

# SOME UNMINDFUL ISSUES OF BUDDHIST LEADERS WHO SEEK SUSTAINABLE PEACE

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## ABSTRACT

One of the major challenging issues the world face today, is religion. This is due to the struggle of Multi-culturalism vs. Religious Pluralism. Even in the case Buddhist traditions, the apparent cultural dominance in some traditions surpass the ecumenism of the Buddha expected of us, as enjoined in the Agganna Sutta's 'indivisibility!' Furthermore, when racism, ethnicity, pro-war assertive designs are drawn, it cannot even remotely connect to the original Buddha Word. This research attempts to address pressing issues that give negative versions of the Buddha's advice and needs corrective measures taken.

In multi-cultural societies, all are faced with not only diversity but also by diametrically opposed ideological convictions of other faiths and communities. Amongst these, one of the subsequent problem is ethnic favouritism.

Gotama Buddha's view of a universalist who is aware of the essential oneness leading to humanise, globalise, elevate and

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ennoble mankind to unity and ‘perfection’ with space for pluralism is a supra development in human thought; an evaluation common to all universalists to whatever religion they belong to. “Patience is the greatest virtue” is not blind tolerance or narrow- intolerance (you do as the laws are such without your own free choice). While some exclusive religions hold; “this is the only way to salvation” others attempt to find common grounds for good governance. The reality is, that religion will always colour politics, as in some countries due to their theology or cultural patterns.

Many traditional societies, lay pressure on gender inequality which is deplorable. This includes the multi-cultural Buddhists as well e.g. The issue on Bhikkhuni (nuns) Ordination. We see how Brahmanism is still influential even in Theravada Buddhist nations. We are happy to note the ecumenism of Vietnamese Sangha and the Indonesian Sangha which should be beacon lights to other Buddhist Sanghas.

Proponents of religious pluralism like Troeltsch, Arnold Toynbee and John Hick contend that all religions are essentially valid and the same but we may look similar but not the same. The perplexed and complex world demands, mutually rewarding multi-lateral inter-faith dialogues that lead to harmony and an egalitarian world with reasonable sustainability ‘good for all parties’ (ubahyattha-samvattanika kusala kiriya).

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With the advent of the twenty first century, one of the major challenges in contemporary society is the struggle of multi-culturalism and religious pluralism. The reason being the impact of social media we face, 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.’<sup>(1)</sup>

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1. Vasettha Sutta, Digha Nikaya.

When we lack ecumenism<sup>(2)</sup> among our religionists, it is not surprising that we dislike or hate other religionists who could call us 'extremists' instead of being identified as time honoured followers of the path of moderation, the Middle Path (Midlist). Any adherent who blindly loves (emotionally) his own creed and hates the religions of others should not call himself a Buddhist! That is in accordance with the Pali Canon Word. For a Buddhist means, 'one who follows the Awakened One'! The Awakened One was for unity and 'Right Understanding' with an universal ambience whereas nouns such as Thai, Burmese, Sri Lankan, Tibetan and the like, are after effects of 'Nuture' against 'Nature'. While a Buddhist aspires enlightenment and unity, the nouns mentioned, 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 humanise, elevate, and ennoble us to unification and perfection with the space to understand pluralism as a development of thought in genetically variant human beings'<sup>(3)</sup> 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<sup>(4)</sup> (*samanattata, samata*) that could sustain diversity. Within such a space, pluralism cannot remain inclusive but has to be exclusive. That mutually rewarding (*ubhatayatha - samvattanika - kusala kiriya*) phenomenon is inborn in Buddhist moral evaluation as far as the judgement of universally good actions are concerned. Rational discourses are suggested by the Enlightened One not for 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

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2. Inter - denominational religious work or meetings of all sects of Buddhist traditions.

3. See research paper in Google Search (type; rev.dr.sumana siri) "Genetics : The Moral Issue", United Nations Organisation Conference, Geneva, Switzerland, 'World Philosophers Meet', 1997.

4. One of the 4 treasures of a ruler / king.

mild persuasions applied, the ideal society can be expected. In this regard, religion being a matter of conscience, should not become regulated, regimented or institutionalised 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 harmonised. Issues should not be swept under carpets, as it will be the greatest assault on Reason! And Buddhist misunderstanding of unistructed Buddhist folks are not necessarily following the Buddha's discourses though the intention 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 conflicts. At times, with unbelievable ‘killing fields’ (Cambodia and Sri Lanka) and the persecution of the minorities which human rightists called ethnic cleansing! 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, genuine dialogues with Tamil Tigers and interaction with 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 could lead to religious chauvinism.

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) 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. His 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, Ahmaddiyas, Khojas, Vohras) in Malaysia<sup>(5)</sup> in line with Wahabbism of Saudi Arabia is to forget that multiplicity is a gift of nature. Conflict in 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. It rejects theologian John Harwood Hick's<sup>(6)</sup> 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 religious diversity. He concludes that all religions claim a head-on collision with religious pluralism.

