

Tolerance as a Value: An Ethical Perspective

Dr. Purnima Das ¹

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Abstract

From the perspective of traditional ethics, the concept of tolerance (*titikṣā* or *sahīṣṇutā*) holds a position of high moral significance. Ethical systems, both Western and Indian, consider tolerance a cardinal virtue. In societies rooted in these traditions, individuals who embody tolerance are often revered as noble or virtuous.

In Indian philosophy, particularly within the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, tolerance is regarded as an essential quality for self-realization and spiritual progress. For instance, in *Bhagavad Gītā* 2.14, Lord Krishna advised Arjuna on tolerance. This verse recommends *titikṣā* (forbearance or tolerance) in the face of changing pleasures and pains, reinforcing its ethical and spiritual value.

Furthermore, the renowned Bengali mystic and spiritual teacher Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa emphasized the practical importance of tolerance in daily life. According to *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, it is stated: “**The more a man develops the quality of forbearance, the longer he lives.**” This assertion connects tolerance not only with excellence but also with longevity, suggesting a psychosomatic or spiritual benefit.

In the framework of Kantian ethics, tolerance is not simply a matter of emotional patience or pragmatic coexistence. Rather, it is a moral obligation rooted in Kant’s foundational concepts of autonomy, rationality and the moral law.

The ethics of care, developed primarily by feminist philosophers, offers a rational and contextual approach to moral reasoning that contrasts with traditional rule-based ethics like Kantianism or Utilitarianism. In this view, tolerance is understood not as abstract impartiality, but as a practical, relational responsibility emerging from empathy, attentiveness and responsiveness to the needs of others.

Thus, classical Indian philosophy, spiritual teachings, Kantian ethics and Ethics of Care advocate tolerance as an ethically valuable and practically beneficial trait, essential for cultivating inner peace and societal harmony.

Key Words: *Titikṣā*, *Kṣamā*, Cardinal Virtue, Empathy, Societal Harmony

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Maynaguri College, Maynaguri, Jalpaiguri, West Bengal- 735302

✉ Dr. Purnima Das, E-mail: purnimadas88199@gmail.com

In Indian Philosophy, tolerance, referred to as *kṣamā* (forgiveness) and *titikṣā* or *sahiṣṇutā* (forbearance or tolerance), occupies a central place among the virtues (*sadguṇa*-s) that define moral and spiritual excellence. Indian ethics, specially as rooted in Dharma traditions (Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism), emphasizes the inner cultivation of restraint, endurance and compassion.

According to Classical Indian Ethical Thought, *titikṣā* is not merely passive suffering but an active endurance of hardship, heat and cold, pleasure and pain, without being mentally disturbed. This virtue appears prominently in Vedantic literature, Yoga philosophy and Bhakti traditions, are often linked to self-discipline (*tapas*) and the path of liberation (*mokṣa*).

***Bhagavad- Gītā* and the Doctrine of Tolerance**

The *Bhagavad Gītā*, one of the most influential ethical texts in Indian philosophy, addresses the role of tolerance in human life explicitly. In Chapter 2, verse 14, Lord Krishna speaks to Arjuna:

*“mātrā-sparśās tu kaunteya
śītoṣṇa-sukha-duḥkha-dāḥ
āgamāpāyino ‘nityās tāms titikṣasva bhārata”*

Translation: “O son of Kunti, the contacts of the senses with the objects, which cause cold and heat, pleasure and pain, are fleeting and impermanent; endure them bravely, O descendant of Bharata.” (*Gītā* 2.14.)¹

Here, *titikṣā* is prescribed as necessary in the pursuit of steady wisdom (*sthita-prajñā*), which is the foundation of spiritual progress. The verse underscores that worldly experiences, being impermanent (*anitya*), should not disturb the inner equilibrium of the self. This teaching aligns with the Stoic notion in Western ethics, where emotional regulation and indifference to external change are seen as signs of moral strength.

Further elaboration on *titikṣā* can be found in the *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* of Śaṅkarācārya: “*śītoṣṇa-sukha-duḥkheṣu sahiṣṇutvaṁ titikṣā smṛtā*”.

That is, the endurance of heat and cold, pleasure and pain is known as *titikṣā*.²

This philosophical tradition does not separate ethics from metaphysics: the practice of tolerance is a means to realize the self (*ātman*) and to cultivate detachment (*vairāgya*).

Sri Ramakrishna on Tolerance as Practical Wisdom

The importance of tolerance is echoed in the spiritual-humanistic teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, one of Bengal’s most revered spiritual figures. He emphasized that tolerance is essential not just for spiritual realization but also for peaceful co-existence in daily life.

