

STRENGTHENING RELIGIOUS HARMONY THROUGH THE PRINCIPLE OF THE MIDDLE WAY IN INDONESIAN BUDDHISM

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the principles of moderation in Buddhism and their application in the context of inter-religious harmony in Indonesia. The methodology used in this research is a religious approach using the Library Research method, included in the qualitative research category which collects data from primary and secondary sources. The analysis carried out is descriptive analytical, aiming to interpret existing conditions. The findings of this research indicate that Buddhist teachings, which emphasize universal love, dialogue, deliberation, and the concept of the middle way, are a very important foundation for creating religious harmony. This concept firmly rejects extremism and encourages transformation towards salvation through the practice of simplicity. However, there are significant challenges in implementing moderation in inter-religious dialogue, such as reluctance from some religious groups, emotional conflicts, and limitations in verbal communication. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to non-verbal aspects of communication and involve all parties to create an environment conducive to constructive dialogue. With sustainable understanding and practice, it is hoped that harmony and peace can be built amidst the diversity of religions and beliefs.

Keywords: *Religious Harmony, Middle Way, Indonesian Buddhism.*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji prinsip-prinsip moderasi dalam agama Buddha serta penerapannya dalam konteks kerukunan antarumat beragama di Indonesia. Metodologi yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah pendekatan agama dengan metode Studi Pustaka (Library Research), termasuk dalam kategori penelitian kualitatif yang mengumpulkan data dari sumber primer dan sekunder. Analisis yang dilakukan bersifat deskriptif analitis, bertujuan untuk menginterpretasikan kondisi yang ada. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ajaran Buddha, yang menekankan pada cinta kasih universal, dialog, musyawarah, dan konsep jalan tengah, merupakan fondasi yang sangat penting untuk menciptakan kerukunan beragama. Konsep ini secara tegas menolak ekstremisme dan mendorong transformasi menuju keselamatan melalui praktik kesederhanaan. Namun, terdapat tantangan signifikan dalam penerapan moderasi dalam dialog antar-agama, seperti keengganan dari beberapa kelompok agama, konflik emosional, dan keterbatasan dalam komunikasi verbal. Oleh karena itu, penting untuk memperhatikan aspek komunikasi non-verbal dan melibatkan semua pihak agar tercipta lingkungan yang kondusif bagi dialog yang konstruktif. Dengan pemahaman dan praktik yang berkelanjutan, diharapkan dapat terbangun harmoni dan kedamaian di tengah keragaman agama dan kepercayaan.

Kata Kunci: *Harmoni Beragama, Middle Way, Buddhisme Indonesia*

A. Introduction

In Indonesia, religious diversity constitutes a significant characteristic of social and cultural life. With more than 260 million inhabitants representing various ethnicities and religions, the nation serves as a tangible example of pluralism. However, this diversity is frequently confronted with challenges of conflict and intolerance. Within this context, the Buddhist principle of the “Middle Way” can serve as an effective approach to fostering interreligious harmony. This principle emphasizes balance and moderation, making it highly relevant in countering extremism and promoting tolerance among different faith communities.

Conflicts often arise when individuals assume that their messages have been conveyed clearly, even though communication may not have been fully effective. This situation becomes increasingly complex due to various factors that hinder communication flow, such as differences in gender, culture, age, status, and environment (Parawansa, 2003). Unconsciously, people often communicate based on perceptions limited by their personal experiences and available information, which may lead to the formation of stereotypes and decisions grounded in prior interactions. More concerningly, conflicts are frequently resolved without addressing their root causes. The difficulty of conveying complex matters, especially under emotional strain or in challenging circumstances, further complicates the situation. Thus, it can be concluded that communication difficulties, compounded by emotions and pressure, often result in confusing and ineffective exchanges (Saleh, 2016).

Etymologically, the term “conflict” derives from the Latin word *configere*, meaning clash or strike against (Charalambides et al., 2005). In social contexts, conflict can be defined as an interactive process in which two or more parties confront each other, with one side attempting to dominate or subdue the other, often through destructive means (Iswahyudi et al., 2023). According to Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 7 of 2012 on the Handling of Social Conflict, Article 1, Chapter I, social conflict is defined as disputes or violent clashes involving two or more groups within society, persisting over a certain period and generating widespread impact, resulting in insecurity, social disintegration, disruption of national stability, and hindrance to development (Maksum & Surwandono, 2020). Such conditions produce negative consequences felt collectively across the nation.