Islam cannot agree to such proposition. 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)<sup>(7)</sup> is considered a ‘Sunnahullah’; is in accordance with the dictates of Allah. e.g. In chapter Ali Imran:19, Allah categorised ‘Religion before Allah, is Islam. So, Islam is Allah and Mohammad (s.a.w.) is the last and final prophet on the Earth! Dr.Hick’s 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 its involvement in human problems. So, our topic “The lamps are different. The light is similar (not the same)” and the input given.

What more, in Islam like in some other religions apparent in

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5. New Laws have been amended to this effect by the Parliament of Malaysia.

6. John Hick's; the iconic thinker of the pluralist theology.

7. ‘Problems of Religious Pluralism, pp. 36-37- ‘Religious Pluralism’p.331.

the Middle - east, Shias are not accepted (No wonder an Islamic critique; Anwar Sheikh called Islam “Arab Nationalism”<sup>(8)</sup> 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 soteriological 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 conclude ethnic favouritism as the core problem. Buddhist nationalists, if they are not racists, should 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 and the Japanese who practice pluralism. In the Early Pali Texts, pluralism is found as we are not just technical creations of a God. Buddhist thought inclines into the saying 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 prominent and a dominant concept in Buddhist scriptures. That being the case, minorities should not suffer because of Thai -ness, Sinhalese-ness, Burmese-ness, Indian-ness, etc. 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 tried 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 conflict between the Thai and Cambodian Buddhists, regarding the ownership of the

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8. Islam: The Arab Nationalism, Islam & Sex , Islam & Terrorism works of Anwar Sheik, Wales, U.K.



territorial land bordering both countries which went viral. This gave shock to the international world who were not familiar with conflicts among Buddhists.

The world renown 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.

We are happy to note that some commendable efforts of ecumenism have been done by the Vietnamese and Indonesian monastics; 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 as they split into two, the Buddha tried to manage the two parties by ecumenism and left to the Parileyyaka forest.

For he realised the divisive forces against multiculturalism. His constant awareness was for the unity of the community; his ideal society, 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 was for universal happiness of all parties concerned. The essence of his was, the cosmic well-being of all beings; the criterion for the often quoted "May all beings be well and happy!"<sup>(9)</sup>

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, the results yet to come can be disturbing. Those who

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9. Karaniya Metta Sutta, Khuddaka Nikaya.

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 in fire, the twin aspects of good and bad has its 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 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, 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 and dialogues to discuss matters of mutual interests .e.g. Taiwan, Korea, ‘Hong Kong’, Malaysia & Singapore.

One successful leader still 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 self - serving purpose. Some leaders held conferences due to pressure from their governments or as a reaction to pressure coming from Christian evangelists. 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 decades!

As noted Indonesian and Vietnam Sangha monastics are a laudable lot in this unification exercise. Other Buddhists could emulate them rather than remaining exclusive. Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia Sanghas are still living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, partly because of the decades of the impact of regimes' diktats and not confident 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!!!

The foresight of Prof. W.S. Karunaratna; a great visionary with prophetic imagination is worth quoting...

“The plural society of Sri Lanka offers ideal laboratory conditions for the translation into practice of the Buddha’s 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 organisations 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 organisations 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 are 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 followed this vision of Prof. W.S. Karunaratna who managed negotiations with Muammar Gaddafi 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*”<sup>(10)</sup>

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 which could empathise for a multi-cultural setting could have mobilized both the individual and society. He was able to humanize, elevate and ennoble humanity to divinity ‘here and now’. Society for him is the vehicle of individual

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10. Prof. W.S.Karunaratna, “Buddhism in a Plural Society”, Buddhist Essays, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

betterment. If such practical idealism is realized, most divisions could vanish paving the way for diversity where multi-culturalism could thrive. 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 of society. Such was his social perception 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.<sup>(11)</sup>

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 the social policy is to maintain the peace and the existing harmony.

The Malaysian episode is different. As Tricia Yeoh states,<sup>(12)</sup>

"Malaysian political culture seeks to politicise every thing under the sun, and nothing is as easily politicised as religion".

She furthers her argument by noting that the former Barisan Nasional government and the so called champions of rigid Islam, an opposition group called PAS use Islam to outperform each other. 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 X-Barisan government was in power for decades.

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11. Brahmajala Sutta, Digha Nikaya.

12. Striving For Change, art. "States of Reform, Governing Penang & Selangor, Penang Institute, 2013. Also art. by Dr. Dzulkefly Ahmed, Kuala Lumpur, 2012.

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, (Forward to a critique; ‘Assalamualaikum’ by Malaysian X-Law Minister, Zaid Ibrahim (Prime Minister’s Dept.) states.

“Islam is reduced to a government bureaucracy manned by control-freaks intent on dictating our lives. Yes, they are all men”.

His stress “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, on the other hand questions the invalid position of Kelantan state ulamas leading the state. He scribes 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 opens his Preface by quoting the famous statement

“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).