



All of Us Can Break the Cycle of Hatred

This article, *All of Us Can Break the Cycle of Hatred*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Arthur C. Brooks was first published in *The Washington Post* on March 12, 2019.

Human beings have a deep longing to live together in harmony. People only feel completely alive when experiencing loving bonds with one another. Everyone, of all faiths and no faith, knows this truth, and most profess it openly.

And yet people fight incessantly. Even though war is blessedly absent in most countries today, these are deeply polarized times. Words too often are delivered with contempt; philosophical differences are likened to warfare; those who simply disagree with another are deemed “enemies.” Often it is on the Internet — which was launched as a forum for unity — where people attack one another, under the cloak of anonymity.

This state of constant conflict is a major source of stress and unhappiness for millions of people. Is there solution?

We believe that the answer is yes. Further, as is the case with all big problems, within this crisis lies an opportunity. Polarization contains the seeds for personal excellence and spiritual advancement. To begin with, the solution is not for people simply to agree with each other, or to prevent disagreements from occurring. There is nothing wrong or inherently destructive about having ideas that differ from those of others. On the contrary, disagreement is necessary in a pluralistic society to find the best solutions to problems. The ability to disagree freely is one of the great blessings of modern democracy.

The solution — and the opportunity for each of us — lies not in disagreeing less, but in understanding the appropriate way to disagree with others, even when we are treated with hatred. A valuable clue can be found in the words of the 8th-century Indian Buddhist master Shantideva in his text “A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life”: “Unruly beings are as unlimited as space / They cannot possibly all be overcome, / But if I overcome thoughts of anger alone / This will be equivalent to vanquishing all foes.”

At first, his words sound somewhat ironic, as if Shantideva were dispensing strategic advice on how to win an argument. It is a little like Abraham Lincoln’s rhetorical question, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?”

That is a misunderstanding, however. In these quotations, to vanquish foes and destroy enemies does not mean to ill-treat others in any way, or even to seek victory over them in a traditional sense. The objective is not to vanquish a person I considered my enemy; it is to destroy the illusion that he or she was my enemy in the first place. And the way to do this is by overcoming my own negative emotions.

Perhaps taking that approach seems unrealistic to you, like a kind of discipline only a monk could achieve through years of concentrated meditation. But that isn't true. You can do it, too, regardless of your belief system. The secret is to express warmheartedness, kindness and generosity, even in disagreement — and especially when others show you contempt or hatred.

What if you don't feel warmhearted, kind and generous? Here's the good news: It doesn't matter. To begin with, there is a space for all of us between stimulus and response; to master yourself means to choose your response to stimuli. When someone treats you with contempt, you are not forced to respond in kind; you are a human being who can make conscious choices. You can choose to behave ethically.

Furthermore, these ethical choices improve your emotions. A great deal of modern science shows that this is the case. When we smile, we feel happier. When we express gratitude, we feel more grateful. When we show love, we feel more loving.

Each of us can break the cycle of hatred, starting today. Do you feel that you've been attacked on social media? Respond with warmheartedness, disarming your attacker with forbearance. Overhear someone make a snide remark about people who think as you do? Respond with kindness. Want to say something insulting about people who disagree with you? Take a breath and show generosity, instead.

Jesus taught, "Love your enemies." You have the power to do this, because love is an attitude you can choose. By choosing it, you will generally find that the person wasn't your enemy after all. How would that help counter the widespread crisis of contempt? Warmheartedness is contagious. Just as people mimic bad behavior, they mimic good behavior. We all want to be happier and better people. The best way for each of us to improve society is to model behavior that offers a way forward. Others will follow. It may take a long time to change society, but it won't come sooner than our own individual actions.

Your golden opportunity to start the cultural healing — and to improve your own life — will come as soon as the next confrontation. Will you take that opportunity?