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## Academic Article

# Buddhism and Political Conflicts: Understanding the Role of Religion in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Buddhism has been part of political conflicts while contributing to peace in Buddhist-majority states such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. To an extent, Buddhism as a religion indeed preaches non-violence, compassion for all sentient beings, and mindfulness at the individual level. However, when religion intersects with politics, contradictions manifest. Through historical and contemporary examples, Stewart clarifies how Buddhist teachings have been used both by peacebuilders and pro-nationalist actors to carve a path toward outcomes that are counterproductive to the core beliefs of Buddhism. The paper then considers the principal Buddhist teachings related to peacebuilding, going over each of Ahimsa (non-violence), Metta (loving-kindness), and Karuna (compassion) as elements that may be used in conflict transformation. The study identifies success stories and failures using three case studies—Myanmar's Rohingya crisis, Sri Lanka's post-civil war reconciliation efforts, and Thailand's protracted political unrest—to illustrate the dynamics of Buddhism politicization in these critical contexts underlined by transnational linkages. The paper also confronts the critiques related to the alleged politicization of Buddhism and moral paradoxes due to harnessing religious doctrines for political uses. While Buddhist teachings provide an excellent set of tools for nurturing peace and reconciliation, the application of these in political settings is an area that should be subjected to rigorous moral scrutiny so as not to run counter either to ethics or inclusiveness.

The paper ends by pondering Buddhism's future direction in terms of global peacebuilding, with a nod to interfaith work and partnerships that engage Buddhist hearts with secular efforts for peace. It highlights the importance for Buddhist practitioners to live out their ethics and be a force of peace in an increasingly fractured world. Ultimately, it is more valuable to a general understanding of religion in political conflicts and how spiritual teachings may foster world peace and compassion through conflict reconciliation.

## Introduction

Buddhism has been regarded as a fundamentally nonviolent and pacifist religion for centuries because of this tradition's deep philosophy of mindfulness, compassion, and peace. This image, however, is not always true, and the relationship between Buddhism and politics can be more complicated, especially in countries where Buddhism holds a societal or cultural status. In some political disputes among Buddhist-majority countries (such as that in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar), Buddhism has led to a rise in tension or, on the contrary, to greater mutual understanding (Bartholomeusz, 2002; Gethin, 1998). This dual nature reveals why we must examine how its tenets could be leveraged for peacekeeping and rapprochement.

Historically, the problem in modern times is asking how much a religion like Buddhism influences political conflicts. Ethnic identities are a factor in many contemporary political conflicts, just as religion can be either fuel for hatred and violence or an approach to mutual understanding and peace. Recent attention brought to the Rohingya situation in Myanmar has highlighted an extreme example of how Buddhist nationalism can be weaponized, illustrating dire humanitarian consequences (Walton & Hayward, 2014). It has also been indicated that despite ongoing divisions in Sri Lanka following its civil war, Buddhist teachings have had a significant impact on various peace processes (Deegalle, 2006). Accordingly, scholars and practitioners working in religion on peace need to understand when Buddhism can play its role, as it should be applied for sustainable conflict resolution. The complex role that Buddhism has played in political conflicts is discussed through an analysis of settings where Buddhist ideas have been (dis)applied to the field of politics, including examples from history and contemporary events. In order to understand where Buddhism participates today in such conflict situations, the discussion will therefore begin with recounting earlier historical contexts in which it interacted with political power. The paper will then explore basic concepts associated with peacebuilding in Buddhism, including Ahimsa (non-violence), Metta (loving-kindness), and Karuna (compassion), and consider the possibilities for using these to manage disputes. In doing so, the paper illustrates some of the challenges and successes experienced by Buddhist communities and elites in complex religion/politics entanglements through specific cases drawn from Thailand including Sri Lanka and Myanmar. The article will also consider some objections to and difficulties with engaging Buddhism in the political arguments, particularly cases of taking advantage religious teachings for secular politics production which contradict basic teachings within themselves. Because the ethics of Buddhism and nationalist impulses differ substantially, we will use our findings to explore what effect these tensions have on the ability for Buddhist peacebuilding initiatives to be successful. Finally, the paper will discuss how Buddhism can remain among those who play a significant role in global peacebuilding and propose ways for Buddhist communities and leaders to better contribute toward establishing comprehension and reconciliation amidst politically divided societies.

