

Tolerance: A Theravāda Buddhist Perspective

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Introduction

The concept of tolerance in Buddhism is very meaningful and significant to the common people. Generally it is regarded as acceptance of contrary beliefs, views and behaviors, the ability to deal with something unpleasant or annoying, the capability to keep waiting and enduring difficult situations and so on. In Buddhism, tolerance goes beyond such common definitions. It is because tolerance can be a condition for the achievement of all kinds of meritorious deeds. Tolerance in Buddhism plays a supporting role to accomplish the offering of food to members of the *Saṅgha*, observing precepts, practicing meditation, and even entering into the kingdom of liberation, *Nibbāna*. For instance, if one cannot bear with all sorts of bodily discomforts, pains, aches, itchiness, tiredness, heat and other difficulties that arise during meditation, concentration that is the foundation for wisdom, will not be developed. Then, there is no wisdom to eradicate the defilements. In contrary, patience can assist practitioners to be free from Samsara. Thus, the common idea of patience ensures the harmonious society but that of Buddhism enables one to reach the deathless, *Nibbāna*.

The Buddha, therefore, admonished his disciples, before promulgating rules and regulations for them, with the following words; “*Khantī paramaṃ tapo titikkhā, Nibbānaṃ paramanti vutta*”, “*Tolerance is the noblest practice, the deathless is supreme*”

Approaching the view of Buddhism on patience as stated above, this paper will focus on what *khantī* is, what religious tolerance is, what *khantī pāramī* is, what *khantī maṅgala* is, how important it is, how to practice it, etc., in accordance with the Theravada Buddhist perspective.

Tolerance in Buddhism

Tolerance can be translated as ‘*Khanti*’ in *Pāḷi*¹ (Sk. *kṣānti*). The Pāli word “*Khanti*” is well known as the blessing of patience: *khantī maṅgala* and the perfection of forbearance: *khantī pāramī*. It is derived from the root */khamu* and ‘*ti*’ suffix. The root *khamu* means ‘to endure, to

¹ T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, *Pali-English Dictionary*, (Landon: Pali Text Society, 1925), p.261

tolerate or to bear patiently’. According to grammatical rule, ‘u’ of /*khamu* is elided and ‘m’ of *kham* is changed into ‘n’: *khan+ti= khanti*. The word ‘*khantī*’ with ‘ī’ long vowel is also used.

In the *Buddhavamsa*, the Buddha exhorted his disciples “to bear praise and disdain with patience” (*Sammānāvamānakkhamo*).² One should neither be elated when meeting with pleasant objects nor upset when encountering unpleasant objects. It is not tolerance of pleasantness if we develop greed under fortunate circumstances or of unpleasantness if we develop hatred under unfortunate circumstances. The essential meaning here is: we are truly patient only when favourable situations are faced without greed; and unfavourable ones without hate.³

Moreover, it is defined, in *Dhammasaṅgani*, that *khantī*, tolerance is 1. *Khamanatā*, forbearance and absence of intolerance, 2. *Adhivāsana*, ability to forgive and endure (harm done to oneself), 3. *Acaṇḍikkam*, absence of rudeness and ferocity, 4. *Anasuro*, absence of bluntness and abruptness, and 5. *Attamanatā citta*, complacency of heart.⁴

In addition, it is expressed in *Sabbāsava Sutta*, that he tolerates cold, heat, hunger, and thirst; the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, and reptiles; ill-spoken, unwelcome words and bodily feelings that, when they arise, are painful, racking, sharp, piercing, disagreeable, displeasing, and menacing to life.⁵

The ultimate reality of forbearance is the group of consciousness and its concomitants led by the mental factor of non-aversion (*adosa cetasika*) which has the characteristic of lack of ill-will or anger.

Although forbearance (*Khantī*) is non-aversion (*adosa cetasika*), every case of non-aversion is not forbearance. The *adosa cetasika* accompanies every arising of a “beautiful” (*Sobhana*) type of consciousness but it is called forbearance (*Khantī*) only if it serves as a

²*Buddhavamsa pāḷi, khuddakanikāya*, (Yangon: the Religious Affairs, 1997), p. 317.