Religion has long been recognized as both a unifying and divisive force within society. On the one hand, religion is regarded as a guardian of morality and values, yet on the other, it is often perceived as a catalyst for conflict. Religious conflicts are not always rooted in sacred teachings themselves but more often stem from misunderstandings in interreligious and intercultural interactions (Choirin et al., 2024). Sociologists argue that every religion embodies two interrelated dimensions: first, a normative dimension that reflects eternal and universal values; and second, a historical dimension that adapts those universal values to local cultural contexts (Umanailo, 2016). When these universal values collide with cultural or historical realities, religion inevitably

becomes entangled in practical human concerns. In this regard, religion cannot be detached from social structures, as it plays a central role in shaping social interactions (E. Dewi, 2012). Empirically, religion continuously engages with societal issues, often intersecting with politics, economics, and social interests. Such intersections, however, sometimes distort the universal values of religion, with religious identity being exploited to legitimize political and economic agendas.

In addressing religious conflicts, the primary goal must be the cultivation of interreligious harmony. Religious harmony refers to a condition in which adherents of different faiths coexist peacefully without sacrificing their rights or freedoms to practice their respective beliefs. Harmony does not imply that followers of one religion must refrain from engaging in issues concerning others; rather, it requires mutual understanding achieved through deep comprehension. Solutions to interreligious social issues can only be sought collaboratively, provided no party focuses solely on fault-finding or exploiting weaknesses in other traditions. Indonesia, as an archipelagic nation celebrated for its natural beauty and hospitality, has long been renowned for its tolerant, courteous, and pluralistic society. In the past, Indonesians proudly considered themselves part of a peaceful and harmonious nation (Safei, 2020).

Nevertheless, in recent years, Indonesia has witnessed rising religious intolerance. For instance, the 2022 religious conflict in Cilegon, where local authorities denied the construction permit for the Maranatha Church despite the completion of all administrative and legal requirements, illustrates how societal pressure can override constitutional rights (Saputra et al., 2023). Similarly, a mosque belonging to the Ahmadiyya community in Sintang, West Kalimantan, was burned by a mob motivated by anti-Ahmadiyya sentiment (Wismabrata, 2021). These incidents underscore the persistence of intolerance and religious-based discrimination in Indonesia, necessitating concrete efforts from the government, civil society, and religious organizations to foster dialogue and religious moderation.

In today's globalized and turbulent era, the urgency of promoting interfaith understanding and encouraging cross-religious dialogue is greater than ever. Religious conflicts worldwide highlight the importance of adopting moderate approaches to managing differences in belief. In this regard, Buddhism has long been recognized as a tradition that fosters tolerance, peace, and profound understanding of humanity and the universe (Chowmas et al., 2024). This study seeks to explore religious moderation through the lens of Buddhism, specifically focusing on conflict resolution strategies grounded in Buddhist principles. Furthermore, it aims to examine the role of Buddhist teachings in facilitating interfaith dialogue and transforming conflict into opportunities for deeper mutual understanding.

Accordingly, this research emphasizes how key Buddhist principles such as the Middle Way, Karma, Wisdom, and Karuṇā (compassion) can serve as a foundation for addressing interreligious tensions and fostering meaningful dialogue (Saidurrahman & Arifinsyah, 2018). By integrating cultural, historical, and spiritual dimensions of

Buddhism with contemporary challenges in multicultural societies, the study aspires to contribute to the academic discourse on religious moderation from a Buddhist perspective. It also aims to provide valuable insights for religious practitioners, community leaders, and scholars interested in building deeper and more harmonious interfaith relations.

B. Method

This study adopts a religious approach and applies the Library Research method. Within this framework, it falls under the category of qualitative research, aiming to generate descriptive data through the observation of individuals' expressions, writings, and behaviors (Moleong, 2018). The data sources consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary data were obtained through the analysis of texts and documents related to Buddhist doctrines concerning the principle of religious moderation. Secondary data were collected from a range of sources, including journals, books, and other relevant scholarly works. Data collection was conducted through an extensive literature review, after which the materials were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method designed to interpret and examine the observed conditions.

C. Results and Discussion

Buddhism has deep roots in northern India and is estimated to have developed as early as the 6th century BCE. Through maritime trade routes, the religion later spread to the Indonesian archipelago. The zenith of Buddhist expansion occurred during the reign of King Ashoka (273–232 BCE), when Buddhism was adopted as the state religion (Septianingrum, 2017). In Indonesia, Buddhist influence began to emerge during the Sriwijaya Kingdom in Palembang (circa 650 CE) and reached its peak during the Majapahit Kingdom in East Java (1293–1500 CE) (Nisa, 2017). Today, Indonesia officially recognizes six religions: Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism (Marta, 2018) alongside a variety of other belief systems and spiritual traditions practiced by local communities. The challenge lies in safeguarding and nurturing this spiritual diversity so that it remains relevant and resilient amid the dynamics of modernity.