This paper examines these topics to enrich the ongoing discourse on how religion can help with peacebuilding and conflict resolution. It tries to suggest that Buddhism may not have acted the way it would like, but its teachings can be very helpful in creating a harmonious situation and peace. Within the framework of Buddhist ethics and spirituality, understanding these insights might inform pragmatic political solutions and intellectual knowledge in an increasingly polarized world.

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## **Buddhism and Political Conflicts: Historical Context**

The origins of Buddhist political authority can be traced back to ancient Indian kings demanding compliance from the aspect of the Buddha. Buddhism always had political ties, serving as an abstract moral guide for states and a frame of legitimacy. From ancient India to modern Southeast Asia, Buddhist teachings have been used to serve social harmony and moral governance. However, the case of Buddhism is more complex as well to politics balanced against principles, given that political ambition has sometimes undermined religious principles (Swearer, 2010). This has been an exceptionally influential case in Sri Lanka, with Buddhism and political discourse. The Sangha (Buddhist monastic community) is at the heart of this association. It has always been one where both have their interests tied, with rulers seen as protectors of Dharma or Buddhist teachings throughout its history on this island. Only in the colonial and post-colonial periods, where Buddhism became symbolic of opposition to foreign rule (Bartholomeusz, 2002), was this relationship solidified. However, in an era where nationalism was conflated with the ideology of Buddhism, it led to ethno-religious-based conflicts between the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority and Tamil minority that devolved into violence, culminating in a brutal civil war coming hard on the heels of independence. Moreover, the same applies to Myanmar, where Buddhism and its relationship with politics have always been complex. At the same time, Buddhism became an important site of resistance to colonial rule and may have helped cement awareness as a nation in opposition to British imperialism (Schober, 2011). However, after independence, the role of Buddhism in politics became more and more contested, with nationalist groups and military regimes appropriating religious narratives and iconography as governance instruments. The more sinister side to this relationship is evidenced by the ongoing Rohingya crisis and how Buddhist nationalism has been so deeply woven into a narrative as to rationalize discrimination and violence against Muslim minorities through fears of corrupt Western influences (Walton & Hayward, 2014). Another example of the intricate complex involving Buddhism and state power is demonstrated in Thailand. Thailand has always been Dharma Kings of the Buddhist faith, holding one way or another to this day in supporting Asians and assisting Sangha. Unfortunately, Buddhism is manipulated in the political battlefield of Thailand, generally diffusing among different political parties, leading to causes conflicts within the religious community (Keyes, 2016). The controversy surrounding the politics of Buddhism in Thailand underscores a central issue regarding the preservation of religious teachings when such convictions are called into question for other political reasons.

Buddhism has often consoled societal harmony and moral leadership in historical settings. However, it can have dark marks, especially when religious ideals give way to overt political agendas. This understanding is critical to contextualizing the role of contemporary Buddhism in political conflicts and peace initiatives.

## **Buddhist Principles Relevant to Peacebuilding**

Buddhist Teachings furnish an all-encompassing structure rooted in non-violence, compassion, and righteousness to offer solutions to any conflict and act as a mediator between parties to heal wounded relationships. Ahimsa means non-harm, and the movement of people is based on this belief that people should do anything, say anything, or think something, whatever it may not harm another person (Keown, 2013). Similarly, the cultivation of Metta

(loving-kindness) and Karuna (compassion), which broaden non-violence from mere refraining from harm to active intent that all beings experience well-being and happiness, dovetails this.

This knowledge provides a solid foundation of the moral principles that reconciliation, as peacebuilding (reconciliation and conflict resolution) experts need to establish. Karuna, for example, leads to deeds that alleviate pain and suffering, while Metta encourages cultivating positive ways toward all people, including our enemies. These ideas are profoundly pragmatic and more than mere ideals; they show people how to settle differences, which lessens hostility between parties (Gethin, 1998). Morality is one of the essential qualities for Peace, and Mindfulness is another crucial factor in Buddhism. Mindful living helps people become self-aware and regulate their emotions better, as it involves seeing your thoughts (and feelings) clearly without necessarily taking them personally. Mindfulness supports the better resourcefulness of individuals and communities in managing conflicts. It helps avoid reactive behaviors and allows a more composed and methodical approach to conflict resolution.

Applying these lessons to politics has been more challenging, yet it might ultimately provide another way toward peace. In much the same way as many of their compatriots in other parts of East Asia, many of Myanmar's Buddhist leaders advocate nonviolence and peace; some are linked to nationalist agendas that counter Buddhism's core values (Walton & Hayward, 2014). These highlight how impossible it is to square religious morality with political pragmatism, particularly when politicians can tap into your God exercise.

