

Balance, Moderation, and the 'Middle Path': Toward Trust between Muslims and Theravada Buddhists in Southern Thailand

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When looking at strategies leading toward conflict-resolution in the troubled Muslim-dominated deep South of Thailand one should also take into account existing touching-points between Islam – understood by many of its followers as an all-encompassing approach toward life that is, nevertheless, grounded in spirituality – and Theravada Buddhism which is practised by the overwhelming rest of the Thai citizens.¹ *Theravāda* (Pali for ‘Teaching of the Elders’ or ‘Ancient Teaching’) is the oldest surviving Buddhist school. It is relatively conservative and generally closest to early Buddhism. Elsewhere² this writer has argued that the currently ongoing conflict in southern Thailand is mainly *not* a religious one, but rather the result of mutual deep distrust between a far-away central administration in Bangkok and the local Malay Muslims in the South. However, this writer would like to argue that a *meaningful* dialogue between *truly* religious people on both sides of the fence could help to dissolve tensions and misconceptions.³

The 'Middle Path' in Islam

In 2010, IAIS Malaysia published in its Monograph Series *Moderation and Balance in Islam: The Qur'ānic Principle of Wasaṭiyyah* from the pen of Professor Mohammad Hashim Kamali, the Institute's CEO and Chairman. Throughout this volume, Kamali makes the salient point that Islam – in its original conceptualisation as laid down in the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* – does reject extremism of any sort – whether in terms of beliefs, political persuasions or even devotional practices. It is up to contemporary Muslims to rediscover that message, which, alas, is all too often forgotten by the ignorant ones. Islam views itself as a ‘middle path’ (*wasatiyyah*) between the life of this world and the world to come. This ‘middle path’ applies to principles of belief, worldview, cultural interaction, and – a part on which I would like to focus here – to religious and spiritual *practices*.

At first glance, Buddhism and Islam could not be more apart from each other – to wit, for instance, the different architectural arrangements of its religious buildings (gilded images of the Buddha in the *wat*, no images whatsoever in the mosque). Looking beneath the surface, however, there are numerous points of convergence.⁴

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The 'Middle Path' in Theravada Buddhism

Like Islam, Theravada Buddhism, too, is scripture-based. Even Buddhists coming from other traditions admit that the Theravada *Tipitaka* (Pali, lit. 'three baskets') canon has preserved the essential and original utterances of the Buddha. One of the most pervasive topics of that vast corpus of literature is the notion of the 'middle path' (Pali: *majjhimā paṭipadā*), the descriptive term which the Buddha used to describe the character of the 'Path of Liberation' which he discovered. It was coined in the very first 'teaching' (Pali: *sutta*) which he delivered after his enlightenment. In this *sutta* he describes the 'middle path' as a way of *moderation* between the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. This, according to him, was the path of wisdom. The 'middle path' does not mean a mid point in a straight line joining two extremes represented by points, but rather a dynamic teaching in order to reach harmony.

Convergences and Divergences

On the levels of spirituality and devotional practice, there are several 'touching points' between Islam and Buddhism which could be explored by sincere people from both traditions. Historically speaking, the influence back and forth between the Sufi movement and Buddhism in Central Asia and India was manifold. For instance, it is now generally acknowledged that Sufism and Buddhism entered into some sort of cultural symbiosis in Central Asia during the early medieval period. As pointed out by numerous scholars, among them Annemarie Schimmel in her magisterial *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*,⁵ several Muslim ceremonial devotional rituals such as the *dhikr*, the mantra-like invocation of the names of God – in particular when involving breath-control as practised by the Naqshbandī Sufis who actually have their origins in that region – can be traced back to similar Buddhist practices (although it is true that the term *dhikr* appears already in the Qur'ān 13:28), however, in a more general fashion and without elaborating on practical issues. Exchanges between Sufism and certain notions of Buddhist spirituality are particularly strong among those Sufi orders (*ṭarīqāt*) which are prevalent in areas which had been under Turkic cultural influence, such as Central Asia and the non-Arabic parts of the former Ottoman Empire (Anatolia and the Balkans), in particular the orders of the Bektashis, Bayramis, and Naqshbandis, to name only a few. Moreover, in both religions there is emphasis on generosity and on equality.

