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Practice of Patience Paramita and Interreligious Dialogue

Introduction:

Mahayana Buddhism is one of the two major traditions in Buddhism. For any practicing Buddhist, the ultimate aim is to attain Buddhahood (enlightenment/nirvana) so as to deliver oneself and all sentient beings from suffering, and Mahayana Buddhists follow the Bodhisattva path to the attainment of Buddhahood. On this path, the practice of the Six Paramitas is essential. Paramita in Sanskrit literally means ‘to cross over to the other shore’, implying to leave the egocentric mentality and go beyond one’s notion of self; Paramita can also be translated as transcendent perfection, so Six Paramitas is also known as the Six Perfections. They entail the practice of the Perfection of Giving (Dana Paramita), the Perfection of Discipline (Sila Paramita), the Perfection of Patience (Kshanti Paramita), the Perfection of Diligence (Virya Paramita), the Perfection of Meditative Concentration (Dhyana Paramita), and the Perfection of Wisdom (Prajna Paramita).

The Six Perfections are believed to be innately within each being’s Buddha nature (the enlightened state), but are obscured by delusion, selfishness, greed and other karmic tendencies. Through the accomplishment of each Perfection, that specific part of potential quality of an enlightened being will surface and this person can be considered a Bodhisattva. When illustrated in everyday sense, the practice of the Six Paramitas is a form of self-cultivation on compassion, virtue and wisdom which could be reflected in the delivery of positive influence on social peace in the wider context.

Globalisation and the explosion of information on readily available knowledge about the various world religions, as well as the increasing religion-based hate crimes are among the reasons that have evoked the demand for interreligious dialogue in recent times; however, it remains an area of challenging issues. This paper will examine closely on one of the Six Paramitas, the practice of Patience Paramita (Patience Paramita is sometimes translated as “forbearance” or ‘endurance’) within a Buddhist context, and how it could be employed to foster better interreligious dialogue.

Definition of Patience Paramita

To practise the Patience Paramita, first of all, one needs to accept the Four Noble Truths¹ (Learn Religions), with the aim to turn away from self-centred consideration of one's own suffering to attending to the suffering of others. 'Patience' is used to signify Kshanti Paramita, however, the Sanskrit word 'Kshanti' also contains the meaning of forbearance, endurance and acceptance. The rationale for such practice is for the strength of the mind and the tranquility of the heart. It is inevitable in life that one would encounter challenges and difficulties in various forms, such as misunderstanding, adversity, distress, hardship or betrayal. The cultivation of Patience guides one to transcend to a state where such situations will no longer be dealt with emotions of negativity, aversion, resentment or with retaliation. This transformation is not owing to the suppression or denial of one's feelings and thoughts, but an attainment of the enlightened quality of Patience through specific means. Thus, a Bodhisattva who has perfected the Patience Paramita, would not lose his/her compassion, composure and inner tranquility when faced with challenging circumstances, as his/her mind spontaneously remains focused on bringing benefit or consolation to others; Bodhisattvas regard different kinds of emotional reactivity as equals, their mind and manner are not directly affected by external factors.

Buddhist Scripture on the Paramita of Patience

There is an abundance of teachings on the practice of Patience Paramita in the Buddhist scripture. Given its broad scope, only a limited amount of the totality could be shared in this paper.

The Awakening Faith of Mahayana

How does one practise Patience? Patience is practised through responding to anger from others with forbearance without wanting to seek revenge. When faced with the phenomena of profit, wane, slander, acknowledgement, praise, tease, suffering or bliss, one should endure and accept with a peaceful mind (CBETA: T32n1667, trans. M. Sun).

¹ The truth of the following: suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering, the way to the cessation of suffering.

Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom (Chapter 30)

Patience is the strength and power of all the disciples and can be used to subdue all evil and manifest magnificence. Patience is a guardian of the precepts, the armour to protect you from the enemies, the best medicine to treat poison, the victory for one's safety from deadly circumstances, the great treasure for the poor and suffering, the grand vessel that delivers all sentient beings from this shore of reincarnation to the other shore of Nirvana (CBETA: T25n1509_030, trans. M. Sun).

