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UNDERSTANDING “THE OTHERS”:  
BUDDHIST-ISLAMIC DIALOGUE FOR PEACE WITH  
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO ‘MODERATION’

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**Abstract**

*In the history of civilization, Islam’s encounter with Buddhism is as old as Islam itself, particularly in the context of the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions where Buddhism exerted enormous influence on Islam, in particular the “Sūfī Islam” spread by immigrant Sūfī saints of the Arab world. Without doubt the principal teachings of Buddhism and Islam are almost alike since the moral ideals of love, humility, justice, truth, honesty and sincerity are some of the cardinal common values found in both. Deplorably in recent times, South Asia replete with religious values is embroiled in communal hate crimes and violent atrocities committed by miscreants and extremists of both communities in the region, although Buddhists and Muslims have had a tradition of living together in peace for thousands of years. While religious community leaders condemn the heinous acts and political stalwarts call for national unity and solidarity, we believe it is now time to search for meaningful ways to promote mutual understanding necessary for peaceful coexistence amongst these different traditions. To this end, the paper examines to what extent Islamic universalism can assimilate Buddhist doctrines and practices, paving the way for interreligious dialogue for peace. And in pursuing this our focus is on the most important teachings shared by these traditions - Majjhima Patipada in Buddhism and al-Wasatiyyah in Islam commonly known as the “principle of moderation” - drawing on some fundamental commonalities between Buddhism and Islam.*



**Keywords:** moderation in Islam and Buddhism, Muslim-Buddhist dialogue, *Majjhima Patipada* and *al-Wasatiyyah*, religious extremism

## Introduction

There is not a single human being living in human society who does not follow a philosophy, an ideal or a way of life that can be deemed a “religion,” whether or not the specific way of life can subscribe to the concept of God or Ultimate Reality as the term is used in traditional monotheistic religions. Yet modern people, fascinated with society’s amenities, tend to disdain religion or adopt their own value systems on the grounds that religion has nothing to do with their day-to-day lives. This seems to be the ill-founded assumption of those who fail to realize that religion has always been with them in the expression of the deepest human inquiries, playing an important role in almost all civilizations and cultures from time immemorial. However, atrocities against humanity are also committed in the name of religion. In a historic speech on January 28 1900, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) rightly said, “Nothing has made more for peace and love than religion; nothing has engendered fiercer hatred than religion.”<sup>1</sup>

Recently we have seen violent conflicts committed by Buddhists and Muslims against each other in the name of religion in the South Asian region, particularly Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Bangladesh. For instance, Buddhist movements such as the Bodu Bala Sena (Buddhist Strong Army) and the Sinhala Ravaya (Sinhala Echo) claim to find religious grounds for activities that involve terrorism. These extremist movements seem to have posed threats against Muslims as well as Christians in Sri Lanka, drawing criticism from the national and international media. We are especially struck by the case of Myanmar where tens of thousands of Muslims have been persecuted by Buddhists. As reported by Reuters (30 June 2013), “At least 237 people have been killed in Myanmar in religious

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<sup>1</sup> S. Adiswarananda (ed.), Vivekananda, *World Teacher: His Teachings on the Spiritual Unity of Humankind* (USA: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2006), 34.

violence over the past year and about 150,000 people have been displaced.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly in Bangladesh, the country’s communal harmony was severely tarnished when Muslim youths attacked the Buddhist community in Ramu, a small town in the district of Cox’s Bazar of Chittagong division, setting fire to more than fifty houses and damaging as many as eighteen Buddhist temples on 29 September 2012.<sup>3</sup> Investigations show that they were engaged in such detestable communal violence because of the Buddhist persecution of Muslims in Myanmar and Sri Lanka in recent years, which triggered their anger. These developments have jolted our conscience as Asia is the birthplace of both Buddhism and Islam. Unfortunately, it is the Asian region that is embroiled in violence committed by fellow religious adherents, and in this context it is imperative that efforts to engage in meaningful dialogue be made. This paper examines to what extent Islamic universalism can assimilate Buddhist doctrines and practices, paving the way for interreligious dialogue for peace. And in pursuing this, our focus is on the “principle of moderation,” drawing on some fundamental commonalities between Buddhism and Islam.

## **ISLAM’S ENCOUNTER WITH BUDDHISM**

Dialogue is the most effective vehicle for peace, which is the underlying meaning of both Buddhism and Islam. Both these traditions can claim to be pioneers in dialogues that took place between Nagasena (150 BCE) and King Milinda in the Buddhist tradition, and Prophet Muhammad’s convening of an interreligious dialogue with non-Muslims in his mosque, which laid the foundation of dialogue in the modern world. But the idea of an interreligious dialogue between Buddhism and Islam comes as a surprise to many people and seems to be a futile academic exercise, since from a doctrinal point of view the two traditions are thought to be far apart.

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<sup>2</sup> Reported by Jared Ferrie and Aung Hla Tun; edited by Alan Raybould and Paul Tait, “Rioters renew violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine State,” accessed online on July 1, 2013 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/07/01/us-myanmar-violence-idUSBRE96003I20130701>.

<sup>3</sup> Harun Ur Rashid, “Ramu Violence: International Implications,” *The Daily Star* (Dhaka, Bangladesh, Wednesday, October 10, 2012).

Nevertheless, a new approach to understanding the commonalities and differences between the two religions has come to the fore in recent times in the wake of sporadic outbreaks of violence in the South Asian region.

