

Positive Conflict

Sulak Sivaraksa

Everyday we find ourselves in conflict situations, ranging from minor inconveniences to serious confrontations. Conflicts can flare up over backyard fences or national borders, over cleaning up the kitchen or cleaning up the environment. They can involve our most intimate relations or the briefest acquaintances.



Whenever people cannot tolerate each other's moral, religious or political differences, conflict is inevitable and often costly. But conflict can also open avenues of change and provide challenges. Conflict resolution skills do not guarantee a solution every time, but they can turn conflict into an opportunity for learning more about oneself and others. Violence and heated arguments, where people hurl abuse and become overwhelmed by their feelings, are sure signs of crisis.

During crises, normal behaviour is forgotten. Extreme gestures are contemplated and sometimes carried out. These are obvious clues that something is wrong. Conflicts can be positive or negative, constructive or destructive, depending on what we make of them. Buddhists know that everything is impermanent, everything is changing; but in many conflict situations, we forget and become attached to our views, refusing to let them go.

We tend to blame the other side alone for our problem. Insight into impermanence can allow us to alter the course of events simply by viewing them differently. We can turn our fights into fun. Transforming conflicts in a way is an art, requiring special skills. The key Buddhist term, skilful means (*upaya*), refers to just this kind of process. We must try to develop skilful means to understand conflict.

We must remember that crisis, tension, misunderstanding and discomfort, including our fights and personal differences, are part of life. It is a mistake to expect to avoid conflict all the time. The best we can do is to make conflicts less painful by learning to anticipate them and to manage them constructively. Conflict resolution depends on awareness.

(from *Seed of Peace: a Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society*, by Sulak Sivaraksa, Bangkok: Sathirakoses-Nagapradipa Foundation) Concern for democracy, human rights and accountable government, and the ability to inspire thousands of others in many different countries with such concern, have been a central strand in Sivaraksa's life-work. Recently he has given support to Burmese refugees in Thailand, being largely responsible for the famous Jungle University for fleeing Burmese students. A conversation with him in *Turning Wheel* magazine, entitled "Making Buddhism Radical" can be found at <http://www.bfp.org/sulak.html>