Mahaparinirvana Sutra (chapter ten)

Bodhisattvas who practise for the attainment of Mahaparinirvana think this way: 'If one cannot endure the pain from emotional and physical hardship, then one will not have the ability to deliver all sentient beings from the 'river' of affliction.' In this way, when under such suffering, the Bodhisattvas will strive to endure and accept in peace. This strength of Patience will emancipate the Bodhisattvas from affliction (CBETA: T12n0375, trans. M. Sun).

From the aforementioned teachings of Patience Paramita, it can be contended that there are three areas for the practice of Patience Paramita.

I. In Time of Mistreatment

The main teaching here is to maintain one's patience in times of conflict, particularly when one is hurt or mistreated by others; it is considered not a Buddhist approach if one responds to the difficult and unpleasant situations with anger, aggression or animosity; rather, tolerance and forbearance is encouraged for a more likely peaceful resolution of the problematic circumstances. Exercising patience when being mistreated is not about becoming a doormat, it is about how one responds (Tsering 2011, p.214). One of the aims for practising patience under harsh situation as described is for the training of inner tranquility, to test whether one's mentality is provoked by the harm-doers, this practice of Patience could also subsequently cultivate a more compassionate mind. Moreover, for the harm-doers, forbearance and tolerance could de-escalate the tense situation; this is also helpful to the general wellbeing of the society.

Dalai Lama once taught that to those who harm us, no matter what they think of us, we shall only wish for the best for them. In this manner, we will not hate but to be grateful that they

give the opportunity for the practice of Patience Paramita. The Buddha and those who love us cannot offer the condition for patience practice; it is best done when hurt is imposed by the not so friendly opponents. All Buddhist who are on the path of the Bodhisattva must undergo this journey (Teachings of Dalai Lama). *The Way of the Bodhisattva* states, ‘Buddhahood cannot be attained without the accomplishment of Patience Paramita, the most eminent teacher who can teach us about the Paramita of Patience is our enemy. (CBETA: W04n0033, trans. M. Sun).’

II. Endurance of Personal Hardship

It is inevitable to come face to face with hardship at some stage in one’s life, Patience Paramita teaches us to forbear and endure hardship without feeling overly sad or frustrated. It is best perceived as part of the spiritual journey to the ultimate enlightenment. Having stated that, it does not mean that one needs to particularly seek for suffering and rejoice once in agony. From a Buddhist perspective, suffering and hardship should not be understood as only being negative, but needs to be handled with the wisdom of patience; some Buddhist teachers say that suffering is like a broom that can sweep away the karmic causes of such occurrences. When one can reflect any hardship as a result of previous karmic debt, and endure with optimism and enough patience, then the feeling of suffering is weakened; on the contrary, if one handles the pain of suffering with anger and other means, such as drugs, not only is the pain intensified but bad karma is created in the mean time. Buddhists are encouraged to contemplate on the fact that as long as one has not transcended reincarnation (samsara), then suffering is expected, all sentient beings are going through the cycle of suffering. This contemplation can be employed to develop profound compassion. Just as the great Buddhist master Shantideva once said, “Those who wish to protect themselves and other beings should practice the sacred secret: exchange yourself with others. (Khenpo Sodargye 2016, p.13)” Buddhists train themselves to think that one’s own endurance of hardship is for bearing the suffering of all sentient beings. The root of suffering is believed to have come from the attachment to the self, so as soon as self-grasping is forsaken and the mind shifts to the benefit of others, then the pain from one’s own suffering would diminish (Khenpo Sodargye 2016, p.11).

