



BUILDING HARMONY:

THE ROLE OF BUDDHISTS IN REALIZING INTERFAITH TOLERANCE

Eko Suryanto¹, Kabri², Fendy³

¹Smaratungga Buddhist College, Indonesia, ekosuryanto82@gmail.com

²Smaratungga Buddhist College, Indonesia, kabri@smaratungga.ac.id

³Smaratungga Buddhist College, Indonesia, fendyfong.mrt@gmail.com

Received: 18/11/2024

Revised: 13/12/2024

Accepted: 20/12/2024

DOI: 10.53565/abip.v10i2.1442

Abstract This article examines the strengthening of the Buddhist community through religious tolerance in Indonesia amid increasing cases of intolerance, which recorded 217 events with 329 violations of religious freedom in 2023. This study aims to analyze various aspects of Buddhist community strengthening, including attitudes towards traditional beliefs, religious attitude phenomena, sectarian and non-sectarian analysis, plurality and multiculturalism, inclusivism and exclusivism, as well as religious tolerance based on Upali Sutta, Kalama Sutta, and King Asoka's policies. Using library research methods with content analysis techniques, this study examines various related literature sources. The results show that strengthening the Buddhist community can be achieved through pluralistic engagement, cultural integration, reduction of violent attitudes, non-sectarian perspectives, and the application of inclusive values in modern contexts. The study concludes that the Buddhist approach to religious tolerance, rooted in the principles of pluralistic engagement and cultural integration, provides a strong foundation for building social harmony and reducing inter-religious conflicts in Indonesia.

Keywords *Interfaith Tolerance, Buddhist Community, Pluralistic Engagement*

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has six religions that are protected and legally recognized, including Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Khong Hu Cu. Each of these religions has basic teachings that are in line with the principle of religious moderation so that people who live it can live in harmony and peace (Paramita, 2021). Setara Institute (2024) shows that in 2023, there were 217 incidents with 329 acts of violation of freedom of religion/belief in Indonesia. This number of events increased significantly compared to the monitoring findings in 2022, which were 175 events with 333 actions. Of the 329 acts of violation, state actors committed 114 acts, and 215 acts were committed by non-state actors. This condition also illustrates that social nodes, as the support of the tolerance ecosystem, are not yet fully supportive of respect for freedom of religion/belief. Intolerance and violation of freedom of

religion from the data suggest the importance of building understanding and practice of tolerance in religious life.

This article discusses the perspective of strengthening Buddhist society through religious tolerance. Various phenomena arise in relation to the diverse religious life in society, including Buddhist attitudes towards the beliefs of other traditions and religions, the phenomenon of religious attitudes, the growth of sects in Buddhism, and some groups not favoring certain sects, plurality, and multiculturalism in Buddhism, the development of inclusivism and exclusivism in Buddhism, the phenomenon of religious tolerance, religious interconnection and moderation, and the relationship between Buddhism and the precepts of the Supreme Godhead.

METHODS

This research uses the library research method by applying content analysis techniques to analyze the data. To ensure the accuracy of the analysis and avoid information errors, cross-reference checks and re-reading of library materials are carried out (Ramanda et al., 2019). This is a type of descriptive research in which the non-experimental research is qualitative and does not require a standardization of measurement (Sugiyono, 2011).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Buddhist Attitudes Toward Other Faiths and Traditions

Pluralistic Engagement

Buddhism has historically emerged in a pluralistic environment, leading to a variety of responses to other religions. These include both inclusivist and exclusivist perspectives, as seen in the works of scholars such as Perry Schmidt-Leukel (Yong, 2016). Respect for other religions does not necessarily demean Buddhism but rather makes Buddhism more respectable. People who do so also feel honored because they have practiced the Dhamma and spread the teachings of love to fellow humans (Yahya et al., 2022).

Tolerance is defined as an open attitude to listen to different views, which functions bilaterally, namely conveying and accepting views without affecting each other's religious beliefs in a shared understanding, and not just religious pluralism (Sirry in Awang et al., 2021).

Cultural Integration

The integration of Buddhism into various cultural contexts has led to adaptations and reinterpretations of its teachings, which can sometimes result in exclusionary attitudes during periods of political or social threat (Yong, 2016). Towards other traditions and beliefs, it is necessary to develop religious moderation, which reflects the Middle Way teachings emphasized by the Buddha. This principle emphasizes the importance of self-control and avoiding extremes (S.V.420). The practice of religious moderation in Buddhism includes meditation, temperance, Buddhist principles, interfaith dialogue, tolerance, conflict resolution, moderation in consumption and work, equanimity, and generosity. These are all important elements that reflect moderation and balance in Buddhist religious practice (Turahmi, 2024).

