



## THE LAMPS ARE DIFFERENT, THE LIGHT IS SIMILAR (BUT NOT THE SAME)

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Religious Pluralism vs. Religious Div  
Panel: BUDDHISM AND MULTI-CULTURALISM  
By  
**Rev. Dato Dr. Sumana Siri, D. Th. (Oxford), DBS, BA (Hon), D. Hom.  
Med. (U.K)**

**D.H.M., N.M.D.,(USA), Ph.D.(VN), Fellow, British Institute of Homoeopathy  
Royal Philosopher, Defender of the State (M'sia), Tripitaka-vagishvaracarya  
Dasha Bhasha Visharada, CEO, Global Buddhist Realists' Movement (U.K.,  
Italy, France, S'pore, Malaysia), Sangha Agong, Singapore & Malaysia  
Chief Sangha Nayaka of the U.K. & Europe**

With the advent of the twenty first century, one of the major challenges in contemporary society is the struggle of multiculturalism and religious pluralism. The reason being the impact of social media we face today. So, not only diversity but also diametrically opposed ideological convictions of religions and identities of cultures cherished by ethnic groups. So much so that even among seemingly peaceful Buddhists, cultural dominance is evident; a departure from the original Buddha Word; ‘the indivisibility of human beings’. (1)

When we lack ecumenism (2) among our religionists, it is not surprising that we dislike or hate other religionists who could call us ‘extremists’ instead of the time honored ‘followers of the path of moderation’, the Middle Path (Midlist). Any adherent who blindly loves (emotions) his own creed and hates the religions of others should not call himself a Buddhist! That is in accordance with the essence of the Pali Canon. Because a Buddhist means, ‘one who follows the Awakened One’! The Awakened One was for unity and ‘Right Understanding’ with an universal ambiance (3); whereas adjectives like Thai, Burmese, Sri Lankan, Tibetan and the like are after effects of ‘Nurture’ against ‘Nature’. While a Buddhist aspires enlightenment and unity, the adjectives mentioned above are based on nations or race stands for division, segregation and disunity. Practically, such terms obviously have a racist undertone! Can those Buddhists be awakened to this fact? For the

simple reason that the Tathagata's Dhamma is universal, so is his vision that leads to the ‘essential oneness of mankind’ to humanize, elevate and ennable us to unification and perfection with the space to understand pluralism as a development of thought in genetically variant human beings (4) who can be enlightened “here and now.”

In a more complexed and perplexed world the demand is for mutually rewarding, multi-lateral dialogues on culture and religion which will culminate in an egalitarian society (5) (samanattata, samata,) that could sustain diversity. Within such a space, pluralism cannot remain inclusive but has to be exclusive. That mutually rewarding (ubhatayattha-samvattanika- kusala-kiriya) phenomenon is born in Buddhist moral evaluation as far as the judgment of universally good actions is concerned. Rational discourses are suggested by the Enlightened One not for the intellect but as catalysts for culture, equality, human rights and human duties. This allows coexistence in harmony that helps good governance in a confused and disturbed world of division and segregation. With social policies balanced and mild persuasions applied the ideal society can be expected. In this regard, religion being a matter of conscience, should not become regulated, regimented or institutionalized by law, as it belongs to the moral domain (Law is interested in the legal and not the moral). Since from the Buddhist point of view, moral discourse is a rational discourse with consistency, negative emotions are not welcome but harmonized. Issues should not be swept under carpets, as it will be the greatest assault on Reason! A wrong view of an uninstructed Buddhist folk cannot necessarily be the Buddha's discourse though the intention of the person could be seemingly right. E.g. recent conflicts in Sri Lanka and Myanmar with regard to racial and religious extremism. As far as the Buddha and the Dhamma is concerned, there cannot be any compromise for ethnic violence or religious extremism. Battle – cries, assertive and aggressive designs cannot even remotely connect to the Buddha's Dhamma.