From the historical point of view, Islam's encounter with Buddhism can be seen to be as old as Islam itself, particularly in the South Asian and Southeast Asian regions where Buddhism exerted enormous influence on Islam in particular the "Sūfī Islam" spread by immigrant Sūfī saints of the Arab world. The principal teachings of Buddhism and Islam are almost alike since the moral ideals of love, humility, justice, truth, honesty and sincerity are cardinal common values found in both. Monotheists such as Jews, Christians and Muslims generally believe that Buddhism, like Jainism in India, is a non-theistic religion albeit a great religion with the principle of non-personal "ultimate reality" characterized as *Sunyata* (Emptiness) by Nagarjuna (150–250 CE)—], the founder of the Madhyamika school. However, the Islamic monotheistic concept of Allah based on the "Oneness of God" (*Tawhid*) by no means corresponds to the Buddhist non-dualistic and non-personal view of "ultimate reality". Although there is disagreement over this view, Mirza Tahir Ahmad the supreme head of the worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim Community argues that "Buddhism was a divinely revealed religion" and that the founder of Buddhism was "a man commissioned by God Himself, to deliver His message in the style that all other messengers were raised."<sup>4</sup> He further claims that the lifestyle of the Buddha accords with that of all the prophets. The present variations of Buddhism practised around the world might be the consequence of the process of change and transmission, as "Buddhist philosophy, teachings and practices remained to be transmitted only verbally for almost five hundred years after Buddha, except in the case of inscriptions on the rocks and stupas made during the illustrious reign of Asoka (273–232 BC)."<sup>5</sup>

Muslims believe that the verses of the Qur'ān available today correspond exactly to those revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in

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<sup>4</sup> M. T. Ahmad, *Revelation, Rationality, Knowledge and Truth* (UK: Islam International Publications, 1998), 132.

<sup>5</sup> M.T. Ahmad, *Revelation*, 131.



the years 610–632.<sup>6</sup> Accommodating and assimilative in nature, Islam particularly its mystical dimension Sūfism subscribes to the view that God left no nation unguided as the Qur’ān says, “For each of you We have appointed a (different) law and way of life. And if God had so willed, he could surely have made you all one single community. But He intended to test you in what He has given you” (Q. 5:48). By the phrase “every one of you” is meant different communities, not just Muslim. Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Christians are major religious communities in the world, and from an Islamic standpoint God raised messengers and prophets among them. This claim is corroborated by the Qur’ānic verse, “To every people We have sent an apostle...” (Q. 16:37). Here, “to every people” denotes “every community” or “every nation.” That God sent His messengers before the Prophet Muhammad is further substantiated by the verse, “And We have certainly sent apostles before you; of some We have told you and of others We have told you nothing” (Q. 40:78).<sup>7</sup>

The above Qur’ānic verses affirm historical developments in the Indian subcontinent where vast cultures and languages must have received prophets before the last Prophet of Islam. And there is an implicit reference to Gautama Buddha as one of the messengers of Islam as claimed by some Muslim Indian commentators. Dhu’l-Kifl says that “the Buddha of Kifl (Kapilavastu),” and the “Fig Tree” of surah 95 in the Quran is the *Bodi* Tree under which the Buddha received his illumination.”<sup>8</sup> The claim that Gautama Buddha can be viewed as a messenger of Islam for the Indians was held first by Ibn al-Nadim (d. 995 or 998).<sup>9</sup>

From the Buddhist perspective, one may argue that according to *Chakkavatti Sinhnaḍ Suttanta* D. III, 76, the Buddha’s prophecy

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<sup>6</sup> J.L. Esposito, *Islam: the Straight Path* (London: Extended Edition, Oxford University Press, 1998), 19.

<sup>7</sup> For some striking verses concerning this claim see Qur’ān, 4:164; 35:24, 14:4.

<sup>8</sup> S. H. Nasr, *Sūfī Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1972), 132. Of the twenty-five prophets mentioned in the Qur’ān, Dhu’l Kifl is one. See also Qur’ān 3:333, 144.

<sup>9</sup> Abu’l-Faraj Muhammad bin Is’hāq al-Nadim, *The Fihrist of al-Nadim: A Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, edited and translated by Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 824.

on the advent of what he called “the Maithriya” or “Metta,” meaning “the Praised one,” leads one to believe that the Buddha too predicted the coming of a special teacher after him.<sup>10</sup> The meaning of the term “Maithriya” reflects the meaning of the term “Ahmad”, another name of the Prophet Muhammad. The signs of this “Maithriya” correspond to some degree to the Prophet Muhammad’s descriptions. The term “Muhammad” is pronounced like “Mohamet” in ancient languages. In Indian languages like Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi and Bengali the term *maha* means “great,” while in Pali *metteyyaa* means “mercy.” According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the name “Maitreya” is derived from the Sanskrit *maitrī* (“friendliness”). In Pali the name becomes “Metteyya,” in Chinese “Milefo,” in Japanese “Miroku,” and in Mongolian “Maidari.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the term “Mohamet” connotes “great mercy,” and this is exactly one of the epithets ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad, as the Qur’ān says, “We sent thee not, but as a mercy for all creatures” (Q. 21:107). Given the narrative of this Buddhist text, the Prophet Muhammad - the seal of prophets<sup>12</sup> - seems to have succeeded the Buddha, and from the Islamic perspective mentioned above the Buddha is one of the Messengers of Islam. Historical evidence shows that both the Buddha and the Prophet which are titles and not personal names, have always been venerated with high esteem by their followers.

Apart from this obvious connection between them, we also encounter commonalities that help us unfold some fundamentals of these traditions in the context of the need for a “trans-traditional” view of religions. “Muslim” refers to a community or *umma* which is equivalent to *sangha* in Buddhism. By “Islamic community” we do not mean Muslims alone but also people of other faiths or *dhimmis* who can maintain themselves within the “house of Islam”. *Sangha*,

<sup>10</sup> It is in *Chakkavatti Sinhnaḍ Suttanta* D. III, 76: “There will arise in the world a Buddha named Maitreya (the benevolent one) a holy one, a supreme one, an enlightened one, endowed with...” See “Muhammad in the Buddhist Scriptures” (19 June 2013), retrieved from <http://www.irfny.com/tag/chakkavatti-sihnad-suttanta/>.

<sup>11</sup> See *Encyclopædia Britannica* online, retrieved on 21 June 2013 from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/358868/Maitreya>.