³Bhaddanta Vicittasārābhivamsa, *the Great Chronicle of the Buddha, Vol. 1, Part. 1*, Trans by U Ko Lay and U Tin Lwin, (Yangon: Ti=Ni Press, 1991), p. 249.

⁴*Dhammasaṅgani pāḷi, khuddakanikāya*, (Yangon: the Religious Affairs, 1997), p. 260.

⁵*Mulapannāsapāḷi, Majjhima-nikāya*, (Yangon: the Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1997), p.13.

deterrent to anger when provoked by others. If the “beautiful” consciousness arises due to any other cause, the *adosa cetasika* that accompanies it is not called forbearance.⁶

In Buddhism, not only tolerance is defined exactly, but also it is regarded as one of the highest *Dhamma*, as it is said by the Buddha, thus: ‘*Bhikkhus*, even if bandits brutally severed limb from limb with a two-handled saw, he who entertained hate in his heart on that account would not be one who carried out my teaching?’⁷

Building Tolerance

People usually say, “Be patient,” “Be patient” to themselves when they encounter struggles or to their friends who are in difficulties. And also they attempt to overcome problems they confront by way of patience. Some fail to knock them out. Some may win to some extent but they cannot maintain the mental state of patience for a long time; they cannot put in effort to push their mind to reach the level of such mental state again just as a careless man who cannot journey again, to a destination that he had reached with the guide of his friend. Why is it happening so? It is because of the lack of practice of forbearance systematically.

It indicates that how to build tolerance in the heart needs to be understood well. To establish forbearance, it is necessary to get rid of anger as it is the opposite of tolerance. In fact, this anger can overwhelm even the mind of some *Ariyās*, the nobles i.e., Stream Winner and Once-returner because it can be eradicated completely only by the Non-returner and Arahant. However, it should be noted that ordinary people can reduce it to some extent. In one’s mind, as long as anger is far away, tolerance certainly will stay. Though the most powerful weapon to kill anger is to meditate, there are other methods to drive it away in order to calm one’s irritated mind, as stated in the *Visuddhimagga*,⁸ thus:

- (1) When one gets angry at someone, to start with, he should admonish himself remembering the Buddha’s teachings as follows;

⁶Bhaddanta Vicittasārābhivamsa, *the Great Chronicle of the Buddha, Vol. 1, Part. 1*, Trans by U Ko Lay and U Tin Lwin, p. 252

⁷*Mulapaññāsapāli, Majjhima-nikāya*, p. 181.

⁸Bhaddanta Buddhaghosa, *The Part of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Trans by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, (Colombo: Buddhist Publication Society, 2010), pp. 293-301.

“If you are angry now, you will be one who does not carry out the Blessed One’s teaching; by repaying an angry man in kind you will be worse than the angry man and not win the battle hard to win; you will yourself do to yourself the things that help your enemy; and you will be like a pyre log.”

- (2) If his resentment subsides when he strives and makes effort in this way, it is good. If not, then he should remove irritation by remembering some controlled and purified state in that person, which inspires confidence when remembered.
- (3) But if resentment does not settle down, then he should review the fact that he himself and the other are owners of their deeds (*kamma*). He should first review this in himself thus: “Now, what is the point of your getting angry with him? Will not this *kamma* of yours that has anger as its source lead to your own harm? For you are the owner of your deeds, heir of your deeds, having deeds as your parent, deeds as your kin, deeds as your refuge; you will become the heir of whatever deeds you do (see A III 186). And this is not the kind of deed to bring you to full enlightenment, to undeclared enlightenment or to the disciple’s grade, or to any such position as the status of Brahmá or Sakka, or the throne of a Wheel-turning Monarch or a regional king, etc.; but rather this is the kind of deed to lead to your fall from the Dispensation, even to the status of the eaters of scraps, etc., and to the manifold suffering in the hells, and so on. By doing this you are like a man who wants to hit another and picks up a burning ember or excrement in his hand and so first burns himself or makes himself stink.” Having reviewed ownership of deeds in himself in this way, he should review it in the other.
- (4) But if it still does not subside in him when he reviews ownership of deeds in this way, then he should review the special qualities of the Master’s former conduct in this way, thus: “Now you who have gone forth, is it not a fact that when your Master was a Bodhisatta before discovering full enlightenment, while he was still engaged in fulfilling the perfections during the four incalculable ages and a hundred thousand aeons, he did not allow hate to corrupt his mind even when his enemies tried to murder him on various occasions? And he should review next the attributes of the Buddha, one by one.

