

# Core Buddhist Practices for Working with Conflict

by Clark Hanjian

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## Introduction

Buddhism embodies a strong tradition of nonviolence. However, while much has been written about Buddhism and conflict, a concise review of essential guidance does not appear to exist. Hence, for the benefit of Buddhist teachers and chaplains, this brochure summarizes the core Buddhist practices for working with conflict.

I define a *core Buddhist practice for working with conflict* as a practice which is rooted in at least one primary source of Buddhism, appears to be reasonably consistent with a broader understanding of Buddhism, and has some recognition in contemporary Buddhism as a skillful approach to conflict.

I selected these practices based on my review of representative teachings from the Pali Canon, Shantideva, and Dogen. There are countless other sources that could be considered, but these three appear to reasonably mark the terrain. My selection was also guided by the insights of modern scholars and Buddhist teachers who have explored this topic.

In distilling these teachings, I attempt to describe each practice faithfully and in a way that makes sense in our time. I also attempt to describe each practice plainly, yet with enough detail to be actionable and applicable in a variety of conflicts.

This collection illustrates that the Buddhist tradition calls for full engagement with conflict. Conflict is not regarded as something to avoid, rather, it is an opportunity to address suffering head on. During every phase of a conflict, we have options to consider, and we can choose to exercise these options or not.

It is important to clarify several points regarding what this collection is not. First, this set of practices does not represent the full range of best practices available today for working with conflict. Contemporary secular work in the field of conflict transformation offers many additional tools and techniques.

Second, this set of practices is not limited in application to interpersonal conflict. These practices can be undertaken by groups and organizations, and

they can serve as levers to shift organizational relationships and systems.

Third, this collection does not focus on practices for mediators, intermediaries, or other third parties to conflict. Rather, it focuses on practices that might be undertaken by individuals or groups who are primary parties, i.e., those directly involved in conflict.

Fourth, while this is a wide-ranging collection of Buddhist practices, it does not constitute a Buddhist panacea for conflict. The messiness of the personal elements in conflict, and the particulars unique to every situation, raise many considerations for how we might skillfully proceed.

Fifth, this collection is not intended to serve as a checklist of “things to do” when facing a conflict. Rather, it is a set of skills that Buddhist practitioners might cultivate and experiment with over time. In the spirit of the Buddhist tradition, one might train in these practices until they become habits that naturally arise when appropriate.

If you are a Buddhist teacher or chaplain, this tool might serve as convenient personal reference for helping others understand what the Buddhist tradition offers for navigating conflict. This tool also might serve as a training resource for workshops, study groups, and retreats. And, it might serve as a guide for personal practice. When we work with conflict well, not only do we create space for suffering to subside, but we demonstrate that it is possible to approach conflict in a way that is not fraught with anxiety and harm.

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This article is based on my thesis, *Clarifying the Core Buddhist Practices for Working with Conflict* (Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program, Upaya Zen Center, 2019). The thesis, which includes primary source citations and rationale for each practice, is available on my website.

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## Cultivate Intention

**(1) Vow to Benefit the Other.** Practice making, and renewing, a commitment to benefit our partner in conflict. Vow to ease their suffering, to avoid causing them harm, and to be of service. Vow to cultivate the heart-mind so that we become naturally intent upon doing these things.

**(2) Train Diligently.** Practice, with energy and effort, sharpening the skills necessary to work well with conflict. Since these skills are yoked to habits of the inner life, train regularly and when no conflict is pressing.

## Cultivate Stability

**(3) Develop a Fully Embodied Presence.** Practice being attentive to posture, breath, senses, and physical presence, all indicators of how well we are working with conflict. Exercise using the body and the heart-mind as one in determining skillful ways forward.

**(4) Develop a Heart-Mind that is Tranquil and Alert.** Practice meditation, cultivating the ability to be present in difficult situations with grace. Build capacity to pause amidst high emotion, and to act with intention rather than out of impulse or habit.

**(5) Develop Self-Compassion.** Practice applying patience, understanding, and kindness to oneself. By doing this, we not only ease our own suffering, but we strengthen our ability to face conflict with less reactivity, and we increase our skill in treating our partners in conflict with similar patience, understanding, and kindness.

