

Sangha conflict resolution process document

Conflicts have been known to tear the carefully woven fabric of a sangha. As a step toward preventing and healing conflicts in our sangha the following process and suggestions for approaching interpersonal conflicts may be helpful.

From The Dharma we learn that*

- difficult times are inevitable, but whether we suffer or not depends on how we react to that difficulty
- by facing difficulty with an open heart, we discover insight, love, and courage
- the basic practice is to stop everything we're doing and just look at what's happening
- the best way to be happy ourselves is to put others' happiness first
- the only really solid ground is open ground

*From the introduction to the book, Solid Ground: Buddhist Wisdom for Difficult Times (p.11) by Melvin McLeod: "Neither Buddhism nor meditation insulates us from pain." "But we have choices about how we respond inside." Continuing, "This is the greatest and most virtuous alchemy of all: to take suffering and, through our practice, transform it into wisdom and love. We have this power and, in every moment, the freedom to use it." (pp. 13-14) Norman Fischer comments that, "The most astonishing fact of human life is that most of us think that it's possible to minimize and even eliminate suffering." (p. 27) He goes on to talk about the richness of learning that comes from wisely handling our suffering, which is what we hope this document will help to facilitate for its readers.

The following are some considerations if you wish to prevent conflict in your relationships or are in a conflict or experiencing conflict within yourself which involves other persons.

Before a conflict develops

In Thay's teachings we are offered Beginning Anew as a process for handling conflict, which is referred to as a practice of reconciliation.

- The first step in Beginning Anew, which is called Flower Watering, is really about preventing an environment of tension and conflict; laying a foundation so that conflicts are much more easily dealt with when they occur. It is acknowledged that conflict is inevitable in human relationships but that it can be dealt with skillfully. We do Flower Watering by focusing on appreciations, gratitude, and loving kindness in our relationships day to day. We do this consciously, creating positive habit energy within ourselves by thinking appreciatively of others in our lives and expressing our appreciations and gratitude to them openly and generously.
- The second step of Beginning Anew is expressing regret. We also do this often and soon, as situations arise where we feel regrets for our own words and behavior or for any tensions

that might have developed between ourselves and another person that might be causing pain.

By taking these steps we hope to prevent small misunderstandings from accumulating and becoming much larger ones, taking care of them as they arise. We are cultivating our awareness and appreciation for the positive qualities that our loved ones, friends, and co-workers bring to our life. We are also owning our part in creating tension between ourselves and others when we express our regrets soon upon realizing that we have played a part in creating the tension.

Conflicts may still arise between people, but these steps help to establish a positive atmosphere of feelings of mutual support and appreciation as well as of taking responsibility for one's own actions and perceptions. These two are essential components to resolving conflicts constructively.

When a conflict arises, we return to the Fourth Mindfulness Training

Loving Speech and Deep Listening

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am committed to speaking truthfully using words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope. When anger is manifesting in me, I am determined not to speak. I will practice mindful breathing and walking in order to recognize and to look deeply into my anger. I know that the roots of anger can be found in my wrong perceptions and lack of understanding of the suffering in myself and in the other person. I will speak and listen in a way that can help myself and the other person to transform suffering and see the way out of difficult situations. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to utter words that can cause division or discord. I will practice Right Diligence to nourish my capacity for understanding, love, joy, and inclusiveness, and gradually transform anger, violence, and fear that lie deep in my consciousness.

Dealing with our feelings

When conflict does arise, the first step in dealing with it is to breathe! Sit with what you are feeling. Turn toward your suffering and open to the process of what it can teach you.

Often the first feeling we are aware of in a time of conflict is anger. In his book titled Anger Thay reminds us not to act on this feeling, saying "When you get angry, go back to yourself, and take very good care of your anger. And when someone makes you suffer, go back and take care of your suffering, your anger. Do not say or do anything. Whatever you say or do in a state of anger may cause more damage in your relationship." (p.24)

Norman Fischer tells us that, "In the Zen Buddhist tradition we have a precept about anger: 'A disciple of the Buddha does not harbor anger.'...our commitment is not to harbor and hold on to that anger, not to encourage it and make more of it than is necessary." (Solid Ground, p. 43)

Sylvia Boorstein comments that, “One of the biggest fuels of our anger is blame. The Buddha talks about ‘the bliss of blamelessness’.” Meaning that ‘I’ve made amends I can for whatever mistakes I’ve made, but that I’m not blaming other people either.’ That’s really the bliss of blamelessness...” (Solid Ground, p. 117)

It has been said that anger is a twin emotion (or sometimes a triple or quadruple!) It is helpful to examine our anger and to identify the other emotions we are having that are supporting and perhaps even feeding our anger. Perhaps we feel hurt, scared, rejected, abandoned, jealous, deceived, or any of a number of emotions. We are all different in our reactions and perceptions. We all come to situations with our personal histories which inform our perceptions and reactions to situations. We cannot assume that another person correctly anticipates how we may feel in response to a situation.

