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## Toward a Buddhist Theory of Conflict Transformation: From Simple Actor-Oriented Conflict to Complex Structural Conflict

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## Toward a Buddhist Theory of Conflict Transformation: From Simple Actor-Oriented Conflict to Complex Structural Conflict

### Abstract

This paper presents a working theory of conflict transformation informed by Buddhist teachings. It argues that a Buddhist approach to conflict transformation consists of an integrated process of self-reflection on the roots and transformation of suffering (dukkha), on the one hand, and active relationship-building between parties, on the other. To overcome a deeply structural conflict in which parties are unaware of the very existence of the conflict-generating system in which they are embedded, however, Buddhist-inspired practice of conflict transformation requires building structural awareness, which is defined as educated consciousness capable of perceiving a complex web of cause and effect relationships in which one's well-intended action can inadvertently generate the suffering of others. A Buddhist approach to the transformation of structural conflict builds on such awareness. This approach advocates for constructing social systems and practices that actively and continuously promote compassion (karuna), nonviolence (ahimsa), and creative problem-solving. These insights presented in this paper build on thirty-seven interviews with experienced Asian Buddhist practitioners, mostly Burmese, as well as four Buddhist workshops that examined the author's main argument. Given its unique focus, this paper contributes to diversifying and globalizing the discourses of peace and conflict studies outside the prevailing mode of western thinking.

**Keywords:** *Buddhism, Myanmar, peace, conflict, structure, reflective practice*

### Author Bio(s)

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**Toward a Buddhist Theory of Conflict Transformation:  
From Simple Actor-Oriented Conflict to Complex Structural Conflict**

**Tatsushi Arai**

This paper presents a practitioner-oriented framework of conflict analysis and transformation designed to identify and integrate complementary aspects of contemporary peace research and Buddhism. It explores how Buddhist teachings can contribute to building practical theories and methods of conflict transformation. Of particular interest is how Buddhist social action can contribute to transforming the structural roots of social conflict that make human sufferings look inevitable and feel normal. To overcome these structural challenges, the paper suggests expanding the scope of Buddhist mindfulness to include a shared commitment to transforming complex causal chains of human interactions in which well-intended Buddhist actions can lead to unforeseen consequences of human suffering. To develop these concepts, this paper builds on an ongoing multi-year research project that seeks to develop a broader scope of peace theories capable of addressing not only conflict transformation, but also development, human rights, and good governance.

For the purpose of this inquiry, we define conflict as a contradiction, or a set of contradictions, between two or more parties, each pursuing their own goals. While conflict parties may be individuals or groups, this paper, which attempts to build conceptual foundations, focuses primarily on individuals and goes on to make inferences on the proposed concepts' applicability to groups.

Another key concept to be explored in this paper is conflict analysis. It refers to an in-depth, systematic, and multi-angled analysis of the root causes and dynamics of conflict. Based on conflict analysis, conflict transformation endeavors to proactively re-channel "conflict energy," or the evolving dynamics of potentially destructive contradictions in human relationships, in such a way as to develop a mutually acceptable and sustainable process of relationship building. Reconciliation is an essential element and a subset of interconnected social processes necessary for conflict transformation. Reconciliation consists of a sustained, integrated process whereby people affected by destructive conflict seek healing from trauma and guilt while striving to overcome the desire for revenge. Reconciliation focuses primarily on cognitive and emotive elements of conflict transformation practiced in the aftermath of violence.

Another important concept explored throughout this paper is violence, which is defined as a form of social influence that harms the human body, mind, and/or spirit, as well as the natural environment. Following Galtung (1996), three interrelated types of violence are identified. These are: direct violence (physical attack), cultural violence (cultural influence that justifies violence), and structural violence (systematic denial of access to opportunities and resources). In many conflict-affected societies, cultural and structural violence such as racism and gender-based violence is so deep-rooted that conflict parties remain unaware of it.

There is both an enduring need for improved understanding, and a serious deficit of adequate understanding, of these basic concepts regarding peace and conflict. This is especially true in South Asia, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, which are home to the great majority of some five hundred million Buddhists living across the globe (an estimate based on CIA Factbook 2016). In conflict-affected Buddhist-majority countries and regions such as Myanmar, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Tibet, there is an inherent and enduring need for and utility in building conflict transformation skills and concepts based on their familiar Buddhist teachings. In East Asian countries and regions that have attained some level of economic development, political stability, and security, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and China, Buddhism can still play a significant role as a respected religious and cultural tradition in overcoming various forms of structural violence characteristic of contemporary societies. The socioeconomic inequities between the “haves” and “have-nots,” the predatory nature of the relationships between human and drug traffickers and their victims, and the deepening tensions between energy companies and environmentalists are a few of the examples of complex social conflicts in which structural violence plays a powerful role.

Contemporary social movements and literature on engaged Buddhism tackle these structural violence challenges in East Asia, as well as in other parts of the world. Simply put, engaged Buddhism refers to an organized form of contemporary Buddhist practices that proactively and nonviolently tackle political, economic, security, environmental, and other challenges in society (Chappell, 1999; King, 2009; Sivaraksa, 2005; Queen, 2000; Queen & King, 1996). Engaged Buddhist practices are distinct from the kind of solitary Buddhist practices that concentrate primarily on individual spiritual salvation. Many engaged Buddhist movements apply such ethical and spiritual principles as compassion, loving-kindness, and the interdependence of all beings to public actions that seek to alleviate socio-economic exploitation,

political repression, racial discrimination, environmental degradation, and various other forms of structural violence. However, as Arai (2015) points out, engaged Buddhist literature and actions on the whole still have a long way to go in terms of establishing Buddhist-inspired theories of structural violence and structural peace that systematically incorporate, yet transcend, the familiar Buddhist emphasis on individual ethics and spirituality. The absence of well-developed Buddhist social theories of structural transformation not only makes it difficult for Buddhist societies and movements to systematically understand the structural roots of human suffering, it also sustains these Buddhist societies' reliance on unfamiliar western concepts of social change and peace research that may not necessarily correspond to their familiar Buddhist worldviews.

