

**From Positionality to Relationality: A Buddhist-Oriented Relational View  
of Conflict Escalation and its Transformation\***

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**Abstract**

Through a theoretical analysis, this paper suggests that the Buddhist philosophy and psychology offer a unique contribution to our understanding of conflict escalation and the potential for its transformation from a relational point of view. In particular, it presents an in-depth analysis of conflict escalation, applying the Buddhist Four Noble Truths and Twelve Links models. With the help of these models, it analyzes the psychological process that invokes the escalation of conflict, resulting in what is considered “suffering” (Duhkha) in Buddhist thought, seen also as lack of relational awareness. The paper demonstrates how a Buddhist-oriented view of conflict adds value to current scholarship of relational conflict resolution and has the potential to help conflict specialists transform adversity into dialogue. Furthermore, it argues that the suggested framework can help scholars and practitioners who implement Mindfulness practices into ADR processes assist disputants cultivate relational awareness.

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**Introduction**

Conflict and its transformation have been mostly analyzed in the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) literature from an individualistic standpoint. The underpinnings of the individualistically-oriented frameworks have as their foundation a perception of the self, stemming from Aristotelian philosophy and reinforced through Descartes’ philosophy, that emphasizes separateness, autonomy, individuality, and self-interestedness (Bush & Folger, 1994; Gergen, 1999). However, in recent decades many scholars in philosophy (Seigel, 2005; Taylor 1989;), feminist theory (e.g. Gilligan, 1993; McClain, 1992), psychotherapy (for example

Mitchell, 1993; 2000; Mitchell & Aaron, 1999), social-constructionist thinking (E.g. Gergen, 1999, 2009; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 1993), political science (e.g. Avineri & De-Shalit, 1992; Sandel, 1982, 1996), and other disciplines have argued that “the self” should be understood from a relational perspective. Different understandings of relationality offer different understandings of the “self”, though they all share the setting of a radical alternative to the individualistic standpoint on many facets. This paper will focus on one such facet – conflict escalation, and will argue that the Buddhist worldview and its relationally-oriented psychological analysis of the causes of human suffering and their transformation can add value to the understanding of interpersonal conflict escalation and its potential transformation to dialogue.

Since the notion of self is central to this paper, “Section I” describes the individualistic underpinnings of this notion and how they lay the ground for mainstream conflict resolution methodologies. This section also presents a growing body of scholarship in ADR that offers an understanding of conflict escalation and transformation from a relational worldview. It argues that the Buddhist philosophy, psychology and practices provide a different perception of relationality from existing scholarship, with emphases that add important value to these frameworks.

“Section II” presents how the teachings of the Buddha help clarify the relational understanding of conflict escalation and transformation. It first outlines in brief central philosophical underpinnings of the Buddhist worldview. It then presents an analysis of conflict escalation as a gradual process of withdrawal from relational awareness to the crystallizing of a false, non-relational sense of self, using the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths model. Then, it elaborates on how the process of escalation occurs and can be transformed, micro-focusing on the psychological stages of escalation as understood in the Buddha’s Twelve Links model.

“Section III” outlines the potential embedded in further adopting the analysis offered in this paper in the ADR scholarship in order to add value to ADR scholarship that incorporates relational foundations as well as scholarship that incorporates mindfulness-based practices to help parties transform their interpersonal dynamics into dialogue.

## **Background**

### **The Governing, Individualistically-Oriented Theories of Conflict**

The predominant, interest-based models of negotiation and conflict analysis (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 1991; Lax & Sebenius, 1986; Lewicki & Saunders, 1985) are rooted in an

individualistic worldview. The individualistic worldview construes the individual as a separate being, autonomous and unconnected, who fulfills her potential and actualizes her freedom and independence by personally developing her own values and subjective life experiences. The individualistic worldview and ethos, which has governed Western thought for many centuries (Seigel, 2005; Taylor, 1989), has its origin in Aristotelian metaphysics. According to Aristotelian premises, knowing a person (subject) or an object demands inquiring and gaining knowledge of her or its “essence,” her core – that is, her inalterably fixed and determined inner substance. This Aristotelian perspective is reinforced in modern times, as Kenneth Gergen (2009, p. xxi) writes:

From the early writings of Descartes, Locke, and Kant to contemporary discussions of mind and brain, philosophers have lent strong support to the reality of bounded being. In many respects, the hallmark of Western philosophy was its presumption of dualism: mind and world, subject and object, self and other.

These traditions posit the “other” as an outer-bounded self with whom one interacts by situating oneself in separation from. Such understanding of human dynamics focuses on separately situated individuals who interact by exchanging ideas. This view is the basis of the common understanding of conversation and negotiation.

An interest based framework of negotiation that encourages going beyond one’s positions to explore one’s interests and needs reflects these underpinning; one of its foundations is the assumption that by exploring interests and concerns, each side can develop better understanding of her own as well as her counterpart’s standing-point, and that an exchange in which the parties will try to meet as many interests and concerns of all sides will assist in finding mutually agreed upon solutions (Fisher, et al., 1991; Moore, 1986; Susskind & Field, 1996). Even when emphasizing aspects of interdependence, the foundational philosophy remains unquestioned: Morton Deutsch, laying the bases for the cooperative-competitive continuum analysis of conflict, claims that people’s inclination towards cooperation or competition depends on how they perceive their interdependence – whether positively or negatively, along a continuum (Deutsch, 1973). Positive goal interdependence means that when one party wins, the other wins, whereas negative goal interdependence means that when one wins, the other loses. Although emphasizing the importance of interdependence, Deutsch and other scholars approach interdependence from an individualistic perspective, understanding it to signify how separate actors or agents that are

dependent upon each other fulfill their needs in a particular situation (Deutsch 1949, 1982, 1985, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; McCallum, et al, 1985; Worchel, 1979).