- (5) But if, as he reviews the special qualities of the Master’s former conduct, the resentment still does not subside in him, since he has long been used to the slavery of defilement, then he should review the suttas that deal with the beginninglessness [of the round of rebirths]. Here is what is said: “Bhikkhus, it is not easy to find a being who has not formerly been your mother ... your father ... your brother ... your sister ... your son ... your daughter” (S II 189–90). Consequently, he should think about that person thus: “This person, it seems, as my mother in the past carried me in her womb for ten months and removed from me without disgust, as if it were yellow sandalwood, my urine, excrement, spittle, snot, etc., and played with me in her lap, and nourished me, carrying me about on her hip.” Likewise, he should review that he seems to be my father in the past and so on.
- (6) But if he is still unable to quench that thought in this way, then he should review the advantages of loving-kindness.
- (7) But if he is still unable to stop it in this way, he should try resolution into elements. How? “Now, you who have gone forth into homelessness, when you are angry with him, what is it you are angry with? Is it head hairs you are angry with? Or body hairs? Or nails? Or is it urine you are angry with? Or alternatively, is it the earth element in the head hairs, etc., you are angry with? In this way, when he tries the resolution into elements, his anger finds no foothold, like a painting on the air.
- (8) But if he cannot effect the resolution into elements, he should try the giving of a gift. It can either be given by himself to the other or accepted by himself from the other. But if the other’s livelihood is not purified and his requisites are not proper to be used, it should be given by oneself. And in the one who does this the annoyance with that person entirely subsides.

As mentioned above, to kill anger completely, there is no other method but meditation. However, it should be noted that even in daily life when one is not meditating, one can practice the ways expressed above in order to eradicate anger so that he can establish tolerance in his mind easily when encountering unpleasant objects.

Religious Tolerance

It is an important subject for people who live in a multi-cultured, multi-racial and multi-religious society. What is religious tolerance? A famous Buddhist monk scholar, K Sri Dhammānanda's answer to this question is as follows;

“Buddhists belong to the religious group that accepts and appreciates the reasonable teachings of every religion. Buddhists can also tolerate the practices of other religious, cultural traditions and customs, although they may not necessarily wish to emulate them. In other words, Buddhists respect the other man’s views and appreciate other practices without harbouring any religious prejudices. This is called religious tolerance.”⁹

It should be understood through his words, that religious tolerance is nothing but a kind of attitude discussed above. Such kind of attitude called religious tolerance can be seen in the Buddha’s teachings. For instance, on one occasion, *Sīha*, a general, who is a follower of another religion came and asked to the Buddha what he wanted to know. After listening the Buddha’s answers, he converted to Buddhism. At that moment, the Buddha said; “Your family, *Sīha*, for many a day has been as a well-spring to the *Nigaṇṭhas*, wherefore deem it right to give alms to those who approach you”¹⁰

This story is a good example to understand how the Buddha treated the followers of other religions. He did not prevent his followers from offering requisites to other religious leaders. It is evident that Buddhism is full of religious tolerance. It should be studied and practiced by all religious followers to create a peaceful co-existence.

⁹ Dr. K Sri Dhammānanda, *Why Religious Tolerance (ebook)*.

¹⁰E.M. Hare, *The Book of The Gradual Sayings (Anguttara-Nikaya)*, Vol. 4, (Lancaster: The Pali Text Society, 2006), p.127.

Tolerance as a Virtue

As a virtue, patience is considered a perfection and a blessing. As a perfection, it is counted as the sixth of ten perfections which belongs to the *Bodhisattas*. It is because whoever wants to become a Buddha to help all sentient beings attain liberation, must cultivate these ten perfections or *Pāramī* until they attain supreme enlightenment.