To address this gap between Buddhist-inspired theory and practice, Arai's (2015) study on Myanmar's engaged Buddhist communities postulates a working theory of structural awareness. Arai (2015) defines structural awareness as educated, enlightened consciousness of a complex web of cause and effect relationships in which well-intended actions can inadvertently inflict suffering on others. Structural awareness, by implication, also suggests that self-conscious efforts to transform the causes and conditions of collective suffering can develop a virtuous cycle of mutual care and spiritual wellness in society. Drawing on Arai (2015), this paper expands the Buddhist theory of structural awareness. It explores concrete ways in which Buddhist practitioners of conflict transformation can overcome structural violence in today's increasingly globalized, interconnected world. While the depth and clarity of Buddhist structural thinking this paper presents makes it a unique contribution to the existing literature in both engaged Buddhism and conflict studies, the paper also demonstrates a cumulative understanding of Buddhist structural peace and conflict theory that its intellectual precursors have developed. They include Galtung (1988), King (2009), Loy (2003), Macy (1991), McConnell (1995), and Sivaraksa (2005).

To achieve this goal of theory development, this paper starts by presenting a bird's-eye view of selected concepts on peace and conflict from a Buddhist perspective. It then proceeds to conceptualize a Buddhist-inspired approach to the analysis and transformation of simple interpersonal conflict, which will then become the basis of more complex structural transformation. (These concepts will be explained later.) The paper concludes by presenting a Buddhist-inspired approach to structural conflict transformation, which builds on the aforementioned perspective on structural awareness.

The working theories of peace and conflict presented in this paper build on thirty-seven in-depth interviews with prominent Buddhist leaders conducted between 2012 and 2017. Thirty of these interviews took place in Myanmar, one each in Thailand and Sri Lanka, and five in Japan. (Some of the findings from these interviews, with emphasis on Burmese Buddhist perspectives studied in 2013 and 2014, are analyzed in Arai (2015), on which this exercise of theory development will build.) In addition, the author's practical experience in facilitating eighteen conflict transformation workshops in Myanmar, in which Burmese Buddhist leaders and lay practitioners, both men and women, offered constructive criticisms on the author's thesis, contributed greatly to this paper. Three Buddhist peacebuilding workshops designed specifically for monks and nuns that the author conducted in Myanmar between 2015 and 2017, as well as one additional Buddhist workshop carried out in Sri Lanka in 2016, were especially significant for theory development. Because of the highly integrated, iterative process of empirical research and field-based experimentation that produced this paper, it represents a living document striving to capture the Buddhist worldviews and practices as lived and experienced by those grappling with real-world social conflicts and democratic transitions on the ground. The paper also endeavors to present a working framework of reflective practice and inquiry ready to be adapted and improved continuously to meet the real-world challenges in Asia and beyond.

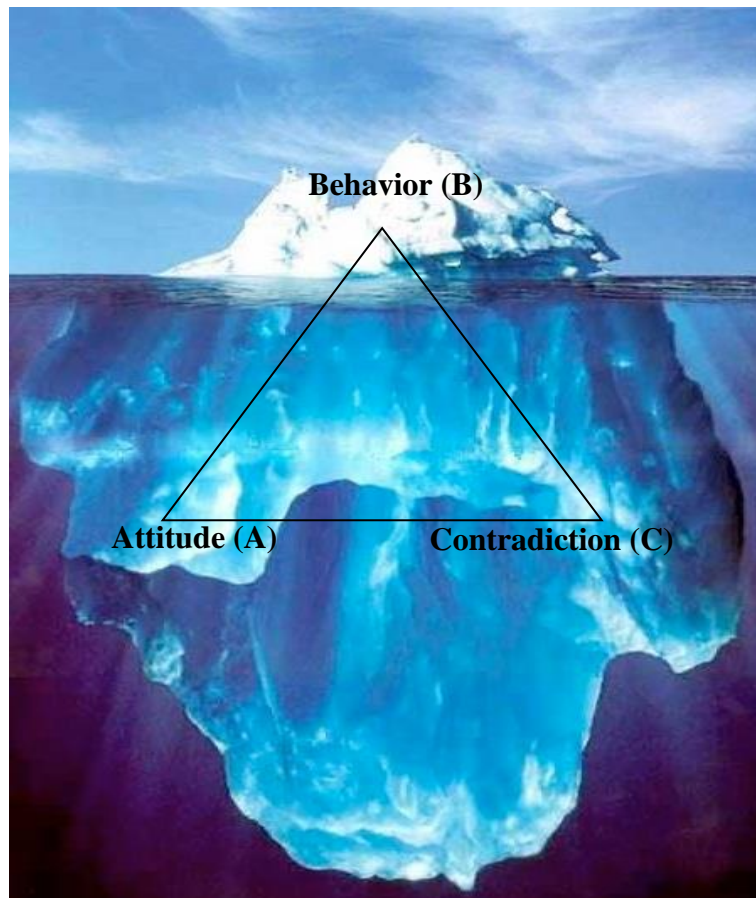
The essential concepts presented in this paper were derived primarily from the Burmese adaptation of Theravada Buddhism, which seeks to practice the Buddha's original teachings under the guidance of ordained monks and nuns. However, most of these concepts are directly transferable to Mahayana Buddhism, which places greater emphasis on lay practitioners' pursuit of enlightenment in secular life. A broader application of the proposed Buddhist peace theories, capable of transcending the Theravada-Mahayana dichotomy, can be realized by honoring the two Buddhist traditions' shared commitment to the ultimate Buddhist goal of enlightenment and liberation from suffering. It is argued that such a quest for Buddhist-inspired peace theories accessible to both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions will serve as a non-sectarian, trans-denominational contribution to peace in an increasingly globalized, interconnected world.

### **Tension between Conflict Analysis and Buddhism: Insights from the Attitude-Behavior-Contradiction (ABC) Triangle**

One of the most fundamental challenges faced by scholars and practitioners who seek to develop a useful Buddhist theory of conflict analysis and transformation is the inner-directed,

spiritual nature of the Buddha's teachings. More specifically, Buddhism is a religious tradition that seeks to enable human beings to overcome suffering (*dukkha*) through a deeply spiritual, self-reflective effort. While Buddhism necessarily looks inward to seek an answer to human suffering from within the inner depth of people's lives (Ghosananda, 1992; Nhat Hanh, 1987; Nhat Hanh, 2012), conflict transformation requires not only looking inward but also looking outward to improve the *relationships* between conflict parties. The Attitude-Behavior-Contradiction (ABC) triangle, a highly popularized framework of conflict analysis that Johan Galtung (1996) developed, helps explain this evocative difference between Buddhism and conflict transformation with respect to the ways of thinking involved. Since the ABC triangle presents a useful framework of thinking for the rest of the paper, it is explained below:

