

# MANAGE A CONFLICT: GOAL AND ACTION THINKING PATTERN



Ven. Hui Chen

## ABSTRACT

One of the most important reasons why people have conflicts is because in discourse, both parties think they are right while the other party is wrong.<sup>1</sup> If we examine closely, we'll find that both parties can be justified according to the supporting points they offer. Therefore, neither party is able to concede easily.

One of the most common ways of negotiation is to make each party give in to some extent so that both parties can reach a kind of compromise<sup>2</sup>. This is possible and most of the time practicable, but this also means both parties have to abase the justification they have been holding tightly. To what extent they have to give in is a big problem for both parties as well. This is because they will compare with the other if they give in more than the other party.

---

<sup>1</sup>Overton, A. R., & Lowry, A. C. (2013), "Conflict Management: Difficult Conversations with Difficult People", **Clinics in Colon and Rectal Surgery**, 26(4), 259–264. <http://doi.org/10.1055/s-0033-1356728>.

<sup>2</sup>Louise Lemieux-Charles (1994), "Managing conflict through negotiation", **CAN MED ASSOC J**, 151 (8), 1129-1132.

Another way is to make a judgment through which one of the parties is declared to be the loser and the other the winner. This is relatively convenient to operate compared with the one above. However, the problem with this one is that the interest of the lost party will be completely ignored, which may bury a seed of hatred for further conflicts.

This paper tends to explore a method for conflict management by studying the wind-flag moving case in the Platform Sutra. This method simply tries to shift the thinking pattern of the parties in a conflict from “right-wrong” to “goal-action” so that each party will try to find other ways to achieve their goals instead of being stuck to a claim that causes conflicts. This method can be named attention shift and it can be classified into the lose-lose category because no party seems to have really gained what they needed, though essentially they are freed from captive status of being in conflict.

## CASE STUDY

According to Platform Sutra in Mahayana Tripitaka, there is a case which goes like this:

At that time there were two bhikshus who were discussing the topic of the wind and a flag. One said, “The wind is moving.” The other said, “The flag is moving.”

They argued incessantly. Hui Neng stepped forward and said, “The wind is not moving, nor is the flag. Your minds, Kind Sirs, are moving.” Everyone was startled.<sup>3</sup>

In this case, the conflict is to determine the correctness of an opinion of whether the wind is moving or the flag is moving. The parties in the conflict we shall call Monk A and Monk B. Monk A holds the opinion that the wind is moving while Monk B says the flag is moving. The mediator is Master Huineng. The result is that the conflict is over with both parties losing, which is a lose-lose situation. The strategy of conflict management used here is typically attention shift.

As ordinary people who have not achieved enlightenment, we still have Ignorance (Avijjā) which means we cannot perceive the ultimate truth. Therefore, we cannot see the entire picture of the whole event when we are dealing with it. As ordinary people we also have strong attachment to ourselves so that whenever we are dealing with things we tend to consider and act in the stance of ourselves. This may sometimes come from the subconscious and is too subtle to be noticed. So normally when we think something is right or something is wrong, this judgment actually comes from our limited and fragmented perception and understanding of the entire picture. This understanding is stained with our own selfishness. Because different people have different karma, different people will have different understandings of the same event with their particular interests at stake; the judgment over the same event will vary from an individual to another. Although we can find thousands reasons to support our judgment, the same amount of reasons can also be

---

<sup>3</sup>Huineng (638-713), **The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma jewel platform sutra : with the commentary of Venerable Master Hsuan Hua**, tr. by Buddhist Text Translation Society, (San Francisco : Sino-American Buddhist Association, 1977), p. 109.

found by the those who may hold a different opinion from ours. That is to say, there is no certain absolute criterion on earth that can decide who is right or who is wrong, because everyone is holding a criterion that is exclusive for him/herself.

A conflict takes place largely due to the different interpretations of who is right and who is wrong based on different criteria. So it tends to be rather difficult to appease a conflict by telling a party one is right and one is wrong.

In the case above, both monks probably have certain knowledge about Buddhist teaching and both probably have good reasons to justify their claim. Monk A may say the reason why the flag is moving because it is cause by the motion of the wind, so eventually what really is moving is the wind not the flag. While Monk B may say the flag is the entity that entails the motion when the wind is just an external factor that assists this motion. So both monks have their understanding of the event and both can justify what they assert because they have their own criterion: one, the cause of movement; and the other, the entity in motion. Behind this argument they both have inherent self-attachment, considering only the criterion they hold as absolute. The conflict will continue as long as they are still dealing with the conflict under the right-wrong thinking pattern.

Another thinking pattern is goal-action, which requires a person to put aside what is right and what is wrong. Instead, he considers, ‘what is the action that is conducive for achieving the goal he has set for himself?’ In this frame of thinking the party can just take whatever action will be helpful and ignore the irrelevant. By doing so, conflicts can be easily resolved because people’s attention has been shifted from something they have thought important to other important things. Although nobody in the conflict is satisfied by the solution nobody cares about the issue in the conflict anymore. That is to say both seem to be the loser but it doesn’t matter to them for they are freed from the conflict.

In the wind-flag moving case, Master Huineng actually didn’t make a judgment saying which monk is right and which is wrong. He simply shifted their attention from the argument of what is moving to what they really needed to pay attention to. Of course his remark, “it’s your heart that is moving” did answer the question “what is moving?” This answer is correct according to many Buddhist theories, particularly Yogacāra’s theory that everything external is just manifestations of the consciousness. However, with this remark from him, it seemed that Master Huineng was more inclined to end the conflict by shifting attention of the two monks onto their mind instead of being eager to get involved in the fruitless argument. As a monk, the ultimate goal is to achieve enlightenment and disseminate the Dharma to other beings. In order to achieve this goal one must practice

what he has learned from the Dharma before he shares with others. One of the most important ways to practice this is to be mindful all the time. As far as goal-action thinking pattern is concerned, one should be always mindful no matter what he is doing. When the two monks were arguing against each other fiercely causing a conflict, they were not being mindful. Therefore, they were not following the goal-action pattern. So what Master Huineng did was to help them establish mindfulness again, returning to the goal-action mode, thus the conflict was also gone.