Tolerance as a Perfection

The meaning of perfection should be understood in the following way;

Only *Bodhisattas* are able to perform deeds of merit such as *dāna*, *sīla*, etc. in an unparalleled manner. Hence these deeds of merit are called *Pāramī*, meaning the duties of *Bodhisattas* (*Paramānaṃ kammaṃ Pāramī*), or the property of *Bodhisattas* (*Paramānaṃ ayaṃ Pāramī*).¹¹ It is also mentioned exactly in *Cariyāpiṭaka* Commentary that the noble qualities such as generosity, morality, etc., not spoiled by craving, pride or wrong view, but founded on great compassion, *Mahākarunā* and wisdom which is the skill in seeking merit, *Upāya-kosalla Ñāṇa* are to be named *Pāramī*.¹² Depending on this definition of *Cariyāpiṭaka* Commentary mentioned above, a Buddhist scholar, U Shwe Aung said that *Pāramī* briefly means “deeds of the noble ones”.

The deeds of these noble ones can be of different kinds, but when classified according to their nature, there are only 10 kinds which are shown below:

- (1) Perfection of Giving (*Dāna*)
- (2) Perfection of Morality (*Sīla*)
- (3) Perfection of Renunciation (*Nikkhama*)
- (4) Perfection of Wisdom (*Paññā*)
- (5) Perfection of Energy (*Vīriya*)
- (6) Perfection of Forbearance (*Khantī*)
- (7) Perfection of Truthfulness (*Saccā*)

¹¹ Bhaddanta Vicittasārābhivamsa, *The Great Chronicle of Buddhas*, Vol: 1, Part 2, Trans by U Ko Lay and U Tin Lwin, (Yangon: Ti=Ni Press, 1992), p. 4.

¹² Bhaddanta Dhammapāla, *Cariyāpiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā*, (Yangon: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1959), p. 269.

- (8) Perfection of Resolution (*Adhiṭṭhāna*)
- (9) Perfection of Loving-Kindness (*Mettā*)
- (10) Perfection of Equanimity (*Upekkhā*)

What is their characteristics? A feature common to all the Ten Perfections is that they have the characteristic of serving the interests of others. Their function is (a) providing assistance to others (*kicca rasa*), (b) being endowed with steadfastness (prosperity, success), and fulfilment (*sampatti rasa*). Their manifestation is (a) the recurring phenomenon of the quest for the welfare and benefit of beings; or (b) the recurring phenomenon of appearing in the mind (of *Bodhisattas*) that it is a useful means of bringing about Buddhahood. Their proximate cause is (a) great compassion or (b) great compassion and skillfulness as to means and ways.¹³

According to Ledi Sayadaw, a learned Burmese monk, *Khantīpāramī* and *Upekkhāpāramī* are the most important parts of all perfections because they can support the remaining perfections to be fulfilled successfully like parents looking after their children as follows:

“Here are a few similes to drive home the significance of the perfections. Patience and equanimity are the mainstay for the other perfections. Only when one has established these two can one expect to fulfil the rest. Just as a newborn infant can only survive with the care of its parents, the remaining eight perfections can only be fulfilled under the constant care of patience and equanimity. Patience may be likened to the mother and equanimity to the father.¹⁴

Hence, it can be said that forbearance is one of fundamental functions of all perfections. And it can assist all perfections to be accomplished completely.

What kind of patience can become a perfection? To give a proper answer to this question, characteristics of *khantī*, tolerance should be understood first in the following way:

It has the characteristic of bearing with patience.

¹³ Bhaddanta Vicittasārābhivamsa, *The Great Chronicle of Buddhas*, Vol: 1, Part 1, Trans by U Ko Lay and U Tin Lwin, p. 44.

¹⁴ Ledi Sayadaw, Uttampurisa Dipani, (Yangon: Ministry of Religious Affairs, 1980), P.26.

- (a) Its function is to overcome both desirable and undesirable objects. (One who is not endowed with endurance adheres to greed when encountering pleasant, desirable objects; and to aversion when encountering unpleasant, undesirable objects. One is then said to be defeated by both desirable objects and undesirable objects. One who is endowed with endurance stands firm against keeping away from both greed and aversion. Forbearance is thus said to overcome all sense objects whether desirable or undesirable.)
- (b) Its manifestation in the *yogi*'s mind is patient acceptance of both desirable objects and undesirable objects or non-opposition to them
- (c) Its proximate cause is seeing things as they really are.

It shows that forbearance has two functions; making the mind stable without greed and without hatred. However, when patience is described as a perfection in the commentaries, only patience which overcomes anger is illustrated with many stories as perfection of forbearance.