### **Tendencies Toward Relationality in ADR Scholarship**

In recent years various scholars have been criticizing the interest-based approaches to conflict resolution, claiming – in the name of relational foundations – that they are based on a worldview that needs to be reconsidered (Cobb, 2006; Greenhalgh & Lewicki, 2003; Jones, 1994; Shailor, 1994).

The transformative approach to mediation, for example, offers an alternative to the individualistic approach in the name of a relational worldview according to which individuals are “seen as both separate and connected, both individuated and similar . . . to some degree autonomous, self-aware, and self-interested but also to some degree connected, sensitive, and responsive to others” (Bush & Folger, 1994, p. 242). The individualistic worldview, the authors argue, misses the fullness and complexity of the human situation because “human nature includes *both* the capacity for self-interestedness *and* the capacity for responsiveness to others” (1994, p. 242). Awareness of agency and connection is the essence of human consciousness, the core of our identity as human beings, according to the relational worldview as portrayed by the transformative approach. Conflict, write the authors, “alienates [the parties] from their sense of their own strength and their sense of connection to others, thereby disrupting and undermining the interaction between them as human beings” (Bush & Folger, 2005, p. 46). The parties’ abilities to exercise their relational nature — experiencing both separateness and connectedness, strength of self, and responsiveness to others — are disrupted. The alienation from strength of self is manifested by fear, confusion, and unsettledness, and results in self-absorption, manifested by shutting down, self-protectiveness, self-defensiveness and hostility towards the other. The mediator’s role in this process, according to the transformative approach, is to help parties realize their strength of self, and to assist them in becoming calmer, clearer and more confident, which would in turn result in responsiveness to others, openness and attentiveness, and reversing the negative conflict spiral.

A different relational approach is offered by the narrative approach to mediation (Cobb, 1993, 1994; Cobb & Rifkin, 1991; Winslade & Monk, 2000, 2008), which also has at its starting point a worldview that questions the individualistic view of the self. Through a postmodern lens, the narrative approach offers a different understanding of relationality and consequently a

different theory of conflict than the transformative approach. The narrative approach offers a critique of the category of the “self” as a fixed entity. It views conflict as a clash between competing narratives that the parties have constructed regarding their situation. It proposes that people live their lives according to stories rather than according to inner drives or interests, stories that are relationally formed within the social-discourse in which they partake. People establish coherence for themselves through their constructed stories, and during conflict, these stories hold much divisiveness (“us/them,” “good/bad”) and create “victims” and “victimizers.” In order to transform conflict interaction, according to the narrative approach, the conflict stories need to be deconstructed or destabilized, so that an alternative, joint story can be constructed.

Conflict de-escalation and transformation, according to the transformative approach (Bush & Folger, 1994), can happen when disputants regain their sense of agency and strengthen their sense of self followed by increased recognition of the other. In the narrative approach (Winslade & Monk, 2000) de-escalation and transformation occur when the parties deconstruct their conflict stories; acknowledge how they are socially constructed, and develop a third story that all parties can live with. The following section will present a perspective of conflict escalation that derives from the Buddhist philosophy and psychology. As will be described, the Buddhist foundational understanding of relationality and the psychological analysis that follows lead to different emphases regarding conflict escalation and transformation.

### **Conflict Escalation and its Possible Transformation: A Buddhist-Oriented Perspective Key Concepts in Buddhist Philosophy on the Nature of the Self**

Buddhist philosophy, in the words of the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Izutsu, “is ontologically a system based upon the category of *relatio*, in contrast to, say, the Platonic-Aristotelian system which is based on the category of *substantia*” (Izutsu, 1977, p. 23). According to Aristotelian premises, as mentioned earlier, knowing an object demands knowledge of its ‘essence,’ its inalterably fixed and determined inner substance. According to the Buddhist worldview, on the other hand, knowledge cannot be attained as long as an object’s fixed and determined inner substance is sought.

A key term in understanding the Buddhist worldview is the term ‘dependent co-arising’ (*pratityasamutpada*): any object – “self” included – is a product of causality, dependently co-arising with other objects that co-arise with it (Izutsu, 1977). According to the principle of dependent co-arising, any given situation is a set of connections and relations in which separate

entities arise, entities that through a process of abstraction we grasp as having characteristics of continuous separate substances.

Seeing entities as continuous, separate substances is an abstraction that results from observing a situation from an external perspective and from ignoring the process of dependent co-arising as it occurs in the moment. In doing so, we create notions of entities that we perceive to be existing separately from their arising, having a substantial and permanent inner nature with which “they” then enter a process of interaction with “another” – a similarly substantial and permanent entity (Kuttner, 2010). This illusion, according to the Buddhist worldview, relates not only to the perception of human beings as having a substantial and independent “self,” but to the perception that *any* entity - whether object, idea, or feeling - is a separate, self-substantive entity. From the perspective of Buddhist philosophy, attributing these characteristics derives from the human need to arrange the world, creating an illusory understanding of one’s perceived reality (Rahula, 1959; Welwood, 2000).

A key term in understanding *dependent co-arising* is the idea of emptiness (*sunyata*). Emptiness is a central term in Buddhism that needs much clarification in order to prevent nihilistic interpretations. The claim that everything is empty means that nothing exists independently, having an internal, substantial, fixed, and permanent nature of its own; the view of objects with an internal core or inner nature (*svabhava*) is replaced by a view that sees separate entities as products of causality or dependency on other things to which they stand in relation (Garfield, 1994; Hoffman, 1980; Kasulis, 1981).