**Figure A:** The Attitude-Behavior-Contradiction (ABC) Triangle – An Iceberg Model



The ABC triangle suggests that there are three interrelated elements of social conflict. These three elements, illustrated by the image of an iceberg above, are attitude, behavior, and contradiction. Each of these three elements is explained as follows:

- Behavior (B) in the triangle represents visible physical behavior that manifests when conflict arises. Examples of destructive conflict behavior include beating, shooting, shouting, making faces, looting, and vandalism.
- Attitude (A) represents feelings and thinking that arise in conflict. ‘Attitude’ in this context refers to what takes place in our minds and hearts when we face conflict. Examples of frequently observed attitudes in conflict-affected relationships include anger, frustration, anxiety, envy, enmity, and vengeance.
- Contradiction (C) describes the nature of relationships between two or more conflict parties. It suggests that underlying every conflict, large and small, is a human relationship in which one party’s desire to attain a certain goal (“I want this land!”) stands in the way of the other party’s (or multiple parties’) pursuit of his or her goal (“I also want this land!”). This perspective on contradiction shows that at the heart of every conflict is a contradiction between two or more parties’ goal-seeking behavior that creates a dilemma for all sides.

To transform social conflict, Galtung (1996) suggests exercising three sets of skills:

- To develop a constructive attitude, empathize with each party and commit to placing oneself in others’ shoes.
- To guide behavior positively, practice active nonviolence, which requires refusing to use coercive force while respecting and protecting all lives.
- To overcome contradiction, exercise creativity, which enables conflict parties to transcend their seemingly incompatible goals so that they can envision and actualize a new reality of peaceful coexistence.

Conflict transformation, therefore, is a sustained, proactive process of exercising empathy, nonviolence, and creativity. To practice conflict transformation, these three processes need to work together to re-channel conflict energy constructively.



How, then, does the ABC triangle relate to Buddhism? According to Arai (2015), Burmese Buddhist leaders generally view conflict as a reflection of greed (lobah), anger (dosa), and ignorance (moha). They, like Buddhists in other parts of the world, believe that these unwholesome roots of action, or the “three poisons,” give rise to human suffering (dukkha) associated with birth, aging, sickness, and death. This Buddhist belief in the internal, spiritual origin of conflict, which eventually manifests in the form of externalized relationships between two or more parties, is a distinct quality of a Buddhist approach to conflict transformation.

Put another way, a Buddhist approach to conflict transformation is fundamentally attitude (A)-oriented with regard to the ABC triangle. It recognizes that human suffering (dukkha) is both the ultimate source of conflict and its most important effect. While nothing in the proposed Buddhist approach to conflict transformation precludes consideration of interpersonal and intergroup relationships that are “external” to the human mind and spirit, it is concerned first and foremost with the inner realm of human life. This is because as McConnell (1995) observes, “there are patterns of thought, feeling, and desire without which external events and issues would have no significance” (p. 6). It is this choice and capacity of the human mind to assign positive or negative *meanings* to human relationships and social events that Buddhist conflict analysis emphasizes first and foremost.

An important premise of the proposed Buddhist approach to conflict transformation follows from this reasoning:

1. Greed, anger, and ignorance give rise to suffering, which in turn makes human beings conflict-prone and thus susceptible to initiating and/or perceiving hostile conflict behavior.
2. Adversarial behavior (B) and contradictions (C) in the relationships between conflict parties are both externalized manifestations of human suffering underlying the parties’ attitudes (A).
3. The net impact of a given conflict must be measured in terms of how much suffering it has generated in the lives of all the human beings directly or indirectly affected by the conflict. (The suffering of other sentient beings (animals) as well as insentient beings (the natural environment) must also be considered. However, such an analysis is outside the scope of this paper.) Importantly, the Buddhist view of suffering does

not discriminate one conflict party from another because Buddhism affirms the interdependence of all beings.

4. The ultimate goal of conflict transformation is the liberation of all the parties from suffering. The liberation must take place within the inner realm of each person first and foremost so that its effect can be extended to human relationships and society.
5. A Buddhist approach to conflict transformation requires an integrated social process in which conflict parties must strive to overcome the roots of their suffering from within, while simultaneously transforming their relationships with adversaries.

This simultaneity of mindful efforts from within and without provides the basis of the rest of the discussion on a Buddhist approach to conflict transformation. It is worth noting 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 (Loy, 2003). In the context of conflict analysis and transformation, non-duality suggests that conflict can either cause suffering or present an opportunity for learning and liberation depending on how the conflict parties choose to interpret their conflict experience. In this respect, non-duality, like the whole body of Buddhist teachings, is a statement of value. It suggests that self-awareness, human agency, and individual choices matter in conflict as well as in social life in general. It seeks to overcome the self-centered tendency in the human mind to assert that the social reality one experiences is the only “objective” reality that matters, regardless of how others view the claim of reality. It advocates for practicing mindfulness, humility, and empathy so that interconnectedness, not separateness, becomes a norm designed to alleviate suffering.

This summary of Buddhist thinking suggests that the proposed Buddhist conflict theory is more likely to appeal to those who have already accepted Buddhist teachings than those who have not. Conflict parties unfamiliar with Buddhism may therefore find it difficult to consider the alleviation of human suffering as the ultimate aim of conflict transformation. Admittedly, setting the goal of conflict transformation as the overcoming of human suffering is more ambitious, more spiritual, and less tangible than the attainment of a mutually satisfactory agreement that meets all the conflict parties’ interests. The latter is what Fisher and Ury (1991) at Harvard Law School prescribed as the goal of interest-based negotiation, a widely popularized method of dispute resolution that cogently illustrates an American rationalist worldview. While

such an American and Western worldview will remain important for conflict theory development, students of conflict transformation in today’s increasingly globalized world must place this distinct worldview in a much broader context of diverse worldviews. The presentation of a Buddhist theory of conflict transformation in this paper should therefore be viewed as a contribution to a dialogue among people holding different worldviews. This is because this paper will enable theorists and practitioners from both the East and West to better understand at least one distinct Eastern approach to conflict transformation and use this understanding to reflect on their unique and diverse worldviews that inform their practices. As a step toward realizing such a broad vision of mutual learning, the rest of the paper will explore how to translate Buddhist teachings into a practical method of conflict analysis and transformation.

**Toward a Buddhist Approach to Conflict Transformation and Peace: An Overview**

The following table compares how contemporary peace research and Buddhism view conflict, violence, conflict transformation, reconciliation, and peace. Table entries on Buddhist perspectives build on Arai (2015), which analyzes a series of in-depth interviews with diverse Burmese Buddhist leaders. To be concise, both the peace research and Buddhist perspectives presented in the table are selective and illustrative only. Alternative table entries are possible and encouraged.