Traditional “so called” Theravada Buddhist countries have been experiencing repercussions of corruption and corruptibility which drew them to war and social conflict. At times, with unbelievable ‘killing fields’ e.g. Cambodia and Sri Lanka and the persecution of the minorities which human rightists called ethnic cleansing. In the Cambodian experience, Dith Pran who acted in the film noted “I witnessed some of the most ignoble horrors and unfathomable brutalities ever known to mankind” (6). Those nations seem to have disregarded ‘the doctrine of man's oneness of the Vasettha Sutta; “we all belong to the same species” in the basket of humanity unlike fauna and flora. A simple reason for lacking such an attitude is ego, due to the dominance of race and religion and the interest in power.

A bit of compassion to ‘Muslim Rohingyas of Rakhine’, genuine dialogues with ‘Tamil Tigers of Elam’ and interaction with ‘Sulu origin South Thai Muslims’ could have been the seeds of peace. Equally, one could argue that rigid positions adopted by followers of any religions who fancy ‘intolerant means’ advocated even by exclusive scholars/imams could lead to religious chauvinism. e.g. The case of the exclusively Muslim PAS Party (Opposition) of Malaysia with the main objective of creating an ‘Islamic State’ which now attempts to pass Islamic Hudud Laws of punishment which they say affects only Muslims and not the non-Muslims, could not be considered fair as it leads to two sets of laws in a secular country!

The problem is seen in the neighborhood of the “Oil kingdom of the Orient” Brunei Darussalam which was transformed to become the first Islamic State in Asia to implement controversial Hudud which involves the non-Muslims as well. Can ASEAN be a united community with such extreme views? In Brunei even non-Muslims must follow Muslims and fast, not even to have a sip of water during the fasting period! Christmas celebrations and Chinese Dragon/Lion Dances in the open are also prohibited. The Hudud laws which are normally meant only for Muslims when applied to non-Muslims alike, will create an issue of not only human rights, but also of religious rights.

For Christians and Muslims who believe exclusivity to be the only way of salvation for mankind e.g. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12 ),(7.) For those who adhere to multi-culturalism and multi-religiosity this is certainly a challenge. Worse still, to believe in a ‘superior culture’ is to deny the Buddha as the unifier of mankind by such Buddhists. Buddha’s was a struggle to transform humanity into divinity; a parallel quote from the Bible “as in heaven, so on earth”! The contrary is observed when non-Muslims are treated as second class citizens in Muslim dominated countries. A novel view, not to legally accept Muslims other than Sunnis (Shias, Ahmadiyas, Khojas, Vohras++) in Malaysia (8) in line with Wahabbism of Saudi Arabia is to forget that multiplicity is a gift of nature. Conflict of loyalties arise because of what we owe to different religions, castes, languages and sects as is happening currently, abundantly in fact, on a week to week basis!

Islam seems to surpass accepting religious diversity. It affirms religious plurality, but not pluralism (9). It rejects theologian John Harwood Hick's (10) simplistic theory that “all religions are equally valid to the same truth”. Therefore, “religious pluralism transcends the conflicting and relative truth claims among religions. It claims a facade of democracy and world peace; the ‘absolute messiah’ to the

phenomenon of religious diversity. He concludes that all religions claim a head-on collision with religious pluralism.

Islam cannot agree to such propositions. It terms this as religious pluralism. It accepts other religions as totally ‘others’. But, ‘Pluralism’ rejects others to be ‘exclusively and uniquely’ others. In other words, diversity and plurality (not pluralism) (11) is considered a ‘Sunnahtullah’ is in accordance with the dictates of Allah. E.g. In chapter Ali Imran: 19, Allah categorized ‘Religion before Allah, is Islam’. So, Islam is Allah and Mohammad (s.a.w) is the last and final prophet on the Earth! Dr. Hicks also maintained that ‘all religions are essentially the same, authentic and valid’.

It is now clear that from a common sense point of view, all religions are not the same, but in ethics there are resemblances which are similar, because of it, it is involvement in human problems. So, our topic..... “The lamps are different. The light is similar (but, not the same)” and the input given by us. Jalal-ud-din Rumi the great Sufi framed this sentence. “The lamps are different, The light is the same”. We have concluded it is not so; not the same, but similar, that too in aspects of common ethics.