### **Buddhist Psychology: Conflict Escalation as a Process of Rigid Self-Formation**

The first lesson the Buddha taught is known as *The Four Noble Truths*, considered to be the foundational teaching of the Buddha, the quintessence of all the Buddha’s teaching (Tsering, 2005). The first truth describes the basic nature of human being as suffering and dis-ease (*dukkha*). It is important to note at this point that one should not conclude that the Buddhist worldview is pessimistic, as the Four Noble Truths describe a process, describing how to overcome this state of dis-ease and suffering. However, the first noble truth involves the experiencing of the dis-ease without avoiding it. Among other meanings, the term *dukkha* includes the notions of imperfection, impermanence, insubstantiality, and emptiness (Rahula 1959, p. 93). This recognition of imperfection, therefore, precludes the ability to grasp onto firm, unifying, and well-defined positions/concepts/views as the means for overcoming the sense of

dis-ease and distress. Translated into conflict dynamics, the first noble truth identifies that when in adversity we experience dis-ease. We have positions and perceptions we cannot impose on the other party; we are left dissatisfied, worn out, or alienated.

The second noble truth – *dukkha-samudaya*, the cause of suffering – addresses the origin of suffering and dis-ease, locating it in the craving to escape the dis-ease by grasping at or clinging to “things,” holding on to the notion that things have fixed qualities of being, rather than recognizing that they continuously co-arise. These “things” can include “my thoughts,” “my positions,” “my worldview,” as well as the firm view of “the other.” The second noble truth stems from the recognition of an illusory attachment to the “self,” and is aimed at diagnosing the causes of the continuous attachment to this illusion. The second noble truth is not aimed at filling the incompleteness or emptiness described in the first noble truth, but at observing the manner by which the human being craves to overcome the dis-ease by escaping into a firm, clear, and distinct definition of an independent self. The craving for the preservation of firm separate “things” is, in the Buddhist perspective, the nature of ignorance (*Avidya*), an ignorance that only reproduces and amplifies itself by grasping to whatever represents “me” and “mine” and preserving it as standing in opposition to whatever is not-me and not-mine (“you” and “yours”). Paradoxically, the desire to eliminate the dis-ease increases it. This is accomplished by further investing in sensory pleasures, as well as by further investing in the process of solidifying and grasping onto well-defined ideas or positions, seeking to see in them a definite and reliable proof of oneself and one’s identity. Ignorance, according to the Buddhist worldview, is whatever keeps producing the attachment and the craving to it (Abe, 1985; Izutsu, 1977; Kasulis, 1981).

The root of the suffering is in the craving itself, craving to “be,” to maintain and preserve the permanent and continuous existing self, a continuous form that wishes to avoid the first noble truth, suffering. This also brings about the craving for “not-being,” craving for the annihilation of the form (Brazier, 2003; McConnell, 1995). Translated into conflict dynamics, the dis-ease is understood to be caused by attachment to a firm sense of self, manifested by the positions, presuppositions, and beliefs we hold on to, by identifying ourselves with them and fortifying them, by craving to be independent of the other party, and by wanting to impose that firm and unchanging positions, presuppositions and beliefs on the separately and firmly perceived other.

The third noble truth – *Dukkha-Nirodha*, cessation or extinction of suffering – provides the possible treatment for the dis-ease. It asserts that there is a way to cease that process, to cease

the constant re-creation and re-formation of self-substantive entities or views: “Cessation of suffering, as a noble truth, is this: It is remainderless fading and ceasing, giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting, of that same craving” (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion, SN LVI.11, as brought by Rahula 1959, p. 94).

One must let go of the process of ascribing characteristics of self, of seeing “them” as firm, fixed and independent – both oneself and the thing wished for. The craving that needs to be uprooted is the craving to preserve and maintain the “I” and the “thing,” or the sense of wanting such. This craving is almost instinctive and immediate; the Buddhist worldview and practice helps to cultivate, at first, an awareness of this almost-automatic act, mindfulness of the creation and re-creation of suffering, followed by its cessation (Biderman, 1995; Brazier, 2003). The possible treatment for the cessation of the dis-ease in conflict dynamics, therefore, can be understood as the letting go of the ongoing craving toward becoming a self-substantive, firm, and distinct party with self-substantive, firm, and distinct positions, presuppositions, and beliefs, cultivating awareness instead to the dependent co-arising process in which “one” partakes with “the other”.

The fourth noble truth – *Duhkha-nirodha-gamini-patipada*, the path that leads to the extinction of suffering – elaborates on how to let go, describing the practice in everyday life that may lead to that cessation. The Buddha spoke of *The Eightfold Path*, a practice to help transform the dis-ease through the cultivation of wisdom, which is the existential realization of emptiness, impermanence, and dependent co-arising (Rahula, 1959; Welwood, 2000). The Buddha taught cultivation of wisdom – relational awareness – in one’s views, intentions, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. This paper will not delve into *The Eightfold Path* and the suggested practices.