## FURTHER DISCUSSION

It is common and natural for ordinary people to take a right-wrong thinking pattern. People are exposed to a lot of information and in order to deal with this information one needs an efficient processing mechanism. This allows a decision and definite result in a short time so that time and energy is not wasted. This efficient processing mechanism is judgment based on dualistic emotions, such as good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, etc. Although this thinking pattern is effective in most cases especially concerning personal affairs, yet it is also easy to bring about conflicts when public affairs are concerned. As mentioned before, this kind of judgment has no universal criterion and everyone holds his/her own standard because of different karmas. Therefore, a more sophisticated information processing mechanism should be introduced. This mechanism is judgment based on rational analysis of the information exposed to us. It simply provides us with another way to meet our interest which the right-wrong mode fails to provide.

Because of the selfish nature of ordinary people, people tend to deal with things for their own benefit no matter if it is a personal affair or a public one. However, the problem is that when dealing with public affairs people habitually tend to think in the same way they deal with personal affairs, which is right-wrong. This is so direct and instinctual that it also shuts down other possibilities to meet one's benefit, thus causing conflicts with others who hold the same right-wrong model of thinking. Human beings have a lot of desires to meet and some of them cannot be met at the same time. So, when one is making a judgment based on right-wrong mode, it can be lost in unwholesome desire whether intentional or not. In the case of wind-flag moving, when the two monks lost their mindfulness and they argued against each other, they did so with the right-wrong mode. In doing so, they were directly and instinctively attempting to gain fame, a desire that was so deeply hidden in their heart they could not discern it. A goal-action mode, however, can easily help the

parties in conflict be aware of more than one benefit or more ways to achieve a certain benefit by opening more possibilities that are shut down by right-wrong mode. With the help of the Master, the monks in this case realized the goal they really wanted to achieve, shifting to the goal-action mode, and soon stopped their conflict.

## EXAMPLES

The goal-action mode actually plays an important role in solving conflicts from individuals to families, even between nations. One of the most impressive examples is China. China is often criticized by many western countries for having communist media and restricting freedom of speech and human rights. This causes bad images of China around the world and unfavourable communication between China and other countries. This is actually not something new to the Chinese people themselves. For among the people in China, there have also been a lot of arguments and conflicts over communism and western democracy. All of these conflicts result from the right-wrong thinking pattern. For many people, democracy is directly related to political correctness while autocracy is considered without a second thought to be wrong, the same with the capitalism and socialism in terms of economy. This kind of thinking pattern used to exist in China for a long time, preventing fast development before it was replaced by the goal-action thinking pattern which focuses on the goal of improving people's quality of life as well as the stability and security of the society. The action that follows is the Opening and Reformation Policy proposed by President Deng Xiaoping 30 years ago. Thanks to this goal-action pattern, within only 30 years China has experienced tremendous promotion both economically and socially<sup>4</sup>, helping the world reduce poverty by more than 300,000,000 people and making cities safe enough for women and children to walk home at night.

An opposite example is the Thirty Years' War in Central Europe during 17th Century<sup>5</sup> when Protestants and Catholics fought for the right way to worship God. The former insisted on the individual's direct contact with the Holy Spirit through his/her reading verses

---

<sup>4</sup>Sun, J., & Ryder, A. G. (2016). "The Chinese Experience of Rapid Modernization: Sociocultural Changes, Psychological Consequences?" *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 477. <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00477>.

<sup>5</sup>Tierney, B., & Painter, S, *Western Europe in the Middle Ages, 300-1475* (Chinese Edition.), tr. Yuan Chuanwei, (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2011), pp. 210-222.

revealed in the Bible while the latter asserted that the connection can only be effectively made through the Church led by the Pope who is considered to be the representative of Christ on earth. Both sides had adequate reasons to support their claims and neither was able to persuade the other side to concede. This typical right-wrong argument finally led to further conflicts which eventually caused the loss of numerous lives.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, whenever there is a conflict caused by an argument over right and wrong opinions, one strategy that can solve the conflict is to shift the attention to a goal and action thinking pattern. This will make the objective of winning moot and cause both parties to effect change through action rather than bolster opinion.

## REFERENCE

### 1. Primary Source

Huineng (638-713). **The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma jewel platform sutra : with the commentary of Venerable Master Hsuan Hua**, tr. by Buddhist Text Translation Society. San Francisco : Sino-American Buddhist Association, 1977.

### 2. Books

Tierney, B., & Painter, S. **Western Europe in the Middle Ages, 300-1475** (Chinese Edition.), tr. Yuan Chuanwei. Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2011.

### 3. Articles

Louise Lemieux-Charles (1994), "Managing conflict through negotiation", **CAN MED ASSOC J** ,151 (8), 1129-1132.

Overton, A. R., & Lowry, A. C. (2013), "Conflict Management: Difficult Conversations with Difficult People", **Clinics in Colon and Rectal Surgery**, 26(4), 259–264. <http://doi.org/10.1055/s-0033-1356728>

Sun, J., & Ryder, A. G. (2016). "The Chinese Experience of Rapid Modernization: Socio-cultural Changes, Psychological Consequences?" **Frontiers in Psychology**, 7, 477. <http://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00477>