What more, in Arabic interpretation of Islam as apparent in the Middle-east, Shias are not accepted (No wonder Islamic critique; Anwar Sheikh called Islam “Arab Nationalism” ( 12 ) and they are not being tolerated, this has advanced recently in Malaysia, legally. For such adherents only Wahabbism matters, as we have noted, such exclusive stereological concepts are also found in Christianity. Among some Buddhists, racial and cultural prejudices e.g. Theravada and Mahayana (The Higher Way & the Lower Way) along with the country base is an issue being adopted without sufficient reflection and not considering the repercussions. A Buddhist Realist would argue that ethnic favoritism is the core problem. Buddhist nationalists, if they are not racists, could emulate Prince Charles, the British heir to the throne who stated in public that, if he becomes the king of the U.K., even while remaining the Head of the Church of England, he wants to become not just “the Defender of the Faith (Anglican) but the Defender of all faiths”! After observing the rites and customs of the Japanese, the Prince of Wales also said that if not for the throne he would have followed the Buddhists (13) and the Japanese who practice pluralism. In the Early Pali Texts, pluralism is found as we are not technical creations of a God. Buddhist thought inclines to the point of the French thinker Voltaire, viz: “Man created God, in his own image”. Though humans are genetically one species, their nature is manifold as much as their bodies are vivid, (nanatta satta, nanatta kaya).

So, whether the religion/race is in majority or minority, pluralism is adopted without space for dominance as anatta is a prominent and dominant concept in Buddhist theory. That being the case, minorities should not suffer because of Thai-ness, Sinhalese-ness, Burmese-ness, and Indian-ness ..... after all the Buddha was born as Siddhartha to a Nepalese Shakya family! Conscious of the decline of his race even before it happened; he did not even try to take measures to defend his race!!!

Geographical boundaries shouldn't be the points of controversy, as was the case of the Preah Vihar temple complex conflict between the Thai and Cambodian Buddhists, regarding the ownership of the territorial land bordering both countries which went viral. This gave shock to the international world who was not familiar with conflicts among Buddhists.

The world renowned Buddhist monk of China; Ven. Xuan Chuang (Ven. Fa-Hsien) reports the Buddhist ecumenism of monks of different schools in Gandhara and Afghan areas; thousands living and dining under the same roof.(14)

We are happy to note that some commendable efforts of ecumenism have been done by the Vietnamese and Indonesian monastic; both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of all sects. But if the unity is only for superficial purpose, certainly it won't last. Unity on the surface due to government pressure or if internally one is against the other, the results may cause disaster as noticed in the past where State policies changed from time to time.

Buddhism being the Happiness Agenda to get rid of suffering at the apex of "Supreme Happiness" to all beings is essentially an accommodation of pluralism. The call for inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue has been an innate practicality since its first discourse. When the monks had an open crisis and they split into two. The Buddha tried to manage the two parties through ecumenism but left to the Parileyya forest (15) in retreat. For he had realized the divisive forces against multiculturalism and pluralism. His constant awareness was for the unity of the community and his ideal society, was not a utopia but the 'essential oneness' of mankind. An all compassing catalyst of humanism based on ethics and psychology for practical solutions, not the mere legal technical mechanism. The aim is for universal happiness of all parties concerned. The essence is, the cosmic well-being of all beings; the criterion is the often quoted "May all beings be well and happy!"

In a practical sense, this is the very foundation that social harmony can be reasonably promoted. With the novel impact of social media globally being influenced on religious diversity and the media having become anti-pluralistic as far as terrorism

is concerned, and the most adverse results yet to come, could be unheard of. Those who use political violence by this rapid means of communication have identified themselves with the digital system. They are therefore a group of machine-centered, technical minded people. As is with the case of fire, the twin aspects of good and bad have their interplay.

With the crisis arising from 9/11 (the New York tragedy) we have seen the rapid change in social life as far as gathering information on terror is concerned in the digital system. In this world of ‘Information Technology’, **Buddhism is Transformation Technology**, viz. in the Dhammapada, “**Conquer the violent person by love, conquer the bad by good, conquer the miser by generosity, and conquer the liar by truth**”.