Table A

*Alternative Views on Peace and Conflict – Peace Research and Buddhist Perspectives*

<i>Key concepts</i>	<i>From the perspective of contemporary peace research</i>	<i>From a Buddhist point of view</i>
<i>Conflict</i>	Contradiction between parties, each seeking his/her own goals	<i>Dukkha</i> (suffering), which is internally directed, is externalized and manifested in the relationships between conflict parties. (See below for the Four Noble Truths.)
<i>Violence</i>	Social effect harming the human mind, body, and/or spirit, either intentionally or unintentionally	<i>Himsa</i> (killing), as a behavioral manifestation rooted in greed, anger, and ignorance

	Direct, cultural, and structural violence as an integrated framework of violence analysis	The five precepts as a guide to remedy and prevention  (The five precepts suggest Buddhist guidelines for spiritual training and ethical conduct. They prescribe Buddhist practitioners to refrain from killing, stealing, adultery, lying, and drinking. See below.)
<i>Conflict transformation (1): in interpersonal relations (addressing a relatively simple scenario)</i>	Taking steps to transform contradictions between parties through nonviolent means.  Creatively redirecting and utilizing conflict energy.	<u>Inner-directed practice</u> : Engaging in self-reflection and dialogue, being able to recognize the awareness of <i>dukkha</i> as a motivation to elicit <i>meta karuna</i> (loving kindness) from within.  <u>Practice linking the internal and external realms</u> : Engaging in self-reflection and dialogue, being able to recognize contradiction as an opportunity to build interdependence, which in turn enables parties to build unity.
<i>Conflict transformation (2): in inter-group relations (addressing a more complex scenario)</i>	Raising awareness of deep-rooted social structures; organizing people based on their increased awareness.  Practicing the above two tasks described in (1).	Cultivating <u>structural awareness</u> to see invisible structural roots of <i>dukkha</i> , both individual and collective. Naming “collective karma” rooted in conflict history.  Practicing the above two tasks described in (1).
<i>Reconciliation</i>	Healing from trauma and guilt, and closure (saying farewell) to revenge.	Practicing patience and karuna ( <i>loving kindness</i> ). Then demonstrating karuna through thoughts, words, and deeds.  (See below for the Noble Eightfold

		Path.) Deepening awareness of karma, which enables parties to appreciate a long-term view of causality, including effects of karuna and forgiveness.
<i>Peace</i>	A sustained, integrated process of realizing equity, social harmony, and conflict-handling capacity.	Enlightenment, spiritual freedom (toward nirvana in the Theravada tradition and Buddhahood in the Mahayana tradition) within oneself and in relation others. The joint search for nirvana/Buddhahood can gradually be extended to family, community, nation, and the world of humanity at large.

Key Buddhist concepts mentioned in the table include the following:

*The Four Noble Truths*

These are widely viewed as the substantive content of the Buddha’s enlightenment, described in the first documented sermon of the Buddha and known as the “Setting in motion the wheel of truth” sermon (Rahula, 1959, pp. 92-94).

1. Dukkha (suffering) reflects discontinuity and impermanence in life, as well as the inescapable dissatisfaction that results from it.
2. Dukkha arises because of greed, anger, and ignorance.
3. Dukkha can be overcome by overcoming greed, anger, and ignorance.
4. Concrete steps to overcome dukkha are prescribed in the Noble Eightfold Path

*The Noble Eightfold Path* – Adapted from McConnell (1995) and revised.


1. Right understanding – of the Four Noble Truths.
2. Right thought – having thoughts free from desire, ill will, and cruelty.
3. Right speech – not lying, using harsh language, or gossiping.
4. Right action – not killing, stealing, or indulging in irresponsible sex.
5. Right livelihood – making a living a right way, never accepting bribes or pursuing illicit trade that can cause the suffering of others directly or indirectly.
6. Right effort – the effort to overcome unwholesome tendencies and promote wholesome ones.

7. Right mindfulness – self-awareness of both mental and physical dimensions of human experience. (When walking, be mindful of the experience of walking. When feeling unhappy, be mindful of the unhappy feeling and the images associated with it.)
8. Right concentration – the concentration used in meditation and associated with wholesome states of consciousness (for example, cultivating goodwill, renouncing desires, and obtaining a clear understanding).

The five precepts mentioned in the above table prescribe prohibitions that should be followed to live a virtuous life. For conflict transformation, however, it is useful to expand on the five prohibitions and propose more proactive guidelines for living a virtuous life. In the following table, the prohibitions, or negative precepts, correspond to steps required to achieve negative peace, which is defined as the absence of direct, physical violence; the five positive deeds, on the other hand, correspond to positive peace, which consists of a sustained, integrated process of overcoming direct, structural, and cultural violence.

Table B

*The Five Precepts and their Implications for Positive and Negative Peace*

	<i>Pancha Shila: The five negative precepts, toward negative peace</i>	<i>Pancha Dhamma: The five positive deeds, toward positive peace</i>
<p><i>More structure-oriented</i></p>  <p><i>More culture-oriented</i></p>	<p>Abstain from taking what is not given.</p> <p>Abstain from taking life (ahimsa), essential for preventing direct, physical violence.</p> <p>Abstain from adultery and sexual misconduct. This is essential for preventing direct, physical violence.</p> <p>Abstain from lying. (This includes refraining from spreading unfounded rumors.)</p> <p>Abstain from intoxicating substances.</p>	<p>Practice good vocation. (This includes rejecting the sale and production of weapons and intoxicants.)</p> <p>Practice compassion (karuna); actively promote the love of all lives.</p> <p>Control sexual life and passions.</p> <p>Tell the truth. (This includes confronting and countering unfounded rumors.)</p> <p>Practice attentiveness, mindfulness, and care for all forms of human relationships.</p>

**A Buddhist Approach to the Transformation of Simple Actor-Oriented Conflict**

A simple actor-oriented conflict is an interpersonal conflict between two or more actors in which relatively few issues and goals are at stake. Examples include two children competing for a toy, siblings arguing over competing claims of inherited property, and divorced parents disputing custody of their children. Describing this type of conflicts as “simple” does not in any way imply that they are easy to transform; simple actor-oriented conflicts can be very difficult to transform when violence, trauma, and identity-related issues are involved.

