

# THE ROLE OF BUDDHIST MONK ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THAI SOCIETY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the problems of the conflict resolution in Thailand, scrutinizes the method of conflict resolution from Buddhist perspectives along with proposes propose the role of Buddhist monks on conflict resolution in Thai Society. This paper is applied documentary research with collecting data from Pāli-Canon, academic selected textbooks, related Documents and Researches.

**Keywords:** Conflict Resolution, Buddhist Monk, Thai Society

## Introduction

Thailand is the world's heavily Buddhist country<sup>1</sup>, which mainly focused on Theravāda Buddhism. Theravāda doctrine or a sect that kept the teachings of the Buddha, it has refused to amend any of the terms of the pure Buddha will have to adjust teaching practices<sup>2</sup>. According to Buddhist teaching Buddhist monk had to know his own benefit, the benefit of others, the benefit of both<sup>3</sup>, monks had the roles and the ways on reducing the conflict in society. Nowadays the world become digital era of globalization and high of technology, geographic boundaries often become obscured<sup>4</sup>. Thailand today consists of workers from various countries, religious, and cultural backgrounds<sup>5</sup> that make Thai society more seen the inevitable rise in the number of conflicts and litigations. These controversies lead to the clogging of court dockets. Because of the heavier workload of the judiciary, the resolution of cases necessarily takes longer to finish.

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<sup>1</sup>Thanyarat Doksone. (2013, October 24). The Washington post. Retrieved from [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/supreme-patriarch-of-thai-buddhism-dies-at-100/2013/10/24/d8dac89a-3cc2-11e3-b7ba-503fb5822c3e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d321c3b551e6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/supreme-patriarch-of-thai-buddhism-dies-at-100/2013/10/24/d8dac89a-3cc2-11e3-b7ba-503fb5822c3e_story.html?utm_term=.d321c3b551e6)

<sup>2</sup> R.H. Robinson, W.L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu. (2005) *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction* (fifth edition). Belmont, California, USA: Wadsworth. p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> AN 1.46

<sup>4</sup> McKinsey Global Institute. (2016). **DIGITAL GLOBALIZATION: THE NEW ERA OF GLOBAL FLOWS**. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Business%20Functions/McKinsey%20Digital/Our%20Insights/Digital%20globalization%20The%20new%20era%20of%20global%20flows/MGI-Digital-globalization-Full-report.ashx>

<sup>5</sup> **The National Legislative Assembly. (2016). Thai Report on Migrant Labour.** Retrived from [http://www.senate.go.th/w3c/senate/pictures/content/file\\_1474942517.pdf](http://www.senate.go.th/w3c/senate/pictures/content/file_1474942517.pdf)

## Definition of conflict

Conflict could be meant: A serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one. A prolonged armed struggle. A state of mind in which a person experiences a clash of opposing feelings or needs. A serious incompatibility between two or more opinions, principles, or interests.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph P. Folger who refer to conflict as the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatibility and the possibility of interference from others as a result of this incompatibility<sup>7</sup>.

However, Anne Maydan Nicotera suggests that conflict in itself is neutral. The way people manage conflict, instead, is indicative of the probable outcome. Depending on the type of conflict, type of task, task interdependence, and group norms, conflict in task groups can be of great benefit in helping group members in many ways, such as reducing groupthink, generating creative alternatives, and maintaining a balance of power.<sup>8</sup>

## Types of Conflicts<sup>9</sup>

Conflict is classified into four types as follows:

1. **Interpersonal conflict** refers to a conflict between two individuals. This occurs typically due to how people are different from one another. We have varied personalities which usually results to incompatible choices and opinions. Apparently, it is a natural occurrence which can eventually help in personal growth or developing your relationships with others. In addition, coming up with adjustments is necessary for managing this type of conflict. However, when interpersonal conflict gets too destructive, calling in a mediator would help so as to have it resolved.
2. **Intrapersonal conflict** occurs within an individual. The experience takes place in the person's mind. Hence, it is a type of conflict that is psychological involving the individual's thoughts, values, principles and emotions. Interpersonal conflict may come in different scales, from the simpler mundane ones like deciding whether or not to go organic for lunch to ones that can affect major decisions such as choosing a career path. Furthermore, this type of conflict can be quite difficult to handle if you find it hard to decipher your inner struggles. It leads to restlessness and uneasiness, or can even cause depression. In such occasions, it would be best to seek a way to let go of the anxiety through communicating with other people. Eventually, when you find yourself out of the situation, you can become more empowered as a person. Thus, the experience evoked a positive change which will help you in your own personal growth.
3. **Intragroup conflict** is a type of conflict that happens among individuals within a team. The incompatibilities and misunderstandings among these individuals lead to an intragroup conflict. It is arising from interpersonal disagreements (e.g. team members have different personalities which may lead to tension) or differences in views and ideas (e.g. in a presentation, members of the team might find the notions presented by the one presiding to be erroneous due to their differences in opinion). Within a team, conflict

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<sup>6</sup> **Oxford Dictionaries.** (2017) Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/conflict>

<sup>7</sup> Folger, J.P., Poole, M.S. and Stutman, R.K. (2005), **Working through Conflict: Strategies for Relationships, Groups, and Organizations, 5th ed.**, Allyn & Bacon, Boston, MA, USA. p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Nicotera, A.M. (1997), "Managing conflict communication in groups", in Frey, L.R. and Barge, J.K. (Eds), *Managing Group Life: Communicating in Decision-Making Groups*, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, MA, pp. 104-30.

<sup>9</sup> Brad Evans. (2013 August 16), **Types of Conflict.** Retrieved from <http://www.typesofconflict.org/types-of-conflict/>

can be helpful in coming up with decisions which will eventually allow them to reach their objectives as a team. However, if the degree of conflict disrupts harmony among the members, then some serious guidance from a different party will be needed for it to be settled.

4. **Intergroup conflict** takes place when a misunderstanding arises among different teams within an organization. For instance, the sales department of an organization can come in conflict with the customer support department. This is due to the varied sets of goals and interests of these different groups. In addition, competition also contributes for intergroup conflict to arise. There are other factors which fuel this type of conflict. Some of these factors may include a rivalry in resources or the boundaries set by a group to others which establishes their own identity as a team.

## **Conflict Resolution in Thailand**

Considering the fact that conflict is part of Thai society, conflict management had been used mediation process for decades but official evidence appear in the court of Thailand in 1992, some documents founded in The State the Constitution (1895) in Rattanakosin era that in 1895 head of a group of villages had authority to become mediator in dispute resolution of civil and minor-criminal cases in their village. In 1914 Marshal had authority to become mediator in dispute resolution of civil and minor-criminal cases in their district.<sup>10</sup> Since 2001 Thailand has applied more the mediation process to courts across the country.

### **Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)**

Thailand has encouraged the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) in order to resolve controversies before the issue proper is formally heard by the court. In fact, Thailand has established an Alternative Dispute Resolution Office under the Office of the Judiciary to oversee the application of ADR in the country.

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) is a tool of mechanism used for managing disputes rather than litigating a controversy in court. ADR is encouraged because the judiciary understands that the longer a dispute persists, the more damage it causes not only to the parties, but to the economy in general. It somewhat gives power to the parties in controversy to decide the fate of their dispute, rather than to have the courts adjudicate on their differences.

### **Arbitration and Mediation**

Arbitration and Mediation are two forms of Alternative Dispute Resolutions employed by the judiciary in order to ease the congestion in court dockets. Arbitration necessitates the selection of a third party (to be called the Arbiter) who will hear the controversy and render a legally-binding judgement. On the other hand, Mediation involves the assistance of an unbiased mediator who will help the parties reach a mutually-acceptable agreement. Mediation is often resorted to in small claims cases where legal costs may be

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<sup>10</sup> Tawan Manakul. (2014), **Thai Dispute Resolution Process in Thailand**. Bangkok, court of Thailand. p. 3.

higher than the award. Mediation is funded by the Office of the Judiciary. The parties in mediation accrue minimal expenses.