Change anicca; impermanence, transformation being the first reality of life in a plural society, it stays valid to all interested in co-existence and harmony. This ‘Transformation Technology’ clearly elaborates the space given to such a dynamic concept as it not a static concept. That too, for the well-being and happiness of all beings, including the machine- centered people.

Though by custom and tradition the Buddhist fraternity accepts pluralism, but by preference, they remain under the umbrella of the country, ethnicity and denomination rather than being Universalists.

In the last three decades there have been commendable efforts by some Buddhist leaders among the Asian dragons (tigers)to promote intra-religious International Buddhist Conferences where all Buddhist traditions (Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana) converged and had mega ceremonies, conferences and dialogues to discuss matters of mutual interests .e. g. Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Malaysia & Singapore.

One successful leader conducts his global conferences and meetings based on the model of multi-national business system. Ultimately, this also ended with more stress on ethnicity, culture and a mono-lateral purpose. Some leaders held conferences due to pressure from their governments or as a reaction to pressure coming from Christian evangelists (16). Though genuine leaders seem sincere, some devotees created the barrier as they were ethnic based. The sectarian factor during these conferences is now almost lost; a novel development unseen and unheard of for centuries!

As noted the Indonesian and the Vietnam Sangha monastic are a laudable lot in this unification exercise. Other Buddhists could emulate them rather than remaining inclusive. Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia Sangha are still living in the 20th century, partly because of decades of impact of regimes' diktats and not confident enough to make changes; the first reality of Buddhist philosophy. The time has come for a mutual rewarding transformation or to face becoming an irrelevant religion of dogmatism.

In order to be open and not rooted in cultural prejudices or in cultural superiority these traditions need to rise up from the deep slumber they are in. Because as long as such nations are controlled by emotions and remain less rational, the state or brutal governance or any other agents could suppress them. E.g. Myanmar was under the junta army rule for half a century, not forgetting the repression the Indons faced for decades!!!

As for Sri Lanka the foresight of Prof. W.S. Karunaratna; a great visionary with prophetic imagination is worth quoting, (17) "The plural society of Sri Lanka offers ideal laboratory conditions for the translation into practice of the Buddha are teaching on the oneness of mankind..... Urgent action is necessary to prevent irresponsible elements from reducing Buddhism and the Buddhist movement into a vehicle of their own bigotry, arrogance and intolerance.

Powerful and prestigious Buddhist organizations in our land are increasingly assuming the roles of trade unions creating aggressive lobbies and pressure groups which seek to impede attempts to promote communal harmony and national unity.

Some of the recent Buddhist organizations that have sprung up in the country are obviously tools in the hands of power-hungry laity and clerics who are eager to build up power-bases for themselves by exploiting the grievances and frustrations among certain '**militant Buddhists**'. **Bankrupt politicians seek to discover short-cuts to power and popularity championing the cause of what is widely believed to be "Buddhists" rights.**

**A LOT OF THESE "Buddhist" rights are in fact, not Buddhist at all. They are rather political rights..... Buddhist activities.....are more revivalist than constructive, more conservative than progressive and more puritanical than liberal.**

Had responsible Sri Lankan leaders including monks follow this vision of Prof. W.S. Karunaratna who managed negotiations with Muammar Gadaffi and the USA

President Jimmy Carter, as Ambassador to the USA, they could have totally avoided the dirtiest war of their history, for though the war is won, the battle goes on!

