The causes would be varied i.e., natural, psychological, social, economic, political and even environmental. No permanent or proper solution will be achieved unless we identify properly the exact cause of the conflict (Nayimbala Dhammadassi, 2003).⁸

⁶ Ray, Parchelo, **A Mind to Fight: Conflict Resolution and Buddhist Practices**, Article presented at the Third North American Conference on Spirituality and Social Work June, 2008, p.4.

⁷ PhraDhammapitaka, **Conflict resolution**, Bangkok : Sahadhammika, 2003, pp. 3-4.

⁸ Nayimbala Dhammadassi, **The Buddhist attitude on conflict resolution**, University of Sri Jayawardenapura, 2003.

Whenever the conflict involves with a large group of people, the causes of the conflict are also complicated. Conflict has many roots, and there are many theories that try to explain these origins. Conflict is seen as arising from basic human instincts, from the competition for resources and power, and from the structure of societies and institutions people create, that is, from the inevitable struggle between classes.

Most Buddhist scholars believe that the main cause of conflict arises from an internal factor, the mind. Nayimbala Dhammadassi says “The root of social, national, and even international conflicts inceptionally lie buried in the minds of each and every individual concerned”.⁹ Similarly, PhraDhammapitaka points out that craving is the cause of conflict.¹⁰ However, Phramaha Prayoon Dhammacitto points out that its main cause is from Lobha (greed), Dosa (hatred) and Moha (delusion).¹¹ Phramaha Hansa Dhamahaso concludes in his thesis that both internal and external factors are the main causes of conflict: “According to Buddhism, the factors leading to the conflict are originated from the interaction of internal and external ones. The internal factors are the unwholesome roots of action the wholesome ones, including craving, dogma and conceit. The external factors are: facts conflict, relationship conflict, interests conflict, values conflict and structures conflict”.¹²

John McConnell notes that the Buddha used two kinds of concepts in identifying causal processes, and mentions conflict and violence as a result of each. They are the akusala-mula and the paticcasamuppada. The akusalamula are Lobha (greed), Dosa(hatred), and Moha (delusion). Using the akusala-mula, we can note the broad psychological dynamics of a conflict.¹³

⁹ Ibid, p.3.

¹⁰ PhraDhammapitaka, **The words “craving, desiring for power and being narrow mind” are created word from “craving, conceit and dogma”, the way to peacefulness**, Bangkok Sahadhammik, 2003.,p.12.

¹¹ Phramaha Prayoon Dhammacitto, **Buddhist Ways for Peacefulness**, Bangkok: Amarin Printing Group Press, 2532, p.17.

¹² Pramaha Hansa Dhammahaso, **A Pattern of Conflict Management by Buddhist Peaceful Means: A Critical Study of Mae Ta Chang Watershed Chiang Mai**, Mahachulalongkornrajvidyalaya University, Bangkok, 2004, p.III.

¹³ John McConnell. **Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium Essay in Honor of The Ven. PhraDhammapitaka on His 60th Birthday Anniversary**, Bangkok: 1999, p.317.

Concerning the current conflict in Thailand, many people who are involved in the conflict believe that any method used to attain a worthy end is justified by the worthiness of that end. Their ideas are summed up in the expression, “the end justifies the means.” The end (to eliminate the influence of Mr. Taksin and his associates, or to demolish bureaucratic polity and help Mr. Taksin) justifies the means (trespassing and seizing the Parliament and the airport, or destroying people’s lives, or private or public properties). However, Phra Dhammapitaka (P.A. Payutto) says “The idea that “the end justifies the means” is a good example of a human belief which simply does not accord with natural truth.”¹⁴

Changing the way of thinking in order to avoid an extreme manner is necessary. Maw Prawet Wasi (cited in John McConnell) puts it this way: “The manner of thinking leads to unsolvable conflicts which escalate to violence... We tend to think in a static, extreme manner..... a dualistic manner. We will divide things into plus and minus, black or white, they or we. Always in this way, then that leads to confrontation. But Buddha said don’t approach the static extreme: always think in terms of dynamic relationship. Apply to everything— mind, society, everything.”¹⁵

The preference or disagreement of the leader of each party makes the number of supporters increase. In Buddhist history, there was a minor conflict between two masters of the monks called the “Suttantika group” and the “Vinayatara group”. The conflict then extended, from the individual to the group and from a small group to a large group, including the people who respected those monks. As the result, the conflict was difficult to stop; though the Buddha had warned them several times to live harmoniously, his admonition was ignored.