Parties to a simple actor-oriented conflict can be groups – for example, families, professional groups, and local communities – so long as these groups function as relatively coherent goal-seeking entities. Conflicts involving groups tend to have complex internal dynamics and inter-group relations that distinguish them from interpersonal conflicts. For this reason, the analysis and transformation of complex, deeply-rooted inter-group conflicts can be accomplished more effectively by appealing to a theory of complex structural conflict transformation, which will be discussed later.

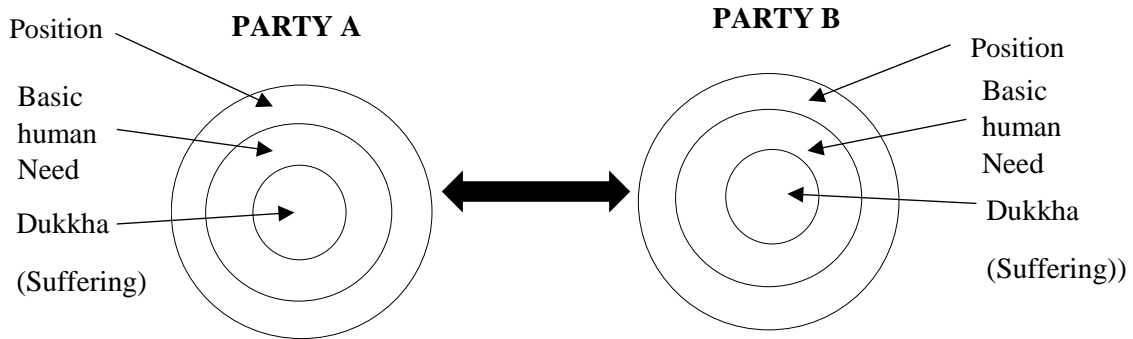
A useful point of departure in conflict analysis in general, and in a Buddhist approach to the analysis of a simple actor-oriented conflict in particular, is to examine each conflict party's basic human needs. Basic human needs refer to the most essential requirements of life without which human beings cannot survive physiologically and/or mentally (Avruch & Mitchell, 2013; Burton, 1990; Maslow, 1987). Examples of basic human needs include welfare needs (for example, food, shelter, clothing, and medicine, which correspond to the four traditional requisites of monks and nuns), freedom (of movement, expression, and speech), identity (expressed in such forms as religion, language, and culture), and security (absence of imminent physical threats to survival as a minimum requirement). Basic human needs theory states that the deprivation of these essential requirements of life can drive people to use all possible and available means to restore them, including aggression. The theory also states that a search for satisfiers to meet the deprived needs is essential to overcome aggressive behavior and prevent it from arising.

### **Conflict Mapping**

Basic human needs theory is useful as a theoretical framework to perform conflict mapping, which is a technique used to graphically illustrate the relationships between conflict parties, their aspirations, and their relationships. One way of performing the mapping of a relatively simple interpersonal conflict from a Buddhist perspective is to use an onion model. The model consists of three layers of stated or unstated drivers of conflict-related behavior, as illustrated by the following diagram:



**Figure B:** An Onion Model of Conflict Analysis



The model illustrates a two-party conflict between A and B. Positions, located at the outer layer and the surface of the onion, represent expressed behaviors and stated goals that opposing sides can readily see, hear, and recognize. Underlying the manifest positions are basic human needs, which represent less visible drivers of the expressed behaviors and stated goals. From a Buddhist perspective, the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance, which give rise to human suffering (dukkha), underlie basic human needs because needs result from human beings' attachment to the impermanent reality in which they live. The two-way arrow that connects Party A to Party B represents the mutually influential and conflicting nature of the relationships between the conflict parties.

As stated earlier, a Buddhist approach to conflict transformation consists of understanding and overcoming the context-specific manifestations of each party's suffering (dukkha, as a fundamental dilemma in life), while *simultaneously* transforming the inter-party conflict in which each party's suffering arises.

### **A Conflict Transformation Framework**

The overarching goals of the proposed Buddhist approach to conflict transformation are to recognize the human suffering associated with the conflict at hand and to enable the conflict parties and stakeholders to find practical steps toward liberating themselves from their sufferings. The following table builds on the preceding Buddhist description of inner and outer dilemmas that make up for social conflict. The two columns in the table describe how to practice two sets of activities simultaneously and synergistically. While the table lists the four elements

of practice from top to bottom in a stage-like fashion, experience in the real-world practice of conflict transformation suggests that the four elements seldom progress in a linear fashion. They can be practiced in an iterative, circular manner, suggesting that the practitioners of Buddhist-inspired conflict transformation must be prepared to undergo many iterations of trial and error.

Table C

*A Buddhist Approach to the Transformation of Simple Actor-Oriented Conflict  
– A Working Framework*

	<i>The Four Noble Truths</i>	<i>Four Selected Elements of Conflict Transformation</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the inner realm of each party</li> <li>• Attitude (A)-oriented, with implications for behavior (B)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the externalized relationships between parties</li> <li>• Contradiction (C)-oriented</li> </ul>
<i>Identify the challenge.</i>	<p>The challenge is suffering (dukkha).</p> <p>Recognize it as a fundamental dilemma in life.</p>	<p>The challenge is conflict.</p> <p>When recognizing the existence of conflict, stay mindful of non-self (anatta) and interdependence in order to transcend the perceived separation of Self and Other.</p>
<i>Analyze its root causes.</i>	<p>Recognize context-specific manifestations of greed, anger, and ignorance that generate suffering.</p>	<p>Name all the parties involved (both visible and invisible), their aspirations (the same), and the underlying contradictions in their relationships.</p>
<i>Recognize that there is a solution to the challenge.</i>	<p>Affirm that enlightenment, or freedom from suffering, can be achieved by overcoming greed, anger, and ignorance.</p>	<p>Affirm that conflict transformation can be realized by transforming the root causes of the conflict.</p>

	This process can be enhanced by envisioning and articulating what an enlightened state of life looks like.	This process can be enhanced by envisioning and articulating what a transformed state of conflict-affected relationships looks like.
<i>Put a solution into practice.</i>	<p>Follow the Noble Eightfold Path.</p> <p>Seek enlightenment and spiritual freedom (nirvana in the Theravada tradition and Buddhahood in the Mahayana tradition) as a long-term aspirational vision.</p>	<p>Practice empathy (karuna), nonviolence (ahimsa), and creativity (supported by wisdom, prajna) through self-reflection (including mediation and prayer) and dialogue between parties; develop concrete joint initiatives of mutual interest that can build relationships.</p> <p>Seek greater unity in humanity as a long-term aspirational vision.</p>

What the Buddhist framework of conflict transformation informed by the Four Noble Truths demonstrates in a nutshell is the importance of looking deeply into the causes and conditions of suffering and conflict. This framework, by implication, advocates for taking concrete action to transform the causes and conditions in order to transform the state of suffering and conflict (McConnell, 1995, pp. 3-11).

