



# Loving- Kindness as a Strategy of Conflict Transformation: An Exploration

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## ABSTRACT

Every individual at some time or the other get into a conflict situation as conflicts are natural part of our lives. The real issue is how we handle the conflicts. There are times we handle differences or conflicts aggressively which leads to the aggravation of the situation. However, if we handle these disputes constructively, there can be transformation of relationships. It is in context, exploring the role of loving-kindness as a strategy of conflict transformation is significant. In this paper, an attempt will be made to delve on the finer points of loving-kindness and how it can be a powerful strategy for conflict transformation.

**Keywords:** Loving- kindness, conflict transformation, self-love, self-compassion, self-kindness

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The excessive *technolization* of our lives, the unbridled pursuit for material goals and the mad craze to achieve everything no matter what path one takes is leading to disconnection between individuals. It is not just with other individuals like parents, siblings, friends, and others whom we may know, there is real disconnect between one's real self. Informal discussions with many individuals reveals how they are lost, they have forgotten on exactly who they are and their real purpose of life. They are confused on what they want of life and cannot recollect when they last heard their little inner voice. A very large number of individuals face increasing inner conflicts and this reflects in their relationships with others. It can be measured by the increasing toxicity and breakdown in relationships. It is in this backdrop it is important to explore on how different strategies can be encouraged and nurtured which leads to reduction in the toxicity,

focus on deeper connections and promote wellbeing. Instead of relying on mechanical processes of resolving disputes, strategies which contribute to inner and outer well-being, and deep and authentic transformation of relationship needs to be nurtured. It is in this context, this paper aims to explore how loving-kindness can be an important pathway to plug the loving and kindness deficit in the world. Through in-depth conversations with young people after sharing with them the notion of loving-kindness, an attempt will be made to delve on how important it is for these youngsters to assimilate its principles in their lives.

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## Understanding loving-kindness

The Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh has beautifully described the on what exactly is loving-kindness and I think it can be the guiding principle on how we can encourage individuals around the world to practice it for a joyful world. He says, “The first element of true love is loving-kindness. The essence of loving-kindness is being able to offer happiness. You can be the sunshine for another person. You can’t offer happiness until you have it for yourself. So build a home inside by accepting yourself and learning to love and heal yourself. Learn how to practice mindfulness in such a way that you can create moments of happiness and joy for your own nourishment. Then you have something to offer the other person” (<https://tnhmeditation.org/loving-kindness/>)

Thich Nhat Hanh further notes, “True love” is based in understanding.” The better you understand yourself, all the yourselves that have been over the years — including your “ancestral selves — the more natural it will be to have lovingkindness for yourself (and thus others). The greater the understanding, the easier it will be to put down that club that most of us carry around to use to pound on ourselves (and others). (<https://orderofinterbeing.org/docs/Conflict-Guide.pdf>)

As we see from the explanations of Thich Nhat Hanh, loving-kindness elevates an individual to a higher plane of personhood as it starts with loving oneself, being kind to oneself and then being the instrument of loving and showing kindness towards others. It also starts by creating moments of happiness and joyfulness for oneself so that this goes on to be a catalyst to create happiness and joy for others. On other hand, if we are unable to practice self-care, self-compassion, self-love and self-kindness, we will get entrapped in a vicious cycle of inner conflict which will further contribute to conflicts with others.

The starting points of loving-kindness are empathy and compassion- both towards oneself and towards others. If we can’t practice empathy and compassion towards ourselves, it would be difficult to practice loving-kindness. It is also the other way out,

without practicing loving-kindness, there cannot be compassion and equanimity.

A perusal of different literature on loving-kindness underlines how it contributes to not just the wellbeing of an individual but of others too. For instance the Visuddhimagga points out, “The characteristic of loving-kindness is to promote wellbeing. Its function is to prefer wellbeing. Its manifestation is the removal of annoyance. Its proximate cause is seeing the loveliness of beings. It succeeds when it makes ill will subside, and it fails when it produces selfish affection.”

Further, Crowley (2016) explaining the benefits of practicing loving-kindness underlines, “Loving-kindness helps us to build a reservoir within ourselves so that when we face adversity, an enemy, we are more able to be present without adding to our suffering. If we feel we are depleted and exhausted, we are more likely to snap or numb ourselves and less likely to bounce back from a challenge with resilience.”

As can be seen from the understanding of loving-kindness, it can be ascertained on how an individual’s mind can be purified by practicing it with utmost sincerity. Also as practicing it leads to inner peace; it helps to develop resilience and inner calmness, even in difficult situations. Further, in situations when one finds oneself angry, individuals will be able to develop deep reflective abilities and try to unearth the real reasons for the triggers. Deep reflection of risks of uncontrolled anger and other difficult situations can help an individual reduce their levels of stress and anxiety. This is directly related to not only their mental wellbeing but also physical wellbeing.

Here it can be underlined that when an individual starts to practice self-love, self-kindness, self-compassion, and self-empathy, hence loving-kindness, they are expected to nurture kind and gentle thoughts and ideas. It leads to the reduction to the feelings of negativity towards oneself and towards others. It also entails sincere wish for others to be happy, free from problems, and sufferings. Also, as our thoughts and ideas are the primary form of our communication, practicing gentleness

and kindness leads to such traits being reflected in our communication with others. It is through the practice of loving-kindness we can nurture the habit of using nonviolent communication in all aspects of our communicative efforts. This is one form of practicing loving-kindness. The other form is through altruistic actions when individuals who practice it reaches out to help others and gives back to the society.

### **How practicing loving-kindness helps in conflict transformation**

Lederach (2014) explains conflict transformation as, “Conflict transformation is to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships.” He underlines the centrality of relationships in conflict transformation as he points out, “Like the heart in the body, conflicts flow from and return to relationships.”