The phenomenon of religious attitudes

Influence on Racial Inequality Attitudes

Religious beliefs often complicate attitudes toward racial inequality. While many Americans view inequality as a bad thing, certain groups resist government intervention, attributing inequality to individual failings rather than structural problems or government policies (Hinojosa & Park, 2004). This paradox highlights how religious frameworks can shape perceptions of attitudes towards different groups.

On the other hand, some Buddhists may face difficulties in internalizing and applying moderation to different groups. Strengthening the understanding of moderation becomes a challenge (Sadtyadi in Turahmi, 2024). Interactions with adherents of other religions and social challenges, such as interreligious conflict or tensions, may hinder efforts to strengthen moderation (Wirawan in Turahmi, 2024).

Reduction of Violent Attitudes

In the context of religious conflict, it has been shown that an understanding of religious moderation influences Buddhists' social interactions. By internalizing the principles of moderation, individuals tend to have more harmonious and mutually supportive relationships within their communities. Moderation helps create an atmosphere that allows Buddhists to interact with more empathy, understanding, and patience toward others. This creates a community that is more balanced, mutually supportive, and free from unnecessary conflict (Mariani, 2022).

Exposure to religious norms of non-violence has been shown to reduce violent attitudes between two groups of different religions (Hager & Sharma, 2022). This suggests that religious teachings can promote peace and reduce conflict.

Sectarian and nonsectarian analysis

The analysis of sectarian and nonsectarian perspectives reveals significant insights into how ideologies shape discourse and practice in different communities. This exploration includes the dynamics of religious diversity, the role of institutions, and the philosophical underpinnings of nonsectarianism.

Rigid religious ideas, often expressed in the form of dogmatic teachings, hold such sway over adherents' beliefs that other points of view cannot be accepted. Human history is replete with catastrophic events caused by radical religious doctrines, resulting in the application of excessive or unjust measures against certain groups of people (Idham et al., 2022).

Sects arise due to disagreements over belief systems and practical interpretations of religion. Sectarianism develops due to one sect's claim of absolute truth and its rejection of other sects. This phenomenon is found in most world religions. Sectarianism, which is based on differences in viewpoints and performance, is the result of a variety of reasons. Theology, political issues, economic conditions, and social and cultural perspectives are controversial elements (Idham et al., 2022).

Sectarianism often manifests in congregational speeches, where leaders use specific discursive strategies to reinforce group ideologies and manage disputes (Idham et al., 2022). Some forms of discursive strategies include descriptive, explanatory, narrative, argumentative, definitional, and motivational. Each has a specific function, which is always to arouse the interest and reaction of a particular audience (Nesaab in Idham et al., 2022).

In Turkey, the Diyanet (religious affairs in government) navigates sectarian diversity by categorizing religious groups and addressing their unique interpretations, reflecting the complexity of modernism and traditionalism (Yakar & Yakar, 2021). The Diyanet answers religious questions, organizes religious education centers, manages religious affairs in the community, and trains preachers and prayer leaders (Yakar & Yakar, 2021).

“Nonsectarian” in Indonesian can be translated as ‘non-sectarian’ or ‘not attached to a particular sect or religion.’ This term refers to things that are not limited by a particular religious group or sect (Nagle in Lestari et al., 2024). In relation to the nonsectarian perspective, the Kalama Sutta teaches the importance of verification and not accepting something based solely on authority, tradition, or rumor. It encourages the use of personal wisdom to determine the truth (A.I.188).

Nonsectarians also focus on the common good by prioritizing human values and social cohesion, often serving as a bridge in communities with diverse religious backgrounds (Wibisono et al., 2021). Nonsectarianism rejects narrow sectarian thinking and promotes tolerance and respect for different beliefs (Teri et al., 2024).

Plurality and Multiculturalism in Buddhism

Pluralism means mutual respect for different views and full recognition of those differences. The true nexus of complex diversity is in the bonds of civilization (Ruslan in Lestari et al., 2024). Pluralism recognizes diversity in spiritual views and practices, allowing space for different traditions and understandings to come together within an open and inclusive framework (Teri et al., 2024).

Pluralism that understands differences in all lines of life develops into an attitude of tolerance, mutual help, and cooperation between religious communities, without mixing religious teachings but in the name of humanity (active-participatory). Pluralism accepts differences that exist in society without forcing individuals or groups within the community to assimilate cultures (Sardi et al., 2021).

