

“Critical Tolerance”: The Option for Buddhists in Multi-Cultural Societies ¹

ABSTRACT: This paper examines whether there could be any scriptural justification for persons who profess to be Buddhists to take an aggressive, intolerant attitude to ‘others’ living amongst them. The evidence of the conduct of the Buddha himself is discussed, as are also the widespread call to abandon anger and resentment; the refusal to be dogmatic; the invitation that the teaching be intelligently examined; the practice of courteously examining and discussing other viewpoints; the rejection of exclusive claims to truth; the assertion that understanding cannot be imposed from without but has to be won by personal insight; the ardent advocacy of compassion and loving-kindness to all. It is shown that tradition, culture, language and even “free speech” cannot be taken as sacrosanct absolutes. Hence while being necessarily tolerant, Buddhism encourages its followers to critically examine doctrines and beliefs to test their worth and truthfulness, though never in a spirit of competition or acrimony. It is observed that whilst Buddhists, like all human beings, have failed to live by the values inherent in such teachings, they have also, by and large, avoided the great excesses of intolerance that have been witnessed in the history of humankind.

01 Introductory

Ethnic and religious pluralism is a feature of life almost everywhere in the world today, and with it the problems of cultural diversity. It is becoming ever more obvious that our complex societies cannot hope to survive unless they learn to live with this diversity and turn it to good account.

All throughout existence it has been customary in human society for individuals to identify themselves with a larger group - ethnic or religious or whatever. This identification is imbibed unconsciously in the course of growing up in society. In this process much else is also imbibed: we acquire the habit of having a high regard for ourselves and a low regard for those whom we see as members of other groups. We assimilate the many stereotypes held by our group about "other groups". Our education does not teach us to question the assumptions that lie behind these stereotypes or prejudiced opinions. In fact we are not even aware that we hold such pre-conceived opinions. They and the ignorance in which they are shrouded are the causes of misunderstanding and conflict in all multi-cultural societies.

This is the obvious intolerance that produces social conflicts; but it is not the only form of intolerance in us. The less evident intolerance with which we treat persons in our immediate familial and societal environment is far more pervasive. Bias, the essential ingredient of intolerance, is based on likes and dislikes - which are the stuff of our daily experience. That being the case, we unconsciously imbibe the intolerant attitude not only towards members of out-groups but also towards anyone with whom we have had unpleasant experiences. These biases lie dormant in our psyche, unknown to us, and make frequent inroads into our conduct, in the normal processes of relationship - in the family, in the wider circle of our friends and colleagues at work and entertainment, or in social and political conduct at the national level. It is to this more pervasive and more fundamental intolerance that Buddhism addresses itself.

02 The Place of Tolerance in Buddhist Thought.

(a) A popular stanza which attempts to give the teachings of the Buddha in a nutshell runs as follows:

To abstain from all that is unwholesome, to do what is wholesome and to purify one's mind:
this is what awakened beings teach. (Dh 183).

The last, cleaning up one's mind, is the fundamental teaching of Buddhism. Buddhism attempts to teach us to be free of the mental conditions from which our troublesome actions spring: attachment,

resentment and ignorance¹. If we are free of these three, then we will be free of the sufferings we inflict on ourselves and others because of them.

The entire Buddhist enterprise at its early and most important phase was devoted to understanding human suffering, the conflicts and sorrows of life. The propensities which cause these phenomena are present and active in all of us. The teaching rests on the basis that understanding them, or rather seeing them as and when they are active in our psyche, is the beginning of a process of self-education. It is that which brings about a transformation of character such that therewith the grip of attachment, anger, prejudice and ignorance on the mind is dissolved. This liberation is what the above stanza calls the purification of the mind².

Inward freedom which the Buddha declared to be the essence and flavour of his teaching³ implies a new mode of perception and a new kind of relationship with the world - which necessarily signifies the absence of that attachment and resentment towards others which under normal circumstances we cannot overcome. To be free in this manner is to have that strength of character that can be at ease with persons of all types - and ideas, viewpoints and perceptions that differ from our own.