III. Unmovable Confidence in the Three Jewels²

There are two aspects to the practice of patience in this area. Firstly, the patience of bearing hardships during the study of the Dharma is required. The Buddhist Dharma is so profound and broad that it requires much time and effort to learn and practise. On a daily basis, one is encouraged to maintain constant awareness of the teachings of the Three Jewels, this would result in the sacrifice of other areas of life. Thus, remaining on the learning journey of Dharma is only possible with commitment and perseverance throughout one's lifetime. In this precious opportunity of short but precious attainment of human existence, Buddhists believe that time should be used wisely to benefit others, and the greatest benefit is to become enlightened so as to have the same ability as the Buddha to help the sentient beings.

The second aspect of the practice of patience is to have adamant confidence in the teachings of the Buddha. The profound Dharma may appear undecipherable and beyond one's worldly comprehension, but a Buddhist practitioner should accept the truth and practise accordingly without fearing the unknown, such as the illusory nature of all phenomenal existence, which will be examined more closely later.

The Antidote to Anger and Aggression

Buddhist teachings show that Patience Paramita is the antidote to anger and aggression, when aggression is experienced in the various forms of resentment, bitterness, being critical and so forth. One of the biggest hindrances on one's journey towards the attainment of Buddhahood is anger and aggression. The Way of the *Bodhisattva* expounds that 'anger and aggression is the greatest of all sins; and the most difficult practice is that of Patience Paramita. (CBETA: W04n0033, trans. M. Sun).' *The King of Samadhis Sutra* shares a similar concept: 'One cannot be saved when holding aggression towards others; that of Precept Paramita and extensive knowledge cannot save him/her, that of Meditative Concentration Paramita cannot save him/her, and that of generous giving alms and offerings to the Buddha cannot save him/her. (CBETA: T15n0639, trans. M. Sun).' From this, it is clear that the extreme harm that anger and aggression could impose on a Buddhist's spiritual path. Why is this so? It is not hard to understand that anger and aggression is on the other end of the spectrum to compassion, and the ultimate goal of Mahayana Buddhism is to help all sentient beings. So undoubtedly, the two conditions contradict one another; when one is exercising aggression,

² The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha

one is no longer compassionate. So Khenpo Sodargye concludes that the act of aggression is the exact opposite of the tenets of Mahayana Buddhism (Khenpo Sodargye trans. M. Sun, 2016, p.133). Thus the practice of Patience Paramita is paramount.

Two Methods to Improve the Practice of Patience Paramita

I. Understanding of Karmic Law

Karma in Buddhism is a theory of cause and effect of one's intent and actions. Good karma is created through good intent and deeds and vice versa. Karma transcends time and space; it does not disappear and would come to effect under connecting conditions throughout one's reincarnations. When in situations of conflict or when harmed by someone, a Buddhist would view this as a result of karmic debt created in the past, not necessarily in one lifetime, but from past lives. One harvests what one has planted; by accepting this, it will become easier to endure and forbear unpleasant situations, not only would anger de-escalate, but such situation will also be seen as an exceptional opportunity to practise patience without the feeling of resentment. In virtue of the law of Karma, Buddhists come to understand that impermanence is the constant in life.

II. The Illusory Nature of All Phenomena

In *the Diamond Sutra*, Buddha taught to rest the mind on the fact that all phenomena arise from the gathering of causes and conditions, and to perceive the body and mind as a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow, and their existence as brief as the occurrences of dew drops and a lightning flash (CBETA: T08n0235, trans. M. Sun).

All phenomena, whether mundane or transmundane, can be perceived as the successive illusory forms very rapidly arising and perishing in a flash as a result of karmic force. This uninterrupted process is at an unimaginable speed so it is impossible to be seen with the naked eye. As stated in *the Sutra of Benevolent Kings*, 'There are ninety split seconds in a moment, and within a moment, each split second experiences nine hundred rounds of its arising and perishing. The manifestation of all phenomena abides by this law (CBETA: T08n0245, trans. M. Sun). ' As the unawakened beings do not have the capacity to sense such rapid movement, they mistakenly think that all phenomena are real. By Buddhist theory, all conditioned phenomena in this world only exist temporarily and becomes a form of

emptiness after its cycle of arising and perishing is complete, just like in a dream. It is not worth attaching to delusions.