The crux to any workable resolution to a conflict lies in responding to the feelings underlying the conflict. No one can respond productively to our anger, but they may respond compassionately to our feeling hurt or scared. They may understand the cause beneath our feelings of rejection or jealousy. But, first we must know ourselves and be willing to be open, vulnerable, and honest about our feelings.

Suzanne Kilkus has written a piece about this for sangha entitled A “**no victim, no blame,**” **conflict resolution process** in which she says

The skills to resolve conflict involve being open to learning from the experience, being willing to let go of the victim perspective, and having an intention of restoring the flow of love and good will within ourselves and toward the other(s) involved. We can look at this as restoring integrity within a system (integrity here means the organic natural balance of things). That’s the ground that is solid enough to hold the process and all the people involved.

This perspective of resolution holds that each person involved in the situation is 100% responsible for their experience. Responsible means having the ability to respond, not the blame game that is our cultural definition. It also means that each person is bringing something of themselves, i.e. their history, their current level of functioning in conflict, their feelings and sense of self, their mental formations, and their particular perception in this moment, etc. When this level of truth is identified and spoken, conflict can resolve in organic and creative ways.

Seeing responsibility in this way ends blaming because there is no more trying to divide up the “pie” in an attempt to identify who’s the victim (the wronged) and who’s the perpetrator (the wrong-er). All conflict is based on the view that the experience is 1 pie (one 100% responsibility) that needs to get divided into what belongs to whom and so an argument ensues because nobody will agree on the division. And so this creates a race for the victim position and many reasons why our perspective is the right one. (This way of handling conflict is pervasive in our species. And it doesn’t work.) This all ends when each person

takes 100% responsibility for their experience so in any relationship experience there is 100% X the number of people involved. That way everyone gets the opportunity to learn something that may not be able to be learned in any other way and share in the restoration of love and well being.

What Suzanne is describing is supported by Norman Fischer's comments on suffering as a place from which to learn and grow. When looked at as an opportunity to deepen our knowledge of self and our connections with others, we can see how vital this process can be to our practice. Tsoknyi Rinpoche comments that it is necessary for us to "gradually cut through the habit of identifying with each emotional wave that passes through our awareness. We can be angry, jealous, or scared without having to act on those emotions or let them take over our lives. We can experience joy or love without becoming attached to the object that we think is the cause of our joy." (Solid Ground, p.75)

Sylvia Boorstein writes, "Suffering can be differentiated from pain. There is pain in life, without doubt, but suffering is the extra tension in the mind that is unable to accommodate change and accept the truth of its experience. The first two noble truths are that life is difficult and that suffering is the tension in the mind that insists an experience be different from the way it is. It's the imperative in the mind that this moment be different that causes our suffering." (Solid Ground, p. 95)

(Are you still remembering to Breathe?)

How to talk about the conflict with the other person

After doing one's own work on our reactions to being in conflict, we may still feel it is important to talk to the other person about the conflict we are experiencing in our relationship with them.

They tells us that, "In the third step of Beginning Anew, we express our own hurt with mindful, loving speech, without blaming or criticizing. We speak in such a way that the other person can listen and receive our words. If we blame and condemn the other person, their heart will close and they will not be able to hear us. We ask the other person to help us to understand why they have spoken as they have, acted as they have to cause us so much pain. Perhaps at a later time they can share with us so that we can understand more deeply. If a strong emotion arises in us while we are expressing our suffering, we should simply stop and come back to our breathing until the emotion subsides."