If it is possible for anyone to be so liberated, then obviously such a person would not have that overarching attachment to a particular grouping which generates violent confrontation and conflict - ethnic, nationalistic, ideological or even 'religious' in the narrow sense⁴. Needless to say, this means that if one can follow the Buddha's teaching to the fullest extent, one must necessarily be free of intolerance.

But this is easier said than done, and the Buddha was well aware of it. Hence he also taught, particularly for his lay followers, a social or socio-ethical teaching. It is not unrelated to the essential teaching of liberation, because one could not hope to be free of the deep-seated propensities of mind if one lived chaotically and in an anti-social manner.

This socio-ethical teaching is expressed in many different ways. In the stanza quoted above it is summarized as "abstaining from what is bad" and "doing what is wholesome". The substance of this teaching is also given in the form of the famous five precepts of Buddhism⁵, which a little reflection will show are imbued with vast social significance. It would be a mistake to think that the Buddhist is merely expected to observe them as a method of personal improvement. What is regularly stressed is that one should observe them and also *advocate* their observance by others⁶.

(b) Conflict pervades all aspects of life in the world. As we saw above, Buddhism traces the causes of conflict to the psychological nature of the human being, i.e., to the fact that simultaneously with our

¹ Ignorance (*avijjā*) is usually defined as not understanding the Four Noble Truths, i.e., the human predicament and its causes etc. It thus includes our illusions and delusions, the unawareness of the forces that determine our behavior and our relationships. It is not ignorance in the normal sense of the term.

² In Buddhist terminology the liberation (*vimutti*) from *rāga* (attachment, psychological dependence), *dosa* (anger, resentment, hate, aggressiveness) and *moha* (ignorance, in the above-mentioned sense).

³ Vin. Culla-vagga ix i 4 .

⁴ In the sense that it defines itself by opposition to others.

⁵ The five precepts are the undertaking not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to engage in sexual misconduct and not to consume substances that intoxicate.

⁶ The texts emphasize *samādāna* as well as *samādāpana* and *samanuñña*: to observe, to cause others to observe and to approve of others' observance. Cp A i 191, i 297 f. etc.

perception of persons and things, we get enmeshed in a process of attraction (*anurodha*) or resentment (*virodha*), due to deep-seated propensities (*anusaya*) being awakened in our minds. A second cause of conflict is "attachment to one's own view" (*sandiṭṭhi-rāga*), i.e., religious and ideological dogmatism⁷.

The Buddha took a definite stand against dogma and ideology in the sense of a rigid set of beliefs which is deemed to represent the truth exclusively and to which one implicitly adheres. On this he had strong words to say: "Clever persons make diverse assertions, each clinging dogmatically to his own view. They say, "Whoever knows thus has known the truth. Whoever despises this is imperfect". .. "What one asserts to be true and real, others say is meaningless and false. Thus they enter into dispute and debate"⁸.

"The Buddha was highly critical of this intolerance... In the Aṭṭhaka-vagga .. (he says) that the lack of tolerance in the realm of views leads to many harmful consequences. First it is a hindrance to one's own knowledge as one becomes emotionally involved in the belief that one already holds. .. - this leads to intellectual stagnation. Secondly emotions bring about many consequences which are morally harmful. Emotional attachment to dogmatic views results in absolute disregard for objectivity. It also disrupts the harmony of social relations. .. The Buddha says that a person finds it difficult to give up his own views when he is led by impelling desires and convinced according to his inclination. .. What incites a person to cling passionately to his own view is more often his consciousness and esteem of the self, rather than the consciousness of the truth⁹".
(Premasiri 17 - 21).

Dogma (ideology) is a property of the intellect, a seduction of the mind. It is one of the major links that bind one to a particular ethnic, religious or political grouping and hence an instrument of identity. It can have no place in a religion which values the unbound mind and regards the notion of enduring identity as a delusion.

(c) An ardent believer in a dogma or ideology would naturally wish to enlarge the number of its adherents. This attachment often leads to conversion by various forms of seduction, creating bad feeling in multi-religious societies and eventually conflict and intolerance. Buddhists, if they are true to the teachings of the Buddha, cannot set about spreading their faith in this manner. The essence of the Dhamma is the cleaning up of one's mind by understanding its workings. It is an endeavour that has to be undertaken by and in oneself¹⁰. One can be a Buddhist only by conviction; one cannot be made a Buddhist by seduction or coercion.

