

## **Buddhist Civilization as a Living Model of Unity in Diversity for the Contemporary World**

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### **Introduction**

The contemporary world is characterized by increasing social fragmentation, religious intolerance, ethnic conflicts, political polarization, environmental crises, and cultural misunderstandings. Even though the world is getting smaller because of technological advancement and globalization people are not still living together in harmony because of their different identities, beliefs and cultures. Consequently, the search for sustainable models of peaceful coexistence and intercultural harmony has become one of humanity's most urgent concerns. This study examines Buddhist civilization as a living model of "Unity in Diversity" and explores its relevance for addressing contemporary multiculturalism, social cohesion and peace-building.

Buddhist civilization refers to the cultural, philosophical, ethical, religious, artistic, political, and social traditions that developed under the influence of the Buddha's teachings over 2,500 years ago (Harvey, 2013). It started in Indian sub-continent including Nepal and India and has since spread to many countries in Asia and beyond. Buddhist culture is an example of how different groups can live together in harmony. It has adapted to different languages, cultures and customs but its core teachings have remained the same. It has developed different traditions including Theravāda, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna in countries like Sri Lanka, Nepal, China, Japan and Korea. Even though they have their own rituals, scriptures and ways of expressing themselves they are all united by the Buddha's same core principles.

The study highlights characteristics of Buddhist civilization such as Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path, *anitya* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), *anātmā* (no-soul), *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), and *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination), which are supporting harmonious coexistence amid diversity.

The Buddha's teachings emphasize universal human values that exceed beyond ethnic and social distinctions. No matter which family or caste you belong to, what is the most important is your action how you treat people and your purity

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of mind. Dalai Lama in his book “Beyond Religions: Ethics for a Whole World” presents a framework for secular ethics based on universal human values rather than religious dogma, aiming to foster global compassion, and shared humanity emphasizing interfaith dialogue, tolerance and mutual respect above ideological differences.

In the Vāsetṭha Sutta (Khuddak Nikāya, Sutta Nipāta 3.9), the Buddha rejects notions of superiority based on birth and affirms the importance of ethical conduct. Buddha says: “I don’t call one a brahman for being born of a mother or sprung from a womb. He’s called a ‘bho-sayer’ if he has anything at all. But someone with nothing, who clings to nothing: He’s what I call a brahman.”

In the Brāhmanavaggo (Khuddak Nikāya, Dhammapada 393), the Buddha says: “*na jatāhi na gottena, na jaccā hoti brāhmano. Yamhi saccañca dhammo ca, so suci so ca brāhmano*”. Meaning: Not by matted hair, nor by lineage, nor by birth does one become a brahman (holy man). But he in whom truth and righteousness exist, he is pure, he is a brahman.

Similarly, the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta (Khuddak Nikāya, Sutta Nipāta 1.8) advocates unconditional loving-kindness toward all beings: “*Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā*” Meaning: May all beings be happy and secure.

Through examples from Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, China, Tibet, and Southeast Asia, the paper demonstrates how Buddhist civilization adopted local traditions without compromising core teachings. The findings suggest that Buddhist civilization offers a valuable framework for intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding, social harmony, and sustainable development. The study concludes that the Buddhist vision of unity rooted in ethical values, provides important insights for fostering inclusive societies and global cooperation in the twenty-first century.

## Objectives

The study aims to:

1. examine the historical development of Buddhist civilization as a model of unity in diversity.
2. explore the contribution of Buddhist civilization to global sustainability and social harmony.
3. analyze how Buddhist civilization accommodated cultural and regional diversity while maintaining doctrinal continuity.

## Methodology

This study employs a **Qualitative research design** based on textual, historical, and comparative analysis.

**Data Collection:** The research utilizes both primary and secondary sources:

**Primary Sources:** Pāli Canon, Mahāyāna Sutras, Buddhist historical chronicles, Classical Buddhist philosophical texts

**Secondary Sources:** Scholarly books and journal articles on Buddhist civilization, Research papers on intercultural dialogue and peace studies, and Contemporary research on peace studies and religious pluralism.

## Data Analysis

- 1. Textual Analysis** – examining Buddhist teachings related to diversity, tolerance, and coexistence.
- 2. Historical Analysis** – studying the spread and adaptation of Buddhism across cultures.
- 3. Comparative Analysis** – comparing Buddhist approaches to diversity with contemporary social models.