**A Brief Case Study**

The four Buddhist workshops conducted in 2015-17 included a thought experiment. The monks and nuns participating in these workshops were asked to explore how to apply the working framework of conflict transformation to a real-world scenario in which two novices experienced strained relationships. Concretely, the scenario presented a conflict between two preteen novices in the playground of their monastery. One of them was from the minority Paoh community and the other one was from the majority Burman community, whose mother tongue is Burmese. The two novices were initially playing together and competing for a toy. However,

when the Burman novice started picking on the Paoh novice's Burmese accent, the latter became deeply upset and emotional. Their teasing quickly escalated into a fierce argument, then into fighting. The Paoh novice hit his Burman peer in the face with a steel bar, thus injuring him and causing bleeding.

The head monk of the monastery took notice of this incident and brought the two novices together for a meeting. Through a deeply empathetic, non-judgmental conversation, the head monk learned that both novices felt that their personal, family, and ethnic identities were disrespected in the course of their rapidly escalating conflict. While the two novices found it too difficult to self-consciously and analytically reflect on the distinct and shared karma of identity-based suffering that they inherited from their families and from their historical ethnic communities (applying the onion model), they could nevertheless intuitively recognize that their attachment to their ethnic and communal identities played a powerful role in their lives and in their relationships (applying the Four Noble Truths).

With the help of simple, open-ended questions that the head monk asked, the two novices began a process of self-reflection and then dialogue on the causes of their fighting. In the course of the dialogue, the tear-filled Paoh novice apologized for hitting his Burman peer and injuring him; the Burman novice became equally self-reflective and apologized to his Paoh friend for picking on the latter's accent. The Paoh novice pledged never to raise his hands again. He went on to offer his injured Burman friend nursing and accompaniment until the latter recovered completely. The steps taken for reconciliation built a deeper friendship between them. The deepening friendship in turn demonstrated the value of forgiveness and unity to their peers at the monastery.

In addition to learning about what actually happened to the two novices, the workshop participants brainstormed possible alternative solutions. The suggested solutions, which incorporated long-term measures, included inventing interactive games that novices from different ethnic backgrounds could play to build friendship across ethnic boundaries, and monastery-wide capacity-building on inter-ethnic harmony that purposefully incorporates relevant Buddhist teachings. These examples of suggested initiatives view the conflict as a wakeup call to build greater mutual understanding and unity among the members of the monastery. They seek to build a culture of inter-communal respect that can prevent similar incidents of violence from happening again.

As this brief case study of a two-party conflict illustrates, the historical and social roots of a seemingly simple interpersonal conflict can be more complex than what it first appears. One of the reasons for such complexity is that interpersonal conflicts, especially those derived from historical differences in large-group identity, are traced to structural roots. The need for structural analysis becomes clear when one raises such diagnostic questions as: why was the Paoh novice, coming from a minority ethnic background, expected to speak in Burmese in the first place?; what prior social experiences of the Paoh novice might have prompted him to feel humiliated and disrespected when the Burman novice picked on the Paoh novice's accent?; what assumptions about interethnic relations had each of the two novices inherited from their parents and grandparents, influencing their interactions knowingly or unknowingly?; what assumptions did the senior monks make when they saw the two novices in conflict and why? These questions highlight the need to develop an additional and alternative framework of thinking and practice capable of tackling more complex structural conflicts than the kind of simple interpersonal conflicts that this case study illustrates. It is to such an advanced framework of thinking that our inquiry will now turn.

### **A Buddhist Approach to the Transformation of Structural Conflict: Toward a Buddhist Theory of Structural Peace**

#### **Basic Concepts**

Structural conflict refers to a deeply entrenched system of relatively stable relationships between conflict parties who remain unaware of the very existence of the conflict they are in, their status as conflict parties, and their deprived needs and unarticulated goals at stake (Galtung, 2010). When structural conflict (as a form of relationship) prevents the fulfillment of basic human needs, it exhibits the quality of structural violence (a form of social effect). Examples of structural conflict include asymmetrical relationships between parties involved in colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid, patriarchy, and the caste system. Deep-rooted social conflicts in such contexts as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India-Pakistan relations, Afghanistan, Arab-Israel relations, Iraq, Syria, and South Africa exhibit defining characteristics of structural conflict. In addition, structural conflicts can arise and remain intact in the “normal” day-to-day interactions that take place in various forms of institutional life (Rubenstein, 2017). Social systems that promote such institutional life include a prison system in which prison guards routinely punish disobedient prisoners, the weapons manufacturing industry that benefits from wars, drug and

human trafficking networks that promote illicit trade, and a racially segregated society that systematically promotes identity-based discrimination.

Theoretically, structural conflict is distinguished from simple actor-oriented conflict. The latter refers to a set of relationships in which conflict parties know the goals they seek (“I want this land and he wants it, too”) and recognize the situation of incompatibility that their goal-seeking behaviors and their competing claims generate. In structural conflict, however, parties often remain unaware of not only their own goals at stake, but also of the very existence of the conflict in which they are embedded.

In the real-world context of deep-rooted conflict, these two conceptual types of relationships are interwoven in a highly integrated, indistinguishable manner. For example, while an abusive prison system internalizes and embodies a structural conflict, individual prison guards and prisoners within the system may not recognize the structural conflict in which they are embedded. Unaware of the structural conditions that encourage rebellious action, discipline, and fighting, the guards and prisoners may continuously use violence against each other. In this context, the structural conflict within the prison system gives rise to interpersonal conflicts; heightened insecurity resulting from the interpersonal conflicts can in turn motivate those responsible for running the prison system to strengthen it. The vicious cycle of interpersonal and structural conflicts makes it increasingly difficult for the parties to differentiate one form of conflict from the other. The vicious cycle also blurs the distinction between causes and consequences of conflict, as well as the victim-offender distinction.

To draw a useful parallel between the social scientific concept of structural conflict, on the one hand, and Buddhist perspectives on the structural causes of suffering, on the other, two sources of Buddhist teachings can be cited. One is the well-known Pali language text, the Dhammapada, which Theravada Buddhists in South and Southeast Asia in particular regard highly. On violence, the Dhammapada, translated by Buddharakkhita Thera (1985), states:

All tremble at violence, all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor *cause* another to kill.