This professor of professors cited “Where there is understanding and compassion there alone is to be found Buddhism and the Buddhist way of life. **Where there are ferocious battle-cries and assertive and aggressive designs there cannot be anything even remotely connected with Buddhism!...Bigotry, arrogance and intolerance cannot fly the Buddhist flag for the simple reason that Buddhism is distinguished by its wisdom and compassion, generosity and reasonableness and sanity and moderation”.**(18)

In our half a century reading of the Blessed One; a unifier of mankind who faced sixty two ‘thicket of ideologies’ and ‘a jungle of views’ in a multi-cultural setting of the Gangetic plains, his efforts for harmony has not been furthered by a substantial lead followers who dominate in the ecclesiastical realm and in social politics. Not only as individuals but also as respected leaders with power whose impact in semi-corrupted institutions is imminent, seems selfish. While the Master struggled to transform humanity into divinity many monastic Sanghas are for wealth, political power and position. The magnetism of wants (not needs) and the repulsion of hatred in the congregation demonstrates the decay of the Dispensation due to their ignorance of harmony and coexistence. The Buddha’s compassion in action within pluralism could empathize for a multi-cultural setting could have mobilized both the individual and society. He was able to humanize, elevate and ennable humanity to divinity ‘here and now’ ‘Brahma- metam viharam idhamahu’ (19). Society for him is the vehicle of individual betterment. If such practical idealism is realized, most divisions could vanish paving the way for diversity where multi-culturalism could strive. Enter, the most excellent of arts; living life untouched by the eight circumstances of life; to be in the world but not of the world; the way of the lotus. If not the cessation of suffering; the happiness agenda, then at least the reduction of suffering could have reduced corruption and the corruptibility of the individual and society. Such was his social conscience and consciousness for a plural social progress. He went the extra mile which other religious founders of religions in the ancient world did not go. It has to be stressed that for valid reasons the Buddha’s attitude was **not negative or narrow tolerance** but to use valid propositions for further ‘Right Understanding’. As for him, to tolerate the wrong was to indirectly support the wrong or bad notion or action.

The aspect of ‘liberte’ born out of empathy can be a moral to draw for adherents of religions and cultures who prefer mono-culture as against multi-culturalism and multi-religiosity. The Singapore experience contains that tolerance by practice and

by effective law. For their social policy is to maintain the peace and the existing harmony.

The Malaysian episode is different. As Tricia Yeoh states, (20) “Malaysian political culture seeks to politicize everything under the sun, and nothing is as easily politicized as religion”.

She furthers her argument by noting that the ruling Barisan Nasional government and the so called champions of rigid Islam, an opposition group called PAS use Islam to outperform each other and Non-Muslims are not qualified to use Arabic phrases. Efforts are taken to show that the Opposition controlled States do not adhere to Islamic principles and therefore disqualify to genuinely represent and serve Muslims, despite the fact that the Penang State government headed by a Christian providing more State government aid to Islamic schools which was not done when the Muslim dominant Barisan government was in power for decades.

In fact, the Opposition State contributed more than double (e.g. Malaysian RM 24.3 million) in the year 2010.

Understanding that the secular country is multi-religious and multi-cultural the Penang Opposition State became the first province to set up a State sponsored “Interfaith Council” whereas even the Central government could not do such a thing since Independence!!!

Dr. M. Bakri Musa , in his Forward to a critique ; ‘Assalamualaikum’ by Malaysian X-Law Minister, Zaid Ibrahim (Prime Minister’s Dept.) noted, “Islam is reduced to a government bureaucracy manned by control-freaks intent on dictating our lives. Yes, they are all men”.

He stresses, “Not- too-bright and self-serving politicians are only too willing to ride this Islamic tiger. Once ridden however, it is difficult to dismount, as the Afghans and Pakistanis are finding out.

**Malaysia’s saving grace is its significant non-Muslim minority, an effective buffer and formidable bulwark against the intrusive reach of these political Islamists”.**

**Zaid Ibrahim, the author of the book, on the other hand questions the invalid position of Kelantan state ulamas leading the state. He describes why ulamas should not be administrators. “It suffers from appalling poverty as well as the**

**highest rates of AIDS, incest, drug abuse and abandon babies. It also has the highest number of surfers of pornographic sites”.**

Zaid Ibrahim had initiated his Preface by quoting the famous statement from the Holy Quran: “Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from error: whoever rejects Evil and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks. And Allah hears and knows all things”. Surah Al-Baqarah (2: 256)

A Buddhist, Seng Ts'an views pluralism...

“There is one Dharma,  
not many Distinctions arise,  
From the needs of the ignorant”

## FOOT NOTES & REFERENCES

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