

# Apology and Forgiveness: Buddhist Psychological Approach to Peace, Conflict Resolution, and Reconciliation

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## ABSTRACT

Peace and conflict resolution have become vital amid various global conflicts. This study aims to examine Buddhist psychological concepts and practices related to apology and forgiveness, and to develop a systematic framework for conflict resolution, peace-building, and reconciliation grounded in these principles. The research was conducted through textual analysis using qualitative methodologies, examining Buddhist canonical texts alongside relevant secondary sources. Employing thematic analysis, four main themes and their related subthemes were identified and explored from the collected data: foundations in Buddhist principles and practices, monastic rituals of apology and forgiveness, meditative practices that foster these qualities, and modern applications and frameworks for reconciliation. The study reveals that the concepts of apology and forgiveness are embedded in early Buddhist practices and cultures, playing a crucial role in conflict resolution and maintaining peace and harmony among individuals and nations. The ritual of apology and forgiveness practised by Buddhist monks serves as a model for seeking and granting reconciliation. The comprehensive framework offered by Buddhist psychology concerning apology and forgiveness is highly relevant to current efforts in conflict resolution, peace-building, and reconciliation. Future research should investigate cultural sensitivities and potential barriers to implementing these Buddhist teachings and practices for conflict resolution and peace.

**Keywords:** Apology and forgiveness, Buddhist principles and monastic practices, Conflict resolution, Peacebuilding, Reconciliation

## INTRODUCTION

Peace, harmony, and reconciliation are universal aspirations amid wars and social conflicts across regions of the world today. Humans are often driven by the intention to exert power over others, including individuals, countries, nations, and different ethnic groups. Additionally, emotions such as anger and hatred have risen, suppressing humanitarian qualities like compassion and loving-kindness. Therefore, there is a strong need to establish peace among nations and individuals through genuine apologies and heartfelt forgiveness. The Buddha's teachings and traditional Buddhist practices provide the capacity to guide people and communities towards a peaceful world and reconciliation.

According to psychological perspectives, the concepts of apology and forgiveness are important psychological mechanisms in mental health, social relationships, and emotional well-being (Lazare, 2004; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Govier & Verwoerd, 2002). The intention and act of apology and forgiveness play a crucial role in peace-building and fostering a harmonious world. The word 'apology' refers to the verbal, nonverbal, or written expression of regret or remorse for a fault or failure, along with taking responsibility for a particular action. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'apology' as 'The pleading off from a charge or imputation, whether expressed, implied, or only conceived as possible; defence of a person, or vindication of an institution, etc., from accusation or aspersion.' The act of forgiveness is regarded as a valuable psychological trait, and psychologists describe it as a conscious decision to release feelings of hatred and resentment towards a person or a group (Luskin, 2020).

The Pāli term '*Khama*' (verb formation: *Khamathi/Khamāmi*; Sanskrit: *Kṣamā*) is used for both requesting forgiveness (apology) and forgiving. Thannissaro Bhikkhu (2004) indicates that the Pāli word *khama* also

means ‘the earth’. According to Buddhist teaching, apology and forgiveness are not merely social impressions but reflect human ethics and wholesome intentions, actions, and emotions. Forgiveness is considered a wholesome act and a skill for removing anger and hatred (Harvey, 2000), while an apology reflects the wholesome act of humility, humbleness, and acceptance of self-faults or wrongdoing. Buddhist psychology explores mental concomitants such as desire (*tanhā*), greed (*loba*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) as the fundamental psychological roots and causes of actions that lead to harm and the suppression of others. Thus, understanding and realizing these mental factors enables humans to gradually reduce such destructive mental factors and harmful behaviours. Buddhism has the potential to introduce a framework for reconciliation based on apology and forgiveness, drawing on its traditional teachings and practices, which lead to creating peaceful relationships and preventing future harm.