Efforts to maintain interreligious harmony are generally framed within the concept of religious moderation. Moderation involves guiding, regulating, and mediating interactive communication, whether oral or written. It also entails reviewing and ensuring that such interactions remain aligned with established norms (Moore & Shires, 1967). Khaled Abou El Fadl, in his work *The Great Theft*, defines moderation as a middle stance that avoids extremism on either side of the spectrum (Fadl, 2007). In Islam, a similar concept is known as *wasathiyah*, which connotes being chosen, moderate, just, humble, and steadfast, while maintaining a balanced orientation between worldly and spiritual concerns. The application of *wasathiyah* in daily life functions as a preventive measure

against extremism, encompassing the principles of moderation (*tawassuth*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), balance (*tawazun*), and justice (*i'tidal*) (Ushama, 2014).

Beyond Islam, one of the oldest religions in Indonesia Buddhism offers its own perspective on moderation, which in essence shares similarities with Islamic thought. In Buddhist tradition, moderation is rooted in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, originally a prince who chose to renounce royal life in pursuit of simplicity and spiritual truth. He upheld four core principles: helping fellow beings, renouncing worldly desires, studying and practicing the Dharma, and striving toward ultimate Enlightenment (Santoso, 2009). In Indonesian Buddhist practice, the divine is recognized as *Sang Hyang Adi Buddha*, the manifestation of the Supreme God. One of the central tenets of Buddhism is *Metta*, which embodies friendliness and non-violence. Through *Metta*, Buddhists are taught to refrain from evil, hatred, and hostility, while cultivating kindness, compassion, and goodwill toward humanity and all living beings (Hanip & Diana, 2022). The concept of the Middle Way further constitutes an integral dimension of Buddhist spirituality, emphasizing the avoidance of extremism as a path to achieving genuine happiness.

1. The Issue of Conflict in Buddhism

In Hindu philosophy, the concept of *atman* is regarded as a fundamental reality (Pranatha, 2024). However, the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, ca. 485–405 BCE) rejected this notion, proposing instead the doctrine of *anatman*, or non-self (Hoffman & Mahinda, 2013). *Anatman* is a philosophical and psychological concept closely related to the root of suffering, wherein the recognition of a permanent self generates distinctions between oneself and others. Psychologically, individuals experience intimacy and closeness with themselves while perceiving others as distant or alien. The stronger one's attachment to self, the greater the sense of separation and even hostility toward others ultimately giving rise to suffering. Thus, the belief in a permanent self becomes the cause of interpersonal conflict, producing a divide between self and other, "us" and "them." Only by transcending such distinctions can genuine conflict resolution be achieved. In Buddhist thought, transcending the self leads to *nirvana* the highest state of happiness signifying the extinction of self. Without the notions of self and other, suffering ceases (Stcherbatsky, 1932).

The essence of Buddhist teaching lies in the Noble Truths, which reveal the reality of suffering. Its causes are rooted in craving (*tanha*) and ignorance (*avidya*). Craving is directed toward external objects of desire, grounded in the illusion of stability, permanence, and separateness of self. Buddhism rejects the idea of an eternal self. Attachment to such a notion produces suffering not only for oneself but also for others. Within the context of conflict, the distinction between self and other generates dialectical constructs that often intensify discord. Resolution of suffering requires liberation from desire and craving. As long as the idea of a separate self persists, such release is difficult to attain. This division breeds desires that may harm others, eliciting defensive or aggressive responses that perpetuate cycles of suffering and conflict. Seng-ts'an vividly

described the suffering arising from such distinctions: “The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences. When love and hate are absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised. But the slightest difference, and heaven and earth are set apart infinitely. If there is even a trace of right and wrong, the Mind’s essence will be lost in confusion” (Stcherbatsky, 1932a).

Conflict and suffering are intrinsic to human behavior, as they are to other mammals. However, humans experience conflict in diverse forms: intrapsychic, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, interstate, and even interreligious (Deutsch et al., 2016). While technological advancement has made the world feel smaller and more interconnected, this proximity does not necessarily foster harmony or peace. The First Noble Truth of Buddhism acknowledges the universal reality of suffering. Craving manifested in attachment to circumstances, people, possessions, health, or territory remains a principal cause of suffering. Territorial attachment, for example, divides the world into “mine” and “yours,” creating distinctions that may escalate into conflict (Frager, 2014). Similarly, religious attachment may lead to conflict when beliefs are imposed upon others, underscoring the necessity of moderation and avoidance of narrow perspectives.

Craving often produces negative emotions such as anger, greed, and hatred, which exacerbate suffering and conflict. Buddhism evaluates emotions based on their consequences: whether they bring happiness or suffering. Emotions that produce harm are regarded as unwholesome states and represent barriers to conflict resolution (McRae, 2018). Personal preferences often underlie such emotions seeking what one desires, clinging to it once acquired, and rejecting what is unwanted, thereby generating hostility. From a Buddhist perspective, suffering is frequently intertwined with fear, anxiety, and anger. Fear often arises from threats of loss (Saefudin, 2020); anxiety is broader and less defined, frequently rooted in existential or global crises (Hardiman, 2016); anger tends to be destructive, manifesting either as retaliation against aggression or as self-destructive tendencies. These emotions may trigger further conflict at both individual and collective levels.