In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, he is quoted as saying: “The more a man develops the quality of forbearance, the longer he lives.”³ This insight suggests a psychosomatic benefit to tolerance, implying that mental equanimity leads to physical well-being and longevity. Ramakrishna’s view harmonizes with Ayurvedic principles, which regard emotional balance as key to health.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say, “He who loves, lives; he who does not love, perishes.” This carries profound significance, both in practical life and in spiritual scriptures. Its essence lies in the understanding that those who possess patience can endure life on earth, while those who lack tolerance eventually perish.

Patience is universally acknowledged as a great virtue. We revere those who embody immense forbearance. Whenever a person embarks on any endeavor, they are bound to encounter obstacles. But when one overcomes these challenges, the joy of pursuing their ambition becomes truly fulfilling. Over time, the accumulated pain and struggle behind the aspiration begin to fade. Had the person not endured and overcome the initial hardships, this success would not have been possible.

Reflecting on this achievement, people cultivate patience and learn to endure suffering. In the *Paspasha Ahnika* of Patanjali's *Mahabhashya*, there is a maxim known as *Kūpkhānaka-nyāya*. It states that those who dig wells may initially get water soiled with mud and dirt while performing the task, but once they find water, they can use it to cleanse themselves. Similarly, even if one begins a task amidst difficulties, the rewards eventually help them forget the hardships. Hence, patience is essential.⁴

Socratic Ethics and the Practice of Tolerance

Although the exact word "tolerance" is not prominently used in Socratic dialogues, the ethical posture advocated by Socrates reflects its spirit. Socrates, as portrayed by Plato, believed in rational self-control (*sophrosyne*), critical dialogue and enduring injustice without retaliation, which mirrors the virtue of tolerance, restraint and ethical endurance.

In the *Apology*, Socrates maintains calm and composure in the face of false accusations and even death. His response to hostility is one of intellectual and moral forbearance: "You may kill me, but you will not harm me."⁵ Here, Socrates suggests that true harm lies not in physical suffering but in the loss of virtue. Tolerance, as understood here, is not passive submission, but active commitment to moral principles despite external challenges.

Socrates also argues that it is better to suffer from wrong than to commit it, which implies a deep ethical endurance: "It is never right to do wrong, even in return for a wrong."⁶ This perspective reflects ethical non-retaliation – akin to tolerance – where the soul's integrity is preserved by enduring rather than responding to injustice with injustice.

Tolerance in Kantian Ethics: A Philosophical Elaboration

In the framework of Kantian ethics, tolerance is not simply a matter of emotional patience or pragmatic coexistence. Rather, it is a moral obligation rooted in Kant's foundational concepts of autonomy, rationality and the moral law. For Kant, morality is not based on outcomes, emotions, or tradition, but on reason and the universal principles of duty. Within this deontological system, tolerance finds its place as a rational requirement of respect for the dignity and autonomy of others.

1. The Categorical Imperative and Tolerance

Kant's most central ethical principle, the Categorical Imperative, requires that we treat others as ends in themselves and never merely as means. This principle provides the moral ground for tolerance. "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."⁷

Tolerance, in this sense, means allowing others the freedom to pursue their rational ends, even if we disagree with them, so long as their actions do not infringe upon the equal freedom of others. This aligns with Kant's idea of universalizability, which requires that one must be willing to accept a principle if it were applied to all rational

beings. “So, act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.”⁸

To be intolerant, in Kantian terms, would often mean trying to coerce or silence others not because they violate moral law, but because they differ in belief, taste, or culture – this would be using others as means to one’s own comfort or worldview.

2. Autonomy, Dignity and Respect

Tolerance also finds strong support in Kant’s emphasis on human dignity. In his later work, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes: “Every human being has an innate right to freedom.... So long as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance with a universal law.”⁹ This suggests a political and moral foundation for tolerating diverse viewpoints, religious and lifestyles, provided they do not obstruct others’ freedom of conscience and speech emerges directly from this reasoning. Kant distinguishes tolerance as a duty of justice, not of benevolence. We must not merely “put up with” others, but respect their rational autonomy as equal members of the moral community.

3. Religion and Tolerance: Kant’s Later Reflections

Kant further develops the notion of tolerance in the religious context in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793): “The ethical community must tolerate all religious faiths that do not undermine morality.”¹⁰ Here, Kant emphasizes that moral conduct is more important than religious conformity. He argues that true religion aligns with moral reason and thus no individual should be persecuted or excluded based on personal belief, as long as they adhere to universal moral laws. This makes Kant one of the early defenders of religious tolerance grounded not in emotional openness, but in rational respect for moral autonomy.

