

# **“Unity in Diversity” of Buddhism**

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Buddhism that exists in many countries worldwide differs in certain details and aspects. It has sprouted into several lineages and ways of practice. Among them are three most prominent lineages known as Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Their existences are sometimes viewed as the religious rift, but when looking deeply at their core concept, we will find that each Buddhist lineage, no matter what practice or principles it emphasizes, is aiming towards the same destination, that is Nibbana or the liberation from all sufferings.

Regarding the modern categories of Buddhism I would like to share my personal view and theory on the issue and I would like to ask readers to think and analyze, in order to create better understanding of Buddhism, the religion we have affiliated with and always hold on to.

I would like to observe on an outstanding attribute of Buddhism which makes it different from other religions, that is: the liberation of thoughts and forms, because the Buddha’s teachings are universal.

The Buddha’s teachings are universal, and this universal condition has free forms, unlike other religions. This can be seen from the arts or symbols that represent each religion. Taking the prominent prophets for example, Christianity’s Jesus Christ cannot be of Asian nationality, or Islam’s Nabi Muhammad cannot be an Asian or a Westerner, but the Buddha can belong to any nation. Looking at the Buddha statues in many countries, their faces normally resemble that of local people. The faces of Buddha statues in western countries normally look like westerners, while those in Thailand share some aspects of the Thai taste. Others in countries like Indonesia, Vietnam, China, and Japan also have their faces varied to the cultures and characteristics of people in those nations.

In other religions, the prophets’ nationality, race and even caste are always identified. However, in Buddhism, even though the origin of Buddha has been connected to Nepal and India, that is only a symbol. In reality, Buddha can be at anywhere. His physical being is not as important as his teachings. As the Buddha once said: “One who sees the Dhamma sees me.” That is the prominent point of Buddhism, which holds on to the Buddha’s Dhamma as the main pillar, while its arts or symbols can be adapted to the culture associated with each race.

I would like to present modern Buddhism under my own theory which is a breakthrough from conventional Buddhist studies. My theory linked Buddhism to the so-called concept of “glocalization” which is an extended word from the word “globalization.” Globalization originally refers to an adoption of ideas from Western to Eastern communities. Later on, a new thinking suggested that globalization does not need to be something from the West to the East, but it could be vice versa. A distinguished example is Buddhism, which spread from the East to other parts of the world. The spread of Buddhism is a product of globalization.

However, I perceive ‘globalization’ as only a thought or a theory. It doesn’t really exist. It is a merely process. What is truly tangible is an idea created from it. It is called ‘glocalization.’ This word is rarely used. It was initiated in around 1960 by a Japanese scholar. It refers to an idea which is universal or global, but when being implemented in individual countries or culture, it is adapted to the local culture, like McDonald’s in Thailand, which normally has a different recipe that suits the Thai taste.

Thus, it can be said that an overall concept of Buddhist propagation is global, but the content is 'glocalized' to make it tangible. As a result, Buddhism appears in different forms at different places.

I see that Buddhist studies from the past have been influenced by the Western concept that views a newly emerged school of thought as a conflicting idea that opposes to the original thinking. For instances, Catholicism and Protestantism are said to be at odds with each other, and the Islam's Sunnis and Shia have been divided and even engaged in a war, because they do not accept each other.

Buddhism, however, is different, as wherever it goes, it becomes mingled with the local culture, because the Buddha's teachings do not force any change of forms. Instead, it aims at transforming people's spirits and minds. The concept of Buddhism is universal, yet it appears in diversified forms. That is 'unity in diversity,' and it has been evident since the days of King Asoka, who had built the inscribed stone pillars wherever he went. Those pillars were inscribed with the local languages used in each particular place, reflecting how diversified Buddhism could be.