(c) The principle of not hurting others and respecting their sensibilities has been stressed again and again in the Buddhist teachings. Any arrogance, issuing from the feeling that one's family, wealth, fame, knowledge, opinion, dogma, ability, austerity or religious attainment is superior to that of others has been unequivocally decried as a source of disaster, socially and personally, to the very person who

⁷. See Premasiri, pp 4 and 7.

⁸. This is a free rendering of Sn 878 and 883 in line with Premasiri 16 f. Cp M i 486 (MLS ii 164): Dogma is "a wilderness, a puppet show, a writhing and a fetter", "coupled with misery, ruin, despair and agony", hence something that the Buddha had abandoned. And A i 66 (GS i 61): Religious people "quarrel because of bondage and servitude to the lust of opinions" (A i 66: GS i 61).

⁹. i.e., a person cherishes an opinion more because it is his opinion than because it is an expression of a fact.

¹⁰. The standard description of the Dhamma, *paccattaṃ veditaṅga*, means that it is to be understood individually.

harbours such sentiments (M iii 37 ff). This idea has been repeatedly expressed by emphasizing that *attānukkaṃsana* and *para-vambhana* (boasting of one's greatness and disparagement of others)¹¹ must at all cost be avoided.

(d) It is well known that in all the texts of Buddhism, great stress has been laid on principles that should govern one's relationship with other beings. The greatest among them are friendliness, compassion, loving-kindness and non-interference. They are to be observed in relation to everybody, irrespective of group-affiliations. Such was the value that Buddhism placed on these principles that the way of life in which they are observed has been called the highest form of religious living (*brahma-vihāra*).

(e) The Buddhist teachings take the attitude that character and not birth is what makes a person great or small and there are numerous expressions of this in the early sources of Buddhism¹². The great elders of the religion of the early days came from different social and 'tribal' affiliations; they acted, and were treated, alike without any distinctions, as one could see from texts like the Thera- and Theri- gāthās¹³. One of the earliest and most daring expressions of the unity of humankind is the Vāseṭṭha Sutta of the Buddhist canon (M ii 196 ff and Sn pp 115 ff). A genuine observance of the Buddhist teachings must therefore necessarily preclude all ethnic intolerance.

03 Tolerance: the Buddha's Personal Example

One of the Buddha's personal predilections as reported in the canon is his wish that he and the teachings be tested in the crucible of reason rather than accepted in faith¹⁴. His advice to "followers" that they should *examine* his conduct and his teachings carefully before all else¹⁵ and his advice to non-followers to examine any religious teaching critically¹⁶ shows that his basic attitude was that one should have the willingness to be open to all views, the willingness to consider them for what they are worth.

It is said that as a teacher the Buddha was not only compassionate but also patient and uninterfering. He would not say what was painful and unpalatable to his listeners, if at the same time it was untrue

¹¹ Cp M i Anumāna Sutta: a boastful and disparaging person is distasteful to others and so these qualities should be discarded; M ii Apaṇṇaka Sutta: Denial of religious values lead to these qualities; affirmation of religious values leads to absence of them; M i Cūlasāropama Sutta: a monk who is arrogant and disparaging on account of his virtues and attainments is like one who looks for the pith of a tree but goes away with the worthless part of it.

¹² E.g. Sn. 116 ff; 462; 600 ff

¹³ Cp also the explicit statement to this effect at Vin., Cull-vagga ix i 4.

¹⁴ Cp M ii Caṅki Sutta. In this important discourse, the Buddha emphasizes the need of understanding truth by oneself, as against reliance on tradition or on a *guru*. He describes the process whereby a person may have an initial faith in a religious teacher and how from that a more solid and rational investigation of his teaching may result and how this in turn may lead to the discovery of its validity by personal insight. Particularly significant is this paragraph:

Faith, personal liking, tradition, consideration of reasons (for accepting something), the (strong) appeal of an idea -- the result of these five are twofold, (as can be seen) even within one's own lifetime. Strong faith may be placed in something, but it may be empty, void and false. On the other hand, there may be no such strong faith in something, but it may be true, actual and not otherwise. The same applies to what has been well liked, well handed down by tradition, well thought out as to its reasons or strongly appealing as an idea. Hence it is not proper for an intelligent person who stands by (what he takes to be) the truth to conclude on any of these grounds that that alone is true and all else is false.