Fear and anxiety may feed into anger, potentially leading to abuse or violence. If left unchecked, such dynamics can escalate into large-scale conflicts, as illustrated by the Poso Tragedy, which began as an interpersonal dispute but expanded into an interreligious identity conflict, resulting in prolonged suffering and loss of life (Alganih, 2016). Internalized anger may produce withdrawal and depression, while extreme fear may trigger trauma. These unwholesome states intensify conflict and foster negative emotional cycles. Heightened emotional arousal inhibits calm reasoning and diminishes sensitivity to others. Hence, effective conflict resolution requires emotional regulation. Mischel underscores the importance of inhibiting impulsive emotional responses to achieve reconciliation, though this proves highly challenging at the peak of conflict (Purwanti, 2018).

From a medical perspective, unwholesome states are marked by heightened emotional arousal in stressful situations that trigger conflict. The brain, particularly the hypothalamus and pituitary gland, stimulates the adrenal cortex to release cortisol, adrenaline, and noradrenaline, elevating blood pressure, heart rate, and oxygen supply (Quamilla, 2016). The body becomes hyper-vigilant and prepared for confrontation. However, during prolonged conflict, stress may become chronic, with continuous cortisol production elevating blood sugar levels and keeping the body in a state of heightened alert (Isfentiani, 2010). Excessive arousal also activates the amygdala, which scans for threats and responds to anger and anxiety. Perceived threats trigger alarm signals, preparing individuals for fight, flight, or freeze responses that obstruct constructive conflict reconciliation. In such states, the inhibition of “hot” emotional responses becomes nearly impossible, undermining self-regulation, which is essential for reconciliation.

A deep understanding of Buddhist teachings can foster a mindset conducive to reconciliation. Before engaging in self-regulation and conflict resolution strategies, it is vital to internalize wisdom values such as non-violence, compassion, wisdom, empathy, and loving-kindness (Hoffman & Mahinda, 2013). These values must be embodied by conflict resolution actors to be effectively transmitted to society, whether through example or integration in reconciliation processes. Buddhist wisdom mitigates negative emotions and establishes a foundation of friendship, agreement, and compassion essential for constructive conflict resolution.

First, the principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*), which entails avoiding harm to living beings, provides the foundation for constructive resolution. Integrated into the Noble Eightfold Path, *ahimsa* advocates non-violence in thought, speech, and action while emphasizing compassion for all life (Bodhi, 1984). Second, compassion (*karuṇā*) is a positive disposition encompassing empathy, respect, and care for others. As one of the Four Brahmavihāras (Divine States), compassion is indispensable for conflict resolution strategies (Yoshinori & Heisig, 1982a). Conflict mediators must demonstrate compassion in both example and intervention to encourage more compassionate attitudes among conflicting parties. Third, wisdom (*prajñā*) in Buddhism refers to insight into the Four Noble Truths and the nature of suffering (F. Dewi, 2020). Wisdom and compassion are inseparable; wisdom is realized through compassionate practice. The concept of “skillful means” (*upāya*) highlights the need for compassionate action to be conveyed with empathy and adapted to others’ needs. Intuitive knowledge and concrete action must be integrated, ensuring that insight is actualized in practice. Fourth, loving-kindness (*metta*) is another essential prerequisite for conflict resolution. The *Metta Sutta*, recited daily by Buddhist monks, underscores the importance of kindness free from anger or hatred (Zalta, 2013). Such wisdom must become a conscious part of one’s mindset to enable effective reconciliation. Empathy closely tied to kindness and compassion constitutes a critical competency for mediators, enabling them to perceive and communicate connectedness with clients without over-identification.

A practical example can be observed in Pekanbaru, where the Buddhist community collaborates with Islamic organizations in social initiatives such as food distribution and education programs. Chowmas et al. (2024) report that such collaboration not only strengthens interreligious relations but also fosters a shared sense of belonging and social responsibility. This exemplifies the application of the Middle Way principle, which prioritizes common interests above individual or sectarian agendas. Thus, Buddhism teaches that these forms of wisdom constitute part of the “Buddha-nature” inherent in every individual, though they require cultivation and practice to develop into tangible competencies for conflict resolution. The following section will further examine the principle of moderation in Buddhism as a framework for addressing conflict and as a foundational principle within Buddhist teachings.

2. The Principle of Moderation in Buddhism

Buddhist teachings, which emphasize loving-kindness and universal values, can serve as a foundational framework for strengthening interreligious harmony in Indonesia. This approach entails dialogue and deliberation, the spirit of religious teachings, interfaith coexistence, religious moderation, and the concept of One World Family. Dialogue and deliberation are pivotal for fostering a peaceful and harmonious society. For instance, in the *Maha Parinibbana Sutta*, it is narrated that the Brahmin Prime Minister Vassakāra sought the Buddha’s counsel regarding King Ajātasattu’s plan to attack the Vajji tribe. The Buddha subsequently consulted his disciple Ānanda, illustrating the centrality of deliberation and dialogue in conflict resolution.