<sup>12</sup> That the Prophet Muhammad is the last of the prophets is articulated in the Qur’ān (33:40).

meaning “gathering” or “congregation”, is “a bridge between Buddhist principles and social realities.”<sup>13</sup>

Islam believes in heaven and hell, and in this respect, people generally think that Buddhism is sharply distinguished from Islam. But the Islamic account of heaven has some similarities to what is known as *nymphs* in Buddhism. The seven layers of heaven in Islam seem to have a likeness to what has been described in *Digha Nikaya* (DN 11), which holds that “the Buddha does not deny the reality of such experiences”<sup>14</sup>. This however must not be confused with the state and reality of the Islamic view of heaven. Likewise the description of the Islamic view of hellfire can be analogous to a certain degree to what has been described in the Buddhist literature *Majjhima Nikaya III*. According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, “Maitreya” is the future Buddha, “presently a *Bodhisattva* residing in the *Tushita* heaven, who will descend to earth to preach anew the *dharma* (law) when the teachings of Gautama Buddha have completely decayed.”<sup>15</sup>

Fasting (*sawm*) for Muslims particularly in the month of Ramadan, is one of the fundamental ways of self-restraint and self-discipline. This rite of fasting known as *upasatha* in Buddhism is practised during the fourteenth moon with certain conditions similar to fasting in Islam. The Prophet of Islam is believed to have regularly fasted during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth moons. From an Islamic perspective fasting was prescribed for the Buddhists also before Prophet Muhammad, as God says: “O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed upon those before you, so that you may develop self-restraint (*taqwa*)” (Q. 2:183).

Some Muslims argue that the *hijab* is not unique to Islam; rather, this was and is a practice among Christian nuns and Buddhist monks. One may note in this context that the pilgrimage robe for both Buddhist monks and Muslim *hajjis* (those who have performed

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<sup>13</sup>D. Ikeda & M. Tehranian, *Global Civilization: A Buddhist–Islamic Dialogue* (London: British Academy Press, 2000), 28.

<sup>14</sup> See *The Digha Nikaya* (The Long Course), retrieved on 21 June 2013, from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/>.

<sup>15</sup> See *Encyclopædia Britannica* online, retrieved on 21 June 2013 from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/358868/Maitreya>.

*hajj*) looks similar except for the color. They are even wrapped with the robe - *ihram* for *hajjis* and *kasaya* for Buddhist monks and nuns - in a similar simple style.

Islam abhors liquor consumption and prohibits the meat of dogs, cats and pigs and it is argued based on the primary version of scripture that Buddhism too does not allow these meats under certain conditions, although there is controversy regarding Buddha's last meal. Angels in monotheistic religions like Islam can be compared with *devas*,<sup>16</sup> meaning celestial beings in Buddhism; even *satanic* force can be traced in the Buddhist texts. A major shift from the pristine form of Buddhism to the present form of Buddhism is markedly observed in their way of worship. According to traditional Buddhist texts, the Buddha did not prescribe statue worship; however, worshiping statues of the Buddha seems to be a common practice among Buddhist adherents today. Islam, as an extreme monotheistic religion, explicitly forbids worshiping any statue or image of God as the Qur'ān says, "...there is no god but God." Another striking similarity between Buddhism and Islam is that both have a mystical dimension: *dhyān* in Buddhism and *fīkr* in Sūfism place great importance on meditation when Buddhists and Sūfis concentrate on the ultimate source of all existence.

Buddhism's encounter with Islam is also to be understood in terms of worldview where Islam comprises an exoteric and an esoteric dimension. The former is known as *Shari'ah* and the latter as *Tassawuf* or Sūfism. Similarly, Buddhism is divided into the Hinayana and Mahayana traditions. The latter can be related to Sūfism in that it has a liberal, mystic and pluralistic outlook on life and the world. In terms of worldview, both Sūfism and Mahayana Buddhism "focus on the fragility and transience of life and worldly pursuits"<sup>17</sup> putting emphasis on human responsibility and the inner life.

Zen Buddhism, which D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) mentions as the esoteric dimension of Mahayana Buddhism, has many doctrinal

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<sup>16</sup> It should be mentioned that *devas* are not to be considered as immortal or incarnations. Some *devas* in Buddhism, translated as angels, are Ārūpyadhātu, Rūpadhātu, Brhatphala, Śubhakarṣna, Ābhāsvara, etc.

<sup>17</sup> D. Ikeda & M. Tehranian, *Global Civilizations*, 28.

strands and social implications in common with Sūfism. Some argue that the Zen thoughts of St. Bernard and of Meister Eckhart can be compared to the Sufi philosophy of Jalal-uddin Rūmī of Persia as well as that of Kabir the Indian poet. It could also be labeled as Mohammedan Zen.

*Avidya* or ignorance is the root cause of human sorrow and suffering in Buddhism, and thus wisdom or *prajñā* is one of the essential teachings for the attainment of *nirvana* (*nibbana*). This tends to parallel the Islamic approach of urging man to acquire knowledge as the first Qur'ānic verse revealed to the Prophet is "read" (*iqra*)<sup>18</sup> signifying "seek knowledge," and even one of the prophetic sayings urges, "Seek knowledge, even in China." The concept of wisdom is known as *irfan* in Sūfism. The inner significance of the four-fold Noble Truths asserts that the life attached to this world is full of suffering (*dukkha*) and that there is a way for the cessation of suffering contained in the eight-fold path known as "*aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*" (in Sanskrit: *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*).<sup>19</sup> As one of the principal teachings of the Buddha, the philosophy of *dukkha* sets forth a similar meaning of the term *kabad* mentioned in the Qur'ān (90:4). Just as Zen Buddhism affirms a sacred relationship between the master and the disciple, Sūfism also requires one to follow the guidance of a master (*shaykh*). With regard to the need for a guide, Rūmī asserts in *Mathnawi* (3:588), "Whoever travels without a guide, needs two hundred years for a two days journey."<sup>20</sup> The Zen master's ceremonial rite of transferring his robe, known as *inka*, is closely linked to that of the Sūfī shaykh's *khirqah* in the process of the succession (*silsilah*) of the order (*tariqah*). Besides, meditation, or *zazen* in Zen is not markedly different from what is called *fikr* in Sūfism, and the former's intensive meditation known as *sechin*<sup>21</sup> can

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<sup>18</sup> The first verse revealed to the Prophet Muhammad is "Read in the name of your Lord who created" (Q. 96:1).