This research paper offers an in-depth examination of how Buddhist teachings and traditional Buddhist practices on apology and forgiveness can guide the world in creating a framework for conflict resolution, peacebuilding, harmonious relationships, and reconciliation. In the initial part of this paper, I examine Buddhist teachings and traditional monastic practices on apology and its ethical foundation and forgiveness and its psychological value, drawing on canonical and secondary sources. In the next part of the paper, I emphasize the mental qualities prominent in apology and forgiveness, such as loving-kindness, compassion, and equanimity, and their practical impact. Further, the later part of this paper focuses on applying these qualities as a framework for conflict resolution, peace-building, and reconciliation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous literature shows the psychological and social benefits of both the intention and the act of apology and forgiveness. Enright & Fitzgibbons (2000) indicate that apology helps relieve negative emotions such as anger and humiliation and serves to cultivate kindness and empathy. Although social scientists and sociological theories earlier ignored the value of forgiveness, social scientists after the 20<sup>th</sup> century conducted research and emphasised the social and psychological significance of forgiveness (McCullough & Witvliet, 2005). For instance, Ashy, Mercurio & Malley-Morrison (2010) investigated orientations towards apology, forgiveness and reconciliation using an ecological approach and showed that attachment styles, religiosity, tolerance and non-violence were the best predictors of people’s views on apology and forgiveness. Further, Ashy and others indicated the need for future research on the utility of apology and forgiveness in conflict resolution. A study conducted by Bolanle O. Ayoko (2016) showed that apology and forgiveness are social skills in conflict management and in cooperative work after workplace conflict. Thus, researchers have explored the developmental, personality and social aspects of forgiveness and assessed its value for social and psychological well-being.

Buddhist literature included in Sutta, Vinaya and Abhidhamma Pitakas is a crucial source for studying the significance and mechanisms of apology and forgiveness, especially in the context of morality, ethics and mental healing. The Vinaya Pitaka instructs monks on how to request forgiveness for their offences to one another and how to seek reconciliation – the Pāli term: *patisaraniya-kamma* (Thannissaro Bhikkhu, 2004). Furthermore, contemporary Buddhist scholars have illustrated the value of apology and forgiveness in contexts such as ethics and morality, and as a means of eradicating hatred (*dosa*) and other unwholesome mental factors and cultivating wholesome states of the mind (Harvey, 2000; De Silva, 2000). However, this study examines the significance of Buddhist principles and traditional practices within an integrated framework for peace, conflict resolution and reconciliation, illustrating the Buddhist psychology of apology and forgiveness.

### Research objectives

The objectives of this study are to investigate the key Buddhist teachings and practices of apology and forgiveness, focusing on their value for morality; to evaluate the relevance and practical aspects of these teachings and practices for conflict resolution; and to propose a structured framework based on Buddhist teachings and practices, applicable to peacebuilding and reconciliation.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted as a textual analysis under qualitative research methods, reviewing, analyzing and exploring the primary source of Buddhist canonical texts and secondary sources of contemporary scholars. Data

was analyzed following the thematic analysis method, and conclusions and recommendations for future research were given based on the data analysis and discussion.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using thematic analysis, the collected data on apology and forgiveness were categorized and analyzed under four major themes and a few subordinate themes. The major themes are 1. Buddhist psychological basis for apology and forgiveness, 2. Buddhist monastic practices of apology and forgiveness, 3. Contemplative practices supporting apology and forgiveness, and 4. Contemporary application and framework for reconciliation. These are elaborated in detail as follows.

### Buddhist psychological basis for apology and forgiveness

The first theme identified three subordinate themes: supremacy of the mind and intention, consequence (karmic effect) of an action, and ethical and moral conduct, which are explored as follows.

#### Supremacy of the mind and intention

According to Buddhist teachings, the mind is the foundation of all bodily and verbal behaviour, and therefore the primary and foremost factor in all behaviour. Without the force of the mind and the intention that arises from it, no verbal or physical action can be performed except for specific unintentional occurrences. The first two verses of the Dhammapada, the handbook of the Buddhist, state, “Mind is the forerunner of all states. Mind in chief; mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with wicked mind, because of that, suffering follows one... If one speaks or acts with pure mind, because of that, happiness follows one...” (Sri Dhammananda, 1988,

p. 41-42). Further, the Buddha emphasized in the Nibbedhika Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya, “Intention (*cetana*), I tell you, is *kamma* (deed). Intending, one does *kamma* by way of body, speech, and intellect” (Anguttara Nikaya 6.63, 1997).

Thus, Buddhist psychology emphasizes that one's volition is more influential than the action and that intention (*cetanā*) determines the action and its karmic consequences. Therefore, as a wholesome intention, the apology plays an ethically meaningful role in one's life and stimulates the person's desire to perform moral conduct in the future. Requesting forgiveness and forgiving someone are not merely simple acts but require a profound mindset, accompanied by influential mental factors such as loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). In contrast, violations of social norms, conflicts, aggressive behaviour and wars are rooted in negative mental concomitants such as anger, hatred, greed, and delusion, which may directly influence one's suffering in the present and future.