“Do the Vajjis engage in deliberation to reach consensus?” Ānanda replied that the Vajjis always deliberated and reached agreements peacefully and harmoniously. The Buddha then stated, “In that case, the Vajjis will endure and will not collapse.” (Finot, 1932).

In the *Maha Parinibbana Sutta*, seven core principles are identified as guidelines for achieving the prosperity and progress of a nation. These principles include: first, the importance of frequently holding meetings or deliberations to discuss significant issues; second, ensuring that every deliberation prioritizes the effort to attain and maintain peace; third, refraining from creating new regulations that alter established ones, instead continuing the implementation of rules that have proven effective and aligned with the teachings of truth; fourth, showing respect and reverence to elders, recognizing them as sources of wisdom and experience; fifth, prohibiting the abduction or detention of women from reputable families to safeguard their dignity and security; sixth, honoring sacred sites as part of cultural and spiritual heritage; and seventh, caring for the welfare of spiritual leaders and ensuring that the unemployed receive appropriate work, with particular attention to religious authorities and their well-being. These principles emphasize the importance of deliberation, respect for moral and spiritual values, and collective efforts to establish social stability and prosperity (Finot, 1932).

By adhering to these principles, safety and well-being can be achieved, fostering harmony in living alongside others with differences. This is essential for nurturing and sustaining interreligious harmony within diversity. Each religion possesses core teachings that can serve as a foundation for followers to strengthen interfaith coexistence. In Buddhism, this essence is known as *Metta*, or universal loving-kindness, which upholds humanitarian values such as tolerance, solidarity, equality, and non-violence. *Metta* inspires Buddhists to refrain from hatred and hostility, promoting the dissemination of friendship and goodwill toward all sentient beings (Chowmas et al., 2024).

Buddhist life is grounded in humanistic values encompassing compassion, tolerance, and equality. The principle of loving-kindness teaches individuals to release hatred, facilitating understanding and forgiveness toward others. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, as explained by Evans, the Buddha emphasized the importance of responding to insult with calmness and without anger. Instead, he encouraged conveying truth with serenity and wisdom (Evans, 2009).

Interestingly, the closing phrase of Buddhist prayers, “May all beings be happy,” reflects an attitude of tolerance and a desire for all individuals to practice their worship without obstruction. This should remind humanity that every individual has an equal role in caring for the world and maintaining interhuman harmony, rather than engaging in conflict for any reason. Buddhist doctrine teaches the Four Sublime States, known as the Brahma Vihāras: *Metta* (loving-kindness), *Karuna* (compassion), *Mudita* (sympathetic joy), and *Upekkha* (equanimity). These four qualities form a vital foundation for tolerance within Buddhist teachings (Stcherbatsky, 1932). By understanding and practicing the Brahma Vihāras, individuals can cultivate a sense of tolerance and respect for followers of other religions in practicing their beliefs and rituals, despite differences in faith.

“Hatred will not cease if it is reciprocated with hatred, but hatred will cease if it is overcome by non-hatred. This is an eternal law” (The Buddha) (Stcherbatsky, 1932).”

Through this approach, Buddhist teachings can serve as an inspiration for strengthening interreligious harmony in Indonesia, fostering a more peaceful, tolerant, and harmonious society. Diversity is inherently a part of human nature and cannot be separated; therefore, mutual understanding is key to navigating such a context. Conflict would not arise if individuals genuinely understood one another, although implementing this is not straightforward, particularly given the lingering memories of past conflicts such as those in Poso, Ambon, the Bali bombings, and others. These examples vividly illustrate that interpersonal relations can give rise to disputes, which may escalate into conflicts with significant human consequences.

3. Middle Way Concept: Majjhima Patipada (Buddhist Moderation Perspective)

In the context of philosophy, the concept of the Middle Way is often referred to as the “golden mean,” representing a moral or virtuous principle that contributes to human

happiness. This concept can be traced back to the thoughts and works of major thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, and Gautama Buddha (Rono, 2020). Within the Buddhist tradition, this principle is known as *Majjhima Patipada*, which is fundamentally understood in the context of life's ultimate goal namely, the cessation of *dukkha* (suffering) (Miyamoto, 1969). The Middle Way represents a mode of living that avoids two extremes: self-mortification and excessive indulgence. The Buddha conveyed this concept in various ways, employing different terms depending on his audience. Nevertheless, all foundational Buddhist teachings remain linked to the Middle Way. The essence of his doctrine is rooted in the Fourth Noble Truth (*magga*) of the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Truth of *magga* delineates a path between two extremes excessive asceticism and excessive pleasure with the objective of ending suffering or attaining *nirvana* (*nibbāna*) (Bodhi, 1984).