<sup>19</sup> T. Brekke, "The Religious Motivation of the Early Buddhists," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67/4 (1999), 849–866.

<sup>20</sup> A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 103.

<sup>21</sup> R. Winston & M. Sagan, *Dirty Laundry: 100 Days in a Zen Monastery* (Novato, New World Library, 1999).



be likened to the meditation in solitude known as *khalwah* of the latter.

Invocation of the Truth or the Ideal is an essential practice of all religions. In Buddhism, there is an urge to seek refuge in order to be relieved of suffering and pain (*dukkha*) in life. Known as the three jewels (*triratna*) in Buddhism, invocation of ideals is a loud chanting of concentration in tripartite idea refuge in the Buddha, in the Dharma and in the Sangha.<sup>22</sup> Chanting in Islam particularly by Sūfis is called *dhikr* or *zikr*, meaning “remembrance of God,” and may be vocal or silent. It is performed by uttering the divine name in formulations such as “there is no god but God” (*lā ’ilāha ’illā l-Lāh*), or just “God” (Allah) - all with the aim of taking refuge in the origin of existence or the Supreme Reality.<sup>23</sup> In the Mahayana tradition in China, Buddhists are required to recite the name of Amitabha Buddha, i.e. *Amituofo* in Chinese. If the goal of Buddhism is the attainment of *nirvana* (*ni* meaning “extinction of suffering”), then this concept can be compared with that of *fana* in Sūfism, which means “annihilation of the self or ego (*nafs*)”. In both cases the objective of the seeker of the Truth is to set himself free from the bondage of the world that not only causes suffering and pain but impedes peace as well.<sup>24</sup> The follower of Sūfism, called a disciple (*murid*) is required to follow spiritual guidance from his master (*murshid*) in order to become socially disciplined, morally honest and spiritually illuminated. The most important aspect of this spiritual journey towards God lies in the fact that every individual must wage a fight (*jihad*) against his ego (*nafs*) with guidance from the master, just as Buddhism contends that man himself is responsible for his sufferings, and that he must strive to disentangle himself from all the bondage of worldly life by treading the paths shown by the Buddha. One of the Sūfi stations (*maqamaat*) of spiritual development is repentance (*tawba*), which stands for penance for sins or misdeeds of

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<sup>22</sup> *Buddhang saranang gacchami* (I take refuge in the Buddha), *Dhammang saranang gacchami* (I take refuge in the Dhamma), and *Sanghang saranang gacchami* (I take refuge in the Sangha).

<sup>23</sup> See Qur’ān, 2:152; 13:28; 73:8.

<sup>24</sup> G. Dastagir, “The Global Mystical Union,” *World & I: Innovative Approaches to Peace* (USA: Winter 2006), 44–51.

life and the promise to God to return to the path of virtues. This is self-purification in Islam. In a like manner, the requirement of repentance for misdeeds is strongly attributed to Mahayana Buddhism which requires *Bodhisattva Dharmakara*, the making of forty-eight vows to *Amitufo* in order to rid oneself of *karmic* obstacles and transgressions, according to Pure Land Sutra (*Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*). In both Zen Buddhism and Sūfism the attempt to achieve the goal by way of self-criticism and self-examination is emphasized for amelioration and transformation, and in this respect the tasks of a Sūfī aspirant (*murid*) can be compared to those of the *bodhisattva* who seeks awakening (*bodhi*).

Gautama Buddha is popularly known as Shakyamuni. Though born a prince, young Shakyamuni abandoned the world and its luxurious amenities in the quest for the Truth. Having chosen a rigorous ascetic life, Gautama realized the necessity of developing self-discipline and self-restraint in order to attain enlightenment. This is explained in Sūfism as "to die gradually to oneself and to become one-Self, to be born anew and to become aware of what one has always been from eternity without one's having realized it until the necessary transformation has come about."<sup>25</sup> The Sūfis consider mastering the unbridled self - *nafs-e-ammara* - to be the most challenging task in life. Known as the "commanding self," or "ego," this lowest stage of human consciousness constantly tempts us towards pride, jealousy, anger, greed, hatred and hypocrisy. In order to move forward to the highest stage of consciousness - *nafs-e-motmai'na* - we need to free ourselves from the psycho-physical world to which we are attached. Renouncing the material world means self-negation which Junayd calls "die to thyself."<sup>26</sup> The ascetic life of Ibrahim bin Adham (718–782), one of the most remarkable early Sūfis, resembles that of Shakyamuni. Like Shakyamuni he "renounced his crown and worldly possessions to seek spiritual enlightenment."<sup>27</sup> Thus, it is justifiable to argue that the ascetic life in Buddhism and in Sūfī Islam are alike.

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<sup>25</sup> S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in S. H. Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, 69; see Farid al-Din 'Attar, *Tadhkirat al-awliya* (*Muslim Saints and Mystics*), ed. R. A. Nicholson, Leiden, 1322, part II, 35.

<sup>27</sup> D. Ikeda & M. Tehrani, *Global Civilization*, 28.

Dara Shikoh, the prominent Mughol prince who completed the translation of fifty of the Upanishads from the original Sanskrit into Persian for Muslim scholars in 1657, made a commendable comment that the “hidden book” (*kitab al-maknun*) in which the Qur’ān is well-guarded mentioned in the Qur’ān (Q. 56:78) is none other than the Upanishads.<sup>28</sup>

With this overview of general commonalities between Buddhism and Islam, we will now shift our focus to the most important characteristic shared by these traditions, *Majjhima Patipada* in Buddhism and *al-Wasatiyyah* in Islam meaning “moderation.”