#### Consequence (*karmic* effect) of an action

As explained above, each action generated by the mind (intentionally or *cetanā*) becomes a *kamma* that gives rise to a consequence (*vipāka*) that manifests now or in future (Harvey, 2000). Actions, whether verbal or physical, performed with a wrong, wicked mind, such as anger, hatred, delusion, and greed, generate unwholesome consequences (*akusala vipāka*) that bring suffering to oneself, while wholesome actions, derived from moral mental factors such as loving-kindness and compassion, generate positive consequences (*kusala vipāka*) now and in future (Sri Dhammananda, 1988, pp. 41-42). Thus, apologies and forgiveness, usually arising from positive mental factors, naturally lead to healthier outcomes.

Forgiving someone benefits not only the person who committed wrongdoing but also others, fostering healthier relationships among individuals and nations. It also includes positive verbal actions called right speech (*sammā vācā*), which foster true, complimentary, and trustworthy words, refraining from lying and from aggressive, hateful speech, thereby contributing to relationship-building.

#### Ethical and moral conduct

Moral and ethical conduct create a platform for peace and reconciliation. The fundamental ethical conduct (*sila*) in Buddhism includes refraining from harming others or killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and

addicting intoxicants (Nānamoli, 2010). Additionally, moral conduct includes positive behaviours such as forgiving, self-sacrifice, altruism, and generosity. Apologies and forgiveness are connected to that moral and ethical conduct, which strengthens the inspiration for peace and conflict resolution.

### **Buddhist monastic practices of apology and forgiveness**

The second theme included two subordinate themes: monastic disciplinary procedures and methods of conflict resolution and reconciliation, as described below.

#### **Monastic disciplinary procedures**

Traditional monastic disciplinary procedures for Bhikkus from the Buddha's era include a systematic, structured process for seeking forgiveness for a monk's wrongdoing and for the Sangha community to forgive the wrongdoer. The Vinaya Pitaka contains the rules, regulations, and procedural guidelines that monastic communities need to maintain morality, the code of discipline (vinaya) and ultimately harmony within the Sangha community.

One such practice is the wrongdoer asking the Sanga for an apology, and the Sanga giving him a second chance to be corrected. Primarily, if a monk violates disciplinary rules, he has no right to communal living with the Sanga. Therefore, he must acknowledge his wrong, apologize, and promise to refrain from that wrong in the future, forever. The Sanga then considers his request and, if possible, decides whether to grant him forgiveness. This process emphasises not condemning the wrongdoer but guiding him back to the correct path and securing the long-term well-being of the Sanga community. However, on such occasions, the wrongdoer monk may have to fulfil a monastic punishment as ordered by the particular panel of the Sanga (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1994; Vinaya Texts: Maha Vagga, Second Khandhaka, 1881).

The practice of Pāthimokkhuddesa (Pathimokkha recitation) is another way to seek forgiveness for breaches of disciplinary rules, whether intentional or unintentional. In many monastic traditions, the Sanga meet at a designated place on a pre-decided day, and each monk is required to plead guilty publicly for any intentional or unintentional breaches of disciplinary rules (Vinaya Texts: Maha Vagga, Second Khandhaka, 1881). By openly accepting his faults and promising not to repeat them, he expects accountability and extends forgiveness.

#### **Method of conflict resolution and reconciliation**

Requesting forgiveness from a senior monk by a junior monk is also a practice of seeking an apology for any wrong done in thought, word, or deed by mistake (...pamādena, dvāratayena katam, sabbam aparādhāṃ khamatu me bhante), symbolizing the reconciliation. When the junior monk makes this request for forgiveness, reciting it three times, the senior monk(s) accept it, saying, 'I/we forgive you, venerable' (khamāmi/khamāma). Moreover, Buddhists often seek forgiveness from the triple gems, Buddha, Dhamma and Sanga, reciting the verse 'kāyena vācā cittena, pamādena mayākatam, accayam khamā me bhante/ ...dhamma/ ...sanga...'. Thus, by reciting these stanzas, the Buddhist expects a kind of psychological relief from mistakes or faults, even if done unintentionally.

The performance of Sāmaggi Uposatha, among the three types of Uposatha in the Sanga tradition, is also significant in the practice of reconciliation (Vinaya Texts: Maha Vagga, Second Khandhaka, 1881; Tin, 2021).

