

Diane Hamilton
Week 1, *A Zen Approach to Conflict*
October 6, 2014
“How Do You Cope with Conflict?”

Hello and welcome to this online Tricycle course. This is called “A Zen Approach to Conflict.” This is a course that we designed to help you bring communication and conflict resolution skills into your mindfulness awareness practice.

As we contemplate how we are growing and evolving, one of the things that we become aware of is that the world is faced with three or four really intractable problems. Look at climate change, for instance. Or look at the problems of poverty and economic justice, or issues related to health around the world, like HIV, AIDS and other diseases. One of the most difficult challenges we have as human beings is our tendency to go to war. If we look at racial and ethnic strife, it is one of the most threatening problems that we have on the planet. There are more people who are injured and killed through our fighting with each other than through forms of disease or adversity.

When we think about our work as practitioners of awareness and those of us working to become more conscious, one of the things that we want to learn is how to work with conflict in a way that is awake, mindful, and filled with creativity, or a way that actually brings much more depth and awareness to our relationships. To the extent that we can do that with one another, we’re going to be able to influence our communities and, to some extent, address this issue on a much larger scale. It’s a really important set of skills. However, when we go to meditation retreats, we spend a lot of time in silence. We’re taught to keep our thoughts to ourselves—particularly our nasty thoughts—and, you know, hopefully not create too much conflict with the other people. What we want to do is actually move one step further. If we neglect to include conversation and communication, we can’t really practice our skills and we can’t really become the healthy, invigorated, communities that we want to be—communities that include our sameness and our deep sense of unity as well as our differences. Learning how to use these skills is a contribution to our human evolution. It’s important for the communities you’re in and it’s going to give you much more freedom in your life.

Secondly, conflict is one of the ways in which the universe creates. Even if we get good at our skill set, we’re still going to encounter moments of disturbance, conflict, difference and disruption because it’s one of the ways in which the universe creates. Another opportunity that’s available to you when conflict arises is the opportunity to actually make change. If you’re in a relationship and suddenly there’s a lot of struggle, it may be that that relationship needs to grow. It may be that there are things that need to be talked about that you haven’t talked about before. It might be that it’s time to end a relationship and move on.

Diane Hamilton
Week 1, *A Zen Approach to Conflict*
October 6, 2014
“How Do You Cope with Conflict?”

The conflicts that arise also indicate the possibility that we can disrupt that status quo, bring new information into our situations and make changes to our lives that are very informative. It's important to see conflict not only as a problem to be solved, but also as an opportunity to be engaged. It's very important we look at the creativity. One of the downsides of that, though, is the hardwiring in our body. As soon as we feel a conflict, we are basically designed to flee, fight or freeze. We have very old systems in the body that give us a very deep response. To learn to turn towards conflict and relate to it as an opportunity that has possibility—as an opportunity that carries energy and can be enlivening and invigorating—is actually a counter-intuitive move. It's like that old adage ‘turning into the skid in an automobile.’ It becomes really fruitful when we learn how to do that, and there's nothing more fun and exciting than working with people who actually know how to do it. Instead of turning away together, we learn to turn toward; we investigate that conflict, work with the energy of it, have a tussle and then make changes. As a result, we can have deeper relationships, become more authentic, more trustable and have more bandwidth for being human. There's great possibility and creativity in our conflicts as well.

One of the first things that we have to do is develop a mindfulness-awareness practice. Now many of you who are in the audience may already have meditation practices or engage mindfulness in different ways, but learning how to become mindful of what happens to you when a conflict arises is a very interesting and useful way to use your attention. We will often react to a conflict rather than paying attention to the nature of the thoughts when they arise. In other words, they may be filled with blame or accusation, or they may be running for cover or making a new excuse. Mostly I'm just responding habitually with no sense at all of what really is going on for me until I can find safety and calm my system. Everything that happens prior to that tends to be somehow unnoticed. We are actually immersed in it so deeply that we're not able to take a perspective on these perspectives that are arising. We're not able to look at what actual thoughts are happening or identify the emotions. Is it embarrassment? Is it anger? Is it frustration? Is it fear? What emotional states arise? Then we tend to be dumped, if you will; the body has such a deep response and so many chemical reactions happen that we're just simply subject to what happens in our bodies. We can learn how to slow that down and use mindfulness and awareness to track our thoughts—to identify, name and regulate our emotional states—and to work with the incredible life force and energy that surges forth when your nervous system is stimulated into fight or flight. Those are big challenges in terms of mindfulness awareness.