## Conceptual Framework

| Buddhist Principle                        | Social Dimension      | Contemporary Application |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Mettā</i> (Loving-kindness)            | Human Relations       | Social Harmony           |
| <i>Karuṇā</i> (Compassion)                | Community Welfare     | Conflict Resolution      |
| <i>Paṭiccasamuppāda</i> (Interdependence) | Global Responsibility | Sustainable Development  |
| <i>Ahiṃsā</i> (Non-violence)              | Peaceful Coexistence  | Human Rights             |
| <i>Majjhimā Paṭipadā</i> (Middle Path)    | Balanced Perspective  | Dialogue and Mediation   |

## Result

### Historical Development of Buddhist Civilization

Buddhist civilization, beginning with Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha over 2500 years ago, continued to date passing through emperor Ashoka's period (268-232BCE), Kanishka's period (127CE-150CE) to different dynasties'

periods, and spreading from Indian Sub-continent to South-east Asia, Central Asia, North Asia, Europe to all across the world.

After the Kalinga War, Aśoka embraced Buddhism and promoted non-violence, religious tolerance, moral governance, welfare policies and international diplomacy. He promoted compassion toward humans and animals and respect for all religious traditions (Thapar, 2012). He spread Buddhism by sending missionaries to Sri Lanka, Nepal, Kashmir, Gandhara, Central Asia, Myanmar and Thailand, and transformed Buddhism into a trans-national civilization.

### **Cultural and Social Foundations of Unity**

Buddhist civilization offers a unique and enduring example of “Unity in Diversity.” It incorporated Confucianism and Taoism as Chinese Buddhism in China, Shintoism as Japanese Buddhism in Japan, Bonism as Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet and Hinduism as Newar Buddhism in Nepal but the main essence of Buddha’s teachings remaining intact. Thus, Buddhism has a unique character of mixing with all kinds of differences fostering conflict transformation and unity in diversity. It believes in peaceful co-existence with surrounding cultures, religions and ethnicity. Buddha says, “*Na hi verena verāni sammantīdha kudācanam; Averaṇa ca sammanti, esa dhammo sanantano.*” (Khudak Nikaya, Dhammapada Yamakavaggo 5). Meaning: Hatred never ceases through hatred in this world; through love alone it ceases. This is an eternal law. Despite Buddhists are divided into Mahayana, Vajrayana, Theravada, Ningmapa, Sakyapa, Kagyupa, Gelupa and many other sects, Buddhist civilization such as *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity) has always bounded society in peaceful harmony resulting into unity in diversity.

### **Philosophical Foundations of Unity**

Buddhism is a philosophy and spiritual tradition that emphasizes the cessation of suffering through ethical conduct (*śīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*), profound wisdom (*paññā*), compassion (*karuṇā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*). Its fundamental teachings are the Middle Path (*Majjhimā Paṭipadā*) and the Four Noble Truths (*caturārya satya*) with the Eightfold Right Path (*ārya astāngika mārga*), Three Characteristics (*anitya*, *dukkha*, *anātmā*) which provide a background for understanding the nature of suffering and the way to overcome it. These principles shaped governments, educational institutions, architecture, literature, medicine, art, environmental ethics, and international cultural relations across Asia (Keown, 2013). They are the tools or models to diagnose the situation of the world and get an insight to solve the global problems ensuring unity in diversity in this contemporary world.

**Loving kindness and compassion:** These values inspire Buddhists and individuals of other faiths to cultivate universal goodwill toward all living beings, irrespective of religious or cultural affiliation. Through the practice of empathy, compassion, and mutual understanding, Buddhism establishes a constructive framework for interfaith dialogue and cooperation across diverse fields. This framework strengthens networks of collaboration in addressing common concerns, and fosters mutual trust, conflict resolution and community welfare.

*Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta* (Khuddak Nikāya Sutta Nipāta 1.8) advocates boundless loving-kindness toward all beings regardless of differences: “*Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā*”. Meaning: “May all beings be happy and secure.”

In the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* (Khuddak Nikāya Sutta Nipāta 3.9), *Brāhmaṇavaggo* (Khuddak Nikāya, Dhammapada 393) the Buddha declared that distinctions among human beings are not determined by birth and caste but by conduct.

**Law of Interdependence:** Buddha’s law of interdependence (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*) depicts that all the beings and non-beings are interconnected, interrelated and interdependent to each other. Samyutta Nikāya Nidana Vagga (SN II,28) and Majjhima Nikāya Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta (MN 38) state: *Imasmin sati idam hoti. Imasuppāda idam upajjati. Imasmin asati idam nāhoti. Imassa nirodha idam nirujjhanti*. “When that exists, this comes to be; on the arising of that, this arises. When that does not exist, this does not come to be; on the cessation of that, this ceases.” This doctrine highlights the interconnectedness of all phenomena and promotes collective global responsibility and sustainable development.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s concept of *interbeing* — that all phenomena and persons are deeply interconnected and mutually constitutive — provides the most accessible and culturally resonant formulation of Buddhist unity in diversity for a global audience (Nhat Hanh, 2020, p.136)

**Environmental ethics:** Buddhist civilization emphasizes non-harming and compassion towards animals, plants and nature as a whole, fostering a sense of unity, collectivity and respect to each other. Thus, Buddhism is also known as Eco-friendly religion.