¹⁵ Vimaṃsaka Sutta M i 317 ff.

¹⁶ Kālāma Sutta, A i 188 ff.

and unprofitable. But in regard to what was unpalatable but true, he acted with not only compassion but also *upekkhā* - which is non-interference rather than indifference, as has sometimes been misunderstood.

"The Buddha was quick to condemn any inference that he taught a doctrine of inaction or apathy". When Potaliya told him that the most worthy person is one who neither praises the praiseworthy nor condemns the blameworthy and advocated "what would seem a complete withdrawal of judgment and a supreme detachment from the issues governing society", the Buddha strongly disagreed with him. "Far better is the person of discrimination who speaks in dispraise of the unworthy and in praise of the worthy, saying seasonably what is factual and the truth". (Harris, Dialogue xvii p 66, citing A ii 100 f).

In line with this is the second quality of the Buddha as a teacher: he *will say* what is true and profitable, whether it is unpalatable or not, but he will do so *only at the right time*¹⁷.

The Buddha is shown to have gladly accepted the opportunities that presented themselves to meet other religious personalities of his time and discuss with them the issues that engaged their minds. In one such meeting, with a Paribbājaka teacher called Nigrodha, the Buddha emphasized at the end of their conversation that it should not be thought that he taught the Dhamma because he wished to increase his following or to dissuade others from observing the rules and practices of their religions. "Let him who was your teacher remain as your teacher; let the rules and practices remain as before .. There are unwholesome propensities that bring about suffering .. It is for their abandonment that I teach dhamma"¹⁸.

An important text which tells us more about the Buddha's dealings with other religions is the report of his conversation with the ascetic Kassapa. The latter asks the Buddha if it is true that he disparages all penance and finds fault with every ascetic. The Buddha replies that this is not true.

I see how some ascetics live a hard life and are born after death into some happy state (though this is not invariably so). .. How then could I disparage all penance and bluntly revile and find fault with every ascetic? There are some recluses and Brahmans who are clever, subtle and well-versed in controversy. .. As between them and me, there is agreement on some points and disagreement on others. And I have gone to them and said, "As for those things, my friends, on which we do not agree, let us leave them alone. And on those on which we agree, let the wise ask questions and talk over them, teacher with teacher or group with group. Let them find out whether I desist from what we in common agree to be unwholesome and follow what we agree to be wholesome"¹⁹.

After these statements the two launch themselves into a discussion of the religious life. The ascetic describes the strict regimen that some of them follow. The Buddha does not agree that this is what makes a religious person in the true sense. Rather, it is from the time that one has "cultivated the heart of love that knows no anger, that knows no ill-will" that one becomes a recluse, a Brahman. Here the Buddha gradually proceeds to take up aspects of the teaching of his interlocutor and frankly says what he thinks about them. This is typical of the Buddha.

¹⁷ M i 395, ii 62 f; A iii 184

¹⁸ D iii 56. See comments of De Silva, Dialogue XV p 88.

¹⁹ Adapted from D i 161 ff: Dial. i 223 ff.

In an introductory note to this discourse, T.W. Rhys Davids, the pioneer translator of Pali texts, makes the following comments:

When speaking on sacrifice to a sacrificial priest, on union with God to an adherent of the current theology, on Brahman claims to superior social rank to a proud Brahman, on mystic insight to a man who trusts in it, on the soul to one who believes in the soul theory, the method followed is always the same. Gotama puts himself as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner. He attacks none of his cherished convictions. He accepts as the starting point of his own exposition the desirability of the act or condition prized by his opponent ... He even adopts the very phraseology of his questioner. And then, partly by putting a new and (from the Buddhist point of view) higher meaning into the words; partly by an appeal to such ethical conceptions as are common ground between them; he gradually leads his opponent up to his conclusion. .. there is both courtesy and dignity in the method employed. (Dial. i 206).