I'd like to just take a moment and, as you're in the audience right now, try to recall the last time you were in a conflict and what your response was. Just think for a minute, if you will, about the very last time that a conflict arose, either with a partner, a spouse or someone at work, and what is it that you thought. What did you feel? What did you do?

Diane Hamilton
Week 1, *A Zen Approach to Conflict*
October 6, 2014
“How Do You Cope with Conflict?”

For most of us, there are three very deeply engrained habitual patterns that we have. Interestingly enough, these three patterns correspond to what's known in the Buddhist tradition as the three poisons. The first response is that we may have a habit of avoiding. For some of us, the minute a conflict arises, the first thing we do is lower our eyes, back away, seek cover, and hope it goes away. Avoidance is a very useful and powerful strategy. If you look at the natural world and the concept of survival, just seeking cover is a wonderful way to avoid—like if you have a predator circling overhead, you can find a shady spot and hide in there—but in terms of your relationships, constantly avoiding can be a terrible bad habit. It's a bad habit because, well, think for a moment. What is the problem with avoidance? The problem with avoidance is that we disappear ourselves and, in disappearing ourselves, we lose vitality in our relationships. We lose presence to ourselves. We may actually become depressed or just simply lose contact with our feeling states, our beliefs and our values. We may not really even know how we feel about things. We're so deeply habituated to withdrawing that we don't even take the time to think and feel and wonder what something is, if it matters, how it matters and what it means. We just disappear.

Unfortunately, what happens when we disappear ourselves is that other people begin to disappear us. In your family, for example, people won't just go to you with problems. People won't have a conversation with you if you're going to shut down in the middle of it. That can result in a lot of frustration with your partners or in your colleagues at work. It might even mean that in meetings, people start to literally look past you to someone else in order to hear how someone else feels about a situation that's arisen. Avoidance is a very powerful and positive deterrent to conflict when it's used properly and it's a terrible habitual pattern. In the Buddhist tradition, or in the Zen tradition, we talk about it as ignorance. It's basically turning away from a situation and saying to ourselves 'I wish this weren't happening' or 'this shouldn't be happening.' Avoidance is something we really want to pay attention to. That was the first poison—avoidance.

The second poison, in the Zen tradition, is called either passion or greed. It's important that we understand what is meant here because it actually corresponds to a particular style of conflict as well. If we think about what is meant by passion or greed, it really has to do with grasping onto something, or holding onto something or clinging. The style of conflict that corresponds to this poison is being overly accommodating. Think for a moment whether or not you're a person who, when conflict arises, often yields or makes allowances for the other, or adapts yourself or shapes the situation such that the other person is comfortable.

When I used to teach conflict resolution at the University, often I would ask people about the three different styles. The second style of accommodation was often the one that many students felt they did too frequently. So, in other words, the tendency to adapt in order to hold on corresponds to the

Diane Hamilton
Week 1, *A Zen Approach to Conflict*
October 6, 2014
“How Do You Cope with Conflict?”

poison. You could think of it as a kind of emotional clinging. If a difference arises between you and me, I'm going to quickly adapt because I don't want to lose you. I don't want you to be distressed. I don't want you to feel alienated from me. That feels so threatening that I'll do whatever it is that you want or need from me in order to keep the relationship stable. I'm not going to let the difference build up. I'm not going to let the tension build up. I'm just going to constantly adapt to keep everything smooth.

Now, this can be an incredibly generous thing to do. We all like to be around people who are generous, people who will take care of us, nurture us, adapt and make it easy for us to go about our business. When that's your habitual pattern—when something is so much your go-to that you don't have other options—you simply always go down that road. Accommodating has the same drawbacks that avoidance has. Once you lose your relationship with yourself, you don't necessarily know what your own preferences are. You're so used to adapting that you may have difficulty standing up for your preferences— even when they're really important to your own life. You might be in that dangerous position of becoming somewhat depressed, of not being able to capture your own life force, your own sense of what's right or your own sense of what really matters to you.