Tolerance in Care Ethics of Feminist Philosophy

The ethics of care, developed primarily by feminist philosophers, offers a rational and contextual approach to moral reasoning that contrasts with traditional rule-based ethics like Kantianism or Utilitarianism. In this view, tolerance is understood not as abstract impartiality, but as a practical, relational responsibility emerging from empathy, attentiveness and responsiveness to the needs of others.

1. Foundation of Care Ethics and its Approach to Tolerance

The ethics of care is originated with Carol Gilligan’s critique of Lawrence Kohlberg’s stages of moral development. She argued that women’s moral reasoning tends to emphasize relationships, empathy and care, rather than justice and abstract rules. “The moral imperative is to act responsibility toward others and to sustain relationship.”¹¹

In this framework, tolerance is not simply non-interference, but an active willingness to listen, understand and respond compassionately to difference. It involves emotional engagement and context-sensitive judgement, especially in caring relationships such as family, community, or intercultural dialogue.

2. Key Characteristics of Tolerance in Care Ethics

Care Ethics reconceptualizes tolerance in the following ways:

Relational Tolerance: Tolerance is about maintaining caring relationships across difference. It recognizes that people’s values and behaviours are embedded in life narratives, not isolated choices.

Empathy and Attentiveness: To be tolerant in this framework is to be attentive to the other's vulnerability, needs and situation. "Care involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's"¹²

Responsiveness over Judgement: Rather than judging from a detached moral standard, the care ethicist responds to individuals in their specificity, aiming for mutual understanding.

Thus, tolerance is not mere forbearance, but moral responsiveness – a willingness to hear and hold the other person's perspective within a caring relationship.

3. Tolerance is Political and Social Ethics of Care

Feminist care theories, such as those of Joan Tronto, expand this to social and political contexts. Tronto argues that care should be a moral and political principle guiding institutions and public life. "Caring requires attending to the needs of others with sensitivity and responsiveness, especially when they are different from ourselves."¹³ Tolerance in this context is not neutrality, but the active work of inclusion, dialogue and responsibility for others' well-being, especially marginalized or culturally distinct groups.

4. Tolerance as Emotional Labour and Moral Practice

In contrast to liberal notions of tolerance that emphasize individual autonomy, care ethics emphasizes emotional labour, mutual recognition and sustained moral attention. It recognizes that true tolerance requires effort: the effort to say in dialogue, to accept discomfort and to maintain relationship across moral and cultural differences. "Caring involves not only feeling and attitudes but also a practice – something we do."¹⁴

Conclusion

In summary, both Socratic ethics and Indian ethical philosophy regard tolerance or forbearance as an expression of inner strength and rational self-mastery. Socrates's unwavering moral stance in the face of injustice and Krishna's advice to endure pleasure and pain equally both convey that ethical endurance is a mark of wisdom and spiritual maturity.

Tolerance in Kantian ethics is not passive virtue or pragmatic compromise. It is a rational and moral duty – a necessary expression of respect for human dignity, autonomy and the moral law. It stems directly from the Categorical Imperative, especially the imperative to treat others as ends in themselves. Tolerance is required not because all opinions are equally valid, but because each rational being has intrinsic worth and must be free to think, speak and act, provided their actions respect the equal freedom of others. This makes Kantian tolerance both principled and limited: it is not unlimited permissiveness, but the ethical foundation of a just and respectful society.

Care ethics transforms the concept of tolerance from passive forbearance or principled non-interference into a relational, emotional and contextual moral practice. It involves listening with empathy, responding to vulnerability and preserving relationships despite differences. Rather than seeing tolerance as a thin form of liberal respect, Care Ethics demands a richer form of moral engagement that is grounded in shared humanity and mutual dependence. This perspective is particularly relevant in multicultural, pluralistic and deeply divided societies, where mere neutrality often fails. Care ethics shows that tolerance is not the absence of judgment, but the presence of care in the face of difference.

In today's era, widespread violence, conflict and hatred among people are largely due to a lack of tolerance. Intolerance now prevails in families, in society and within nations. As a result, people are constantly in a state of agitation. From society to individual minds, gentle human instincts seem to be fading. Where there is no tolerance, there can be no empathy, compassion, or selflessness, because such qualities stem from our innate human instincts. A place where people exist without humanity or compassion cannot be called truly alive – it signifies destruction. In such a situation, if a person becomes indifferent or hardened, they risk turning into a machine, which leads only to the erosion of humanity.

Thus, tolerance emerges as a shared value between East and West. It is recognized not as weakness or passivity, but as a powerful and active moral disposition, essential for the realization of virtue, justice and harmony in both the self and society.

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