The Sāmaggi Uposatha can be held on any day by the Sangha, in contrast to other Uposatha days (Tin, 2021). The Sāmaggi Uposatha takes place when groups of monks reconcile after a conflict or quarrelsome incident. These Sanga groups meet and conduct the Sāmaggi Uposatha, extending mutual understanding, apologies, and forgiveness so that they ensure long-lasting peace and harmony among the Sanga.

If a monk commits a wrong or offence against another monk, the first step is to request forgiveness. When the monk confesses the offence, for example, by insulting someone, he should accept his misconduct, request an apology, and promise to refrain from such behaviour in future. The quarrelsome bhikkhus of Kosambi provide an ideal example of this. An argument over a minor disciplinary rule escalated into a situation that even the Buddha could not control. Eventually, they recognised their fault, begged for forgiveness from the Buddha,

apologised to one another, and restored harmony among themselves (The Book of the Discipline Vol. V, 2001; Sri Dhammananda, 1988; Dhammapada verse 6). Another such incident is the imposition of the supreme penalty (*brahmadanda*) on Bhikkhu Canna. After the Buddha's passing, the Sanga decided to impose the *brahmadanda* penalty on him, but he ultimately requested an apology from the Sanga, which was granted, and he was reintegrated into the Sanga community (The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-Piṭaka) Vol. V; Dialogues of the Buddha 2 Dīghanikāya, 1899).

### Contemplative practices supporting apology and forgiveness

The third theme was expanded upon, highlighting three sub-themes: the practice of sublime states of the mind, the role of *sati* (mindfulness) in apology and forgiveness, and the contemporary framework for reconciliation.

#### Practice of the sublime states of the mind

A key contemplative practice that directly supports the spread of peace, harmony, and reconciliation is the cultivation of the four sublime states of the mind, called the *brahmavihāra*. The *brahmavihāra* refers to the mental states of divine beings such as gods and Brahmas. These mental factors are also considered the higher mental qualities of humans, which are essential for peaceful and harmonious living. They are *mettā* (lovingkindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity) (Ñānamoli, 2010). *Mettā* is the unconditional wish for all living beings to be happy, healthy, and free from suffering. It is also called loving-kindness. The term *karuṇā* refers to sympathetic understanding of others' suffering and the desire to help them escape from troubles and suffering. *Muditā* is the genuine pleasure in others' health and wealth, rather than a jealous mind. *Upekkhā* is the equanimity and balanced mind that arises through understanding the fluctuations of life.

In the context of apology and forgiveness, these practices and their positive mental concomitants are crucial. If one cannot spread loving-kindness and does not feel empathy for others' suffering, it is hard to forgive others' mistakes. The practice of loving-kindness and compassion helps one to reduce hatred and the desire for revenge against the offender, thereby fostering forgiveness. One should also be able to tolerate others' happiness and pleasure when they receive forgiveness. Similarly, equanimity helps one to tolerate all mental, physical, social, and psychological circumstances that arise during the process of requesting an apology and offering forgiveness for wrongdoing. Therefore, these sublime practices benefit one by creating an inner psychological environment for both requesting and offering forgiveness and ultimately for the success of the reconciliation process.

#### The role of *sati* (mindfulness) in apology and forgiveness

'*Sati*' is the Pali term for mindfulness. Some scholars translate it as 'attention,' 'bare attention,' 'awareness,' and similar terms, even though such translations do not capture the full meaning of the term '*Sati*' (Nyanaponika Thera, 1962). *Sati* (mindfulness) is a vibrant concept and practice in the Buddha's doctrine, i.e., the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path (right mindfulness—*sammāsati*), the first factor among the seven factors leading to *nibbāna* (*satisambojjhanga*), the third factor of the five *indriya dhammas* (*satindriya*), and the third factor of the five *bala dhammas* (*satibala*). *Sati* is prescribed in the Abhidhamma piṭaka as a wholesome common mental concomitant (*sobhana sādāraṇa cetasika*) that can be cultivated in every mind (Nārada, 1980). Thus, *sati* (mindfulness) or *sati cetasika* will not arise in unwholesome states but only in virtuous, wholesome, meritorious mind, speech, and actions.