After experiencing two extreme practices namely, extreme asceticism and the material indulgence common in his era the Buddha sought true happiness through the *magga*. As a prince, he enjoyed an exceptionally luxurious life bound to material wealth, as detailed in the discourse *Delicately Nurtured* from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*. He stated,

“Monks, I was raised with extreme care, exceedingly gentle and without limit. I possessed three palaces: one for the winter, one for the summer, and one for the rainy season. During the four months of the rainy season, I was attended by female musicians. I did not leave the palace during those months.” However, such great material indulgence did not bring him true happiness (Yoshinori & Heisig, 1982b).

The reason behind the Buddha's decision to leave the palace and all material luxuries at the age of twenty-nine was his quest for true happiness. He chose to retreat to the forest and lead a rigorous ascetic life. After six years of strict discipline, he realized that such methods did not lead him to truth or genuine happiness. He stated, “Yet with this mortifying austerity, I did not attain a higher human state, nor knowledge or vision worthy of the noble” (Rahula, 1966). Thus, neither the excessive pleasures as a prince in the palace nor the self-mortification as a forest ascetic brought Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) true happiness. Disillusioned with the extreme monastic lifestyle, Gautama eventually discovered what became known as the Middle Way (*Majjhima Patipada*), which led him to supreme enlightenment (Miyamoto, 1969). In the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha declared, “Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata, the Perfect One, has discovered the Middle Way which gives vision and knowledge, leading to Calm, Insight, Enlightenment, and Nibbāna” (Bhikkhu, 1993).

The Buddha taught that extremism offers no guidance for living, nor does it lead to peace, harmony, or happiness. Therefore, he rejected both extremes: self-mortification and excessive indulgence. From a social perspective, the Middle Way (*Majjhima Patipada*) can be understood as a mode of life between the ordinary pursuit of material pleasures and the ascetic practices of extreme self-denial. This path “avoids two extremes:

one extreme is the pursuit of happiness through sensual pleasure, which is ‘low, common, unbeneficial, and the way of ordinary people’; the other is the pursuit of happiness through self-mortification in various forms of asceticism, which is ‘painful, unworthy, and unbeneficial’” (Diamond, 2021). The Buddha’s view of the Middle Way is elaborated in eight categories or divisions known as the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya-Atthangika Magga*). The Eightfold Path provides a practical means to guide individuals from the extremes of overindulgence or self-mortification toward a balanced path, fostering an ideal individual endowed with wisdom and loving-kindness (Bodhi, 1984).

This transformative process involves three essential stages of training: first, Ethics or Morality (*Sīla*); second, Mental Discipline (*Samādhi*); and third, Wisdom (*Prajñā*) (Saxena, 2019). Developing a balanced individual with wisdom and compassion engages both the heart and the mind. Morality (*Sīla*) addresses the heart, managing emotional interactions with others through expressions of loving-kindness and compassion. Meanwhile, Mental Discipline (*Samādhi*) and Wisdom (*Prajñā*) focus on the cognitive aspects. *Samādhi* regulates negative mental states and corrects erroneous views and perceptions through Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration from the Eightfold Path. In contrast, *Prajñā* develops the positive aspects of the mind, cultivating Right View and Right Understanding through Right Thought and Right Comprehension of the Eightfold Path (Bodhi, 1984). Hence, the Middle Way in Buddhist teachings provides a moderate lifestyle that offers practical mechanisms to transform extremists into balanced and peaceful communities.

When discussing the Noble Truths, Imtiyaz’s perspective is noteworthy. According to him, the Four Noble Truths, wherein the fourth truth represents the path to liberation from suffering, guide individuals gradually toward Nirvana through adherence to their principles (Badaruddin & Zailiah, 2023). The first two principles of the Noble Eightfold Path are Right View (*sammā-ditthi*) and Right Intention (*sammā-saṅkappa*), emphasizing *panna*, or wisdom, which reflects an individual’s character. Imtiyaz further notes that these two principles serve as preparation for following the Middle Way. The final three principles Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*), Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), and Right Concentration (*sammā-samādhi*) are exercises designed to cultivate mental progress and accustom practitioners to the Middle Way (Yusuf, 2009).