The wish to grasp a separate, fixed and permanent substance – according to the Buddha’s teachings – is thus an illusion that causes human suffering and dissatisfaction or “dis-ease” (*duhkha*) (Rahula, 1957; Brazier, 2003). The term *duhkha* the Buddha uses, which is traditionally translated as “suffering,” has a broader meaning and can apply also to the state of discomfort experienced in adversarial negotiations. *Duhkha* in Sanskrit is the opposite of the term *sukha*, which means comfort or satisfaction, and therefore the term dis-ease conveys most accurately its meaning. When used as “suffering,” it seems to apply only to people in a state of great misery; however, when seen in its broader interpretation, *duhkha* and the first noble truth, seem to



address a human condition applicable to all, thus describing a general truth, applicable also to the state in which people find themselves in when in conflict or adversity.

Dis-ease involves attachment to psychologically formed entities, perceived as objects with such characteristics. This constant process of self-formation (I.e., of forming entities with inner “selves”) needs to be transformed, according to the Buddhist worldview, because such a mindset and mental activity is a partial and insufficient realization of reality, and a form of what is described in the Buddhist framework as ignorance (*avidya*) (Rahula, 1959). *Avidya*, “ignorance” or “confusion” means not seeing things as they are. *Vidya* (the prefix 'a' is a negation prefix) means clear vision or sight. A-*vidya* therefore means having no clear sight, or having false knowledge (White, 1956, p. 252).

The attitude toward the dis-ease is somewhat paradoxical: the cessation of dis-ease passes through making it fully present, where both parties face, while in conflict, the truth of the dis-ease and the inability to get what they want. When cultivating awareness to that dis-ease and the inability to get what they want, and if observing mindfully the craving involved with this process, the realization that this inability does not call for satisfying one’s interests in separation to the other can occur and the conflict can be seen in a new light. This does not imply adopting an accommodating personality or giving up on one’s own views (positions, interests, needs or feelings) as a solution, but giving up “positionality,” viewing each of them in a manner that grants them characteristics of a firm, fixed, unchanging “self.” The Buddhist underpinnings can therefore be understood as suggesting that what is needed is not a shift from “positions” to “interests,” but from the distinct, bounded, and firm self-substantial positions and arguments to a relational awareness of positions, seeing them in the ongoing dynamics of dependent co-arising (Kuttner, 2010).

According to this worldview, the process of developing ignorance is a mental process that veils sight from the circumstances as they are and from the relational dynamics, substituted by clinging to a coherent and consistent sense of self. Gergen, Gergen, and Barrett (2004, p. 54) write:

One unfortunate aspect of traditional conversation is that we are positioned as unified egos. That is, we are constructed as singular, coherent selves, not fragmented and multiple. To be incoherent is subject to ridicule; moral inconsistency is grounds for scorn. Thus, as we encounter people whose positions

differ from ours, we tend to represent ourselves one dimensionally, ensuring that all our statements form a unified, seamless web. As a result, when we enter a relationship defined by our differences, commitment to unity will maintain our distance. And if the integrity or validity of one's coherent front is threatened by the other, we may move toward polarizing combat.

Following the four noble truths, interpersonal conflict escalation can be seen as a gradual process of self-formation, in which parties shrink and then withdraw from their relational space of co-arising, thus developing a sense of coherent, firm separate selves, a polarizing mindset and rigidity. When disagreement about a certain issue arises, a sense of distress or dis-ease also arises. Caroline Brazier (2003), a practicing psychologist and teacher of Buddhist psychology, describes the process of the formation of the self as an escape from and avoidance of the suffering and distress involved in a difficult sensory experience:

Grasping after identity arises out of seeking sensory comfort. Life is uncertain, and when we face dukkha, we look for certainty. As we come to terms with the reality of dukkha, we struggle with the experience of impermanence. We want to believe that there is something reliable that cannot be taken away from us by the cycle of birth and death. In a changing uncertain world, there can be comfort in believing that something is permanent and reliable... When all else fails, however, I may end up feeling that the only thing I can rely on is myself. There is a kind of security in 'knowing who I am.' (Brazier 2003, p. 30)

When in conflict, parties often entrench into separate spaces, creating and then clinging to firm, fixed, independent perceptions of self and interpretations of the situation. By so doing, they further their suffering and in order to transform it, according to the Buddhist worldview, there is a need to let go of the clinging to that illusive sense of identity and cultivate relational awareness as understood within the Buddhist worldview.

### **Conflict Transformation: Cessation of the Process of Self-Formation**

While the four noble truths provide a descriptive analysis of the process of fortification, the Buddha's *Twelve Links model* explains how crystallization occurs in the mind and offers a detailed analysis of the psychological process of that withdrawal (McConnell, 1995; Brazier, 2003). As will be elaborated, the Buddha explains the Twelve Links model through the process of self-formation of an individual. This paper suggests that applying the principles presented in

the model to interpersonal conflicts may enrich the understanding of current theories on interpersonal conflict escalation and transformation.

Friedrich Glasl, in a nine-stage step-by-step model of conflict escalation suggests that the escalation of interpersonal conflict can be understood as a change in in-group and out-group images, motives, moods, and forms of interaction (Glasl, 1982; Jordan, 1997, 2000; Smyth, 2012). The slip from cooperation is perceived by Glasl as a gradual process of withdrawal into a more-firmly entrenched, separately and differently perceived sense of the conflict situation. Cooperation slips into tensions and frictions, crystallization into standpoints and “consolidated into more well delimited parties” (Jordan, 2000, p. 1), and clear, strict boundaries definitions. To gain strength, parties become increasingly locked into inflexible standpoints. Growing mistrust among the parties lead to a sense of insecurity and loss of control, which the parties try to compensate for with an increased emphasis on a strong, righteous self-image, followed by a more global picture of “the other” and images of typical behavior patterns which – as the conflict escalates – is developed into the other’s “true nature” and questionable moral character and identity. Such images, Glasl explains, serve an important role in providing a sense of orientation: one has the feeling of knowing what to expect from their environment. He also describes the process as a gradual loss of interdependency in the other and a growing intent to enforce one’s agenda on the dialogic space, while ignoring the other’s perspective as part of the joint space. There is an increased sense of entrenchment in one’s firm and unchanging perception of himself, the other and the situation, becoming more and more a survival mechanism manifested by a growing attempt to preserve the “formed” self.