### **Expanded Case Studies: Buddhism in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation**

Buddhism has long been recognized not only as a spiritual path but also as a practical framework for addressing conflict and fostering peace. Grounded in principles such as compassion, non-violence, and understanding, Buddhism offers unique approaches to reconciliation and peacebuilding. Across diverse regions and cultural contexts, Buddhist teachings have been applied to resolve conflicts, heal divisions, and promote harmony. The Expanded Case Studies: Buddhism in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation, explores these applications through real-world examples, showcasing how Buddhist principles can help individuals and communities navigate conflicts and work towards sustainable peace.

This study is particularly relevant in today's world, where complex conflicts often require innovative and compassionate approaches to resolution. By focusing on case studies from different parts of the globe, we aim to demonstrate the effectiveness of Buddhist strategies in peacebuilding, emphasizing both their adaptability and their deep-rooted ethical foundations. That can be employed to transform conflict, encourage dialogue, and nurture reconciliation.

### **Myanmar: Buddhist Nationalism and the Rohingya Crisis**

Buddhist nationalism and conflicts between the Buddhist majority and their non-Buddhist neighbors have roiled Myanmar since it achieved independence. The example of the Rohingya is certainly pertinent as a case study of how religion can be played out to justify and enable discriminatory — even deadly — action. While radical groups within the Buddhist community have instilled anti-Rohingya sentiments, viewing them as a threat to national and religious identity, Buddhism itself has been rooted in compassion and non-violence (Walton &

Hayward, 2014). Buddhist monks such as Ashin Wirathu have also been vital in encouraging anti-Rohingya sentiments, using their religious authority to influence public opinion and political policy. Contrary to the fundamental Buddhist ideals of Metta and Karuna (loving-kindness and compassion), it resulted in large-scale murders as well as uprooting. The narrative is not particularly novel, but some Buddhist leaders have dissented. It is based on Buddhist prescriptions, which train the followers to be monks and lay Buddhists in a way that helps them not only navigate away from violence but also as forces of counter-narrative for peaceful coexistence (Kipgen, 2014). In Myanmar, a secular war-torn Buddhist nation where nationalism is profoundly ingrained and religious minority politics have been driven by the mobilization of religion, the politicization of Buddhism makes real-world applications (to rejecting) difficult for peace-building. However, there are initiatives such as interfaith dialogues and reconciliation projects involving different communities in the neighborhood to bridge whatever division between Muslims and Buddhists. These programs outline common values of tolerance and peacefulness to create a kinder and more peaceful community.

### **Sri Lanka: Reconciliation Following the Civil War**

This is another crucial example of how Buddhism has and can diffuse politics in Sri Lanka for peace. The 1983–2009 civil war in the country was characterized by deep ethnic and religious divisions between the government, dominated mainly by Sinhalese Buddhists, and a separatist force that is predominantly Hindu: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Force. Throughout the war, Buddhism was used as a significant reminder of the state of its actions. Naturally, certain groups of monks even encouraged it to safeguard their country so that they could give their religion alone (Bartholomeusz, 2002). Sri Lanka has struggled with the issue of building reconciliation between its Sinhalese and Tamil populations since a long civil war ended. Several films and other projects that encourage forgiveness, compassion, or reconciliation between former enemies are based on Buddhist ideas. Some Buddhist groups have worked to ease the suffering of trauma and build communities through mindfulness and meditation techniques that help people cope with the effects of violence (Deegalle, 2006). This was a complex and slow track. However, there are still major tensions and mistrust across communities, and pushing Buddhism to create a sense of national unity occasionally forgets that true inclusivity is justice rather than 'segregating' (by which they mean acknowledging the plight too) all groups. The challenge lies in how Buddhist teachings are enacted and practiced in a manner that can be substantively healing rather than being used as fodder for exclusive or triumphalist narratives.

### **Thailand: The Role of Sangha in Political Crisis**

What emerges from Thailand is the reflexive and more animated relationship between Buddhism as an institution, particularly of the Sangha or its leading monastic community, and politics— out in shaping rather than being shaped by it. Historically speaking, the sangha has always been more than merely a religious institution; it is also an ethical guideline—a source of stabilizing influence in society. From ancient times, when the idea of a righteous Thai king ruled under Buddhist principles and legitimacy was guaranteed by his being ordained, they depended upon each other. It continues to be practiced today, and the Sangha's effect on social values continues (Swearer, D.K. 2010).

