

Ten Reflections (9 of 10) Reconciliation

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Hello, and welcome to the ninth talk on the Ten Reflections. Today the topic is reconciliation. Tomorrow it will be healing. I associate these two topics with becoming whole, both interpersonally and for oneself. In this holistic approach, we are not divided through fear, greed, or hatred. Reconciliation is an inclusion through coming together and meeting. I think that reconciliation's root meaning in Latin is to come together, to meet.

It might be nice to go through these ten reflections briefly. I connect them in a sequence, with a logic of how one follows the other. Of course, there are other ways in which they can be arranged. It is not required that they follow this sequence, but I delight in this arrangement and the story it tells.

Finding meaning and purpose in this life gives us a guide for what we're going to do. It is important then to be able to act, to have agency. Agency requires a certain degree of autonomy. Our agency is not something that is permitted by or enabled by other people. We're not dependent on others; we have an autonomous ability to live a life of meaning and purpose.

As we act singularly for ourselves or together with others, we get to know ourselves in relation to what's important for us, what drives us, the purpose and meaning behind the actions we do.

In this process, we can have a clear sense of identity, of who we are, that is very important. If we're lost to ourselves and not sure who we are, that lack of identity can be a source of all kinds of challenges. In Buddhist thought our identity doesn't come from some inherent essence of who we are or how we're born. The essence that Buddhism bases our lives on is based on how we live and act. The key in Buddhism is acting ethically. The ethical principles and the virtues we live by become our primary identity.

Based on our identity we can have dignity – a sense of personal value, knowing that we're dedicated to not harming anyone. In fact, we might be dedicated to the opposite, to benefiting self and others.

With this dedication towards action for the benefit of others and for oneself, then we enter into the world of community. Just as identity is shifting and changing, community is not static and fixed. Community also morphs depending on the people we are with and how we are relating to them. Our sense of community can become more and more open and inclusive of the people we feel part of. Our ethical actions help create a healthy sense of community.

With our sense of community, we get to know people in a deeper way and feel kinship. When we experience the common humanity that we share, we feel like we're kin – we're all family. As a result, when there is conflict or fractured relationships and divisiveness in society, we can have a dedication to and a huge need to come back into unity and wholeness together, back into a sense of community and kinship.

As this process unfolds, the work of reconciliation and healing is involved. I think of reconciliation as being the interpersonal work, and healing as being the deep personal work that happens in relation to community and others. Some people might not see these two terms as so separate.

Reconciliation is a very central movement in Buddhism, maybe without using that exact word. I would say the Buddha put tremendous emphasis on the activity of uniting people who are divided and supporting the unification of people who are united. One of the definitions of wrong speech is that it "divides the people who are

united and keeps divided the people who are already divided.” This principle is built into the precepts and the Eightfold Path. The whole foundation of Buddhist practice is an orientation to living a life that is concerned with the sense of unity we have with others – the sense of coming together in harmony.

In the Buddha’s life, the clearest way of building community was in his own monastic community – finding a way for them to live together in harmony and unity, not divided. In Buddhism, people who create a schism in the monastic community receive the most severe consequence in monastic life: they are no longer allowed to be a monastic. This is because creating unity is such an important thing.

Creating harmony takes work. I have been directly involved with conflict resolution work in groups. I was chair of a conflict committee for some fifteen years and sat as a mediator for lots of conflicts. I can tell you that it’s a lot of work. But it’s really worthwhile work because it is practice work. It is Buddhist practice to enter into the world of our relationships with others and get to the bottom of the relationships, understanding ourselves and others well, finding common ground, and working with our divisiveness, anger, and resentment. It can take a lot of time.

However, the consequences in the long term tend to be much better than remaining divisive. Divisiveness and anger can have immediate consequences – pushing people away, for example – but they can also have long-term negative consequences. So it’s better to invest upfront in the time for reconciliation than to take the easy, simple, and short way of anger, resentment, and hostility, which may have repercussions for a lifetime for some people.

It is possible to reconcile. In Buddhism, a huge part of the process of reconciliation is not necessarily looking for forgiveness or apology. There’s certainly a time and place for that. But in Buddhism, the emphasis is first and foremost to be able to do some introspection to understand the pain and downside of living with resentment or anger, even sometimes being attached to hurt or being a victim. Instead, we want to look and see and, in a healthy and appropriate way, begin to dissolve the anger we have, let go of the resentments we hold onto, and then cultivate a sincere and authentic sense of goodwill for others.

The movement of letting go of anger and cultivating goodwill can look a lot like forgiveness. But in some ways, it’s simpler because it doesn’t require something from someone else. It doesn’t require the complexity of forgiveness that sometimes exists. Forgiveness is a form of generosity – giving, forgiving – which I think can be quite beautiful. But the Buddhist approach (there are other approaches) is to do this work for yourself and then be in conversation with others.

In some of the places in the world where there have been political reconciliation processes, the word “truth” has been associated. There has to be truth-telling. Things have to come out in the open for reconciliation to happen. Once we do our own work and are no longer holding resentments, holding ourselves apart, being critical of others, and seeing them through angry eyes, then maybe we’re ready to speak the truth. Then we can talk about what happened – the pain, the hurt, and the difficulties we’ve had – but without attacking people or poking them with mean statements.

It’s profound work to look for reconciliation. It’s not always possible because there have to be two people willing to be part of the work. But it’s certainly impossible if both people don’t want to do it. If one person does the inner work to create the conditions – the openness, kindness, friendliness, and goodwill – then sometimes other people will come along in time. It can take a long time before people are ready for some kind of reconciliation, some kind of meeting to work things out. But then we prepare ourselves for that and make sure that we’re clean, that we’re not holding onto something that’s going to make it difficult when the time finally comes.

A reason why reconciliation is such an important thing for Dharma practitioners is that if we are contributing to divisiveness and separation, then that’s a way of dividing ourselves. It shuts down part of us. It is a way of living in which we’re not complete or whole because we’re not including all of ourselves in the field of awareness. To become free and to use mindfulness to become freer and freer, we have to meet, confront, and work with the places where we’re divided, caught, or stuck and tight.

It’s part of the wonderful gift of mindfulness practice that sooner or later we have to meet the parts of ourselves that have been buried or closed, where we are unwilling to look at our hurt, anger, or resentments, and are

unwilling to think about dissolving them or working through them. It's the work of a lifetime sometimes. But it's such a great thing to be part of reconciliation and social healing.

What experience of conflict, resentment, or divisiveness have you been part of?

And what is your interest in reconciliation? How might working on the divisiveness that exists in families, among friends, and in communities, be important for you personally? How is working through these things part of a life effort that has tremendous meaning and purpose?

Now we are back at the beginning of these ten reflections that begin with meaning and purpose. Reconciliation is part of a very meaningful and purposeful life.

In summary, the ten reflections in chaplaincy are: meaning, purpose, agency, autonomy, harmony, reconciliation, healing, dignity, community, and kinship.

Thank you very much.