### ***Majjhima Patipada*: The Buddhist Perspective of Moderation**

In philosophy the concept of the “middle path” is known as the “golden mean,” a moral idea or virtue leading to happiness in life that can be traced back to the thoughts and works of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius and Gautama Buddha. Known as *Majjhima Patipada*, the middle path in Buddhism can basically be understood in relation to the ultimate goal of life, namely cessation of *dukkha*. It is a way of life that avoids both the extremes of self-mortification and of self-indulgence. The Buddha explained it in many ways with different words to different people<sup>29</sup>, the fundamental teachings of the Buddha all dealing in some way or another with this path. The essence of his teachings however is grounded in the fourth Noble Truth (*magga*) of the Eightfold Path.<sup>30</sup>

The Noble Truth *magga* denotes a way between two opposites extreme asceticism and self-indulgence aimed at the cessation of suffering or the attainment of *nirvana* (*nibbana*). After experiencing the two extreme practices of extreme asceticism and extreme materialism that were prevalent in his time, the Buddha sought true happiness in the *magga*. As a prince in the palace, he enjoyed an extremely luxurious life attached to material wealth, as mentioned in the discourse of “Delicately Nurtured” of the *Anguttara Nikaya*. He

<sup>28</sup> A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 361.

<sup>29</sup> W. Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught: Revised and Expanded Edition with Texts from Suttas and Dhammapada* (Sri Lanka: Grove Press, 1974), 45.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

said, “Monks, I was delicately nurtured, extremely delicately nurtured, delicately nurtured beyond measure...I had three palaces—one for winter, one for summer, and one for the rainy season. In the four months of the rains I was waited on by minstrels, women all of them. I came not down from my palace in those months”.<sup>31</sup> However, material pleasure though immense did not bring him happiness. He therefore abandoned the palace and all the luxurious material wealth at the age of twenty-nine and set out to the forest in search of happiness, and embraced a rigorous ascetic life.<sup>32</sup> After practising an arduous austerity for six years he realized that it did not guide him to the Truth and happiness. He said, “But with this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superior human state, any distinction in knowledge or vision worthy of the noble ones.”<sup>33</sup>

Thus, extreme self-indulgence as a prince at the palace and self-mortification as a hermit in the forest did not lead Gautama to attain complete happiness. Disappointed at the severity of monastic life, Gautama finally resorted to what we know as the middle path (*Majjhima Patipada*), which led him to attain supreme enlightenment. As mentioned in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha said, “Avoiding both these extremes, the *Ta-thagata*, the Perfect One, has discovered the Middle Path that gives vision and knowledge, which leads to Calm, Insight, Enlightenment, and Nirvana.”<sup>34</sup> Extremism, according to the Buddha, neither gives any vision for life nor guides people towards peace, harmony and happiness. He therefore rejected both the extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence.

From a social perspective, the middle path (*Majjhima Patipada*) is a way of life to be found in between the life of ordinary

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<sup>31</sup> J. N. Kinnard, *The Emergence of Buddhism: Classical Traditions in Contemporary Perspective* (USA: Fortress Press, 2011), 18.

<sup>32</sup> C. R. Davids, “The Unknown Co-Founders of Buddhism,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2 (1927), 193–208.

<sup>33</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu (trans.), “*Maha-Saccaka Sutta*: The Longer Discourse to Saccaka” (“*Maha Saccaka Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya*,” MN 36, 2008), *Access to Insight*, 12 February 2012, retrieved on 26 June 2013, from <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.036.than.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu (trans.), “*Maha-Saccaka Sutta*...”

people who indulge in material pleasure, and that of ascetics who engage in self-mortification. Such a way “avoids two extremes: one extreme being the search for happiness through the pleasure of the senses, which is “low, common, unprofitable and the way of the ordinary people”; the other being the search for happiness through self-mortification in different forms of asceticism, which is “painful, unworthy and unprofitable.”<sup>35</sup>

The Buddhist view of the middle path is articulated under eight categories or divisions, which are generally referred to as the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya-Atthangika Magga*). This eightfold path constructs a practical way to turn people from the extremist positions of extreme self-indulgence or self-mortification towards the middle path that produces well-balanced individuals or ideal persons endowed with wisdom-love.<sup>36</sup> The transformation process requires three essential training steps, namely (a) Ethical Conduct or Morality (*Sila*), (b) Mental Discipline (*Samādhi*), and (c) Wisdom (*Prajñā*).<sup>37</sup>

The development of a “well-balanced individual” with “wisdom-love” involves the faculties of heart and mind. Morality (*sila*) represents the aspect of the heart and manages emotional contacts with fellow beings in the expression of loving kindness and compassion. Mental discipline (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) represent the aspect of the mind and thought.<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, *samādhi* deals with the negative aspects of the mind and controls false views as well as wrong perceptions through “right effort,” “right mindfulness,” and “right concentration” of the eightfold path, while on the other *prajñā* focuses on the positive aspect of mind and develops right views and right perceptions through “right thought” and “right understanding” of the eightfold path.<sup>39</sup> In other words, the middle path in Buddhism provides such a moderate way of life that it provides a practical mechanism for transforming extremists into a community of well-balanced and peace-loving people.

<sup>35</sup> W. Rahula, *Buddha Taught*, 45.

<sup>36</sup> M. I. Ramzy, *Muslim-Buddhist Co-existence in Sri Lanka: A Study on the Discourses of Walpola Rahula* (Malaysia: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2012 (unpublished PhD thesis)), 167.

<sup>37</sup> W. Rahula, *Buddha Taught*, 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> M. I. Ramzy, *Muslim-Buddhist*, 167.