In Buddhist terms, Glasl’s model of interpersonal conflict escalation can be seen as entrenchment into a fixed, firm, separated self that result in further suffering and dis-ease. The Buddha’s presentation of The Twelve Links model offers a detailed analysis of the psychological process of that entrenchment, or rather – of the formation of a sense of self in which one entrenches, or attaches to (McConnell 1995; Brazier, 2003).

The Twelve Links are a wheel that keeps constantly spinning and creating dis-ease. However, it can also – as the third noble truth describes – be ceased. Each link leads to the following link in a continuous manner, the twelfth followed by the first, and so on, in a manner in which it is impossible to put the finger on the “first” or “last” link (see figure next page).

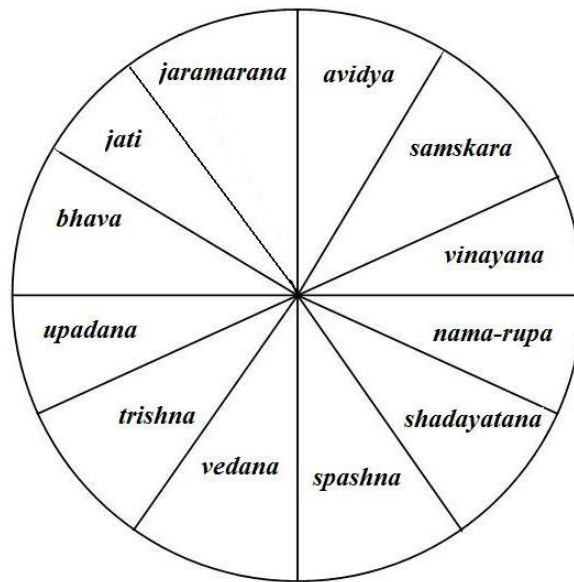


Figure 1. The Twelve Links

The first link is ignorance (*avidya*), but it is at the same time also the last link, the outcome or derivation of the whole process that preceded it. Ignorance therefore both leads to a self-oriented mindset and is also an outcome of a self-oriented mindset. The process should not be perceived as a linear process with a starting point of self-formation (the first link) and an end point (the twelfth link), but a continuous process of spinning the wheel of ignorance and disease, once cycle after another, endless unless ceased through the transformation of ignorance into wisdom (Rahula, 1959). As each cycle is a continuation of previous cycles, it therefore relies on the ignorance previously created, which conditions the “present” cycle. Moreover, it is a process of dependent co-arising: the model is consistent with the notion that no link, just as no cycle, exists independently, but rather is dependent on the other links for its arising (and in the same manner – each cycle depends on previous cycles).

The first link, as mentioned, is “ignorance” (*avidya*). Because of the confusion or lack of clarity manifested in that link, conditioned by previous cycles, it lays the terms for the formation of “the world” through the eyes of “the self,” and also invokes the effort to create meaning that would support the view one already possesses. Batchelor (1997, p. 68) describes what *avidya* is responsible for: “I set out on the absurd task of reordering the world to fit my agenda.” This is usually a tendency with which disputants arrive at to the mediation process. Ignorance conditions the second link: primary volitions, mental formations called *samskara*. This is a primary, almost

abstract, mental force, an impulse or inclination that reproduces mental power based on patterns of behavior that have been repeated. Coming right after ignorance and suffering, the *samskara* state is an attempt to escape that suffering. Brazier (2003, p. 184) explains: “Samskaras are the constructions that people build in their minds as they try to make their experience yield evidence to support their self-construct. Because they hold on to the deliberately limited view, they build samskaras.” Samskaras set the ground for the arising of the third link, consciousness’ activity (*vinayana*), which is sometimes translated into English, as “distinctive knowing” or “discriminative consciousness” (McConnell, 1995). *Vinayana* is the ordinary mind that separates the world into ‘me’ and ‘everything else (Brazier, 2003). At this stage “the other” is formed in the consciousness, perceived to have similar characteristics of selfhood in need of conformation. This is maybe the most important, most dangerous of all links, because people tend to generalize and to mistakenly assume that there exists in them – and in others - a unifying and permanent “self”. This is where the division into what is “mine” and what is “not mine” occurs. This link sets the terms for the arising of the fourth link – *nama-rupa* (name-form), where the “me” grants name and form to both oneself and the discriminated “other” in order to organize it/them in a manner that would fit the self-picture already created and to create order.

With the inclination to escape the confusion of the conflict situation which one cannot control through the formation of a firm, permanent self, distinguished from all other entities, at this stage both oneself and the other entities are structured in separation from one another, each organized in a well-defined form and identifying name. The process of ascribing name and form allows one to sustain the discriminative act between oneself and all other things, as in the previous link, and to fix and establish that discrimination, assisted by the ascribing of their firm permanent names and forms. As Brazier (2003) explains:

Naming is a form of possession. In the act of putting a word to an object, you put your mark on it... in naming an object you are picking out that object from its surroundings... This is a kind of extension of the selective viewing that we have already seen operating. It is an effect of self-material creeping into your world-view. (Brazier 2003, 66)

However, ascribing *nama-rupa* completes the escape from the intimidating, unknown, and unfamiliar to defined, clear, and distinct forms and categories that one perceives. It alienates one from both one’s experience and from the immediate surroundings, securing one’s “own” form

and the objects' form or selves. It allows law and order, it brings steadiness and structure, but also an almost automatic selection of familiar categories, patterns and forms based on previous "knowledge" and "familiarity" from previous life-cycles, cycles of psychological birth and death and of suffering. Disputants are trapped in their own, private language games, their separately constructed meaning of concepts and of the situation, selecting what in their eyes is important to deal with individualistically, in separation from the dynamics of the situation they partake in.