**(6) Develop Equanimity.** Practice welcoming pleasant experiences without grasping, welcoming unpleasant experiences without turning away, and welcoming neutral experiences without indifference. Nurture the ability to enter conflict with openness and spaciousness.

**(7) Develop Contentment.** Practice releasing the grip of envy, lust, and greed. Abandon clinging to sensual and material pleasures. Reduce the field of potential conflict by requiring little.

**(8) Develop Supportive Relationships.** Practice expanding the web that supports skillful engagement with conflict. Cultivate friendships with those who encourage wholesome perspectives and actions. Avoid the influence of those who encourage unwholesome perspectives and actions.

## Cultivate Awareness

**(9) Observe the Impermanence of Circumstances.** Practice noticing how the circumstances of a conflict are always shifting, including: primary parties, secondary parties, observers, issues and concerns, relationships, perspectives, emotions, resources, external conditions, and criteria for reconciliation. View conflict as a fluid system rather than a static condition.

**(10) Observe the Incompleteness of Solutions.** Practice noticing how our solutions to conflicts are unable to satisfy completely and indefinitely. Since we cannot account for all the changing circumstances and unforeseen consequences that arise over time, notice how our solutions naturally become unsatisfactory. Notice how focusing less on specific results and more on relationship quality provides a useful basis for working with this incompleteness.

**(11) Observe the Interdependence of Participants.** Practice noticing how all parties connected to a conflict – adversaries, representatives, allies, friends, relatives, communities, businesses, observers, mediators, etc. – are deeply intertwined, lacking separate selves, and functioning as one system. Notice how inaction, acts of harm, and acts of kindness, impact every participant in the system. Notice how the well-being of one is not separate from the well-being of all.

**(12) Observe the Consequences of Conduct.** Practice noticing how actions related to conflict unfold. Notice how certain actions (such as killing, stealing, and lying) often lead to burden and discontent, and how certain actions (such as generosity, patience, and kind speech) often lead to ease and freedom.

## Cultivate Challenging Perspectives

### **(13) Abandon Adherence to One's Current View.**

Practice not-knowing. Since our perspective on a conflict is always incomplete (due to our limited vantage point) and thoroughly biased (due to our unique set of life experiences), leave space for a change of mind and a change of heart. Leave space for better options to emerge.

### **(14) Explore while Suspending Judgment.**

Practice examining all aspects of a conflict with genuine interest. Bear witness to the many stories at hand, without clinging to or rejecting any one story. Be curious about difficult people and experiences. When judgment arises, investigate the beliefs, biases, and emotions that motivate our judgment.

### **(15) View Oneself as Equal to the Other.**

Practice seeing how we are equal to our partner in conflict: we both want to be happy, we both want to avoid suffering, and we both must weigh a variety of considerations in discerning the best path forward. Be alert to how our partner wants their needs met as much as we want our needs met.

### **(16) Immerse Oneself in the Other's Perspective.**

Practice clarifying how our partner in conflict sees the world, sees us, and sees this conflict. Look through their eyes, placing oneself in the context of their lifetime of experience, relationships, and lessons learned. Consider how we might approach this conflict if we were in their position.

**(17) View the Other as a Teacher.** Practice respecting the other as an important guide in our work to ease suffering. Identify how our partner in conflict provides us with powerful opportunities to cultivate intention, stability, awareness, challenging perspectives, and skillful action.

**(18) Shift Focus from the Offense to the System that Created It.** Practice shifting attention from the heat of the moment (troublesome events, people, and circumstances) to the underlying web of relationships, structures, institutions, and processes. View offenses, even blatant acts of malice, as the natural result of myriad causes and conditions.

## Cultivate Skills for Action

**(19) Pause and Reflect.** Practice restraint when provoked. When we feel an urgent need to criticize, defend, or retaliate, make time and space for reflection. Before re-engaging with the other, take stock of our physical body, emotions, thoughts, and options for proceeding.

**(20) Abstain from Actions that Reliably Enflame Conflict.** Practice not engaging in actions that are known to fuel conflict and increase suffering. Avoid harming and destroying life, taking what is not given, engaging in sexual misconduct, consuming intoxicants, and speaking in false, divisive, or harsh ways.