### ***Al-Wasatiyyah: The Islamic View of Moderation***

The Islamic view of moderation known as *al-Wasatiyyah*, is an important characteristic of Islam pertaining to the individual and to social roles in human life. This Islamic principle is not to be confused with a concept introduced by modern philosophers and scholars to face the challenges of modernity; rather, it is a revelation from God since the emergence of Islam and is contained in the Qur’ān. In its early stage of revelation, the Qur’ān characterizes Muslim society as a “moderate community” (*Ummatan Wasatan*) in that Muslims may live in a moderate way. As it says: “And in this wise We have made you a community justly balanced, that ye may be witness against the mankind and that the apostle may be in regard to you a witness” (Qur’ān, 2:143). According to this verse, God recognizes a community that is moderate in the maintenance of inter-personal and intra-personal relationships. Thus the message of moderate life is a crucial aspect of Islam to be followed by the people of the world. It is pertinent to argue that the moderate community, which is recognized by God, tends to be a role model to others and provides witness to them of the straight path just as the Prophet did to his companions. However in recent decades, Islamic moderation (*al-Wasatiyyah*) has become a popular topic of dialogue against the backdrop of the rise of extremism within the Muslim community and alarmingly, those who subscribe to the extremist view of life whether social or religious trace its root in scripture.

The Qur’ān explains the issue of “moderation” by providing examples from history. It rebukes the people before the Prophet Muhammad, that is those with reprehensible behavior in choosing an extreme way of living either in materialism or in monasticism. The Qur’ān disapproves of extremism that seeks only material pleasure, putting aside spirituality (Q. 2:96). In the same vein Islam also de-emphasizes monasticism, which was not prescribed by God, but created by the people who chose it (Q. 57:27). These examples enshrined in the Qur’ān were meant to guide not only the Prophet Muhammad but his followers as well towards the moderate path (Q. 28:77).

It was one of the challenging tasks of the Prophet to guide his followers to a moderate way of living, while protecting them from

falling into extremism and laxity that may give rise to miseries in life on earth. He warned them about excessiveness in optional as well as compulsory duties and rites. For example, without intense love and respect for the Prophet Muhammad none can aspire to complete faith (*iman*). There are a number of Qur'ānic verses and Prophetic traditions (*hadīth*) that ask Muslims to obey the Messenger with profound love.<sup>40</sup> However by this is not meant blind infatuation as the Prophet said: “Do not exaggerate in praising me as the Christians praised the son of Mary, for I am only a Slave. So, call me the Slave of Allah and His Messenger.”<sup>41</sup> This does not imply that veneration of the Prophet is forbidden in Islam, or proscribed by the Prophet himself.

The Prophet always asked Muslims to follow his way of living, which was truly a devotional, moral and spiritual life, as is clearly shown in a famous *hadīth*, “So whoever turns away from my *sunnah* (way) is not from me.”<sup>42</sup> It must be pointed out that by saying this the Prophet did not ask anyone to abstain from night-time supererogatory prayer, or fasting, or even enjoying a marital conjugal life. What he seemed to disallow is for Muslims offer prayers for a whole night, fasting perpetually without a break, practicing celibacy and the like. One day during his speech (*khutba*) in prayer, the Prophet took notice of a man called Abu Israel Nadhara, who never sat, never sought shadow, never broke his fasts and never spoke. In response to these extremist practice of religious rites the Prophet said, “Order him to speak, let him seek shade, to sit and complete his fasting.”<sup>43</sup>

Islam does not allow extremism in the individual life, either involving the vertical relationship of the human being with God, or socially in the horizontal relationship of human beings (human to other beings). As noted by al-Qaraḍāwī, God ordains the law of equilibrium in the physical world as well as in the human kingdom so

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<sup>40</sup> See Qur'ān 5:92; 4:80; 24:63; 48:8-9; al-Bukhary, Ḥadīth No: 6257. For example the Prophet said: “No one of you truly believes until I am dearer to him than his father, his son, his own self and all the people” (Al-Bukhary, Ḥadīth No: 15; Al-Muslim, Ḥadīth No: 44).

<sup>41</sup> Al-Bukhary, Ḥadīth No: 3214.

<sup>42</sup> Al-Bukhary, Ḥadīth No: 5063; Al-Muslim, Ḥadīth No: 3469.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Bukhary, Ḥadīth No: 695.

that people can live together in peace and harmony (Q. 33:38). God guides mankind towards the moderate and straight path through His prophets and messengers, and He specifically expressed satisfaction with the Prophet Muhammad and his followers as a balanced community. As the Qur’ān says, “And thus we have made you a just community that you will be witnesses over the people and the Messenger will be a witness over you” (Q. 2:143). During the early days of Islam, the Muslim community (*ummah*) strictly practiced moderate life and rejected all manifestations of extremism whatsoever in individual and social life. A large number of Muslims, for instance, could not support extremist political groups like *Khawariji* (the rebels against the acknowledged Islamic government)<sup>44</sup> and *Mu’tazilah*, which was founded on an extreme form of rationalism.<sup>45</sup>

Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, who has been promoting Islamic moderation for more than three decades, says the moderation in question refers to several meanings, such as justice (*al-adl*), straightness (*al-istiqama*), goodness (*al-khairiyyah*), safety (*al-amn*), strength (*al-quwwah*), and unity (*al-wahdah*).<sup>46</sup> However, in general, it refers to “the Justly-Balanced Way or Equilibrium (*al-tawazun*).”<sup>47</sup> Kamal Hassan explains it in contrast to two opposites: extremism (*ifrat*) and laxity (*tafrit*). To his mind, it is a way of life that creates a path between the two edges of materialism and spiritualism, individualism and collectivism, realism and idealism, permanence and change, etc.<sup>48</sup> However, it is not always found in the middle between two opposites. Rather, it could be in one way sometimes as

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<sup>44</sup> A group of Muslims who revolted against the Islamic government during the Caliphate of Ali (655–661 CE). They were excluded from the Muslim *ummah* because of their extremist understanding of religion even though they were practicing Muslims.

<sup>45</sup> A movement founded by Wasil bin Ata (700–748), who over-emphasized rationality in the understanding of Islamic beliefs.

<sup>46</sup> M. K. Hassan, 2011. *Voice of Islamic Moderation from the Malay World* (Kuala Lumpur: Emerging Markets Innovative Research, 2011), 163–65.