The incredible role of the Buddhist sangha in peacebuilding and reconciliation: It teaches things like ahimsa (non-violence), karuna (compassion), and Maitri (benevolence)-all of which are great in understanding, says, mediation, and dialogue instead of war. Monks have sometimes entered the business, organizing exchanges and peace talks between officially conflicting sides for constricting and communication. As an institution that transcends the political divide by focusing on the core teachings of Buddhism, there is a crucial role to be played here in fostering national unity. Placing an emphasis on commonalities of tongue and spirits and suggesting a neutral respect can reduce the slits heightening comradeship among Thais no matter their party loyalty (Pattana, 2015).

The role of the Sangha in Thailand demonstrates both the ongoing strength that Buddhism wields and some of the difficulties faced by religious and moral resources regarding political engagement. While the engagement of monks in political controversies endangers their neutrality, it also offers a chance for peacebuilders to maintain and promote reconciliation. Continuing to fulfill the role of moral guardians in a society undergoing rapid change requires the secular order to respect traditional and accepted facts about itself while dealing with internal and external threats. Thailand is riven by bitter political infighting, and the Sangha acting as a moral arbiter will be no less critical. The trick will be for the Sangha to leverage its proper vehicle path role against impassioned and divided times. In so doing, the Sangha can play a pivotal role in helping to lead Thailand towards this more harmonious and peaceful future marked by these essential Buddhist principles.

### **Additional Case Study: Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge**

Buddhism in Cambodia has, moreover, been implicated in the country's bitter political past — interacting with broader global factors and issues of post-conflict politics during the period that followed upon the fall from power of rulers fed on Buddhist values as much as those who had incarnated them a great deal less. When the Khmer Rouge assumed power in 1975, an atheist communism ideology sought to eradicate religion from society as a long-term goal, and the description of “Buddhism was opportunistic and material (Chandler, 1999). With the demise of the Khmer Rouge, Buddhism had a renaissance and initially emerged as part of its recovery process. Earlier Manus and the comeback of established monks and traditional Buddhist practices were seen as essential to identity, given that VIETI moral sort of clean uniform when it was a cleansing exercise.

Since then, Buddhist leaders have worked in various peacebuilding fields, including community reconciliation and healing trauma through meditation and mindfulness practices. Reeves, indirect exposure with community dialogues and engagement building, a tossup over politically visible religious issues (cf. Harris 2005). The case of Cambodia demonstrates the enduring strength and potential role that Buddhist institutions have to play in post-trauma healing, even when new forms of repression continually emerge.

### **Challenges and Criticisms**

Of course, this involvement of Buddhism in political disputes has not always been without criticism. Detractors say it opens the way to a partisan application of Buddhist teachings that would erode its moral base and instead ally itself with Sinophobia marginalization. For example, in Myanmar, the Buddhist community and other parties are

appalled by the associations of Buddhism with nationalist and anti-Muslim campaigns (Walton & Hayward, 2014). Such actions go against the basics of Buddhism, a religion primarily based on compassion and non-violence; these acts could also tarnish people's opinion about Buddhism being an agent of peace.

Also, the lines between political and religious power could blur in many nations as Buddhism is closely aligned with state authority. An illustrative manifestation of this is the way that it can be exploited to ensure government actions are covered by employing religious rhetoric, as we have seen in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, which only quashes dissenters. Their religion places them under severe moral strictures, and navigating the complexities of such relationships is a challenge that every senior Buddhist leader must face;

Buddhist peacebuilding initiatives have been criticized for being parochial. By parochial, I mean purely focusing on reconciliation within the Buddhist community by ignoring the views and needs of other religious or ethnic groups. Empowering poor people to change corrupt or ineffective domestic policies is an essential dimension of peacebuilding, as are efforts to protect groups who feel they need the security that a 'hard power' state can provide. Particularly where multi-cultural societies are concerned, including varied voices is important for peace to be sustainable.

### **The Future of Buddhism in Political Peacebuilding**

Over the long term, Buddhism still might have much to offer political peacebuilding. However, such efforts will not be successful if they do not balance practicality and religion. Through their moral conduct, compassion, and mindfulness practices, many Buddhist groups and leaders can be a significant factor in promoting healing and reconciliation. Nevertheless, this will have to be paired with the discussion of how Buddhism has been wrongly applied throughout history, and efforts must be made to ensure its tenets are carried out justly — and for all.