All tremble at violence, life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor *cause* another to kill (p. 53).

In other words, Buddhism not only encourages non-killing but also advocates for building human relationships and social conditions that prevent people from generating a desire to kill. Empathy, or the willingness to put oneself in others' shoes, is an essential requirement for the cause.

Another well-known Buddhist teaching related to structural conflict is the principle of right livelihood (Arai, 2015), which is a guideline contained in the Noble Eightfold Path. As previously mentioned, right livelihood consists of working in an ethical and social responsible manner and meeting the basic needs of socio-economic life. It includes rejecting bribes, unethical trade, and other forms of socio-economic activities that can directly or indirectly cause suffering. Right livelihood is thus a socio-economic requirement for the prevention and transformation of structural conflict.

Consistent with what the previous sections of this paper have demonstrated, these Buddhist teachings suggest the distinct worldview that social structure is ultimately a mirror image and a reflection of how the human mind makes sense of the world, as well as what human actions have cumulatively built in society. In other words, Buddhism understands social structure as an inherently cultural construct that thoughts, words, and deeds have developed over time. What follows from this Buddhist worldview is that a Buddhist approach to the transformation of structural conflict, first and foremost, requires *structural awareness* (Arai, 2015) that permits the recognition of structural conflict in the first place. More specifically, structural awareness, as discussed earlier, refers to educated and enlightened consciousness that recognizes a complex system of causes and effects. It enables people to see that well-intended actions can inadvertently cause the sufferings of others through the unforeseen effects of their relationships. It recognizes that seemingly humanistic motives for just actions, as well as their unintended effects, can be a product of a well-established and unquestionable sense of moral righteousness and entitlement inherited from generation to generation. Deep self-reflection and dialogue on karma, including its collective form, can contribute to the development of structural awareness capable of naming and confronting such deep-seated patterns of thinking and find solutions.

Using the Attitude-Behavior-Contradiction (ABC) Triangle as a framework of analysis, Buddhist practitioners of conflict transformation can build on their structural awareness and develop three kinds of skills—structural empathy, structural nonviolence, and structural wisdom/creativity—in order to transform structural conflict:

- *Structural empathy*, as an extension of karuna, requires understanding human suffering that results from intended and unintended actions. Moreover, structural empathy advocates for building a holistic, sustainable system of human relationships that actively and continuously promote social harmony and mutual respect. The Buddhist worldview of interdependence described by Galtung (1988) articulates a philosophical basis of structural karuna well:

There is unity in the universe ... other is seen as an extension of self, as a unity-of-self-with-other, in a unified universe where no self is separate, detachable. Injury to other is injury to oneself....Self and other mesh in a higher unit, a Self....They become continuous with each other....[W]hat is done in the Buddhist culture is to extend a self, incorporating and incorporated by other, to a self potentially pervading the whole universe (pp. 81-82).

The question that needs answering, then, is: what does a systematic practice of structural karuna, which strives to realize this Buddhist vision of interdependence, look like? Since Buddhism is essentially a guide to self-actualization, it is unlikely to prescribe any definitive and dogmatic answer to questions of this character concerned with social systems. However, because of the strong and consistent emphasis of Buddhism on self-actualization and awakening (Loy, 2003), it is reasonable to highlight an institutional practice of education as a basis of structural karuna. Following this line of reasoning, one may propose that structural empathy be put into practice by way of developing well-designed curriculums, trained teachers, sensitized parents, and adequate resource support that actively promote peace education at secular and religious schools. The goal of Buddhist-inspired peace education is to enable the teachers, students, and their communities to deeply appreciate the sanctity, dignity, and interconnectedness of all lives.

- *Structural nonviolence*, as an extension of ahimsa, requires building a sustained, holistic system of human relationships that prevents structural violence from growing and that actively promotes the love of all lives. The overarching goal of structural nonviolence is to advance equity, which is defined as equal life chances for all members of society regardless of their social status or backgrounds. Examples of

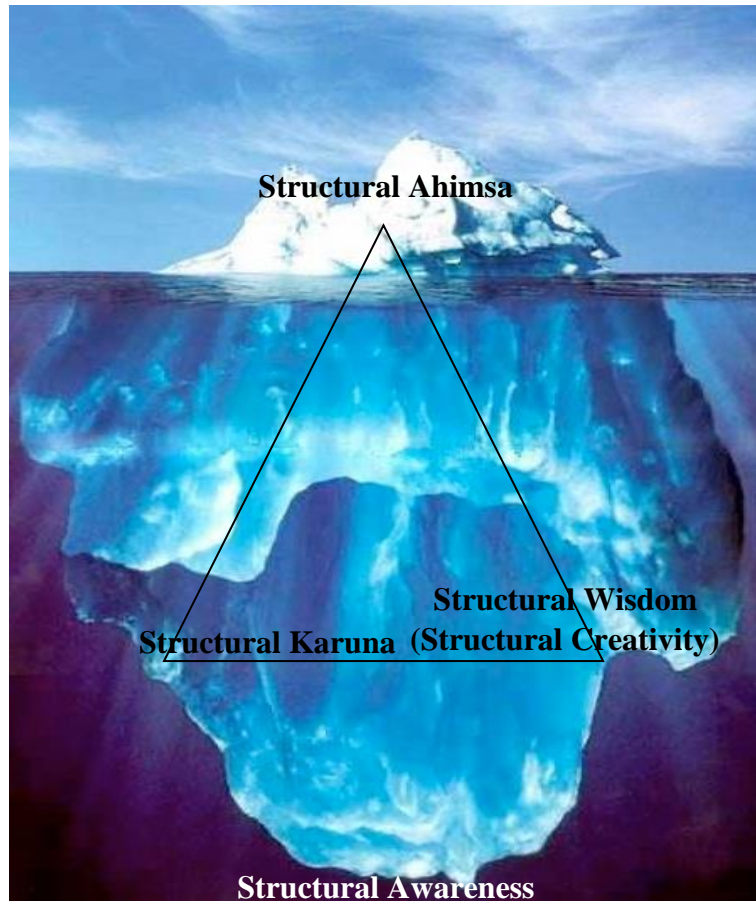


structural nonviolence include health clinics, agricultural cooperatives, and other inclusive development initiatives that prioritize the needs of the poorest and the most marginalized, while simultaneously creating conditions for preventing poverty and marginalization from growing.