<sup>47</sup> Y. al-Qaradāwī, *Al-Khasa’is al-’Ammah li al-Islam [The Significance of Islam]* (Kaherah: Maktabah Wahbah, 2003), 121.

<sup>48</sup> G. F. Hourani, “Islamic and Non-Islamic Origins of Mu’tazilite Ethical Rationalism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7/1 (1976), 59–87.

reflected in ethics and virtues like truth or justice.<sup>49</sup> In addition to extremism (*ifrat*) and laxity (*tafrit*), Umar introduces another element, namely the “straight path” (*sirat al-mustaqim*), to explain Islamic moderation (*al-Wasatiyyah*).<sup>50</sup> In this way, moderation (*al-Wasatiyyah*) in Islam could be understood according to three terms. Firstly, extremism (*ifrat*) is overstepping the accepted limit in the realm of actions through making excessive or exaggerated interpretations of the level prescribed by God. Secondly, laxity (*tafrit*) is a lack of rigor in practicing religion, or the turning away from right things usually against the accepted tradition. For instance, a Muslim should pray when there is a call for prayer (*Azan*); however if anybody delays it intentionally, it is called laxity (*tafrit*). Thirdly, the straight path (*sirat al-mustaqim*) means a way that has no turns or twists signifying a particular way of faith that equally avoids the two extremes of excess and deficiency.

In brief, the Islamic notion of moderation (*al-Wasatiyyah*) is a way of life that constructs a straight path (*sirat al-mustaqim*) between the two opposites of extremism (*ifrat*) and laxity (*tafrit*). God Himself ordains it by the term “straight path” (*sirat al-mustaqim*) (Q. 1:6) which refers to the people upon whom are bestowed His mercy and appreciation, as mentioned in the Qur’ān: “the path of those on whom you have bestowed your grace” (Q. 1:7).<sup>51</sup> The Qur’ān also refers to the people who went astray because of their extremist understanding of religion or laxity in the same verse (Q. 1:7).

The scope of Islamic moderation is not limited to the creed and ritual practices or spiritual and social life of an individual; rather it is a way of life that is concerned with inter-personal and intra-personal affairs of an individual. According to Yousuf al-Qaraḍāwī, it covers Islamic creed or tenets of faith (*itiqad*), acts of worship or fundamental religious obligations (*ibadat*), morality (*ahlaq*), balance

<sup>49</sup> N. S. Umar, *Al-Wasatīyah fī daw al-Qurān al-karīm* (The Wasatiyyah in the Light of the Qur’ān) (al-Riyād: Dār al-Waṭa lil-Nashr, 1992), 34.

<sup>50</sup> G.F. Hourani, “Islamic.”

<sup>51</sup> The Qur’ān gives an account of those on whom God has bestowed His grace, as it says, “those whom God has blessed, namely, the prophets, the *Siddiqin* (those who attained the highest rank among the followers of a prophet), the *Shuhada* (those who sacrifice even their lives for the sake of God) and *Salihin* (those who follow the Shari’ah completely—the righteous).” See the Holy Qur’ān, 4:69.

between spirituality (*ruhiyyah*) and materialism (*maddiyyah*), legislation (*tashri*), and balance between individualism (*fardiyyah*) and collectivism (*jamaiyyah*).<sup>52</sup> Hassan further elaborates the scope and includes “a combination of virtues including justice, goodness, tolerance, cooperation, obedience to the just Muslim ruler, inter-religious dialogue, honouring of agreements, and acceptance of cultural or ethnic diversities and the attitude of optimism.”<sup>53</sup>

It is worth noting that by no means can the Islamic notion of moderation (*al-Wasatiyyah*) be considered a concept that merges Islamic thought with non-Islamic philosophical and cultural traditions, as claimed by some people who have attempted to go outside of Islam<sup>54</sup> to adopt non-Islamic ideologies that contrast with Islamic beliefs and thoughts.<sup>55</sup> It is a firm stand on the straight path without favoring either tautness or slackness in adopting local culture in Islamic thoughts and practices.<sup>56</sup> The rationale of the revelation of chapter 109 of the Qur’ān is to explore how Islam avoids incorporating non-Islamic traditions. Once, a group of Quraish (the ruling Arab tribe) approached the Prophet with disputed proposals to reach some sort of compromise as a way of finding a solution to the conflict between Muslims and others. At last, they came up with a suggestion that if the Prophet would worship their gods like *Lat* and *Uzzah* for one year, they would worship his God for the same period of time.<sup>57</sup> In this case, God directed the Prophet not to favor this proposal and said, “Say to them: ignorant people, do you bid me to worship other than Allah?” (Q. 39:64). This steadfast position articulated by God, attributing to what is meant by the Islamic way of moderation (*al-Wasatiyyah*) prescribed in the Qur’ān, must not be replaced with philosophical or cultural traditions; rather, its meaning has to be understood in light of God’s Will, as mentioned before.

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<sup>52</sup>M. K. Hassan, *Voice of Islamic Moderation from the Malay World* (Kuala Lumpur: Emerging Markets Innovative Research, 2011), 162–63.

<sup>53</sup> M. K. Hassan, *Voice*, 161.

<sup>54</sup> Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, “Features of the New Islamic Discourse,” *Encounters-Leicester* 3 (1997), 45–63.

<sup>55</sup> A. Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, vol. 2 (USA and Canada: Routledge, 1993), 37–39.

<sup>56</sup> Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, “Features.”

<sup>57</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* 10 (Riyadh: Dar-us-Salam, 2000), 614.



## Comparative Study of Moderation

From a Buddhist perspective, *Majjhima Patipada* is recommended as an option not as compulsory, whereas in Islam practicing *al-Wasatiyah* is not optional but compulsory. Muslims who do not practice *al-Wasatiyyah* are to be excluded from the Muslim *ummah*, as mentioned before, and will be accountable to God. Although the *Majjhima Patipada* constructs a middle path between the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, it is an individualistic principle targeted at transforming an individual from a self-indulgent life or the practice of asceticism to a middle position. However, Islamic moderation is a way to transform an individual as well as a community from holding an extremist understanding to holding a moderate view of life. Moderation in Islam is thus concerned with the socio-political as well as the economic life of people.