In this mind set, when being mistreated, a Buddhist would attempt to view the whole incident as illusory successive forms that are very rapidly arising and perishing, nothing is reality. There exists neither the reality of the opponents nor one-self. If one can maintain this mentality, then the practise of Patience Paramita will not be as difficult.

An account in *The Diamond Sutra* shows the highest attainment of Paramita of Patience. The Buddha says: “Subhuti, it is as in the past when the King of Kalinga dismembered my body, at that time I had no mark of self, no mark of others, no mark of living beings, and no mark of a life. If I did not attain the emptiness of the four phenomena, there would have arisen much anger and aggression (CBETA: T08n0235, trans. M. Sun).” The Buddha, in one of his past lives as a Buddhist practitioner, goes beyond the notion of self, others, all living beings and life in his practice of Patience Paramita. Indeed, the practice of Patience is a virtue that the practice of precepts and ascetic cannot surpass. Those who attain the Paramita of Patience, are undoubtedly the Supremely Enlightened (CBETA: T12n0389, trans. M. Sun).”

Employing Patience Paramita in Interreligious Dialogue

Religion plays a definite role in the promotion of peace in today’s society, but at the same time, religious differences could be the root cause of potential conflict. In light of this, communication and mutual learning between different religions are important and could be achieved through interreligious dialogue. As the famous Swiss Catholic theologian Han Kung stated, ‘No world peace without peace between the religions. (Hedge 2010, p60)’ It is also recognised that dialogue between religions is today a religious and human imperative (Coward 1979, p.184).

Interreligious dialogue has been encouraged by theologians and philosophers of religion since the emergence of the theological position of religious pluralism. Although it is considered an essential feature of peaceful coexistence, but challenges are evident in the areas of unique truth claims and attitude towards disagreement in relation to beliefs and values. On these issues, the practice of Patience Paramita can be exercised to reduce stress and facilitate better interreligious dialogue.

Each religion has its unique truth claim that is not shared with the religious other. During interreligious dialogue, participants need to learn to respond and listen with openness and respect without claiming one's own truth as the most unique and superior. Paramita of Patience teaches to detach from the notion of self; in situations of disagreement on the ultimate truth, if one could learn to forgo the notion of self, then the notion of one's own religious truth superiority will seem insignificant. This is somewhat a similar concept to John Hick's claim of salvation: transformation of human existence from self-centredness to a recentring in the Ultimate Reality (Hick 1995, p.18). This implies that no religion holds absolute and eternal truth but is the human conception acting as a catalyst to facilitate one's spiritual development. This theory could also find its parallel in the Buddhist theory of illusory phenomena and impermanence. From the Buddhist perspective, all phenomena are a manifestation of its corresponding causes and conditions, so it can be contended that the manifestation of the different religious doctrines, practices and ultimate realities also arise from their dependent and relevant conditions of human needs and experiences. So it is feasible to say that all religions are equal in their purpose and value to those who find them instructive and illuminating, thus all religions deserve equal respect. Just as an analogy used to describe Mark Heim's conception of salvation. All the religions are like a mountain range, each mountain has its own path (religion) to its own top (salvation/truth). Although the various religions are different, but they all guide their followers to the respective ultimate truth (Fegert 2013, pp.499-500).

John Hick uses Kant's idea of the noumenal and the phenomenal to explain the different salvific transformation to the one shared Real. Whether or not they all lead to the same Real, but the idea of noumenon and phenomenon share similarity with the Buddhist theory, where the noumenon is possibly the ultimate enlightenment (Buddhahood or nirvana) and the phenomenon is the manifestation of the corresponding causes and conditions. By following this mindset, in situations of dialogue conflict regarding truth claims, a practitioner of Patience Paramita would view the differences as different manifestations of the various truths, so all the ultimate truths are unique and superior in their own context. This positive attitude could help de-escalate the anger and distress caused by contesting one's own unique superiority, and at the same time, it could also encourage active learning of the beliefs and values of other world religions.