- *Structural wisdom* (or *structural creativity*), as an extension of Buddhist wisdom (prajna), involves practicing a Buddhist-inspired system of democratic dialogue and problem-solving. The aim of the system is to skillfully and continuously redirect tensions and contradictions inherent in society as an opportunity to realize deeper unity in human relationships. Examples of structural wisdom and creativity include institutionalized practices of “dhamma democracy,” which promotes inclusive governance capable of turning differences of opinion into an opportunity for mutual learning and self-actualization at all levels of society, from families to nations. The overarching goal of “dhamma democracy” is to develop an inclusive and empathetic social space for all constituents of society to join. To serve the integrated purpose of problem-solving and self-actualization, the social space being created must enable its participants to confront the inescapable human tendency of delusion (moha) about the roots of suffering (dukkha) and to achieve the wisdom (prajna) necessary to see the karmic link and unity between self and other, “us” and “them”.

The revised iceberg model that follows illustrates the working Buddhist theory of structural conflict transformation outlined above:

**Figure C: A Buddhist Theory of Structural Conflict Transformation – A Revised Iceberg Model**



The model suggests that structural awareness, or the awareness of karma embedded in individual and social life, constitutes deep layers of the sea that uphold and embrace the entire structure of an iceberg. The model further illustrates that it is such a deeply self-reflective, self-critical understanding of structural awareness that enables individuals and societies to consciously practice an integrated process of structural ahimsa, karuna, and wisdom/creativity.

#### **A Brief Case Study**

The four Buddhist workshops that took place in 2015-17 examined a structural conflict over environmental degradation and socio-economic deprivation in Shan State, which is located in northeastern Myanmar. The case study highlighted the lives, grievances, and identities of farmers who have long worked to protect trees in their native land, which the government recently seized to develop a new marketplace. Given this government decision, the long-standing community norms that protected the trees in the area are rapidly losing legitimacy and

credibility. Aggressive logging practices that could soon deplete the forest resources are gaining momentum.

After an initial examination of the conflict scenario, discussions in the workshop then highlighted local workers whose job is to cut trees in the same area to produce firewood. These workers not only cut trees in great numbers, but also burn them to make large quantities of charcoal. They consider firewood production to be the only reliable means of generating income to support their poor families. They are aware that the conservation of natural resources is important. But they insist that sustaining their livelihoods takes precedence over environmental concerns because of their extreme poverty.

The workshop participants struggled to make sense of the deeply structural nature of this conflict because both the farmers protecting the forests and the workers cutting the trees are victims of structural violence, which resulted from a complex web of cause and effect relationships. To develop a structural understanding of such a complex conflict, the actors and stakeholders involved must train and sensitize their minds to see the larger picture of their collective suffering, as well as their shared karma of structural violence that generated the suffering. Practicing structural ahimsa in this context requires pointing out the deep-rooted inequity in undemocratic, arbitrary land appropriation practices. Application of structural ahimsa also calls for realizing development policy and community practices that can overcome conditions of socio-economic deprivation over time. Ways of applying structural wisdom and creativity, on the other hand, include placing these issues on the agenda for open democratic discussions through such means as a well-supported election campaign. Applying structural wisdom and creativity ultimately requires realizing genuine “dharma democracy” through truly inclusive, participatory governance. Finally, structural karuna enables farmers, workers, government authorities, businesses, lawmakers, and other stakeholders to recognize the entire structure of interconnected karmic relationships that generate and sustain their distinct and shared suffering. Structural karuna also calls for building mutually respectful relationships among multiple stakeholders through such means as public awareness-building campaigns on environment and development. Moreover, joint efforts to practice structural karuna must actively engage government authorities as fellow human beings, acknowledge their historical suffering (dukkha) from a Buddhist perspective, and enable them to see the interdependence of their lives and the lives of other stakeholders.

## Conclusion

This paper has identified distinct ways of Buddhist thinking that may be used to develop Buddhist theories of conflict analysis and transformation. It has also proposed Buddhist approaches to the transformation of simple actor-oriented conflict and complex structural conflict. Finally, it has demonstrated practical applications of these approaches through concrete case studies.

The Buddhist frameworks of conflict transformation presented in this paper promote an integrated practice of social change that consists of deep self-reflection on human suffering (*dukkha*), on the one hand, and organized efforts to build relationships that can systematically prevent human suffering, on the other. Buddhist efforts to transform structural conflict require cultivating structural awareness essential for overcoming societal karma, especially when society fails to recognize such deep-rooted, pervasive karma. The proposed theory of Buddhist-inspired structural conflict transformation presents both a vision and practical method of social change for which Buddhist practitioners can strive.

Two questions about the applicability of the proposed Buddhist theory merit attention. Both of these questions address the need to overcome the sustained interreligious and intercommunal tensions in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and other Asian countries. First, how can Buddhist practitioners apply their theory of conflict transformation to an interreligious conflict in which their opponents do not share Buddhist faith? Put another way, what should Buddhist practitioners do when the other side of the divide does not even share what Buddhists see as the most basic assumptions about life and society, such as the origin of suffering (*dukkha*), dependent origination, and non-self? In the face of such fundamental worldview differences, how far should Buddhist practitioners go in exercising patience and compassion, especially when they are unsure about the prospect of their gestures of goodwill being reciprocated? More fundamentally, what if the interreligious divides are so deep-rooted in social structure and historical consciousness that the Buddhist practitioners can neither recognize the conflict nor accept their status as conflict parties?

The second question is closely related to the first: How can Buddhist practitioners distinguish Buddhist teachings from the racial, national, and ideological discourses that have deeply internalized Buddhist messages and symbols? In other words, how can Buddhist practitioners come to recognize and problematize the potential contradiction between the

exclusive nature of their inherited racial, national, and political identities, on the one hand, and the all-inclusive and universal nature of Buddhist ideals, on the other? Furthermore, how can Buddhist practitioners facing an “existential conflict” with Muslims, Hindus, and/or Christians choose to practice universal Buddhist compassion as a higher moral principle than the protection of their own racial, national, and political identities?

A useful starting point of an inquiry into these questions may be found in the Buddha’s vision of universal love and structural peace, which the following passage from Suttanipata, I. 8 (Rahula 1959, p. 97) cogently illustrates:

Whatever living beings there may be – feeble or strong, long (or tall), stout, or medium, short, small, or large, seen or unseen, those dwelling far or near, those who are born and those who are yet to be born – may all beings, without exception, be happy-minded!

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