There's an additional problem at work as well. Since you're accommodating, everyone likes you—you're a nice person and all—but they may not trust you entirely to tell the truth. They may not trust you to take a stand when you need to and they may not be sure that they can count on you if there's some sort of situation that needs leadership, direction or someone to fight the good fight. In other words, because you behave the same way in each situation, there's a quality of authenticity and a quality of trust that is compromised. So, the second poison has that same downside that the first poison has. However, if you're overly accommodating, people will tend to regard you as nice. So you've got that going for you.

The third poison is the poison of manifestation hatred. In the conflict resolution world, we refer to this poison as competitive. When a difference arises, or if there's a conflict or struggle, your first impulse is to fight. Your first impulse is to want to prevail. Your first impulse is to want to dominate or somehow win the situation. It's an awesome response if you're playing competitive sports. Fantastic. If you're in business, it works really well with your competitor, but it doesn't work so well with your colleagues. It doesn't work so well with your superior, either.

The upside of aggression is that where there's aggression, there's life force. Right? So we'll notice that competitive athletes, as far as we know, are not really suffering from, well—let's just say they're not taking anti-depressants. I don't really know what to think about that. Are they? I'm not

Diane Hamilton
Week 1, *A Zen Approach to Conflict*
October 6, 2014
“How Do You Cope with Conflict?”

sure. When people are competitive, they tend to have a lot of raw energy, a lot of life force and many resources in terms of galvanizing themselves. That said, there isn't that tendency to disappear. There isn't that tendency to be disregarded by others or disrespected. However, if you respond constantly with a competitive attitude, people will start avoiding you. People won't talk to you at times because they know it's going to be an encounter. They're going to have to feel that and, to some degree, you're going to be cut off from conversations that are important to you. You may not get information that you need to make good decisions, and in the long-run, people will develop that quality of walking on egg-shells. They may become avoidant because they simply don't want to encounter that push. That push is there on every subject, every time. Because it's deeply held and familiar, it just means that other people are going to become familiar with having to encounter that. They're not going to want to. That's something you really need to pay attention to if you have a competitive style.

The idea is that we come to know these three basic styles. We also learn what our style is and become familiar with it. Over time, we then start to become acquainted with the styles of others. At that point, we can really start to become more skillful with how and when we avoid, when we engage, how we engage, and when we fight the good fight.

I want to just point to one last style, which is actually a combination of two. This is the passive-aggressive style. Many people are almost artistic in their capacity to use passive-aggressiveness. If you're smiling to yourself, you know what I'm talking about right now. Passive-aggressiveness is actually a combination of avoidance and aggression. You don't want to be noticed, but you still want to prevail. Right? Now the interesting thing about being passive-aggressive is that there's actually a deep relational impulse, meaning that people who are passive-aggressive don't go out of a relationship the same way an avoidant person does. They actually stay, but they communicate in very subtle and sometimes complex ways, ways in which we can tune into and feel. Dealing with the passive-aggressive person can be extremely frustrating because there's no way to have a really direct conversation. At the same time you may feel like, “am I crazy?” or “what's really going on here?” If you're the passive-aggressive person you may feel that you've succeeded, but haven't succeeded in a way that anybody is really going to notice. There are all kinds of problems in that particular style. It's just something for you to think about and reflect on.

In closing, I want to just remind you that the conflict is an opportunity for us to grow as human beings. It is also an opportunity to make changes. It's the way we include difference and use difference as an energetic and energizing quality in our relationships. It opens us up to more authenticity, more depth and more trust ability, but we need to become deeply aware of our

Diane Hamilton
Week 1, *A Zen Approach to Conflict*
October 6, 2014
“How Do You Cope with Conflict?”

conflict style. We need to use our attention, our awareness and our ability to watch our patterns in order to actually cultivate these skills. So mindfulness awareness practice is key to this.

Let's all take a moment to think about our conflict styles. Think about those three poisons, or all four, and reflect a little bit on who you are in conflict. What is your go-to? What do you usually do when a conflict arises? Just take a few minutes to reflect on that. Notice what happens in your thoughts. Notice what you feel in your emotional state and, most importantly, what strategy you have for coping with it. In our next section we're going to be looking at how to take your own side first in the conflict.