Many people are concerned about the unpredictability of conflict at the present. Conflict can be either hot, as in the case of outright warfare, or cold, when the

¹⁴ PhraDhammapitaka (P.A.Payutto), **Buddhist Economics**, Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1992, p.21.

¹⁵ John McConnell. **Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millennium**. Essay in Honor of The Ven. Phra Dhammapitaka on His 60th Birthday Anniversary, Bangkok : 1999, p.317.

antagonism is repressed or ignored.¹⁶ “Conflicts have a definite tendency to escalate, i.e., to become more intense and hostile, and to develop more issues, i.e., what the parties say the conflict is about. Therefore, escalating conflicts become more difficult to manage. The process of escalation feeds on fear and defensiveness”.¹⁷ The current conflict in Thailand has changed to violence many times. And it may change to violence and give valuable lessons for the people in order to develop the country in the future. Robert J. Brym holds the view that political interests and conflicts shape the growth pattern of cities.¹⁸ This point of view is similar to John J. Macionis “Tension and conflict within a society also produce change”.¹⁹

There are many Buddha teachings which help the people in the community to live happily and harmoniously, for example, Virtues for Fraternal Living;

1. To be amiable in deed (Metta-kayakamma), showing friendliness and goodwill to their colleagues, associates, and fellow community members by willingly helping them in their duties, and bearing a courteous and respectful manner, both in their presence and in their absence;

2. To be amiable in word (Metta-vacikamma), teaching or advising the others with a heart of goodwill, using polite and respectful words to each other, both in their presence and in their absence;

3. To be amiable in thought (Matta-manokamma), establishing one’s mind in a goodwill, looking at each other in a good light;

4. To share any lawful gains with virtuous fellows (Sadharana-bhogi), sharing with each other whatever gains have been rightfully acquired;

5. To keep moral harmony (Sila-samanyata), maintaining virtuous conduct, abiding by community rules and regulations;

¹⁶ Brian Muldoon, **The Bodhisattva Warrior: The Way of Compassionate confrontation**, Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New Millenium, Bangkok, 1999, p. 281

¹⁷ Fisher, Ron, **Sources of Conflict and Methods of Conflict Resolution**, The American University, 2000. p.2.

¹⁸ Robert J. Brym & John Lie, **Sociology**. Thomson Wadsworth, 2006, p.439.

¹⁹ John J. Macionis, **Society the basics**, Person Education Limited, 2004, p.439.

6. To be endowed with right views along with one's fellows (Ditthisamanyata), respecting and honoring each other's view, reaching consensus or a greed upon the main principles. Principles number one to three help us to be beware of ourselves in deed, word and thought, to think and act toward others with kindness; according to Dhamma (natural law), good action gives rise to good results. Principle number four helps us to learn to give, not only to get; accordingly, the giver will become attached to the mind of the receiver. Principle number five helps us to respect and follow the rules and regulations which are accepted by the people in a community. The last one reminds us that we can think differently in diversity, but we are not divided.

By contrast, in the current conflict, the ways that many people on each side have acted and reacted to each other are totally opposite to the above Buddha teaching. For example, the late Prime Minister, Mr. Samak Sundaravej, once went to the US in order to be treated because of his serious illness. There was a group of Thai people waiting to embarrass him by shouting and using rude words. At the same time, it is commonly seen on the news that there are some groups of people who act in similar ways, sometimes using violence, toward the opposite party, including the present prime minister who can not proudly visit the people in the north of Thailand. This event has never happened in Thailand before.

These are some of the Buddha's words: "Nahi verena verani – sammanti' dha kudacancam averenacasammanti -esa dhammo sanantano" Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased only by non-hatred. This is an eternal law. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (cited in Brian Muldoon) says: "During any conflict, we need people who can understand the suffering of all sides... When you see that your enemy is suffering, that is the beginning of insight. When you see in yourself the wish that the other person stop suffering, that is a sign of real love. But be careful. Sometimes you may think you are stronger than you really are."²⁰

According to Buddhism, knowing the main cause of conflict that arises from people's minds brings about the way to the solution, but not being able to change

²⁰ Brian Muldoon, **The Bodhisattva Warrior: The Way of Compassionate confrontation), Socially Engaged Buddhism for the New MillenNium**, Bangkok, 1999, p. 281.

the people's minds doesn't mean that the current conflict in Thailand is a dead end since the minds of the people cannot be changed immediately. Of course, in the long run, it is necessary to educate the people to beware of their own minds or the way of their thinking, and to understand the truth of natural law.