**Attitude of Non-violence:** Buddha’s principle of non-violence advocates for a life free from harm and violence towards all living beings. It is vital for interfaith cooperation as it addresses for human rights and conflict resolution through peaceful means and understanding rather than aggression.

**Middle Path** (*Majjhimā Paṭipadā*): Buddhist civilization of applying middle path avoiding two extremes; neither too offensive nor too defensive, following mid-way with love and compassion, tolerance and patience, helps to foster peaceful co-existence and unity in diversity. Thus, it promotes balance, dialogue, and mutual understanding. This principle provides a framework for resolving ideological and cultural conflicts.

**Non-attachment:** The concept of non-attachment (*upekkhā*) in Buddhism encourages people engage with the persons with different beliefs as it allows individuals to listen to and learn from others without biasness or preconceived notions which ultimately creates peaceful environment and brings positive result.

**Mindfulness:** Mindfulness (*sati/smriti*) and meditation (*samādhi*) are integral aspects of Buddhism. They promote inner peace, clarity, and empathy, which are vital for nurturing harmonious relationships. Mindfulness helps individuals to be present and attentive, promoting genuine connections with others thus creating peaceful and harmonious circumstance.

### **Ethical Foundation of Unity**

Buddhist civilization rests upon ethical principles: Five Precepts (*pañcaśīla*), Ten Wholesome Actions (*dasakusalkarma*), Four Sublime States (*caturabrahmavihāras*), Six/Ten Pāramitās (*khata/dasapāramitā*), and Middle Path (*Majjhimā Paṭipadā*). These values encourage peaceful coexistence regardless of religion, ethnicity, nationality, or social status.

### **Educational Contributions**

Besides philosophical texts like Tripitaka, Abhidharmakosh, Vinaya, Kangyur, Tangyur etc, Buddhist civilization deals with other subjects also such as: medicine, astronomy, politics, economy, art and architecture, language etc. People from different ethnic groups, different communities and from different countries came to India to study Buddhist philosophy and other subjects in different Buddhist Universities: Nālandā, Odantapuri, Vikramśīlā, Takṣaśīlā, and Valabhi, which also helped to bring social harmony, peaceful co-existence and unity in diversity.

### **Art and Architecture**

Buddhist civilization produced remarkable artistic traditions. For example: Sanchi Stupa, Bharhut, Ajanta Caves, Ellora, Amaravati etc. in India. Swayambhu, Boudha, Golden Temple, Machhendrabharu etc. in Nepal. Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Borobudur in Indonesia, Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, Potala Palace, Same monastery in Tibet, Ayutthaya and Sukhothai in Thailand, Wat Phnom in Cambodia, etc.

Japan. This Buddhist civilization of Art and Architects brings the people from all around the world at one place and maintains a valuable framework for intercultural dialogue, peacebuilding, social harmony, and sustainable development.

## **Discussion / Conclusion**

The findings of this study demonstrate that the principles of Buddhist civilization remain highly relevant to the contemporary world in responding to today's global challenges, including religious intolerance through interfaith dialogue; ethnic, cultural and international conflicts through non-violence and reconciliation; social inequality through compassion and ethical responsibility; environmental degradation through interdependence and ecological ethics; consumerism through moderation and contentment; mental health challenges through mindfulness and meditation; and global polarization through respect for diversity and peaceful coexistence. By emphasizing compassion, loving-kindness, mindfulness, and the principle of interdependence, Buddhism provides practical and ethical frameworks for fostering mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and collaborative problem-solving in culturally and religiously diverse societies. These teachings encourage individuals and communities to transcend prejudice and cultivate shared responsibility for the well-being of all beings. Consequently, Buddhist civilization offers meaningful guidance in several contemporary fields, including interfaith dialogue and cooperation, conflict transformation and reconciliation, the promotion of cultural diversity and social harmony, environmental stewardship, global citizenship, and the advancement of sustainable development.

Therefore, Buddhist civilization should be understood not merely as a historical phenomenon but as a living and dynamic model of unity in diversity for the contemporary world.

**Keywords** - Buddhist Civilization, Interdependence, Mettā, Peacebuilding, Unity in Diversity

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