In the transformative approach, conflicts should not be seen as a negative thing; instead it should be seen as an opportunity to grow and learn. In this context, Lederach (2014) says, “Conflict also creates life: through conflict we respond, innovate, and change. Conflict can be understood as the motor of change, that which keeps relationships and social structures honest, alive, and dynamically responsive to human needs, aspirations, and growth.” He further notes in this context, “Conflict transformation pursues the development of change processes which explicitly focus on creating positives from the difficult or negative. It encourages greater understanding of underlying relational and structural patterns while building creative solutions that improve relationships. Its bias is that this is possible, that conflict is opportunity.”

According to Lederach, dialogue is critical part of the process of conflict transformation. He points out, “Dialogue is needed to provide access to, a voice in, and constructive interaction with, the ways we formalize our relationships and in the ways our

organizations and structures are built, respond, and behave.”

The overarching goal of conflict transformation is minimization of the conflict and the maximization of the personal growth and well-being of the individuals involved at all levels including emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual. It aims to plug the breakdown in communication and open opportunities for healthy dialogues and interactions while also working on the fears related to emotions and interdependence in the relationship. The thrust is to find nonviolent methods to finish the adversarial differences.

With these principles of conflict transformation in the backdrop and with the goal of positive transformation of the relationship between the conflicting parties, it would be worthwhile to explore how practicing loving-kindness can be a powerful strategy for transformation of disputes.

The central idea of loving-kindness is not just to practice self-care, but it also about thinking sincerely about the well-being of others and their happiness. It is an expression of deep compassion for the other. So, when we are nurturing loving-kindness as our habit, we are actually being more aware on the essence of human interdependence and essential unity of all beings. From the very point when we start realizing the nature of our interconnectedness and how each one of us are dependent on each other, we will start seeing the goodness in others. This helps us to reframe the adversarial differences, transform the negative narrative to a positive one and work towards the transformation of the relationship.

In this context, it would be apt to point out what Mahatma Gandhi was stressing on the essential unity of human beings. He said:

*“I do not believe...that an individual may gain spiritually and those who surround him suffer. I believe in advaita, I believe in the essential unity of man and, for that matter, of all that life’s. Therefore, I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him and, if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent. (Young India, 4-12-1924)*

Hence, it can be argued that when we are sensitive and aware of the essential unity of all beings and genuinely think of other's well-being including that of nature and other beings, we are developing our own resilience to conflict situations. Also, we are not seeing our adversaries as our enemies; instead we are seeing them as a human being who is also capable of being compassionate and loved.

As practicing loving-kindness entails nurturing gentle and kind thoughts for not only oneself but also for others, it contributes to removal of annoyance. In situations of conflicts, there are elements of annoyance between the conflicting parties. For conflict transformation, removal of this annoyance is important. By being able to practice loving-kindness, these annoyances which are the cause of ill-will and differences can be removed. As these annoyances starts to end, the negative narratives will start to transformation to positive ones.

When individuals are able to practice loving-kindness, they are able to see the '*loveliness of beings*', even in situations of serious differences. There is deep respect for human dignity, greater understanding of perspectives of others and a readiness to accept the positions of others. It can be argued that for ordinary people it may be difficult and challenging to see the '*loveliness*' in their adversaries. However, when individuals start nurturing the principles of loving-kindness with utmost, it would be easier to see the '*loveliness*' in the people with whom they have differences. The negativities that are nurtured towards the adversary begins to melt and it is easier for the individual to see the side of the story of the adversaries and the reasons of their unmet needs.

Further, as practicing loving-kindness entails involving in acts of self-compassion, self-love, and self-kindness, it helps individuals to experience inner peace and is able to resolve inner conflicts. One is able to understand one's own unmet needs and tries to resolve it. A calmer self helps in addressing the issues of differences and conflicts in a positive way which contributes to the transformation of the conflict. Also it would further contribute towards

the depletion of the space for ill-will towards one's opponent. With depletion of space for ill-will, new possibilities emerge for constructive conflict transformation.

In the context of the different dimensions of loving-kindness, it can be argued that by nurturing these, individuals can contribute towards healthy communication ecosystems. In conflict situations, there is negative or dysfunctional communication between the disputing parties. The aim of conflict transformation is to change this negative communication to positive communication. An individual who is at peace with herself/himself and uses strategies of compassion, love and kindness in her/his communicative efforts will find it easier to transform the negative communication to a positive one. Through this process of transformation, space for healthy and constructive dialogues opens up; this is significant for ending the dispute. In fact practicing loving-kindness can help individuals to nurture nonviolent communication at different levels- the intrapersonal level, interpersonal level and during interactions in institutions. It will also help individuals being non-judgmental and avoid stereotyping. This would entail being non-judgmental to oneself and also towards others. All these are essential elements for conflict transformation.

## CONCLUSION

Kundu and Shah (2004) encapsulate the essence of loving-kindness and the strength of nurturing love and kindness in the elevation of personhood. They note:

*Let's all think of kindness as our strength, as a symbol of love, courage and wisdom. Let's appreciate the good in ourselves as it would help us to look at the good in others. While we search for the real happiness within ourselves, let us work with others in finding their own happiness. We also believe that each one of us should aim to practice the art and science of expressing gratitude. It not only helps us remain positive and lifts our spirits but also is a step to practice loving-kindness.*

These profound thoughts on the pathways to practice loving-kindness offers important guide posts for transformation of conflicts. In a chaotic world today when individuals are driven towards crass materialism and achieving success at any cost, even though it could entail using unethical means, encouraging the practice of loving-kindness is significant for the happiness and wellbeing of not only individuals but also the society at large.

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