Broadly speaking, the view of moderation means a balanced relationship between theory and practice, between thought and behavior, and between action and consequence. From the Buddhist point of view, this principle applies to the “Law of Dependent Origination” (*Pratītyasamutpāda*) and the “Eightfold Noble Path” (*aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*)—the former deals with the process of human activity, while the latter with practice.

The Islamic view of *Ummatan Wasatan* is a way of life recommended by God. *Wasat* means “justly balanced.” The moderation view of Islam, therefore, implies a balanced path between individual and community (*fard* and *mujtama*), between religion and the world (*din* and *duniya*), and between this world and the afterlife (*duniya* and *akhirah*). In a nutshell, the Islamic view of moderation can be applied to beliefs (*aqidah*), acts of worship (*ibadah*), divine laws (*shari’ah*), and moral conduct (*akhlaq*).

## Conclusion

What we understand from the above discussion on *al-Wasatiyyah* and *Majjhima Pratipada* is that there is no philosophical or religious grounds for the emergence of extremism from within the Muslim and the Buddhist communities themselves. That said, we cannot deny that there are such movements operating in many parts of the world,

claiming religious sources for their existence. Furthermore, the leaders of these movements sometimes identify themselves as servants of God or protectors of religion and justify their violent activities by taking refuge in religious scriptures and concepts albeit in a twisted way to suit their mindset or motive.

World religions comprise at least four fundamental elements, the historical, the doctrinal, the ritual and the moral which are inseparable. They contain fundamental and universal truths that can be expressed in many ways as they are manifested in variation and in differentiation. The underlying unity of religious beliefs must be sought in the essential teachings common to all religions. Religions can encounter one another in many ways; at least from the three basic perspectives of the geographical, the theological, and the textual which correspond to historical, doctrinal, and scriptural aspects respectively. And from all the three perspectives, Buddhism and Islam come in close contact on many issues. The intellectual and doctrinal differences between Islam and other traditions are fully acknowledged by Islam without which diversity, created intentionally by God, would not be found in society. Notwithstanding, Islam proclaims the unity of humankind (Q. 2:213) as God says, "O mankind, surely We have created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may know each other" (Q. 49:13).

Islam and Buddhism are two major religions that promote the moderate way of life *par excellence* but extremist groups belonging to both communities exist for their own reasons. Although these groups claim religious grounds for their existence, mainstream scholars and religious leaders reject them and brand them as outsiders of religions. Religious leaders, educators, scholars, politicians and social activists from both communities have to concertedly advocate for the moderate path in their religions in order to eliminate extremism which lies not in religions *per se*, but in the mindsets instilled by wrong scriptural interpretation and influences from political motivation. They also need to work for sustainable peace and development in nation-building through dialogue. In moving away from antagonistic attitudes towards each other, Muslims have to emphasize the spiritual aspect of *al-Wasatiyyah* in order to

construct intimate relationships with others, while Buddhists need to engage more in the social aspect of *Majjhima Patipada* that constructs social well-being to know “their partners”, the Muslims. According to a famous saying of the Prophet, “Religion is very easy and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. So you should not be extremists, but try to be near to perfection.”<sup>58</sup> Muslims who have lost or drifted away from the God-ordained “middle way” of life in all aspects - individual, social, religious, political - must find ways to restore this principal value in all walks of life for a better quality of living within their own community and with others in peace and harmony.

Islam extends a universalizing recognition to all the revealed traditions. It enjoins all Muslims to revere all the prophets, for it has the fullest appreciation of earlier traditions handed down by Moses, Jesus and others, who preached love, peace and social justice. Suffice it to mention that both Buddhism and Islam contain mystical currents in the broader sense of the term “mysticism” which can be defined in terms of God, the Absolute, Love, Wisdom, Ultimate Reality, Ideal, One Reality and Nothing. It is also worth mentioning that each tradition has at least two aspects, an exoteric and an esoteric. While the former deals with rites and rituals, the latter addresses the spiritual aspects of life. The time has come to realize that the origin of all religions is not to be sought in multiple sources. It is not an exaggeration to assert that they share common goals which bind the adherents of each tradition vertically to the source as well as horizontally to each other.

In order to promote peace and harmony, scholars, researchers, academics and religious leaders of both Buddhism and Islam should engage in meaningful interreligious dialogues based on the principles of faith, core beliefs, religious laws, truths and ideals that provide guidelines for human action. Both Buddhists and Muslims need to reshape and redesign the education system to foster modernism, secularism and pluralism in order to understand their own faiths and at the same time each other’s cultures, as diversity is the utmost fundamental human need in the present century. There is a great need for interfaith and intercultural educational exchange programs to be

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<sup>58</sup> *Sahih Bukhari*, Volume 1, Book 2, Number 38.

introduced into the curricula of the Buddhist monasteries and Islamic *madrassas*.

Muslims need to understand history. In the thirteenth century Oxford and Cambridge were known as *madrassa*-type seats of learning of Christendom, but today these are leading institutions of education. To our great surprise, we notice that both *bhikkhus* and *maulavis* lack formal institutional education save for a few academics. It is little wonder that *bhikkhus* confined in temples and *maulavis* in mosques seem reluctant to learn the modern advancements of science and technology which they use and sometimes misuse as end-users, not as designers. We stress that Buddhists and Muslims need genuine scholars, not *de facto* clergy, to move forward and to be able to bring forth a balanced development between tradition and modernism. What is needed most in the wake of continued violence in recent times committed by the emotionally charged fanatics of both Buddhism and Islam is the understanding that there is a universal, eternal truth underlying all religions, and that the essence of these great traditions which lie in love, peace, brotherhood, humanism, harmony, and co-existence has to be understood in accordance with its pristine purity.

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