The practical consequence of adhering to the Middle Way, as advocated by the Buddha, is the rejection of extreme practices such as ascetic yoga, which were considered excessive in the pursuit of liberation. Such extremes were believed to induce suffering and reinforce egoism. Consequently, the Buddha recommended the Middle Way as a path to liberation, enlightenment, and salvation. The Middle Way also serves as a means to avoid suffering and the cyclic existence of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination) (Yew et al., 2021). According to the Buddha, this practice embodies simplicity, peace, and compassion, guiding individuals toward understanding *śūnyatā* (emptiness). Those who achieve Nirvana are expected to continue following the Middle Way in maintaining morality, meditation, and wisdom. Strickler similarly asserts that the Middle Way is

synonymous with the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha encouraged followers to adhere to the Middle Way to avoid self-mortification and excessive sensual indulgence. The Middle Way reflects a sacred life driven by intrinsic values rather than fear of supernatural forces or external rules. Its ultimate goal is self-purification, serving as an internally structured guide for individual progress and enlightenment (Strickler, 2021). By following the Middle Way, one is expected to attain genuine progress and enlightenment.

In the context of Tathāgata's teachings, Kalupahana presents a doctrine through the Middle Way that may appear tautological due to the extrapolation of consequences from specific conditions. For instance, due to ignorance, conditions arise; from conditions, consciousness emerges; from consciousness, the psycho-physical personality arises; and so forth, leading to aging, death, grief, and suffering (Kalupahana, 1986). This sequence generates the totality of suffering; however, with the cessation of ignorance, the conditions dissolve, thereby ending all suffering. This explanation relates to two philosophical theories: the theory of existence and non-existence. The traditional Upanishadic school posits an eternal existence, asserting that all beings possess a spiritual entity such as Brahman or Ātman (Jayatilēle, 1971). The Buddha critiqued this theory for assuming permanence, while the Materialist school denied any spiritual entity. Finding both extremes untenable, the Buddha rejected them, proposing the Middle Way *paṭiccasamuppāda* or dependent origination which addresses the arising and cessation of phenomena.

In Buddhist teachings, the concept of simplicity encompasses two aspects: philosophical and practical. The philosophical aspect is articulated in the *Kaccāyanagotta Sutta*, which discusses the two Indian philosophical theories of permanent existence (Upanishads) and non-existence (Materialism) (Kalupahana, 1986). The solution to this dichotomy lies in the concept of simplicity, namely *paṭiccasamuppāda* or dependent arising, which comprises twelve principles explaining the origins of human experience. The practical aspect of simplicity is found in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, which addresses two extremes: excessive pursuit of desire and total rejection of desire. The Middle Way for these two extremes is the Noble Eightfold Path, also recognized as a practical embodiment of simplicity (Yusuf, 2009). The following section will discuss the application of the Middle Way and the principle of simplicity in moderation practices, along with the challenges encountered during this process.

4. Implementation of the Principle of Moderation in Interfaith Dialogue and Its Challenges

From a Buddhist perspective, *Majjhima Patipada* should be understood as a recommended choice rather than an obligation. This contrasts with Islamic doctrine, in which the practice of moderation, technically known as *al-Wasatiyah*, is a duty (Haitomi et al., 2022). As a duty, this practice must be performed; failure to do so is considered a violation of God's command, carrying serious consequences, potentially resulting in sin

and accountability in the hereafter. *Majjhima Patipada*, which creates a middle path between self-indulgence and self-mortification, is individualistic, aiming to guide a person from extreme lifestyles or ascetic practices toward a balanced position (Yusuf, 2009). In contrast, moderation in Islam functions to transform both individuals and communities from extremist understandings toward more moderate life perspectives (Islamy, 2022), closely intertwined with socio-political and economic aspects of society. In general, moderation entails balancing theory and practice, thought and behavior, as well as action and consequence. In the Buddhist context, this principle is applied through the Law of Dependent Origination (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) and the Noble Eightfold Path (*Aṭṭhaṅgiko Maggo*), the former relating to human activity and the latter focusing on practice (Stcherbatsky, 1932a).

The implementation of these principles is challenging, particularly within Indonesia's multicultural context. Interfaith interactions are often conducted through formal dialogue, reflected in various interfaith dialogue centers such as the *FKUB* and similar organizations. However, dialogue fundamentally represents a constructive and peaceful conversation, enabling each party to express opinions and learn from one another. Through such dialogue, differences and similarities between faiths can be explored more comprehensively (Malau, 2024). Successful interfaith dialogue requires participants with self-restraint, a high degree of tolerance, and a willingness to exchange ideas with individuals from diverse backgrounds. According to Buddhist teachings, the practice of dialogue must be grounded in awareness of simplicity, peace, and compassion, ultimately leading to harmony (Stcherbatsky, 1932a).

Despite the critical role of dialogue in fostering better interfaith relations, the author observes that a majority of religious communities in Indonesia remain insufficiently progressive to meet the standards of Buddhist simplicity. This complicates dialogue implementation, particularly amid rising religious conservatism. Participants must navigate the tension between maintaining their beliefs and remaining open to differing perspectives (Riza, 2020). They must freely express opinions, feelings, values, and interests while simultaneously being willing to listen with an open mind. Practicing simplicity and relinquishing ego is essential to better understand others' perspectives. Consequently, the application of the Middle Way is vital for creating a conducive and comfortable dialogue environment.