The immediate and hopeful purpose of interreligious dialogue is the encouragement of the understanding and practice of peace, humanity and compassion, so it is preferably based on

interactions between parties who share common interests and aims. Paul Knitter proposes that interreligious dialogue carries global responsibilities on two levels. Firstly, it should be implemented under the recognition of religious pluralism; secondly, it should work towards achieving justice and wellbeing for humanity (Knitter 1996, pp.11-17). Paul Hedges' suggestion of four main types of interreligious dialogue seems to shadow such awareness. Firstly, it is the dialogue of theological exchange where comparisons of theological and philosophical ideas and concepts take place; secondly, people centred dialogue of life concerning day-to-day meeting and encountering; thirdly, the dialogue of action concerning the discussion of secular affairs, such as human rights and social justice; lastly, the dialogue of religious experiences where people come together to share spiritual or mystical experiences (Hedges 2010, pp.60-61).

A comprehensive and complicated affair as such will undoubtedly cause issues during its execution; Cornille considers five conditions as critical to the success of interreligious dialogue, including humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality. There are two aspects to humility, the humility in recognising the limitations of one's knowledge and understanding of the religious other, as well as the humility towards one's own religious tradition (Cornille 2008, p.10). Second condition is the commitment to a particular religious tradition and a willingness to attest to its truth and validity with other worldviews and belief systems (Cornille 2008, p.59); a balance between openness to other religions and commitment to one's own religion is required here. Interconnection implies a shared common ground (Cornille 2008, p.95), such as issues of world peace or alleviation of human suffering. Shared concerns usually bring religions together for dialogue. Cornille also suggested the sharing of common religious experience and the notion of a 'unifying transcendental reality for lasting interconnection (Cornille 2008, p.121). As for empathy, it involves the process of transposing oneself into the feelings, the thoughts and the experiences of another (Cornille 2008, p.138). The condition of hospitality suggested by Cornille refers to the openness to learn from the religious other and a receptive attitude towards individuals and groups who come from other religions than one's own (Cornille 2008, p.177). All five conditions seem to be applicable and achievable through the practice of Patience Paramita, as Patience Paramita teaches to cultivate a compassionate mind and exchange oneself with others in times of suffering and conflict, so the conditions of interconnection and empathy are met. Moreover, Patience Paramita informs the profound nature of the Dharma, and the dedication and perseverance required throughout one's learning journey, this concept could also be applied

to the learning of the “Dharma” of other religions, hence fulfilling Cornille’s conditions of humility, commitment and hospitality.

Conclusion:

The practice of Patience Paramita is an essential part in the learning of Mahayana Buddhism. The fruit of its perfection will not only bring compassion and wisdom to one’s own spiritual development but could also deliver significant positive influence to the field of interreligious dialogue. Self-centredness has the potential to become the peace breaker in virtually all circumstances, and Patience Paramita can be the peace maker that encourages one to forsake the notion of self-grasping. Although interreligious dialogue will continue to face challenges and difficulties, but the implementation of Patience Paramita could certainly ease, to some degree, the tension and stress caused by religious disagreement.

Some may claim that Buddhism teaches passive practice in which one sits back and hopes to receive divine revelation from meditation. But from the practice of Patience Paramita, with this being only a small part of the huge system of Buddhist teaching, one can see its active practice in the great effort of being mindful of one’s own conduct in the matters of everyday living, as well as being attentive and watchful of the ever-changing human condition. The moral and spiritual fruits of Buddhist cultivation, such as compassion and impartiality, are responsive and beneficial in fostering modern affairs, such as interreligious dialogue. Positive mental attitudes and the actions to which they lead are important for achieving not only one’s own inner peace, but also peace for the wider community.

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