The conditioned consciousness and the structured *nama-rupa* prescribe a certain manner of dealing with dis-ease and preparing to meet the discriminated objective world in accordance with previous engagements. The sensory contact, which comprises the engagement in the world, is now directed at identification of the familiar and known. The senses, *shadayatana*, are described in the fifth link. The naming process conditions the way that the senses are drawn. This sets the terms for the sensory contact in a way that makes the contact less intimidating, as the sense faculties 'lock on' the sense object. Each sense tends to be attracted to things to which it has been attracted in the past and repulsed by things it has previously avoided, thus creating an illusion of continuity (Brazier, 2003). It is important to note the Buddhist worldview sees the thinking as a faculty with a status similar to the senses. While within Western foundational premises reasoning is perceived as being of higher order than the five senses, Buddhism describes six senses, thinking (*manas*) being one of the six and equally important. The generation of thoughts, positions and ideas, can be therefore understood in the same manner: the same activity that conditions the meeting and the seeking-out of objects also conditions the formation of positions and consolidated views. The grasping onto ideas, positions, and worldview, which we tend to identify with our continuous and independent selves, can be therefore understood to be an illusion created in order to overcome the insecurity and confusion of the conflict situation, vulnerability that can be taken advantage of by the threatening other party in the conflict dynamics.

The sixth link – *spashna*, "invested contact" or "self-interested contact" – is the actual contact of the all-ready "me" with what is perceived as the "not-me" objects. The contact is made with the commitment to the duality of "me" and "other" (Brazier, 2003). This and the following link can be seen as the origin of the expectation from "the other" and the increased commitment to "oneself".

One's reaction to the contact is the concern of the seventh link, *vedana* (feelings). The contact with the object conditions the reaction to that meeting: does the contact match the presuppositions with which I have arrived (and therefore is attractive, or pleasant, to me), or is it not in line with my expectations, as formed prior to the contact (in which case the feeling is unpleasant and my resentment and hostility arise)? The word *vedana* literally means knowingness, the feeling of recognition: 'I know what this means'. It means "knowing" in the sense of familiarity and possession, and if I don't know or recognize, it threatens to breach the order that has been created (Brazier, 2003). This is true also of the views and positions one holds: ideas and positions one has consolidated now react to the other's consolidated positions. These other's positions are now examined through their relatedness to one's own maintenance: one reacts pleasingly to them if they match one's presuppositions and affirm oneself, or reacts in hostility if they are not in line with one's expectations. The object is therefore used for the attainment and maintenance of "my" forms and views and "my" innermost subjective goals. This is an immediate response, almost automatic, at times described as an immediate physical reflex, with which the reacting person identifies because of its immediacy.

However, both the pleasing and resisting identification stem from the ignorance described, and set the terms for craving, craving for the attractive, pleasing experiences from the point of view of the self. The eighth link focuses on craving or thirst (*trishna*). McConnell (1995, p. 31) explains:

Variouly described as thirst, hunger, and blind desire, *tanha* is the restless yearning which stimulates the search for something which will quench it... The sense of unease and dissatisfaction, the restless search for an object that will fulfill the need, are key characteristics of craving.

The thirst becomes the foundational impulse, and satisfying that thirst the central need. I crave the things that entail the preservation of the mental formation that has become my own, and reject those that bring confusion. One – as elaborated by the next link – attempts to detect the object/view/position that would fill the sense of discomfort and deficiency one experiences.

The ninth link deals with the linkage between clinging and objects, with the attempt to cling or attach to certain objects, craving for their continuous fulfillment of a certain need. This can also be ascribed to thoughts, perceptions, and opinions. It is a process of feeding the consciousness, both by clinging to opinions and positions, as well as by assuming that 'if only I

could possess this or that, the suffering and confusion would be gone.’ A sense of goal or purpose aimed at solidity, structure, and permanence is formed, but, as Batchelor (1997, p. 74) writes, “While creating the illusion of a purposeful life, craving is really the loss of direction. It is a process of compulsive becoming.”

Clinging to existence is fundamentally expressed in the *becoming* and the attachment to the subjective “self” and one’s “identity.” Such entity holds the characteristics of selfhood in a more concrete manner than all other objects to which one attributes these characteristics. The tenth link, *bhava* – ‘becoming’ or ‘conceiving’ – describes the becoming of the self. After a certain pattern is created, and as a result of the wish to preserve it as a characteristic that describes one’s behavior, certain mental structures are formed. Assumed to describe a picture of “who I am,” these structures form a firm perception of oneself, thus serving one’s craving for permanence and stability, for being. The awareness of incompleteness and change is suppressed because “self” pictures are now being formed (McConnell, 1995). A shift occurs from seeing change as the constant process of dependent co-arising, with no agent behind the process, to a mindset in which a consolidated self perceives and experiences change (‘I was like this, I have gone through changes, and now I am like that’). In fact, at this point the category of ‘change’ is consolidated; the idea of a fixed entity is now for the first time present. The craving and clinging can be viewed as a platform for increased interest in oneself while not taking into account the other. In a conflict situation, one develops firm commitment to the image of one’s self, committed to consistency and coherency while attacking the other party’s image of self as she perceives it (Glasl, 1982), attempts to prove her inconsistency and incoherency and drawing attention to flaws on the personal level rather than dealing with the merits of the situation at hand.