Several additional factors challenge dialogue as a strategy for peace. First, some religious groups are reluctant to engage in communication with other faiths. These groups may fear external influence, possess limited knowledge or trust in other communities, and their leaders may block serious interfaith interaction. Furthermore, radical groups often reject all dialogue with moderate or liberal factions perceived as enemies. Such radicals tend to express opinions emotionally, making it difficult to adhere to standards of peaceful dialogue, which require nonviolent, rational, and respectful communication (Huriani et al., 2022).

Second, an idealized yet unrealistic dialogue focuses solely on identifying commonalities among religions. Such an approach fails to facilitate genuine peaceful dialogue, as it implies that differing parties cannot maintain their positions while remaining open. While shared values may help build bridges between groups, the principal challenge in Indonesia is not to homogenize religions superficially, but to enable followers of all faiths to accept differences and coexist peacefully (Jamarudin, 2021).

Third, challenges arise when disputing parties carry emotional or psychological burdens, as religious issues are closely linked to emotional dimensions (Wahab, 2014). Some groups may harbor resentment or feel oppressed, making it difficult to manage anger, particularly if traumatic experiences are involved, as seen in Poso and Ambon. Dialogue cannot proceed effectively until these psychological issues are addressed through training and counseling in anger management, forgiveness, and trauma healing.

Fourth, interfaith dialogue in Indonesia is often criticized for engaging primarily educated and liberal leaders while neglecting grassroots communities (Usman et al., 2014). Religious leaders may convey liberal perspectives on tolerance in formal forums, yet fail to communicate these views to their local communities. Meanwhile, teachers and preachers actively influencing local attitudes may lack interest in interfaith dialogue or studying other religions.

From a Buddhist perspective, interfaith dialogue is an effort to achieve calm and harmonious living, attainable when individuals relinquish extremism, avoid excess in life, and follow the Middle Way, ultimately leading to knowledge, serenity, enlightenment, and Nirvana (Bhikkhu, 1993). Nevertheless, applying these principles is challenging, given the diversity of religious groups and their readiness to participate. Successful dialogue on critical issues should involve all stakeholders, and models for interfaith dialogue in Indonesia have been proposed to include various societal layers. Dialogue can occur at multiple levels and in different formats, such as high-level religious leaders, grassroots community dialogues, life dialogues addressing shared concerns, action-oriented dialogues to remove coexistence barriers, and theological dialogues among scholars and religious leaders to discuss doctrinal matters (Schumann, 1999; Ubaidillah, 2017).

Although these models differ in methodology, the author notes limitations in verbal communication skills, which are lacking in many Indonesians or uncomfortable for some participants. In Buddhism, communication extends beyond verbal expression to non-verbal forms, manifest in actions and symbolism. For example, the Buddha demonstrated simplicity and sincerity through attire and behavior and embarked on a journey of life's meaning by renouncing worldly preoccupations (F. Dewi, 2020). Such non-verbal communication is often overlooked, limiting dialogue to those proficient in discussing academic concepts, thereby only reaching specific population segments.

Dialogue is one form of communication in conflict resolution, yet it has limitations. Religious conflict is complex, encompassing dimensions of human belief that cannot be fully expressed through verbal communication alone but also through emotions

and feelings, often communicated symbolically in Indonesia (Djumati et al., 2019). Sole reliance on formal verbal dialogue risks missing subtle signals, symbols, and cues essential for fostering peace. Therefore, it is crucial to engage all religious groups or disputing parties through diverse communication methods and in multiple contexts, ensuring inclusivity regardless of status or skill in promoting peace. In the context of religious moderation, as discussed earlier, Islam views moderation as an obligatory practice, whereas in Buddhism, moderation is an individual choice to achieve Nirvana by living simply and avoiding egoism and extremism (Strickler, 2021).

D. Conclusion

Based on the discussion regarding the Principle of Moderation in Buddhism, it can be concluded that this principle provides a significant foundation for fostering interreligious harmony. Through dialogue, deliberation, and the spirit of religious teachings, the Middle Way in Buddhism emphasizes the importance of avoiding extremism and seeking balance in life. Although the implementation of moderation in interfaith dialogue faces several challenges, such as reluctance from certain religious groups to participate and limitations in communication, understanding and applying the principles of Buddhist moderation is expected to assist society in cultivating harmony and sustainable peace amidst religious and belief diversity.

The Middle Way in Buddhism holds substantial potential to strengthen religious harmony in Indonesia. By emphasizing balance and moderation, this principle can help communities navigate differences and promote cooperation among various religious groups. Through an inclusive approach and constructive dialogue, it is anticipated that recurring conflicts can be minimized. Achieving this goal requires commitment from all stakeholders, including the government, religious leaders, and the general public. By fostering mutual respect and understanding, Indonesia can serve as a model for other nations in terms of religious diversity and tolerance.

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