It must be said that as a teacher the Buddha was quite forthright and critical²⁰. He never hesitated to speak out his mind on what he saw as futile or harmful religious views and practices. One must view this critical fieriness in the context of the principles that he followed as a teacher. It would then seem that he was frank, often severely so, not in order to hurt or gain some satisfaction, but in the conviction that it eventually would be for the good of his audience. The many creditable things which he said about the "ancient Brahmans" (e.g., Sn 284 ff) and the 'true' meanings he often attributed to various usages, as opposed to their conventional meanings, actually underscore his desire not to be offensive, as Rhys Davids implies in the above comment. The basic thrust of the teachings and the social philosophy that shines through them reveal the critical but essentially tolerant stamp of the Buddha's mind.

In Kalama and some other Suttas the Buddha recommends to his audiences a religious norm that would be irreproachable from any point of view. This is about the avoidance of the unethical and the abandonment of greed, hate and delusion, which his audiences accepted as worthy and non-controversial, i.e., non-sectarian²¹. In point of fact this "non-controversial teaching" coincides with the essence of the Buddha's own teaching. The significant thing in this kind of statement is that the Buddha thought, and his listeners are said to have accepted, that what he taught was what any enlightened teacher would advocate.

We might also note here that the one definite way (*ekāyana magga*) for ending suffering mentioned in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (M i), which almost defines the Buddhist way to transcend the bonds of the human mind, is unflinching awareness, which is scarcely sectarian - in the sense that an identification with a particular ideology or religious establishment, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, is not only **not** a prerequisite for this awareness, but also in fact is a hindrance whose presence is detected in the process of awareness and thereby dispensed with.

²⁰ Cp De Silva, Dialogue xv p 86, on Buddhist criticism of Brahmin views on caste and ritual.

²¹ Cp A i 217 ff. A lay member of the Ājīvaka religion asks Ananda, the Buddha's close disciple, "Whose religion is well propounded and who fares properly on the religious path?" Ananda's reply is centred round the theme of the abandonment of greed, hate and delusion. Those who teach this have proclaimed a good religion; those who work for this, fare well religiously; those who have achieved this have fulfilled the religious life. The questioner praises Ananda for his non-sectarian reply, in which there was no exaltation of his own *dhamma* nor disparagement of anyone else's *dhamma*; a reasonable answer was given and 'self' was not boosted.

The same attitude is strikingly evident in one of the last utterances of the Buddha, namely his admonition to his monks that they be "lamps unto themselves": persons whose refuge is themselves and *dhamma* and not anyone or anything else (D ii 100). It is also evident in the emphatic assertion made often and in many different ways by the Buddha that it was not proper for anybody to propound a teaching and then assert "this alone is true and all else is worthless"²².

04 Some Discordant Notes and the Problem of their Authenticity

But yet it would be factually incorrect and intellectually dishonest to disregard some contrary indications that are to be seen in the Buddhist literature. Some texts, a few even in the canon, show not merely a critical, but also a triumphalist and adversarial attitude towards other religionists.

The story of the Buddha's confrontation with Sarabha (A i 185 ff) is a case in point. Sarabha was a former Paribbājaka who had become a *bhikkhu* and who subsequently became dissatisfied with the life in the Buddhist Sangha. He returned to his former religion and tried to justify his action by saying that he understood the Buddha's Dhamma and then decided to give it up. The Buddha deals with this erstwhile disciple directly and visits the Paribbājaka monastery where he is residing. His questions directed at Sarabha draw a blank as the latter is well aware he cannot justify his claim to have understood the Buddha's teaching. At this the Buddha gives him the reasonable advice that he should have talked matters over with him before making his unsupportable claims. So far the text is generally factual. However, it does not stop there but goes on to say that thereupon the Buddha, in full view of the Paribbājakas and others, "made the lion-roar thrice" and "sprang into the sky" and returned to his monastery.