The tenth link of becoming sets the terms for the eleventh link, birth (*jati*). It refers to the psychological birth of the substantive, solidified self as an independent, separate firm entity, now having life of his own. This includes not just the psychological birth of oneself, but also the attribution of similar characteristics to all entities, people, and objects (McConnell, 1995). At this stage one wishes to preserve not only the patterns as described above, but a pattern that confines the way the “self” relates to “the object,” a steady relation that maintains its continuous, separate existence, to which one attributes a firm independent identity, even if that identity “changes.”



In fact, at this stage the realization of dependent co-arising is hard to recover. However, all that is born, the Buddha asserted, will also decay and die; birth sets the terms for death and decay, which is the twelfth link (*jaramarana*). According to this psychological interpretation, we constantly create mental pictures, crave to preserve them, make use of formulated relations to objects in order to preserve them, and then are compelled to see them decay and die (McConnell, 1995). It is the decay of our concocted self-picture, a picture in which much has been invested in creating, and therefore its decay brings frustration, suffering, and dis-ease.

This is the cycle of suffering that the Buddha explains can be ceased. The more energy and potency are invested in forming and preserving firm, independent, permanent mental formations or self-pictures, the greater the pain and suffering involved in their loss. Uprooting the suffering does not include further solidification of a more firm and stable mental picture of the self, but rather developing awareness of the process of its formation, followed by cultivation of qualities of mind that would allow the cessation of that process and of letting go of the attachment to “them,” as the third noble truth suggests (Welwood, 2000).

The formation of the “self” and the craving for its preservation while losing awareness of the process of dependent co-arising, set the ground for the creation of ignorance and unclear vision, thus creating barriers to seeing things as they are. With the belief in self and ignorance of reality, another round of the cycle begins, “our minds spinning new meanings on the old theme of self” (McConnell, 1995, p. 139).

The mechanism described in the Twelve Links model is the process of granting a status of self-substantive, permanent, independent entity to both objects and subject, drawing parties in conflict into adversity and lack of awareness of their relational dynamics. This solidification process, therefore, plays a central role in the process of conflict escalation and the cessation of it, can help transform it into dialogue (Kuttner, 2012). The mediator or third party’s role is hence differently perceived than the transformative and narrative frameworks, her emphases directed at the dynamics in the here-and-now of the communication and focused on helping detect the manifestation of suffering and ignorance as described in the Twelve Links model and the usage of various mindfulness practices that can help transform these non-relational dynamics. Further research on how this intervention is practically conducted should be carried out.

A conflict specialist or negotiator who is able to identify the tendency to fortify within the firm, separate self and can be mindful of the inclination towards spinning the wheel of

suffering can then help transform this tendency into relational awareness (Kuttner, 2010). Therefore, it is important to be able to identify both the mental dispositions and the manifestations of such withdrawal, and the Twelve Links model provides an entry point for such identification. Further research is needed to help identify various manifestations of each of the twelve psychological dispositions described.

The relational emphases of conflict escalation and transformation suggested in this section perceives the path from adversity to collaboration differently from the ones suggested in the interest-based framework to negotiation and mediation or the relational frameworks offered by the transformative and narrative approaches. The next section will explicate why following the relational approach offered by the Buddhist worldview is important if wanting to cultivate dialogue and therefore add important value to other relational approaches to conflict intervention.

### **Cultivating Relationality, Cultivating Dialogue**

By developing awareness of the mental processes involved in self-formation, and consequently developing mindfulness of the process of entrenchment in separate selves, negotiators and conflict specialists can help cease destructive conflict-interaction and transform it into more collaborative dynamics. Moreover, the relational framework as presented in this paper can help set the terms for a form of communication that requires the cultivation of relationality – dialogue. Dialogue, unlike other forms of communication, requires the cultivation of awareness of the self as co-arising through and within the process of relating. Martin Buber, when writing on dialogue, drew a distinction between two modes of conversation: “I-Thou” and “I-It.” While the I-It relation is the more common and non-dialogic way of being, characterized by cold indifference with respect to the other, the I-Thou is a dialogic relation, in which there is acknowledgment that “Through the ‘Thou’ a man becomes ‘I’” (Buber, 1987, p. 28), meaning that only in the presence of the I-Thou primary relation can the self be wholly apprehended. Similar to the Buddhist philosophy, Buber made a radical claim that the relation precedes the knowing of the self. He wrote: “In the beginning is relation—as category of being, readiness, grasping form, mould for the soul, it is the a priori of relation, the inborn Thou” (Buber, 1987, p. 27). Kenneth Gergen, when describing from a social-constructionist perspective what the uniqueness of dialogue is, also emphasizes that as individuals we are born of relationship. Meaning, he explains, is not the private individual’s meaning, but rather co-constructed through

dialogic interpretation: “We remove meaning from the head of the individual, and locate it within the ways in which we go on together” (Gergen, 1999, p. 145). Social understanding, he explains, is not a matter of penetrating the privacy of the other’s subjectivity, but rather a relational achievement that depends on coordinating action: “When we view dialogue as a relationship between separate, autonomous individuals, each with private interests, perceptions and reasons,” he emphasizes, “we intensify the sense of conflict” (1999, p. 152). In dialogue meaning is perceived to be a joint process and as emergent from the interaction; the emphasis on self-expression is therefore revisited:

In part the importance of self-expression can be traced to the Western tradition of individualism. As participants in this tradition, we believe we possess inner thoughts and feelings and that these are essential to who we are; they virtually define us. Thus, if dialogue is to proceed successfully, it is critical that one’s voice is heard. (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001, p. 701)

However, this false sense of dialogue should be transformed, according to Gergen, McNamee & Barrett (2002), into awareness of dynamics in which the “inner” me and “outer” world cannot really be distinguished, and in order to learn about myself – my needs, my interests, my positions, my fears, and my sensations – awareness of the manner in which “my” needs, interests, and so on, relationally co-arise in the present moment is needed (Kuttner, 2010, 2011).

While presenting his dialogic view of human understanding and thinking, Charles Taylor draws a distinction between ‘monologic acts’ (single-agent acts) and ‘dialogic acts’, the later not emerging, he explains, from the common epistemological tradition. He claims that the:

‘I’ has no content of its own. It is a sort of a principle of originality and self-assertion, which can lead at times to impulsive conduct, or to resistance to the demands of society, but does not have an articulated nature that I can grasp prior to action. (Taylor, 1991, p. 307)

Within a ‘monologic act’, one fails to capture that:

The self neither preexists all conversation, as in the old monological view; nor does it arise from an introjection of the interlocutor; but it arises within conversation, because this kind of dialogical action by its very nature marks a place for the new locator who is being inducted into it. (Taylor, 1991, p. 312)

The framework offered by the Buddhist philosophy and the analysis described in this paper is aimed at describing conflict dynamics in terms of deficiency of awareness of the relational, dialogic nature of the parties and the perpetuation of a monologic, individualistically-based mindset. By using this framework, the conflict specialist can intentionally help disputants cultivate relational awareness in which the monologic dynamics, common in a world in which the individualistic worldview prevails, is transformed into dialogue.

As mentioned in the introduction, in the late twentieth century thought at large and in the field of ADR in particular, there has been a growing interest in mindfulness-based practices, stemming from the Buddhist worldview. ADR scholars have begun incorporating Buddhist techniques into the theory and practice of conflict management since the beginning of the current century (e.g., Bowling, 2003; Freshman, 2006, 2010; Freshman, Hayes, & Feldman, 2002; Noble, 2005; Peppet, 2002, 2004; Riskin, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2010; Rock, 2005). Riskin (2004) has argued that negotiation and mediation trainings fail to provide what he calls foundational training, training that would allow the practitioner to cultivate the skills needed to implement collaborative practices, and that mindfulness-based trainings can help cultivate these capacities. Riskin and other ADR scholars have advocated that practitioners should develop mindfulness-based capacities such as maintaining equanimity, being nonjudgmental, developing awareness of the present moment, improving concentration and improving analytical capabilities, attending to one's own emotions as well as of others, increased attentiveness and listening capabilities, increased awareness of one's own habits and reactions, increased ability to see beyond one's own needs, and developing ethical conduct. Much of this work has involved borrowing tools from Buddhist meditation. However, the literature lacks an analysis of conflict escalation from a Buddhist perspective and its potential transformation from a relational standpoint connected to the foundational philosophy and psychological analysis offered by the Buddhist worldview.

This paper therefore offers an analysis of conflict escalation that can add value to the existing ADR scholarship that focuses on incorporating mindfulness practices into ADR processes. In addition, it argues that, in order to de-escalate conflict interaction and develop a creative mindset that overcomes dualistic thinking and polarization, there is a need to help parties re-think the individualistic sense of self and adopt a relational sense of dependent co-arising, as described in this paper. This may help set the terms for dialogue even where such quality of interaction did not previously exist among participants. Moreover, the proposed

framework is relevant in settings where there exist no apparent conflict among participants but rather an individualistically-oriented conversation that participants may wish to improve, cultivating a quality of interaction that negotiations, conversations and discussions do not necessarily hold. The practical means to achieving such transformation should be further researched.

### **Conclusion**

Buddhism offers a 25-centuries long worldview and method of transformation of suffering and dis-ease. Buddhist psychology offers us a micro-level explanation of the process of withdrawal from relational awareness to what is described in this article as the illusory sense of selfhood that escalates conflict dynamics and perpetuates human suffering. This paper suggests that from a relational point of view, conflict escalation is to be viewed as a process of self-formation, analyzed as clinging to firm, independent consistent and coherent sense of self. From a relational point of view we cannot suffice with a shift from positions to interests, offered by the mainstream scholarship and practice of ADR but should aim at ceasing the human tendency to withdraw from the relational, dialogic space in the midst of conflict.

A conflict specialist or negotiator who is able to identify the tendency to fortify within the firm separate self and can be mindful of the inclination towards spinning the wheel of suffering can then help transform this tendency into relational awareness. Therefore, it is important to be able to identify both the mental dispositions and the manifestations of such withdrawal, and the Twelve Links model provides an entry point for such identification.

Further research is needed to examine the manners in which the process of self-formation as described in the Twelve Links model is applicable for the process of interpersonal conflict escalation, and how to practically assist disputants to cease the cycle. However, the Twelve Links model can shed light on the processes of conflict escalation and conflict transformation, providing a thorough analysis of the enforcement of dis-ease in human interaction in the midst of conflict and offering to see the conflict situation as an opportunity to cultivate relational awareness and dialogue.

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