The Dhamma is universal. Dhamma is not attached to the Buddha himself. Even the Four Buddhist Holy Places are looked up for their significance as the Buddha's places of birth, enlightenment, discourse and death, but where they are located does not matter. If contemplating from the Dhamma point of view, these Four Buddhist Holy Places are situated within ourselves. His Holiness Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara the late Supreme Patriarch's translation of the word "Sangvejaniya Sthana" (the Buddhist holy places) as a place that provokes knowledge; that is, to become aware of the cycle of life to death. As such, Buddhists are taught not to be attached to a place or a person, including the Buddha, but instead pay more attention to his Dhamma.

However, the Dhamma is usually interpreted, and the interpretation ends up in diversity, with several Buddhist lineages being founded. Buddhists need to understand that the existence of different Buddhist lineages is not a rift or conflict of ideas. When I address about Buddhist nikayas, I always avoid such words as 'school' or 'sect' since they imply division within the religion. Instead, I use the word "lineage" which refers to different teachings by different masters that are not opposing to one another.

Since Buddhists are not attached to the physical being of the Buddha, they created the Buddha of their own imagination. With synthesis of the Dhamma, the Buddha typically possesses three main virtues under 3Cs, which are Compassion, Cleanliness and Circumspection. Originally, a person who wanted to become a real Buddhist had to adopt the three virtues, by focusing on common passion of people where he lives and cleanliness through the practice of vinaya and circumspection through thorough study and practice of the Truth. That is how Theravada Buddhism was originated. This very teaching is presented and preserve in a most popular Buddhist verse i.e. **Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa** which means I solemnly practice the virtue of compassion (*bhagavato*), cleanliness of mind (*arahato*), and circumspection of rightful knowledge (*sammāsambuddho*).

About 500 years later, or around the year 2000, Buddhism became partly influenced by the Western culture, particularly Christianity which believes in an unconditional love or godly love. A new thinking emerged, giving importance to the two elements of compassion and circumspection or wisdom, more than cleanliness of mind. This new concept believed that with the practice of compassion and circumspection, cleanliness will naturally follow. Later on, the evolution of Buddhism continued, with sculptures or other symbols being constructed following the interpretation of Dhamma. Compassion was interpreted in a form of

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, which etymologically simply means ‘one who listens.’ This Bodhisattva is upheld as the one who listens to the suffering of mankind. Chinese Buddhists are regularly seen hitting an instrument to make a sound while praying, because they want the Bodhisattva to hear their prayer. Meanwhile, circumspection or wisdom was also interpreted in the form of Manjusri Bodhisattva. This evolution process was an initial concept of Mahayana Buddhism.

This concept of Mahayana had spread to China, where a different idea emerged that the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva who represented compassion should not be a male character as being created originally in India, because a man is not as good as a woman in conveying a message of compassion. Therefore, the Bodhisattva was changed into a female-like character, causing the Chinese statues of Bodhisattva to appear in a more delicate form, and later became the origin of Guan Yin. In Mahayana Buddhism, the practice to achieve compassion and circumspection must be performed through the Bodhisattva. Therefore, religious ceremonies to pay homage to the statues are performed to achieve that very purpose.

The Mahayana Buddhism had lessen its significance on one of the virtues originally upheld by the Theravada from three to two elements, as they believed compassion and circumspection would be a shortcut to achieve the goal faster. The Mahayana lineage would focus less on cleanliness of mind through the practice of strict monastic discipline (**Vinaya**), while putting more emphasis on donations and helping people as well as developing self-circumspection. Chinese temples or monasteries elsewhere that adopted the Mahayana Buddhism would generally set up an almshouse to offer donation or food for people in need. The Buddha in Mahayana concept is an unconditional giver. Another 500 years later, Nalanda University was founded in India. There another idea emerged with an attempt to find a new shortcut from the Mahayana practice. This new idea still supported the two elements of compassion and wisdom, but it looked for a new method to achieve Nibbana. It talked about what to do to achieve “**Sunyata**” or voidness. The answer is to merge circumspection (**sammāsambuddha**) and compassion (**bhagavato**) together, and the theory of ‘dualism’ was applied to explain everything that happened—men and women, day and night, good and evil. This is a means to understand Dhamma. When dual things merge into one, voidness occurs.