A similar situation is depicted in Cūla-saccaka (M i 227 ff) and Ambaṭṭha (D i 87 ff) Suttas too. In these it is shown that the Buddha's reasoning did not make Saccaka and Ambaṭṭha, who boastfully went to debate with him, to acknowledge the weakness of their arguments. They remain silent. The texts go on to portray the Buddha as saying that their heads "would split into pieces on the spot" if they refrain from answering his question even for a third time. At this, a supernatural being appears above the debaters with the intention of splitting their heads as prophesied by the Buddha, if they persisted in their recalcitrance (M i 231; MLS i 285; D i 95; Dial i 117) - and this eventually leads to Saccaka and Ambaṭṭha seeking shelter in the Buddha.

These are some early examples of a triumphalist attitude to other religionists. This adversarial trend is in direct contrast to the teachings in such texts as the Kālāma and Vīmaṃsaka Suttas and particularly in references to *attānukkaṃsa* and *para-vambhana* mentioned above.

The widespread call in the early texts of Buddhism to abandon anger and resentment, the critique of dogmatism, the invitation that the teaching be intelligently examined, the practice of courteously examining and discussing other viewpoints, the refusal to put any value on exclusive claims to truth, the assertion that understanding cannot be imposed from without but has to be won by personal insight, the ardent advocacy of compassion and lovingkindness to all creatures -- all these click together so

²² See quotation from Caṅ

ki Sutta, note 14 above. The said attitude is criticised at M ii Aggivacchagotta Sutta, Sn 832, 837, 843 etc., etc.

tightly that it must be concluded that critical tolerance²³ is the genuine Buddhist attitude and that any kind of triumphalism is quite incompatible with the early teachings of the religion. Texts that appear to be inconsistent with this are *ipso facto* suspect as to their authenticity. I personally think that the few 'triumphalist' sentences in the Suttas mentioned above are very likely to be unauthentic²⁴.

The adversarial strand continues and comes out strongly in later commentarial texts²⁵. And of course it is only too well known to students of Sri Lankan history that the orthodox Mahāvihāra fraternity in the island always adopted a distinctly antagonistic attitude to fellow religionists of non-Theravada schools.

We are also equally familiar with the fact that, at crucial periods in Sri Lankan history, segments of the Buddhist Sangha adopted a nationalist stand and condoned the politics of violent confrontation in relation to non-Sinhala groups who were perceived as threats to the dominance of Buddhism in the country. At least partly then, conventional Buddhism has ended up in discarding some of the most precious things for which the Buddha stood.

This is of course not the whole story. There also prevailed, and perhaps by and large, a distinctly more tolerant attitude to other religions in Buddhist societies of Asia which have not perpetrated such religion-based atrocities as crusades and holy wars or racist evils like the Nazi holocaust.²⁶

05 Importance of the source of Buddhism to the educator.

Diversity and intolerance of it are aspects of the reality we face. The imperfect Buddhism of persons caught in the trap of human psychology (as against an ideal Buddhism reclaimed from ancient texts) is part of that reality. Can the tide of history be turned back? Why the emphasis on the source of Buddhism?

The Buddha has always been a powerful spiritual attraction at all places and times. Unbiased perception of what he stood for can be very meaningful in defining and promoting the values of a good society. It should be able to provide useful insights in education for peace and harmony in a multi-religious country.

In this respect, three insights that Buddhism provides come to mind.

(a) "Right Speech" is more important than free speech.

A very important area in which the currently fashionable liberalist approach and Buddhism are not in

²³ "Critical tolerance" is the phrase used by Theravada scholars to indicate the attitude of Buddhism to other religions. See, e.g., Jayatilleke.

²⁴ The true contours of this dissonance can be determined only by a rigorous textual criticism. Research in this direction is at a very rudimentary level in Buddhist studies. One of the historical tasks before Buddhist scholarship is to study this paradox so that the Buddhist world may be enabled to reclaim that precious flavour of freedom which was a definitive characteristic of Buddhism at its earliest phase and which seems to have been diluted by the orthodoxy and traditionalism which has been the hallmark of much of the Buddhist establishment from as far back as one can see.