What can be done now? Though we can not change all the minds or the thoughts of the people who are getting involved with the conflict, we know the people who originated the conflict, and who can, in turn, lead the others to stop or ease the tensions. Of course, Mr. Taksin Shinnawatra, the former Prime Minister, is one of the party leaders who must be involved in negotiation. The other parties should be the people who have authority in decision-making.

The most common way to reach a mutually acceptable agreement is through negotiation.²¹ The commentaries of the Anguttara Nikaya and the Samyutta Nikaya recount an example in which The Lord Buddha transcended to an imminent battle field in order to settle a bitter dispute between people of the Sakya clan, who were his paternal relatives, and of the Koliya clan, who were his maternal relatives. As a result, the Buddha brought about peace through his intervention and the resolution of the dispute. The Buddha also proposed to the Sanghasabha the strategy to settle a conflict called Adhikaranasamatha (the rules for setting cases), the process of which is silence, majority, persuasion, compromise and so on, as the peaceful means of negotiation, mediation, inquiry and judgment.²² Wanchai Wattanasap proposes the process and result of a decision-making in conflict resolution seen below in table 1²³

²¹ Fisher, Roger; and Bill Ury, **Getting To Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In**, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981.

²² Phramaha Hansa Dhammahaso, **A Pattern of Conflict Management by Buddhist Peaceful Means: A Critical Study of Mae Ta Chang Watershed Chiang Mai**, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Bangkok, 2004, p.3.

²³ Wanchai Wattanasap, "**Conflict: principle and resolution tool**", King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2004, p.150.

Table 1: The process and result of a decision- making in conflict resolution

Process	Decision-Making	Result
Violence/Fight	The Winner	Win-Loose
Non-Violence Direct Action or Civil Disobedience	The Winner	Win-Loose
Legislation	The Legislature	Win-Loose
Litigation	The Court	Win-Loose
Arbitration	Arbitrator	Win-Loose
Mediation	The Parties	Win-Win
Negotiation	The Parties	Win-Win
Avoidance/Fight	-	Status quo

Source: "Conflict: principle and resolution tool". Wanchai Wattanasap. King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2004, p. 150.

The above table shows that mediation and negotiation are the best ways for both parties (Result-win-win).

Without the intention of resolving the conflict or of not giving a way out for the other party, negotiation is impossible. Gulliver notes that a disagreement becomes a dispute "only when the two parties are unable and/or unwilling to resolve their disagreement; that is, when one or both are not prepared to accept the status quo (should that any longer be a possibility) or to accede to the demand or denial of demand by the other. A dispute is precipitated by a crisis in the relationship".²⁴ In Buddhist history, the Buddha tried to mediate between the monks' masters in each group who were in conflict in order to stop it. However, both parties ignored his admonition. Then the Buddha went away in solitude, to live in Rakkhitavana forest. Having heard that the Buddha went to the forest to live in solitude because of these two groups of monks' conflict, the people who used to support these monks were unhappy, since they were missing the Buddha. Then they refused to support them anymore by stopping offering alms food, etc. After

²⁴ Gulliver, P.H. **Disputes and Negotiations: A Cross Cultural Perspective**, New York : London, etc.: Academic Press, 1979, p. 35.

these two groups of monks had learnt a big lesson, they realized their fault and went to apologize the Buddha. We may say that the Buddha's way was indirect form of conflict resolution.

The current political conflict in Thailand can be resolved by the politics through the negotiation of the politicians, especially the leaders of each party. Of course, they have to think about the nation's benefit instead of considering their own advantage, bringing about the harmony to their mother's land again. They also have to be amiable in deed (Metta-Kayakamma), in word (Metta-vacikamma) and in thought (Matta-manokamma), viewing the other people as their Dhamma relatives.

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