Furthermore, indicating the significance of this mindfulness practice for various purposes today, a number of Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) have been developed and introduced into the field of psychotherapy, and empirical evidence has demonstrated their positive outcomes and recommended them as an alternative treatment for enhancing mental health (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Shapiro Jr., 2008).

Moreover, scholars such as Michael M. Tophoff (2020) and Bingiriye Sunandabodhi (2024) have proposed the applicability of meditation practices for conflict resolution across different settings. Practising mindfulness yields worldly/mundane and super-mundane/transcendental benefits. It also helps purify the minds of beings, overcome sorrows and lamentation, and end suffering and grief (Dialogues of the Buddha - Dīghanikāya - Part II, 2002). Thus, the regular practice of mindfulness—the practice of moment-to-moment awareness—enables

a person to observe, identify, and prevent distracting drives and desires such as delusion, anger, hatred, and jealousy, thereby fostering a passion for apologies and forgiveness. Similarly, mindfulness helps one understand the mental obstacles to forgiveness and avoid them.

### Contemporary application and framework for reconciliation

Buddhist teachings and monastic traditions have long introduced and practised various methods for the survival and better management of monastic communities and for resolving conflicts and maintaining mutual relationships among the members of the Sanga community. However, these principles and practices related to apology and forgiveness can be effectively applied to resolving conflicts in today's world, building peace, and creating reconciliation. For instance, Tophoff (2020) indicates that the meditator's behaviour in personal practice and interpersonal conflict-resolution strategies, modelled on the character of the Bodhisattvas, contributes to contemporary society. Furthermore, Bingiriye Sunandabodhi (2024) points out that Buddhism is capable of addressing the psychological root causes of modern conflicts, such as unwholesome mental concomitants (i.e. greed, hatred, and delusion), and of developing fundamental principles such as tolerance, loving-kindness, and equanimity that direct society towards peace and conflict resolution. Moreover, Siddhi, Mahatthanadull & Vuḍḍhikaro (2018) show that the Buddhist practice of *Mettā* (loving-kindness) offers an integrated method for conflict management in modern societies, examining conflicts in various regions and countries and exploring the applicability of Buddhist teachings such as loving-kindness and the noble eightfold path.

These Buddhist principles for conflict resolution can be applied across different settings. For example, they can be applied in organisational settings such as schools and workplaces to minimise or prevent conflicts and to establish healthier relationships in resolving conflicts (Fehr & Gelfand, 2010). People in organisations and communities can be made aware of the apology and forgiveness practised in Buddhist traditions, and they can be trained, both psychologically and physically, to request an apology, to pardon, and to offer forgiveness, as in monastic methods. This method is beneficial for both members of those organisations and the administrative faculties, and it helps promote mutual understanding and the re-establishment of trust among each other.

In line with conflict resolution in organizations and institutions, this method can be effectively applied to promote peace and reconciliation among nations. Countries and nations should spread loving-kindness and compassion for all across different regions and ethnic groups. Even though some groups, nations, or countries may have made mistakes or taken wrong decisions against world peace and harmony, other nations should make them aware of this and force them to be corrected, and wrongdoers should be willing to request an apology for their mistakes. Similarly, both parties should learn to practise equanimity to prevent psychological barriers.

### CONCLUSION

Apology and forgiveness are significant in conflict resolution, peace-building and reconciliation, and are valued by researchers and practitioners in the social sciences. From a Buddhist psychological perspective, apology and forgiveness play a significant role in resolving conflicts and maintaining peace and harmony, and this practice dates back to the Buddha's era. Buddhist sources, including the Tipitaka canonical texts and contemporary Buddhist scholars, provide a wide range of sources for creating a framework for resolving modernday conflicts. In particular, the significance of the intention behind an action and the karmic effect of intentional deeds provide a foundation for this practice. The Buddhist monastic ritualistic practice of apology and forgiveness provides a model for the process of requesting and offering forgiveness. Buddhist monastic traditions offer examples of this practice, especially apologies for wrongdoings committed intentionally or unintentionally. It also reflects the humility of the person. In another way, it can be introduced as a method of psychological healing for offenders, allowing them to understand the fault, be corrected, and avoid wrongdoing in future. The cultivation of mindfulness and sublime states of the mind advances the intention of requesting and offering forgiveness. Therefore, this holistic framework has effective implications for modern conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and reconciliation initiatives. Future research may further focus on cultural sensitivity and potential barriers to implementing the Buddhist principles and practices of an integrated, holistic method for conflict resolution, peace, and reconciliation.

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