²⁵ See for an example DhA i 434 ff: the story of Sirigutta and Garahadinna in which the former, a lay disciple of the Buddha, is depicted as inviting Jaina monks to a meal and arranging seats for them in such a way that they would fall into a concealed ditch of filth as soon as they sat down; this was to prove that the Jains were not omniscient. Also the story of the Buddha's "Twin Miracle" (DA i 57 and DhA iii 204) where the Buddha performs extraordinary feats of magic in the sky to defeat the claims of other religious teachers that they would perform miracles only in competition with him.

²⁶ See Toynbee (1), 165 ff esp 167 and Toynbee (2), 251 f

agreement is about the attitude to free speech. While liberalist tolerance puts a singular value on unconditional freedom of expression, the Buddha urges that we speak not so much freely as responsibly and truthfully words that bring unity and concord and not strife and discord²⁷. The early texts have so much to say on this that it must be regarded as a teaching of cardinal importance in the social ethics of Buddhism.

(b) Culture is not sacrosanct; it should be critically examined.

Arguably, the advocacy of tradition could be tantamount to an espousal of an absolutist view of culture. One should say that there is in Buddhism an implicit critique of such attitude, although many Buddhists themselves advocate the sacredness of traditional culture. Where self itself is not solid and absolute, but is seen as a (changeable) product of the historical experiences of a person's consciousness²⁸, and identification on the part of such a relative 'self' with dogma and ideology is seen as a major cause of social conflict, could identification with a culture be invested with any greater value? In this context the attitude of the Buddha towards language is instructive, namely that it should be treated for what it is, a tool of communication; it should not be elevated to a higher pedestal²⁹.

Buddhism can have no quarrel with the celebration of 'external' kinds of diversity such as language, art forms, food, dress, habits of work, social organization etc. But it demands that we be alert to the implications of behaviour dictated by culture or social acceptability, so that we are enabled to discriminate between what is wholesome and what is not. Such alertness is indispensable in order for freedom to come into being. Freedom enables us to see beyond diversity and to take the signs of diversity for what they are: products of historical circumstance. They are not absolute.

The inability to apprehend the relative nature of culture is a powerful contributory factor in ethnic disunity and accounts for much of the fanaticism on both sides of the divide in all places where ethnicity has become the trigger for outbursts of the human propensities to violence and self-aggrandizement.

Tolerance of other cultures is undoubtedly necessary, not least because we have no moral right to impose our views on others. But that does not mean that critical judgment can be jettisoned for sake of tolerance. Cultures have to be seen for what they are. They are not exempt from the requirement that nothing should be accepted without investigation. So Buddhism would not subscribe to a blanket endorsement of all cultures. It would regard cultures whose mode of living entails breach of its ethical values as "not praiseworthy". However, the only possible action about them is to show how and why they are not praiseworthy - and that too within the bounds of right speech and non-interference. This is the limit of possible action implicit in Buddhist teachings in regard to such matters.

(c) Tolerance cannot be learned with intolerance hiding in mind.

Last, but not least, Buddhism offers the educator the powerful insight that the real issue is not so much that one should teach the student how to *become* tolerant; far more important is it to see the intolerance that *is* already entrenched in the mind. Our task is to discover the art of bringing the propensities to

²⁷ Ethical speech is described in some detail in Suttas like Saleyyaka (M i 285 ff), Sevittabbāsevitabba (M iii 45 ff) etc.

²⁸ A point made with great earnestness in the Buddha's discourse to Sāti in the Maha-taṇhā-saṅkhaya Sutta, M i 255 ff.

²⁹ Araṇa-vibhaṅga Sutta, M iii 234 f. Several scholars have discussed this point, e.g., Tilakaratne, Ch VII.

intolerance delicately to light and allow the power of awareness inherent in discovery to wash them away. Buddhism everywhere proceeds on the basis that the hidden loses its potency to dominate the mind when brought under the light of observation. In point of fact tolerance is *unlearnable* as long as intolerance, unobserved, rules the deeper layers of the mind.