They reminds us that, "The Buddha gave us very effective instruments to put out the fire in us: the method of mindful breathing, the method of mindful walking, the method of embracing our anger, the method of looking deeply into the nature of our perceptions, and the method of looking deeply into the other person to realize that she also suffers a lot and needs help. These methods are very practical, and they come directly from Buddha." (p. 25)

A process for discussing a difficult subject with another person is suggested by the teachings of Nonviolent Communication (NVC). This is a 4 step process that includes the following:

- Observations: communicating what I observe (see, hear, remember, imagine) free from evaluations, that does not contribute to my well-being. “When I hear, see, etc.”
- Feelings: how I feel (emotion or sensation rather than thought) in relation to what I observe.
- Needs: what I need or value (rather than a preference, or a specific action) that causes my feelings. “...because I need/value....”
- Requests: the concrete actions I would like taken. “Would you be willing to....?”

NVC is a practice that many have found helpful in enhancing their communication skills. It is very helpful to study and practice these techniques with others. If you are interested in pursuing this in more depth, training opportunities and practice groups are available through Madison Area NVC: www.madisonareanvc.org/

Sylvia Boorstein reminds us that we need to choose carefully when and where to approach a conflict. We need to be sure there is time for deep listening to occur. “There’s a list in the Vinaya, the Buddha’s code of monastic rules, of what the Buddha said people should think about before they admonish another person. The first is ‘In due season will I speak, not out of season.’ This means, wait until it’s a good, propitious time and you have reconstituted yourself and are in your right mind, and also that the other person is in the frame of mind to hear you. Then you can speak on the other side of anger.” (Solid Ground, p. 117)

Deep Listening

The goal of deep listening is to hear beyond the words of the other person and yourself, to the essence of what the words and feelings are pointing to. Deep listening occurs when your mind is quiet. Deep listening is not defensive, argumentative, or intrusive. It is not about struggling to analyze or interpret. It is a purely receptive state of mind. In a state of deep listening, we realize our oneness. We realize that we are not separate; we are connected. When we listen deeply, we let go of any beliefs we have about the other person. We let go of our prejudices and past memories of him or her. We enter a state of deep listening to be touched by the other person and to hear the essence of what he or she is saying. (from What is Deep Listening? By Joe Bailey)

Constructive feedback

During the discussion of a conflict one needs to be ready to skillfully take in the feedback given by the other person. One needs to be personally aware of what one is willing and able to agree to change. Both sides need to find points of agreement and to accept that there may be some places

where an agreement to disagree may be necessary for the time being. Indeed, you may need to leave the process for some time and return to it at a later time.

Forgiveness

Once the situation has been carefully and compassionately explored together, it is also important to be ready to ask and give forgiveness as it is appropriate. It may be helpful to use a forgiveness meditation. The following practice is adapted from a guided meditation taught by Eric Kolvig.

*Bring attention into your body, in whatever position you are in right now.
Bring attention to the heart center in middle of chest, the energy center that is right behind
breastbone, and feel whatever is there without judgment.
Send your breath through the heart.
Send the following phrases along with your breath, through your heart.*

*Bring to mind the ways that you may have harmed yourself in this difficult situation, and say
to yourself,
"I allow myself to make mistakes
I allow myself to be imperfect
I allow myself to be a learner, still learning life's lessons
I forgive myself for this harm I have done to myself
And if I can't forgive myself now, may I forgive myself sometime in the future."*

*Now bring to mind the ways that the person with whom you are entangled may have harmed
you, thru speech or action. Hold that being in your heart, and say to yourself,
"Just as I allow myself to make mistakes, so I allow you to make mistakes.
I allow you also to be imperfect.
I allow you to be a learner, still learning life's lessons.
I forgive you for the harm that you have done to me,
And if I can't forgive you completely now, may I forgive you sometime in the future."*

*Now bring to mind the ways in which you may have harmed the other person in this
situation, and say to yourself,
"I allow myself to make mistakes.
I allow myself to be imperfect.
I allow myself to be a learner, still learning life's lessons.
I forgive myself for the harm that I have done, for my sake and also for the other's sake,
And if I can't forgive myself completely now, may I forgive myself sometime in the future."*

*Finally, hold the image of that being who you have harmed in your mind's eye. And ask
their forgiveness by saying these phrases to yourself,*

*“Please allow me to make mistakes
Please allow me to be imperfect
Please allow me to be a learner, still learning life’s lessons.
Please forgive me for the harm that I have done to you,
And if you can’t forgive me completely now, please forgive me sometime in the future.”*

And, from the beginning of the conflict to a time of resolution, remember to send Metta to yourself and then to the others involved.