### **The Role of Mediator**

The Mediator plays a vital role in the process. Not only does he keep the peace between the parties, he likewise assists the participants in designing a solution that would mutually benefit them. An agreement is reached between parties after mediation. The agreement must specify all the terms and conditions which the parties must fulfil after the mediation is wrapped up. If a party fails to comply with the agreement, the other party may come to court for enforcement of the mediation agreement. Thailand had established numerous amount of mediation centers, has been increasing mediation training programs, and recruiting a large number of new mediators to prove the efficiency of the approach. With mediation, we can demonstrate that despite the fast pace of our new lives, some traditional remedies can still be considered as dependable.

In general, many young or inexperienced Thais would seek the wisdom of their respected Buddhist monk or elders in resolving community issues because of social interest among Thais as the culture. This is actually an informal mediation by Buddhist monk. This is practiced until today. Temple or the public and private sectors now utilize mediation more in order to resolve differences at the earliest stage of the conflict to help reduce the number of conflicts and litigations and the clogging of court dockets. Because of the heavier workload of the judiciary

Nevertheless, every individual has different standpoints; there will always be instances when misunderstandings will occur among us. With the arising of these intractable conflicts comes the need for conflict management. Even in seemingly ordinary situations, conflict may be rooted by other non-apparent reasons. Understanding the other sides of the issue would allow those involved to come up with an ideal resolution to the problem. In dealing with conflict, there are conflict management styles to be followed. The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which is an assessment used globally in conflict handling, specifies five strategies used to address conflict. They are as follows:

### **Accommodating**

Accommodation involves having to deal with the problem with an element of self-sacrifice; an individual set aside his own concerns to maintain peace in the situation. Thus, the person yields to what the other wants, displaying a form of selflessness. It might come as an immediate solution to the issue; however, it also brings about a false manner of dealing with the problem. This can be disruptive if there is a need to come up with a more sound and creative way out of the problem. This behavior will be most efficient if the individual is in the wrong as it can come as a form of conciliation.

## **Avoiding**

In this approach, there is withdrawal from the conflict. The problem is being dealt with through a passive attitude. Avoiding is mostly used when the perceived negative end outweighs the positive outcome. In employing this, individuals end up ignoring the problem, thinking that the conflict will resolve itself. It might be applicable in certain situations but not in all. Avoidance would mean that you neglect the responsibility that comes with it. The other individuals involved might think that you are neglecting the problem. Thus, it is better to confront the problem before it gets worse.

## **Collaborating**

Collaborating aims to find a solution to the conflict through cooperating with other parties involved. Hence, communication is an important part of this strategy. In this mechanism, effort is exerted in digging into the issue to identify the needs of the individuals concerned without removing their respective interests from the picture. Collaborating individuals aim to come up with a successful resolution creatively, without compromising their own satisfactions.

## **Competing**

Competition involves authoritative and assertive behaviors. In this style, the aggressive individual aims to instil pressure on the other parties to achieve a goal. It includes the use of whatever means to attain what the individual thinks is right. It may be appropriate in some situations but it shouldn't come to a point wherein the aggressor becomes too unreasonable. Dealing with the conflict with an open mind is vital for a resolution to be met.

## **Compromising**

Compromising is about coming up with a resolution that would be acceptable to the parties involved. Thus, one party is willing to sacrifice their own sets of goals as long as the others will do the same. Hence, it can be viewed as a mutual give-and-take scenario where the parties submit the same amount of investment for the problem to be solved. A disadvantage of this strategy is the fact that since these parties find an easy way around the problem, the possibility of coming up with more creative ways for a solution would be neglected.