**(21) Overthrow the Angry Heart-Mind.** Practice breaking the grip of anger. Observe how being lost in anger fuels conflict and damages our relations and communications with others. When we notice anger arising within, apply antidotes to create an inner shift: renew our commitment to benefit others, return to practices that cultivate inner stability, explore challenging perspectives on the situation, offer generosity, etc.

### **(22) Energize the Compassionate Heart-Mind.**

Practice calling forth our intentions and commitments. As we face our partner in conflict, even in difficult times, recall our vision of serving others, doing no harm, wishing well, and working to ease suffering.

**(23) Focus on Relationship, Not Results.** Practice tending to the quality of the relationship we have with our partner in conflict. Abandon plans and subtle hopes to achieve any particular outcome. Instead, repair and nourish the relationship, clearing the way for a helpful plan to emerge.

**(24) Examine One's Own Role.** Practice reflecting on our own role in fostering and perpetuating the conflict. Acknowledge this role fully and openly.

**(25) Accept Full Responsibility.** Practice accepting full responsibility for addressing the conflict, for improving the quality of the relationship, and for creating opportunities for reconciliation. Rather than blaming others, or trying to control them, or waiting for them to change, acknowledge the myriad causes and conditions that hinder them from acting more skillfully at this time.

**(26) Proceed with an Uplifted Spirit.** Practice setting aside despair during the difficulties of conflict. If appropriate action is possible, we can proceed in the spirit of our vow to benefit others. If nothing can be done, we can offer all good wishes to our partners in conflict.

**(27) Offer Reciprocal Respect.** Practice being as protective and compassionate with our partners in conflict as we are with ourselves. Avoid acting toward them in ways that we personally find displeasing.

**(28) Disregard Offense.** Practice not internalizing a perceived offense. If the offense was not intended, release the perception and pay it no more attention. If the offense was intended, practice setting it aside and not accepting it.

**(29) Be at Ease with Some Adversity.** Practice reframing our attitude toward discomfort in conflict. Not every inconvenience is intolerable or warrants resistance. Not every insult or false accusation needs to be defended. In the spirit of our commitment to benefit others, try to approach discomfort with some equanimity and some openness to what we might learn.

**(30) Abandon the Intention to Harm.** Practice setting aside any intention to harm our partner in conflict. Even when we feel wronged, or when we feel some threat to our reputation or well-being, throw off the inclination to hurt, offend, humiliate, or retaliate. As we become aware of any hostility or ill will lingering within, apply the antidotes of loving-kindness and compassion.

**(31) Speak with Care.** Practice speaking gently, truthfully, with kind intent, and only when it seems to be beneficial. Refrain from speaking about the faults and errors of others. Speak plainly and with sensitivity to the temperament of our partner in conflict.

**(32) Offer Generosity.** Practice offering our resources to our partners in conflict. Share material resources, time, and attention. Give freely, with ease, and without concern for having enough.

**(33) Offer Forgiveness.** Practice offering forgiveness and pardon whenever our partner in conflict makes an apology or acknowledges their transgression.

**(34) Rejoice in the Good Fortune of the Other.** Practice being glad, as an expression of loving-kindness and harmony, when things go well for our partner in conflict.

**(35) Forgo Rejoicing When the Other is Harmed.** Practice letting go of any inclination to find joy when our partner in conflict suffers misfortune or harm.

**(36) Offer Praise When Praise is Due.** Practice offering praise to our partner in conflict whenever they speak or act well. Extend genuine appreciation for their positive attributes.

**(37) Undo the Conventions of Caste.** Practice being alert to how our modern caste system uses circumstances of birth (such as ethnicity, race, gender, and economic position) to bring unearned privilege to some and unearned disadvantage to others. Since this system is a primary fuel for human suffering and conflict, practice identifying its component habits and structures, dismantling what is harmful, and developing worthy alternatives.

**(38) Address Community Conflict in a Spirit of Harmony.** Practice coming together in concord to address conflict within the community. Apply the various practices described above to help the community discern a way to proceed with loving-kindness and compassion.

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