The integration of pluralism in the educational framework aims to foster empathy, sympathy, and solidarity with others (Saihu, 2019). Religious pluralism education is actually born or sourced from respecting the basic rights of each individual to their respective beliefs and beliefs (Saihu, 2019).

Buddhism comes from a pluralistic environment, engaging with various religious traditions in ancient India, which shaped its inclusive and exclusivist attitudes towards other religions (Yong, 2016). While the pluralistic nature of Buddhism often encourages harmony, challenges remain, especially in areas where exclusive interpretations can lead to conflict.

Multiculturalism is a concept in which a community in the context of nationality can recognize diversity, difference, and cultural plurality, whether racial, ethnic, or religious. A multicultural nation is one in which ethnic or cultural groups can coexist peacefully, characterized by a willingness to respect other cultures (Sardi et al., 2021).

The existence of multicultural education, on the other hand, has the potential to revive a dialogical atmosphere in the community of religious educational institutions (Gerson, 2020). The Vasala Sutta explains the category of bad people based on their actions, not based on caste or social status (Sn.116-142). This confirms the Buddhist view that it is not based on a particular culture but based on one's behavior. According to Parsudi

Suparlan (2021), pluralism is an understanding that provides a comfortable space for the paradigm of difference as one of the fundamental entities of humanity. Meanwhile, multiculturalism is an ideology or understanding that voices cultural differences or a belief that recognizes cultural pluralism as a pattern of community life (Sardi et al., 2021).

To support the concept of pluralism and multiculturalism, six conditions support harmony and unity in the community (Saraniya Dhamma), namely: (1) love in action, (2) love in speech, (3) love in thought, (4) sharing with others, (5) morality, (6) a common view that is liberating from suffering (A.III.288-289).

Inclusivism and Exclusivism in Buddhism

Buddhism, known for its teachings of universal wisdom and compassion, faces challenges in the era of globalization and religious pluralism. Two approaches often discussed in this context are inclusivism and exclusivism. This article will explore both concepts in the context of Buddhism, along with examples from everyday life.

Inclusivism in Buddhism refers to an attitude of openness to the truths and values of other spiritual traditions while maintaining faith in the core Buddhist teachings. According to Schmidt-Leukel (2017), "Buddhist inclusivism recognizes that paths of salvation can be found in other traditions, although they may not be as complete or perfect as those of Buddhism."

Inclusivism, as a nonsectarian characteristic, is an attitude that sees that there are values and truths in various views and groups by recognizing diversity and appreciating different perspectives without rejecting other groups as wrong (Ulfa in Lestari et al., 2024).

Inclusivism comes from the understanding of inclusiveness, which refers to the doctrine that all religions have a path to salvation, and that path is recognized (Safehian in Awang et al., 2021). Inclusivism in Buddhism often emphasizes respect and dialogue with other religions, as illustrated by Ashoka's teachings, which advocate mutual respect among religions (Yahya et al., 2022). Inclusivism Examples in Daily Life:

1. Interfaith Dialogue: Many Buddhist communities engage in interfaith dialogue, demonstrating an openness to learning from other traditions. For example, the Dalai Lama often participates in dialog with leaders of other religions, promoting mutual understanding (Yeh, 2019).
2. Meditation Practices Across Traditions: Some Buddhist meditation centers offer techniques from various traditions, including Vipassana, Zen, and even secular Mindfulness meditation (Wilson, 2018).
3. Ritual Adaptation: In some Buddhist communities in the West, elements from local traditions are integrated into practice, such as Buddhist Christmas celebrations in some American monasteries (McMahan, 2020).

Exclusivism tends to view Buddhism as the only true path to enlightenment or liberation. This approach is often associated with a stricter interpretation of Buddhism. As Kiblinger (2015) explains, "Buddhist exclusivism emphasizes the uniqueness and superiority of the Buddhist Dharma as the only path to Nirvana." Examples in everyday life of Exclusivism:

1. Rejection of Syncretism: Some Buddhist communities strongly reject the mixing of Buddhist practices with elements from other religions, seeing it as "polluting" the Dharma (Harris, 2016).

2. Criticism of Conversion: There are Buddhist groups that strongly criticize members who convert to other religions, considering it a “betrayal” of the Dharma (Crosby, 2021).
3. Strict Interpretation of Texts: Some groups emphasize a literal interpretation of the suttas, rejecting modern adaptations of Buddhist teachings (Anālayo, 2017).

