

Buddhist Tolerance for Peaceful Co-Existence of Asian Nations

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1. Introduction

As technology and sciences have significantly progressed these days, Information Technology (IT) is one example providing people around the world an opportunity to communicate rapidly like they are living in the same village, so called “global village” or “globalization”. On the one hand, globalization becomes a network connecting humans around the world to learn and understand each other. On the other hand, the globalization may also lead to religious and cultural conflicts widely and rapidly, depending on how people use it.

For Asian people to live harmoniously in globalization, I believe that key success factors are to learn, to accept and to understand one another through “tolerance”, which is the common essence of Asian way of peaceful living for countless of time. In this article, I would like to present “tolerance” in Buddhist perspective for peaceful co-existence in Asian nations.

2. Buddhist Doctrines on Tolerance

The world “tolerance” in this paper includes open-mindedness to recognize other religions and cultures without judgment, prejudice or bias. It is the fact that if one is open-minded, he will have more space in his mind for other religions and cultures. On the contrary, those who are narrow-minded, it is impossible for him to embrace other religions and cultures. According to Buddhism, the narrow-heartedness is the result of attachment to views or beliefs, the defilements that should be aware. Even for Buddhists, the Buddha never taught his disciples to attach to Buddhism with blind faith although it is tempted for those who believe in any religion to attach to what they believe, with blind faith, not wisdom. Blind attachment may lead to pride viewing that only their religion or belief is superior to that of others. Such view obstructs people to learn. In Buddhism, the realization is impossible when people still have strong attachment or cling to their religion or view with blind faith.

Monks, if anyone should speak in blame of me, of the Teaching or of the Order, you should not be angry, resentful or upset on that account. If you were to be angry or displeased at such blame, that would only be a hindrance to you. For if others blame me, the Teaching or the Order, and you are angry or displeased, can you recognize whether what they say is right or wrong?...Monks, if anyone should speak in praise of me, of the Teaching or of the Order, you should not on that account be pleased, happy or elated. If you were to be pleased, happy or elated at such praise, that would only be a hindrance to you. If others praise me, the Teaching or the Order, and you are , you should acknowledge the truth of what is true...¹

¹ Maurice Walshe, Trans. **The Long Discourses of the Buddha** (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p. 68.

This statement shows that the Buddha never encouraged Buddhists to blindly attach to even the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Teaching, and the Order (Community). He would like his disciples to contemplate on disparagement or praise with their wisdom. In case of being disparaged, one should not, on the sudden, be angry, but listen deeply to such dislike discourses. There might be good advice beneath. On the contrary, when the Triple Gem is praised, one should not be driven in such pleasing words without wisely contemplation on the correctness of what is heard.

The Buddha did not encourage his followers to have mere faith in anything without proper understanding. One day a group of people called Kalamas told him they had been considerably troubled by many ascetics, all of whom taught a different way, all of whom said that their way was the only way, all of whom said that any other way was wrong. The chief of the Kalamas asked Buddha how he could know which was right and which one was wrong. The Buddha advised Kalamas:

Do not be led by report, or traditions, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, nor by logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: “this is our teacher”. But, O Kalamas, when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome, wrong, and bad then give them up....And when you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome and good then accept them and follow them...²

This statement shows that the Buddha gave freedom of thought to his followers to carefully consider and investigate before agreeing with any teaching.

The Buddha did not encourage people to change their old religion without careful consideration. As the example of a man named Upali who wanted to change his old religion, one day he approached the Buddha and told him that he would like to be one of his followers. The Buddha asked him the reason for changing his religion. The man replied, “*I heard that so many people are praising and appreciating the Buddha’s teachings and his religious way of life. So I also decided to follow the Buddha.*” Then the Buddha asked him, “*Have you ever heard my teachings? Do you know whether there is truth in my teachings? Do you know whether you can practice my way of life.*” The man replied, “*Ven. Sir, this advice that you just gave me, is more than enough for me to understand the nature of your teaching.*” Soon he became a follower of the Buddha. Again he asked, “*Is it permissible for me to continue giving alms to the priests of my former faith?*” The Buddha replied that there was no reason whatsoever for him to stop giving alms to any priests. The Buddha explained on many occasions that anyone could give alms to anybody in this world. Giving alms is a meritorious deed. This story is a good example for us to understand the sort of method the Buddha adopted to introduce his religion and to understand how the Buddha treated the followers of other religions.