06 Conclusion

Far from being a traditional doctrine, Buddhism began as a radical critique of all contemporary traditions. The Buddha's call to the Kālāmas not to mistake tradition for wisdom is a definitive context as far as this matter is concerned. But this is not the only place where he is critical of the traditionalist or *anussavika* approach³⁰. The Dhamma cannot be imbibed from the historical or the surrounding culture. It is *anitiha*: not a matter of tradition or hearsay (A ii 26). It is *ariya* or imbued with value for the very reason that it is to be adopted after being tested by investigation on one's own part and not because it stems from a traditional source. So Buddhist tolerance cannot be a blind acceptance of tradition or culture. Rather, it involves appreciation of what is seen to be good after due investigation, and then accepting only that-- as well as being critically aware of what is not good, but refraining from behaving towards it in a bad way, such as, for example, using authority or power or coercion to blot it out.

The Buddhist teaching of *anatta* tells us that we are not rigid entities but are creatures of the circumstances of our consciousness and our will: changeable and improvable. On that basis, Buddhism teaches how to transform character by means of self-knowledge. In this process it sees the nature of the self and its seeking anchorage in the group. The group is in its assessment a fiction. To see this and to be free of this and such other crutches, including dogma, is liberation. Liberation from greed, hate and ignorance involves the discarding of identification and affiliation.

The *ariya* culture or the culture of Buddhist *dharma* is distinguished by the willingness to investigate and discard everything that hinders liberation. The Eightfold Path and all that is called *kusala* belongs here. The *kusala* ethic which the Dhamma advocates has been described as what brings enduring, and not merely transient, happiness and well-being to both self and others³¹. Such culture cannot be picked up from tradition and accumulated; rather, it is there for the purpose of discarding worthless accumulations and so all biases and pre-conceived opinions. It stands for liberty, lightness, sensitivity, refinement and poses no threat to anyone³². It understands that the other is like oneself. Where there is such understanding there can be no intolerance. However it cannot be uncritical, but knows where to draw the line.

* * * *

Language, culture, nation, motherland - we remain chained to these with which we affiliate ourselves. As long as we remain bound by these fetters we cannot be free. And as long as we are unfree, we will be holding on to the seeds of discord and intolerance. The Buddha dares us to perceive these subtlest of

³⁰ See discussion of this in Dharmasiri, 285 - 292. He cites M i 520, ii 170 f; A ii 26, and Th i 331.

³¹ *These ideas as to what constitutes the good (kusala) are elaborated in such discourses as Maha-dhamma-samādāna and Culla-dhamma-samādāna (M i), Ambalaṅkika-rāhulovāda (M ii) and Sevitaḥḥa-asevitaḥḥa (M iii) Suttas.*

³² *Compare the Buddha's description of what is acceptable and good and worthy of being done as what stands for the wellbeing of both self and others, what hinders neither self nor others in, e.g., M ii Ambalaṅkika Rāhulovāda Sutta.*

the fetters of the mind. When he says, "I am no one whatsoever. I am only a person who is awake"³³, he tells us that we can let go of all our affiliations; we can be free far beyond the horizons of the most liberal of political visions - to a degree that none of our charters envisage. But dare we go so far? Do we have the boldness to think of such freedom? Dare we question **all** our affiliations?

WORKS CITED AND ABBREVIATIONS

(Abbreviations are in bold type)

I: PALI TEXTS / TRANSLATIONS

(Pali Text Society Publications)

A	Aṅguttara Nikaya
Dial	Dialogues of the Buddha
D	Dīgha Nikāya
DA	Dīgha Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā
Dh	Dhammapada
DhA	Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā
GS	Gradual Sayings
M	Majjhima Nikāya
MLS	Middle Length Sayings
S	Suttanipāta
Vin	Vinaya Piṭaka

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¹ This paper is based on an original prepared for a conference on Religious Liberty held in USA in 1976 and later revised for a Sri Lanka Foundation Institute - UNESCO Seminar on Peace, Tolerance and National Reconciliation in Colombo. It was published as "The Impossibility of Intolerance: A Buddhist Perspective", in Dialogue (NS) Vol. XXVIII 2001 and in a World Fellowship of Buddhists souvenir (2010) to mark the 60th anniversary of its founding.

³³ A ii 39; Sn 455