And then, a commentator, Dhammapāla expresses exactly what *khantīpāramī* is in *Cariyāpiṭaka Aṭṭhakathā* as follows;

“*Karuṇūpāyakosallapariggahitaṃ* *sattasaṅkhārāparādhasahaṇaṅ*
adosappadhāno tadākārapavattacittuppādo khantīpāramitā”¹⁵

It says that founded on *Mahākaruṇā* and *Upāya-kosalla Ñāṇa*, tolerance to wrongdoings of others (or in terms of *Abhidhamma*, the group of consciousness and mental concomitants that arise in such a mode with tolerance headed by non-aversion, *adosa*) is the perfection of forbearance.

Therefore, patience appeared through beating attachment is not required in perfection of tolerance.

Moreover, to know if a deed is a *pārami* or not, there are two distinguishing characteristics to consider. They are:

- (1) its aim is to have compassion on others and
- (2) to be liberated from the round of rebirths.

¹⁵Bhaddanta Dhammapāla, *Cariyāpiṭaka-aṭṭhakathā*, p. 273

Only deeds such as almsgiving, morality, etc. which are done with these above aims can be considered *Pārami*. Otherwise, they are not of *pārami* status.¹⁶

Therefore, tolerance discussed above must be founded on the compassion for others and must be practiced together with the intention to escape from the circle of birth and death, to be included into the perfection of patience. That is why, it should be concluded that if whosoever is endowed with such a noble intention can become a Bodhisatta.

Tolerance as Maṅgala

As a virtue, patience is also a blessing called *Khantīmaṅgala* in Theravada Buddhism. Here Buddhist blessing is different from that of other religions. Mostly the idea of blessing from other religions is connected with God. There is no God in Buddhism. According to Buddhism, blessing comes not from God. That is why, ancient learned monks composed a verse that says what blessing Mangala is, as follows;

“*Desitaṃ devadevena, sabbapāpavināsanāṃ.*

Sabbalokahitathāya, maṅgalaṃ taṃ baṇāma he”.¹⁷

“The Buddha preached 38 blessings that can destroy all demeritorious deeds for the welfare of all beings”

In accordance with this definition, blessing, *Mangala* is the *Dhamma* that can eradicate demeritorious deeds. It is translated as auspiciousness. If one follows and practices these 38 Blessings, one can attain Enlightenment. At least, it can cause the one who cultivates these blessings, to be peaceful in daily life. You can verify this for yourself. It is because that according to Buddhism, blessing does not come from elsewhere but from one’s own wholesome efforts.¹⁸

¹⁶U Shwe Aung, *The Buddha: The Peerless Benefactor of Humanity*, Trans by U Hla Maung. (Yangon: Myawaddy, 1995), pp. 55,56.

¹⁷ U Vāsetṭhābhivamsa, *Pa Rate Kyi Natethaya Thit*, (Yangon: Mikhin Ayeyawadi, 1999), p. 87.

¹⁸ Dr. K. Dhammasāmi, *Blessings... You Can D.I.Y.*, (Yangon: Nang Devi Sarpay, 2012), p. 4.

For example, if you are full of patience, whatever you experience, good or bad, you will not be shaken. Your mind will not be the ground for resentment and attachment or like and dislike.

In other words, it destroys hatred and it will not give a chance for the unpleasant feelings to take root in your heart. At that time, being patient can be called a blessing of tolerance. Therefore, Dr. Dhammasāmi said; “Patience is a good parameter to measure one’s ability in perceiving, using, understanding the essential qualities of a temporal leader as well as the aspirant for enlightenment.”¹⁹

As presented above, the blessing of patience can also be used for daily affairs as well as for spiritual affairs like meditation.

Conclusion

The discussion above is a small attempt to explore tolerance from the Theravada Buddhist perspective. Tolerance can be a pillar not only for a *Bodhisatta* to become a Buddha but also for all to be peaceful. And it comes to be known that to be a *Bodhisatta*, one needs to change the intention when one performs meritorious deeds. Besides, it demands to be practiced, as a spiritual virtue, and the opposite of anger, in today’s society in which even family members are mentally estranged from each other in the same house and the connection of their hearts are broken. Therefore, the mental quality called tolerance as considered in Theravada Buddhism is a necessary virtue for a harmonious society.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 47.

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