As this article lists, interfaith dialogue is an exciting way to increase the efficacy of Buddhist peacebuilding. Faith leaders must redouble their efforts to tackle the root causes of conflict and foster greater unity between faiths. In addition, deeper engagement with secular peacebuilding paradigms could help anchor Buddhist thought within the broader spectrum of political conflict resolution. Opportunities for further impact peacebuilding have the capacity to grow and be even more impactful through interfaith dialogue, as well as collaboration with other religious traditions. Faith leaders who come together across religious divides not only increase how they address systemic conflicts but also create more cohesive societies. Engaging more fully and effectively with secular peacebuilding frameworks can also help to incorporate Buddhist values into the much larger ecosystem of political conflict resolution. Whether Buddhism can be a positive force in politics will depend on how practitioners of the faith lead their lives. Political peacebuilding is only as strong and powerful as those who embody it. Buddhism certainly should be grounded in core teachings of nonviolence, compassion, and ethical integrity if it wants to continue offering insights into the increasingly complex landscape of political conflicts.

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## Conclusion

Buddhism is a part of those answers, acting within struggles and peace movements that serve as modern proof for the enduring lessons it contains. Examples abound in which Buddhist teachings have been construed as facilitating healing and reconciliation, even if applicability to political venues sometimes proves daunting. In this article, we investigate historical and contemporary connecting points between Buddhism and politics to show that if adhered to ethically as well in an inclusiveness frame, peace can be very easily maintained with the path offering us guidance.

While the world still faces political unrest and struggles to come together as one, the teachings of Buddhism on nonviolence, compassion, and mindfulness are timelier today than ever. As Buddhists negotiate complex political terrain and ethical precepts, people must engage with each other for a more just and peaceful society.

## Recommendation

### Implementation of the Role of Religion in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation

The enduring lessons of Buddhism offer practical tools for addressing contemporary struggles and fostering peace, both in personal and political contexts. While applying Buddhist principles in the political sphere may be challenging, their potential for healing, reconciliation, and conflict resolution remains significant. For these principles to be effective, their application must be grounded in ethical commitment and inclusivity, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected in the process.

To implement Buddhist teachings effectively in peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, several steps can be taken:

1. **Promoting Nonviolence and Compassion:** At the core of Buddhist teachings are the principles of nonviolence (ahimsa) and compassion (karuna). Encouraging these values within communities and across political movements can create a more peaceful and understanding environment. Education and dialogue should focus on the importance of empathy and the reduction of harm, emphasizing how nonviolent action leads to more sustainable and lasting resolutions.
2. **Encouraging Mindfulness in Leadership:** Mindfulness (sati) helps individuals become more aware of their actions, thoughts, and emotions. Leaders in political and social movements should be encouraged to cultivate mindfulness, allowing them to respond to challenges with clarity, patience, and moral integrity. Mindfulness practices can be incorporated into leadership training, offering a way to manage conflict and stress while promoting thoughtful decision-making.
3. **Fostering Inclusivity and Dialogue:** Buddhist teachings emphasize the interconnectedness of all beings (paticcasamuppada), underscoring the importance of inclusivity in peace processes. Implementing structures that promote open dialogue, where all stakeholders have an equal voice, helps prevent marginalization and creates an environment of mutual respect. This inclusive approach can reduce the risk of future conflicts and ensure that solutions are both equitable and sustainable.

4. **Addressing Root Causes of Conflict:** Buddhism encourages addressing the underlying causes of suffering (dukkha) rather than merely treating symptoms. In political contexts, this can be applied by focusing on systemic injustices, such as poverty, inequality, and oppression, which often lead to unrest. By tackling these root causes, efforts toward peace become more effective and meaningful.
5. **Integrating Ethical Precepts into Political Practice:** Ethical conduct (sila) is a fundamental part of the Buddhist path. Implementing policies and practices that align with ethical precepts, such as honesty, fairness, and non-harming, can foster trust and cooperation. Political leaders and organizations should be encouraged to adopt ethical guidelines inspired by Buddhism to ensure their actions contribute to the welfare of all.

As the world continues to face political unrest and division, the teachings of Buddhism provide a timeless guide for navigating these challenges. By engaging with others through compassion, mindfulness, and ethical responsibility, individuals and communities can work together toward a more just and peaceful society.

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