In the year 256 BCE, the concept of “Buddhist tolerance” was highly accepted during Emperor Ashoka reign. As he mentioned;

One should not honor only one’s own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honor others’ religion for this or that reason. In so doing, one helps one’s own

² Tipitaka, **Anguttaranikaya**.

religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs grave of one's own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honors his own religion and condemns other religions, does do indeed through devotion to his own religion, thinking "I will glorify my own religion". But on the contrary in so doing he injures his own religion more gravely.³

What Emperor Ashoka wanted to tell us is that some people have misunderstood that to honor one's own religion and condemn others' religion is the way to promote and glorify their own religions. He suggested that condemning others' religion is equal to condemning one's own religion; in the same way, honoring others' religion is equal to honoring one's own religion. This statement shows that Emperor Ashoka had implemented the Buddhist tolerance in his administration.

3. How to Apply Buddhist Tolerance for Peaceful Co-existence in Asian Nations

It can be said that tolerance is a common essence of all Asian religions and cultures. But the question is: How can we make it practical or apply it in our daily life? How can make it a necessary condition for spiritual development? So, in the following presentation, the author will try to share how to make tolerance practical based on Buddhist perspective.

Tolerance in Buddhist perspective can be divided into the following three aspects:

1. Brotherhood-Based Tolerance: In Buddhism, tolerance is not only a superficial thing at the level of recognizing, understanding, and compromising with other religions and cultures so that we can live together, but it is based on the belief that all beings, whether humans or non-humans; whether Buddhists or non-Buddhists, are our fellows who are facing the same problems in the long way of the cycle of rebirth. Buddhism teaches that in the cycle of rebirth, no all beings have never been our relatives in the past lives; they may have been our father, mother, brother or sister. So, from this mental attitude, true Buddhists try to avoid killing or harming all beings. Because killing or harming the others is equal to killing or harming their own relatives. This can be called the "Brotherhood-based tolerance" in Buddhism.

2. Universal Love-Based Tolerance: Believing that all beings are facing the common problems in the cycle of rebirth as mentioned above, Buddhists have tried to spread loving-kindness and compassionate mind to all beings in daily life, wishing them free from suffering and be happy. Especially in Thailand, after chanting and practicing meditation, Thai people are traditionally taught to spread loving-kindness and compassionate mind to all beings. Buddhists believe that spreading loving-kindness and compassionate mind is a part of merit-making and of spiritual development towards the Enlightenment. According to Buddhism, the ones, who have narrow-mindedness and no universal love to all beings, still have defilements that obstruct them not to attain the Enlightenment. So, it can be said that the tolerance based on the universal love is identical with inner transformation or spiritual development towards the Enlightenment in Buddhism.

3. Spiritual Development-Based Tolerance: In addition, Buddhism teaches that the narrow-mindedness or non-tolerance is one of defilements in human mind that must be removed

³ See in Walpola Rahula, **What the Buddha Taught** (Taiwan: the Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2005), p. 4.

if they want to attain the Enlightenment. Buddhists hold that it is their religious duty to remove the defilement dealing with narrow-mindedness or non-tolerance from their minds. If not so, the final goal or Enlightenment can not be attained.

4. Conclusion

From the above presentation, it can be concluded that tolerance is a common essence of all Asian religions and cultures. The question is: how can we make it practical in our daily life and identical with our spiritual development towards the final goal of each religion. From Buddhist perspective, tolerance will be a superficial and temporary thing if it is superficially interpreted or explained in terms of mutual understanding, recognizing, and compromising among different religions and cultures. It will be a permanent thing if we can make it the way of our daily life and a necessary condition for spiritual development towards the final goal of each religion and culture.