

Concept paper: Affirming Buddhist values regarding religious pluralism.

The aim of this project is to look in depth at relations between religious majorities and minorities in the three Buddhist majority states of Myanmar, Thailand and Sri Lanka, in addition to the Muslim majority state of Bangladesh, where Buddhists constitute a small minority.

We have started this project because we realize that although Buddhism has largely been perceived as a peaceful religion that values reason, non-violence and tolerance, the situation in Buddhist societies calls for a more nuanced understanding of Buddhism in relation to conflict and inter-religious relations. For example, reports by United Nation bodies and others have challenged the picture of Buddhism coexisting harmoniously with other religions.

Against this background there seems to be a need to articulate more clearly the Buddhist values regarding relations between different religions. Our aim is to foster peace and tolerance between different religious communities.

This project brings together Buddhist scholars – laypeople and monks alike – in a series of workshops and meetings where interreligious relations and religious minority rights are discussed. We believe that raising these sensitive issues in an atmosphere of mutual understanding between fellow Buddhists creates for a unique environment of trust.

Also, we aim at strengthening Buddhist engagement with bodies such as the United Nations and organizations representing other religions helping to dispel misunderstandings about Buddhism and also to be useful to Buddhists in judging own practices in the light of Dhamma and the standards of the United Nations.

This workshop focuses on fundamental topics such as the concepts of the Dhamma compared with those of the Human Rights of the United Nations. Moreover, it raises discussion on the standards of Buddhism concerning contentious issues such as conversion, proselytism, inter-religious marriages, religion in education and freedom of expression. We do not aim at arriving at consensus concerning these issues, but wish to foster reflection and clarification regarding Buddhist positions regarding pluralism and tolerance.

Points for reflection and engagement

I. Buddhist doctrine and historical perspectives

- Buddhist attitudes to other religions as seen in the Tipitaka and the commentaries
- Buddhist attitudes to other religions as seen in Buddhist chronicles.
- Emperor Asoka and his policy on religious pluralism – lessons to be learnt?
- The Buddhist attitudes and policies towards other religions or belief systems as seen in the history of the Theravada Buddhist countries of South and Southeast Asia

II. The Buddhadhamma in relation to the Human Rights principles of the United Nations

- *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* stresses “the dignity and worth of the human person”. How can this be expressed in terms of Dhamma?
- According to the Dhamma, which freedoms do humans have in relation to “*thought, conscience and religion*” (as explained in Article 18 of the UN: *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*)?
- In matters of freedom of religion, what does freedom from coercion mean in terms of the Dhamma?
- What is the position of the Dhamma in relation to the freedom “*to manifest one's religion or beliefs*”?
- “*All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law*”(whatever their religion). How does the Dhamma defend this principle?
- The right of “*ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities, ... to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language*”. Does the Dhamma support such freedoms?
- Is “*freedom of expression*” a freedom supported by the Dhamma?
- The ICCPR says: “*Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law*”. Is this statement in accordance with the Dhamma?
- Concerning the freedom to marry according to one’s own choice UDHR says: “*Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have*

the right to marry and to found a family". Is this freedom a principle supported by the Dhamma?

- Can the religion of the majority be recognized as State religion without impairing the rights of religious minorities or discriminating against them?

IV. The path forward

- Affirming Buddhist values in relation to religious pluralism
- Joint statement affirming a Buddhist position on freedom of religion, or belief
- Developing strategies for engaging in dialogue with other religions and international organizations like the UN.

From relevant documents of the United Nations:

1. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*: "the dignity and worth of the human person"
2. Religious freedom, Article 18 of the UN: *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)*:
 - a. *Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.*
 - b. *No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.*
 - c. *Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.*