Given the different conflict management styles, you might be thinking of the one style that would suit you the most. It is important to note that the strategy involved in coming up with a resolution is relative to the kind of the problem.

## Conflict Resolution in Buddhism

The Buddha lived in an era of political and social conflicts. Even within his own monastic community there were occasions of conflict. Once there was a conflict between Dharmadhara monks and Vinayadhara monks over a significance of a minor rule. When negotiation did not resolve the conflict the Buddha left them to argue and went to forest. He did so as a way to make them feel the repercussions of conflict and it was effective to bring harmony again<sup>11</sup>. However, he made a pungent comment saying that those who quarrel do not know that they are mortals. He also used the term 'pare' to quarrelsome ones to indicate that conflict makers are not considered by him as insiders of the religion. The Buddha, in no uncertain terms, has affirmed that he was against conflicts and committed to peace. This characteristic of the Buddha was so well known that at the point of some kings were to fight for his relics a Brahmin called Dona brought peace and understanding to them by reminding them that the Buddha's commitment to peace. He said 'Listen to me, Sirs; just allow me to utter one sentence. Our Awakened One was a peace-person (santivādo).' And that small reminder made everyone agree that there should not be war in relation to the relics of the Buddha<sup>12</sup>.

### Buddha as a mediator

There were several occasions that the Buddha functioned as a mediator in managing conflicts. For instance, the Buddha personally intervened when Sakyans and Koliyans were about to enter into war over a dispute on the water of Rohini river. He pointed out to them that it was foolish and dreadful to destroy invaluable human life over a trivial matter<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, when Vidūbhabha went to massacre Sakyans, in spite of his own ill health, the Buddha intervened three occasions to prevent the attack<sup>14</sup>. Buddha's teaching is a message of peace and non-violence. It is not only a philosophy of life, but a doctrine of progressive reconstruction of society. Buddhism is a path of enlightenment aiming at the root of all conflicts. It is an answer for the problems which prevailed in Buddha's time in India. But the validity of his message is universal. Therefore, his philosophy of peace is relevant even to the problems of contemporary world. That is why the Buddhists all over the world keep on meditating "Let all beings be happy, let all beings live without fear, let all beings enjoy peace and happiness, and be free from all sorrows and troubles". Learning and practicing of the values of sharing, loving and equality amounts to creating a mindset conducive for living a conflict free life.

The question might arise here whether it would be possible to live without conflicts and wars. Buddhism would not agree if somebody would say it is not possible. It should be encouraged, at least in principle. To encourage such an ideal we can refer to a story presented in Samyutta Nikaya. There it is said that Sakka, the lord of gods, who defeats his adversary Vepacitti, the Asura leader, in battle, does not retaliate even verbally when Vepacitti insults him in the presence of his subordinates. This is not because he is afraid or weak, but because, being a wise person, he knows that one who does not react in hate towards a hater wins a victory hard to win.

### The Buddhist teaching focused on Craving, Hatred, Conceit (*māna*)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kh.Dh.A. (MCU), pp. 53-56

<sup>12</sup> D.M. (MCU), pp. 177-179

<sup>13</sup> Kh.Dh.A. (MCU), pp. 141-144

<sup>14</sup> Kh.Dh.A. (MCU), pp. 334-335

<sup>15</sup> Abhi.Vi. (MCU) p. 584.

It is a general fact that the nature cannot meet the demands made by human greed. The Buddha has seen that sensual desires of men are insatiable. Even if everything in the world is achieved the greed of man is never satiated. Yet, as men have to engage in competition with equally greedy others – not only men but animals as well- to find satisfaction from the limited resources they die in dissatisfaction without reaching their target. In fact it is not only the greed for things that make people aggressive. Their greed for power is also seen as a strong factor causing conflicts among people. Conceit (māna) as leading to conflicts among people. They mostly pride their birth into a caste, race, and country; even to inherit a particular language and religion as factors that make them unique. Some pride their learning, skills, beauty and good looks etc and look down upon others. This results in snobbish behaviour, ill-treatment, debate and violence. People are too proud to allow others to excel and wish to be on the top of the world at the expense of others.