That’s an interpretation of Vajrayana. To attain Sunyata, one needs to take off and put down one’s self and emotions. While Theravada teaches us to know our emotions and desires, Vajrayana interpreted emotions and desires in different forms of emotions and desires Bodhisattva. For example, Buddha images in a furious character were created for people to better understand their own anger. The practices of meditation, chanting, music, dancing and other ceremonies were performed in order to put out the anger. Under Vajrayana concept, one can understand those symbols and rituals by using one’s wisdom. “Vajra” means lightning. Vajrayana helps its practitioners to immediately get rid of ‘ignorance’ just like a lightning strikes at the ignorance. One example is Soto Zen which promotes an idea of sudden Enlightenment. Soto Zen believes it did not take the Buddha six years to attain Enlightenment. Indeed, Buddha spent those six years searching for the Truth, but it took him only one night to achieve Enlightenment. So if Vajrayana followers are able to develop their wisdom, all of a sudden they can achieve Enlightenment.

The Vajrayana lineage in China sometimes put laymen in a higher level than monks. The laity who practice Dhamma are honored because it is more challenging than a practicing monkhood. Monks are generally controlled by the monastic rules, while lay people live with greed and desires. If those desires can do nothing to one’s mind and spirit, despite their existences, that means one can achieve an ultimate goal.

Korean Buddhism was also developed from China. There are several Buddhist lineages with different details. The Jin-Gak order, for example, allows monks to get married. “Jin-Gak indeed means returning to Truth or Enlightenment, but the method to reach that goal varies. Jin-Gak focuses on performing rituals, while Theravada focuses on meditation.”

Simply put, Buddhism has three main lineages. Each lineage holds on to the three main virtues: Vinaya (cleanliness of mind), compassion and circumspection, but each focuses on different elements. Theravada focuses on Vinaya or cleanliness of mind, while circumspection and compassion comes after. Mahayana emphasizes more on compassion than circumspection and cleanliness of mind through monastic disciplines. Vajrayana focuses more on circumspection than compassion and cleanliness of mind through monastic disciplines.

Everything depends on interpretation. Some people might be in favor of chanting and praying. The practice that focuses on circumspection will not suit their taste. But if they come upon another practice that focuses on praying to create understanding, this could work well with them. Each Buddhist lineage may have different methods of presentation, but the outcome is the same. Some people believe in Theravada and say other lineages are getting lost. But think carefully, if there are more than 500 Buddhist population all over the world. About 150 million among them are Theravada, while the rest are Mahayana and Vajrayana. Do you mean the majority are wrong? It's certainly not that way.

After all, Buddhism is universal. It can go everywhere, to any locality. There is neither a rift nor quarrel in Buddhism. Different lineages just sprouted up, but they do not reject or oppose to the previous ones.

Presently, it is said that Thailand is a Theravada community, which is not true. There are three lineages of Buddhism here: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. This also occurs in other countries, China or Korea alike. Some scholar would say that there is no such thing as a pure Theravada, pure Mahayana or pure Vajrayana. In fact, all variation of Buddhist practices carry the same goal is to end the suffering and achieve the happiness.

Most importantly, every Buddhist lineage shares the same goal, that is to attain nibbana or ultimate happiness, and no matter what practices they opt for, each Buddhist lineage never denies each other, and has stayed together in harmony. Therefore, unlike other world religions Buddhism does not divided into many **Buddhisms** but it preserves the same Buddhism with different emphasis in practice. A true example of unity in diversity. This has been a form of original Buddhism and still well preserved it with the modern Buddhism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

December 2559/2016

Published on *Karuṇā, Magazine of International Brotherhood Mission, Jyotinagar, Dibrugarh, Assam, India. April 2018*