Buddhism itself is often seen as leaning more towards inclusivism. In the Upāli Sutta (M.I.379), the Buddha advises a Jain who wants to become his follower to respect still and support his old teacher. This shows an inclusive attitude that respects other spiritual traditions. Elements in the Pali canon that can be interpreted exclusively. For example, in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta (D.II.72), the Buddha states that only in his teachings are there “true ascetics” (Burns, 2018).

The difference between inclusive and exclusive approaches has significant implications in the broader social context. Inclusive approaches tend to promote social harmony and inter-religious dialog, while exclusive approaches can lead to community tension and isolation (Harvey, 2023). From the perspective of Buddhist ethics, the concept of “right effort” (*sammā vāyāma*) in the Noble Eightfold Path can be interpreted to support an inclusive attitude. Efforts to avoid bad thoughts and develop good thoughts can be extended to include respect for truth in other traditions (Bodhi, 2016).

Inclusivism and exclusivism in Buddhism reflect a spectrum of attitudes towards religious pluralism and the interpretation of Buddhism. While inclusivism offers a path to dialog and understanding across traditions, exclusivism can help maintain the integrity and uniqueness of the Buddhist tradition. In the context of an increasingly connected world, understanding the nuances between these two approaches is important, not only for Buddhists but also for society at large. As Thich Nhat Hanh (2015) states, “In a diverse world, we need to learn to ‘listen attentively’ to other traditions while remaining rooted in the wisdom of our own.”

Religious tolerance according to the Upali Sutta, Kalama Sutta, and the government of King Asoka

Religious tolerance is an important aspect of modern multicultural societies. Buddhism, rooted in ancient Indian tradition, offers valuable insights into how to manage diversity of beliefs. This article will explore the concept of religious tolerance through three lenses: The Upali Sutta, the Kalama Sutta, and the policies of King Asoka's reign.

The Upali Sutta presents a dialog between the Buddha and Upali, a devoted follower of Nigantha Nataputta (the founder of Jainism). After an in-depth discussion, Upali decided to become a follower of the Buddha. The Buddha's response to this conversion is very interesting: “Investigate carefully, householder. It is good for famous people like you to investigate thoroughly” (M.I.379). The Buddha then advised Upali to continue to honor and support his old teacher. Bhikkhu Analayo (2015) interprets this attitude as “an early example of religious tolerance in the history of religions.” The Buddha's attitude in the Upali Sutta reflects several important aspects of religious tolerance:

1. Respect for individual choices: The Buddha recognized Upali's right to choose his own beliefs.
2. Encourages critical thinking: The Buddha emphasized the importance of careful investigation before making spiritual decisions.

3. Respecting other traditions: The Buddha encouraged Upali to remain respectful of his old teacher (Peacock, 2019).

The Kalama Sutta is often considered a key text in understanding the Buddha's attitude toward the diversity of beliefs. In this sutta, the Buddha advised the Kalamas who were confused by various spiritual masters who claimed the truth: "Do not accept something just because it has been heard repeatedly... However, when you know for yourselves: 'These things are useless, reprehensible, condemned by the wise; when done and carried out, these things lead to loss and suffering,' so you must abandon them" (A.I.189). Bhikkhu Bodhi (2017) interprets this teaching as "an invitation to investigate and think critically, not a blind acceptance of dogma." The Kalama Sutta promotes tolerance through:

1. Rejection of blind authority: Buddha encouraged people not to accept teachings based solely on tradition or authority.
2. Emphasis on personal experience: The validity of teaching should be tested through hands-on experience.
3. Focus on ethics: The main criterion for assessing teaching is its ethical impact (Harvey, 2021).

King Asoka, ruler of the Mauryan Empire (268-232 BC), is known as one of the most influential practitioners of religious tolerance in history. Although a devout Buddhist, Asoka promoted respect for all religious traditions in his kingdom. In the XII Small Stone Inscription, Asoka states: "One cannot respect only one's religion and condemn the religion of others. Instead, one should respect other religions for a variety of reasons. By doing so, one helps one's religion to develop as well as help other religions. By doing the opposite, a person digs a grave for his religion and also harms other religions" (Thapar, 2016). Asoka's policies reflect several principles of religious tolerance:

1. Universal respect: Asoka encourages respect for all religious traditions.
2. Social harmony: Tolerance is seen as the key to maintaining harmony in a diverse society.
3. Shared growth: Asoka believes that respecting other religions also benefits one's religion (Singh, 2019).