When the roots of conflict are diagnosed it is easy for people to cultivate peace within and without. If hatred keeps generating more hatred only and if it is not possible to have any happiness in life when we are surrounded with enemies who wish to destroy us, the only way to avoid conflict and achieve peace in mind and society is to control our greed, hatred and conceit with cultivating of good moral qualities. If a ruler, aggressive, greedy and hateful, wishes to engage in a course of conflict using all what he has to gain his personal interests even at the cost of others, the inevitable consequences will be dispute, quarrel and warfare. The great root cause behind the rulers set against rulers, citizens against citizens, children against parents, brothers against brothers, friends against friends is Kāma (desire for sensual pleasures). ‘If the ruler would cease to fight and live in peace with his subjects and follows the principle of righteousness by conquering his selfishness how happily and peacefully would all his subjects live’

However, avoiding itself is not sufficient as it is inevitable that conflicts of various nature are bound to arise in society. One might expect, with such glowing record of tolerance and peace psychology, the Buddha to apply his theory to resolve real conflicts. As a matter of fact, the Buddha was approached by some people to get his assistance to mediate in their conflicts. Two young Brahmins called Tarukkha and Pokkharasati, once approached Buddha to resolve a conflict on their religion. And the Buddha resolved their issue by convincing what was right after a systematic and sober discussion. This was a good example of successful mediation where the both parties agreed with the conclusion.

### **The role of Buddhist monks on conflict management in Thai Society**

The Buddha has provided practical wisdom in resolving socio-political and economic conflicts according to Kūṭadanta sutta that presents, rather mythological in form, how a conflict between the state and people aggravated owing to short-sightedness of advisors was resolved by applying a rational approach. It speaks of a king whose kingdom was ravaged by riots of poor people. The king is advised by his Brahmin adviser that this situation will not be solved by executions, imprisonments or other repressive measures, for those who survive will continue to cause problems as the reason why they are against the government is not addressed. He gives the alternative of economic planning which involves granting grain and fodder to those who cultivate crops and keep cattle; granting capital to traders; and giving proper living wages to those in government service. Thus in resolving of conflicts socio-political in nature it is advised that attending to the root of the problem is necessary<sup>16</sup>.

In Thailand, Theravāda Buddhism is an integral component of religious, social, and political interactions. At the center of this faith sits the paragons of spiritual purity: monks. In addition

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<sup>16</sup> D. St. (MCU)

to being role models of virtue to the Thai people, monks are at the apex of a social pyramid that influences a large number of beliefs and daily practices. Buddhist monks as religious leader are also actively involved in working for reducing destructive conflicts are trying to develop successful managing conflict. Experiments and research and even courses to train conflict resolution or mediator are in progress in many countries. In general, Buddhist monks or religions institution are also expected to help to prevent problems and conflict, at least conceptually, in conflict resolution processes, even though Buddhist monks are often found culprits of causing conflicts themselves but Sangha of Thailand also observance is the belief that respect is an essential pillar of a harmonious society including to Sangha.

### **Conclusion**

The role and the way of the monks on the promotion of reducing the conflict in Buddhism had two kinds: the role to the self and the role to the others. The monks had the roles and the ways on reducing the conflict in Buddhist community as a mediator, apply the role in the participation of doing the activities with the monks and the people to support Sangha (community) support the government, religious studies, the supporting education, the propagation, the public construction, and the public support by the media between the religious authority and the government authority to do the activities in one way. Moreover, Buddhist monk should teach the people in the way of life of morality for live their life happily in the society. It made the happiness to the people, and the problems decreased because of the role of Buddhist monks on conflict management in Thai Society support managing and transform the conflict and build peace in the society.



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