

Quarrels (1 of 5) Wisdom Through Calming

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Warm greetings from IMC. This Monday morning, we begin a new five-part theme. The topic this week will be quarrels – what the Buddha had to say about quarrels and disputes. The overall context for teaching this is that since the beginning of the year, I've been focusing on the teachings that emphasize practicing with challenges – how to be with them and practice with them.

One of the big challenges is the conflicts we have with other people and others in the world – quarrels, disputes, and hostilities. So that's the topic for this week. As world events take center stage, it seems that there's no shortage of growing divisiveness, quarrels, and disputes that people are living with or worried about. You will find it valuable to take a Buddhist perspective, which is a different perspective than usual on this theme.

The Buddha addressed quarrels and disputes quite a bit. As it is in our world, conflict was a common phenomenon in the ancient world. The disputes that came closest to the Buddha were within the religious communities of different spiritual seekers, practitioners, and teachers, where there was an active environment of debate in which people would participate in order to conquer their opponents.

In this competitive, quarrelsome environment of different religious teachings, one such person came to the Buddha to challenge him. He asked him in a belligerent way, "What is it that you teach?" The Buddha said, "I teach that by which we have no quarrels with anyone in the world." Hearing that, the person was disturbed, upset, and disgusted, and left right away, realizing that the Buddha would not engage in doctrinal quarrels and debates.

What the Buddha said is a profound thing: I teach that by which we are not in a quarrel with anybody in the world. The question is, what does quarreling mean? Quarreling is arguing with people about anything there is to argue about. Is there an alternative?

One of the primary ways the Buddha talks about quarrels is in personal terms – how we can find the source of quarrels in ourselves. What are the psychological conditions within and without that bring us to a situation where we are quarreling and arguing with people in a hostile way?

It's a little unsatisfying when the Buddha always points us back to ourselves, because aren't some quarrels interpersonal? To understand what's going on, we also have to find a way to engage interpersonally. If we don't confront people who are doing something unjust or wrong, will we just allow them to continue while we meditate, get calm, and check out?

I don't think that's what the Buddha is teaching. He was not someone who checked out. He was someone who was constantly showing up in his life, meeting and engaging people where they were. He did it with such great wisdom and care that his teachings were recorded and some of us still find ourselves inspired by him. He was an effective teacher.

There are a number of examples of different people who came to the Buddha and asked questions like, "Why is it that people quarrel?" One of the oldest versions of his answer might be from the earliest period in the Buddha's teaching career when his teaching wasn't yet highly developed. When someone asked that question, the Buddha described a very simple series of layers within us. The layers activate each other more and more until at the more activated states we end up quarreling. The Buddha described the conditions within us that have to be in place for us to be ready to quarrel.

Then the question arises, where does that condition come from, and what is the condition? The Buddha goes through deeper and deeper layers inside. One way of understanding these layers the Buddha describes is that they are layers of activation and reactivation. This is the way we get reactive. The more activated we are, the more reactive we become, and the more we're triggered to become even more reactive.

One of the effects this has on our attention is that the more activated we are, the more constricted our attention is. It becomes more focused and narrowed on a particular concern, topic, or perspective through which we look at the world. We might look at the world only through the perspective of our hurt, anger, or hostility. We might look at it only through the perspective that one person is wrong, or another is evil, or we are wrong. With reactivity the focus gets narrower and narrower, and the thinking becomes tighter and more constricted.

When the Buddha describes the different layers of activation, he is also describing layers where we can get calmer and calmer, more and more settled. If we understand it this way, then we see that the Buddha always looks at reactivity from the point of view of how we can practice with it, not so we can become calm. The point is not to become calm or peaceful and go on with our business, not caring about the fact that people are harming us or harming others, or that we have differences of opinion. Rather, as we get calm and centered enough, we have available to us a much more intelligent, creative way of thinking, where our thinking won't be caught up and constricted as it is when we are focusing on something and reactive to it.

Here, our thinking is not part and parcel of the reactivity that we have. Rather than a reactive consideration of the conflict, we have access to deeper wellsprings of understanding, wisdom, and sensitivity that take much more into account. When we're deeply relaxed, a broader, wider field of concern and consideration is possible than when we're tense and everything has gotten constricted.

In earlier descriptions of the personal genesis of quarrels inside of us, the Buddha says that for quarreling to be present, an immediate condition must be present. This relates to this teaching; elsewhere the Buddha described different conditions. Don't take this as being the final or only word – maybe describing it this way had to do with the particular person he was talking to. The principle is what I want to emphasize here, not the accuracy of each of these points.

Here, when someone asked the Buddha, "Where does quarreling come from? What is the condition from which it comes?" the Buddha answered that it comes from liking and not liking, having preferences about things. We like something, we don't like something, we prefer one thing, or we prefer something else. If we can relax our quarreling, disputes, and argumentativeness, we might be able to notice that underneath that we have a strong preference for things we want and don't want, like and don't like.

Then the question is, where does that come from within us? If we drop down another layer, there is a calmer state. From there, in order to have preferences or liking and not liking, the condition is desire. Not all desires are wrong and not all liking and disliking is wrong, but they are activated states. We notice that as we relax the liking and not liking, we have a preference, a desire – not for one thing over another, but a deeper form of desire that is calmer than the activated state of acting on liking and not liking.

Where does desire come from? The answer is that it comes from the experience of pleasantness or unpleasantness, comfort or discomfort. Being present for that level of pleasantness and unpleasantness is a calmer, more open state of awareness.

Quarrels constrict attention. Liking and not liking are less constricted. There's more movement in attention and more openness. When we drop further down there is simple desire and the awareness that we have desire. Then we're not caught up in the object of desire – the object that we like and don't like. When we're more settled and relaxed we see we have desire.

If we relax the desire, we see that we're operating in relation to things being pleasant and unpleasant. There's nothing necessarily wrong with pleasant or unpleasant. What's nice about it is that we're much more settled when we're tuning into the direct experience here and now of how things are pleasant and unpleasant.

Where do pleasant and unpleasant come from? The Buddha says they come from sense contact – the sense feelings that we have in our body. There's sense contact and from that, there's pleasant and unpleasant. From

pleasant and unpleasant come desires. From desires come liking and not liking – preferences. Once we have likes and preferences, from there we get quarrels when we can't get what we want.

This is a very simple, maybe oversimplified discussion, but the important point is that we can move down through the layers and come to a place where we are aware, relaxed, and open, with present-moment awareness. If we are mindfully present with an open awareness of sense contacts as they come and go, then we don't have a constricted mind. We have a greater sensitivity.

From there we can tap into what the Buddha called “contemplation or thinking from the womb,” from a deeper, gestational source within. This is not a reactive way of thinking. It comes from deep wisdom, consideration, openness, and sensitivity. From that place, we can consider the conflict from a very different perspective than if we do it when we are caught up in the argument and yelling at people.

The reason the Buddha focuses on really taking a deep look at ourselves is not to dismiss the fact there is conflict. Rather, that's where we can do the most important work to come to a place where we are ready to discuss the conflict with someone in the best state of mind and heart possible.

This is one of the reasons why meditation is so useful, if meditation helps us to deactivate. We diffuse and disarm ourselves from the intensity of the anger or upset, which could be harmful. We're not trying to deny ourselves or deny what's happening, but to come from the best place possible.

That's the beginning. I hope that the discussion this week on quarrels will make our world, at least the local world around us, a more peaceful and compassionate world. Thank you very much for being here.