Contemporary Relevance

The teachings of the Upali Sutta, the Kalama Sutta, and the policies of King Asoka offer valuable insights into managing religious diversity in the modern world. Some contemporary applications include:

1. Interfaith dialogue: The Buddhist approach in the Upali Sutta can be a model for respectful interfaith dialogue (Ezek, 2020).
2. Critical education: Kalama Sutta supports an educational approach that emphasizes critical thinking and personal inquiry (Wilson, 2018).
3. Public policy: Asoka's policy can inspire modern government approaches to religious pluralism (Sharma, 2022).

The Upali Sutta, the Kalama Sutta, and the policies of King Asoka present a complex picture of religious tolerance in the Buddhist tradition. They emphasized the importance of

respect for diversity, critical thinking, and social harmony. Amid the challenges of contemporary pluralism, these principles remain relevant, offering guidance for managing the diversity of beliefs with wisdom and compassion. As stated by Thich Nhat Hanh (2015), "True understanding always brings love. With understanding and love, we can bridge the chasm between different spiritual traditions."

Religious interconnection and moderation

In the era of globalization and increasing pluralism, the concept of interconnection and religious moderation has become increasingly important. This article aims to formulate and analyze both concepts, as well as explore the relationship between the two in the context of diverse modern society.

Religious Interconnection

Religious interconnection refers to the relationship and interconnectedness between various religious traditions. According to Knitter (2019), "Religious interconnection is the recognition that religious traditions do not live in isolation, but influence and shape each other through historical and contemporary interactions." This concept includes several main aspects: Dialog End-Im, Reciprocal influence between traditions, Similarities and doctrinal differences, and Collaboration on social issues. Religious interconnection can be formulated on several levels:

1. Theological Level: At this level, interconnection involves dialogue and understanding of theological concepts from different traditions. For example, the concept of monotheism in Abrahamic religions or non-dualism in Eastern traditions (Hedges, 2017).
2. Ethical Level: Interconnection at this level focuses on the moral and ethical values taught by different religions. Many religions share universal values such as compassion, justice, and peace (Küng, 2018).
3. Ritual and Practice Level: This involves understanding and respecting different religious practices. For example, how various traditions understand the concept of prayer or meditation (Moyaert, 2020).
4. Social Level: Interconnection at this level is concerned with how different religious communities interact and work together in society (Patel, 2016).

Religious Moderation

Religious moderation is an approach that emphasizes balance in understanding and practicing religious teachings. Bagir (2021) defines it as "a religious attitude that balances between practicing one's religion (exclusive) and respecting the religious practices of others who differ in beliefs (inclusive)." The key elements of religious moderation include Rejection of extremism, Openness to diverse interpretations, Commitment to universal human values, and Balance between text and context in the interpretation of religious teachings. Religious moderation can be formulated in several aspects:

1. Textual-Contextual Balance: Religious moderation emphasizes the importance of understanding sacred texts in both historical and contemporary contexts. This involves flexible interpretation but sticking to basic principles (Kamali, 2015).

2. Inclusivity: Moderation encourages an inclusive attitude that respects the diversity of religious interpretations and practices, both within the religion itself and between religions (Swidler, 2014).
3. Rationality: A moderate approach emphasizes the use of reason and critical thinking in understanding religious teachings, rejecting blind dogmatism (El Fadl, 2015).
4. Civic's Commitment: Religious moderation encourages active participation in community and state life, bridging the gap between religious identity and citizenship (Hefner, 2021).

CONCLUSION

A commitment to pluralistic engagement and cultural assimilation distinguishes the Buddhist perspective on the recognition of traditions and alternative religions. Buddhism comes from a heterogeneous context, leading to a spectrum of responses to other religious frameworks. Respect for alternative religions is considered an increase in the integrity of Buddhism, not a reduction in the integrity of Buddhism. Tolerance is conceptualized as a receptive disposition to diverse viewpoints without sacrificing the integrity of one's beliefs.

The exploration of religious attitudes illustrates the complex dynamics between religious beliefs and people's perspectives. Religious beliefs can shape attitudes regarding inequality and acts of violence. The principle of religious moderation is emphasized as a means to reduce conflicts and foster social cohesion.

An examination of the sectarian versus non-sectarian viewpoint explains the inherent complexity of religious diversity and the functioning of institutional frameworks in the interpretation of religious principles. Sectarianism often arises from the assertion of absolute truth, while non-sectarianism underscores the importance of tolerance and appreciation for differences in beliefs.

The idea of plurality and multiculturalism in Buddhism embodies the basic pluralistic ethos and its involvement with many traditions. Buddhism advocates the recognition of diversity and the recognition of the differences of societies. Multicultural education is considered essential for fostering empathy.

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