On the other hand, it must be stated that the belief in an omnipotent creator deity – as the case with the three major monotheistic religions, Islam, Christianity and Judaism – would not be in line with the basic teachings of the Buddha as laid down in the *Tipitaka* canon, as such a belief would – from the perspective of Theravada thought – result in *dukkha*, a Pali term roughly corresponding to a

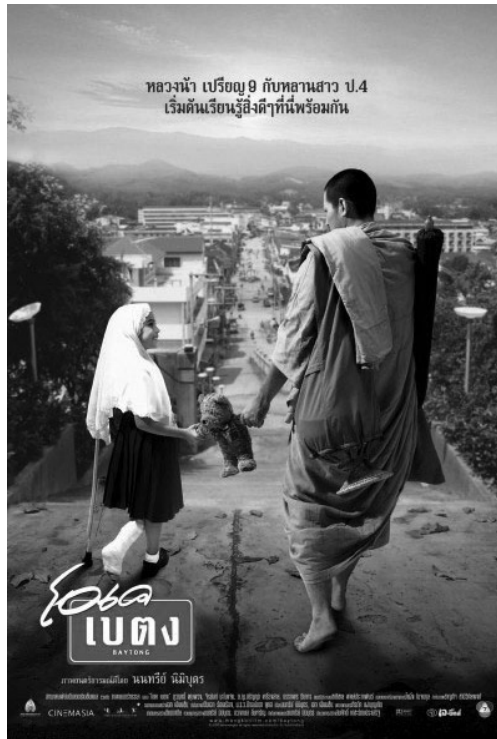
number of terms in English including ‘suffering’, ‘pain’, ‘discontent’, ‘unsatisfactoriness’, ‘unhappiness’, ‘sorrow’, ‘stress’, ‘frustration’ and the like. This is mainly grounded in the Buddhist notion of ‘causation’ or ‘dependent origination’ (Pali: *paticca-samuppāda*) a cardinal doctrine which refers to the causal relations between the phenomena which sustain *dukkha*. ‘Dependent origination’ – one of the key components of the Buddhist ‘Four Noble Truths’ – is therefore incompatible with the teachings of Islam. Another issue of content with Islam, and one of the consequences of the previous point, is the Buddhist denial of the notion of a ‘soul’ or a ‘self’. In Theravada Buddhism – as one of its key concepts, the Pali term *anattā* refers to the notion of ‘not-self’. In the early *suttas*, the Buddha commonly uses the word in the context of teaching that all things perceived by the senses (including the mental sense) are not really ‘I’ or ‘mine’, and for this reason one should not cling to them.

Some Suggestions

This writer has always been convinced that approaches which bring together *real* people from *real* life have been more fruitful than the myriads of ‘interfaith’ conferences and alike. Take for example, the course of Franco-German relations: in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with the rise of mutually hostile modern nationalism, writers, historians, and politicians in both countries tended to project their ‘enmity’ backwards, regarding all past history as a single, coherent and unbroken narrative of ongoing conflict and re-interpreting earlier history to fit into the concept of a ‘hereditary enmity’. Today, France and Germany are among the most enthusiastic proponents of the further integration of the European Union, which is also due to post-WWII student exchanges which enabled people from both sides of the Rhine to get to know (and appreciate) each other more closely. Literature and the movie industry also played a positive part in this process. This could also be a way forward in order to overcome hatred and mutual distrust in southern Thailand.

Some work in this respect has already been done: back in 1985, Thai director Euthana Mukdasanit created the movie *Butterfly and Flower* (*Pee seua lae dawkmái*), which was drawn from a popular Thai novel of the time and which highlighted the hardships along the Thai-Malaysian border. Not only did the film help expose urban Thais to regional (southern) poverty; the film also broke new ground by portraying a Buddhist–Muslim romance. The movie was very popular nationwide and earned a Best Film Award at the 1986 East–West Film Festival in Honolulu, Hawaii. The film is adapted from a 1978 novel of the same title by Nipphan (Makut Oradee), which won an award at the Thailand National Book Fair. The book has become required reading for secondary schoolchildren in the kingdom.

More recently, in 2003, Nonzee Nimibutr wrote and directed *OK Battong*, a movie about Muslim–Buddhist relations in southern Thailand: Tum is a young man who has been a monk living in a Buddhist temple in Thailand since he was five years old. However, after hearing that his sister has been killed in an attack on a train by Malay insurgents, he decides to leave the monastery and make his way to southern Thailand where his sister ran a beauty salon in Battong, a town in a district of Yala province which borders Malaysia. In trying to put his sister’s affairs in order, Tum finds himself in a conflict: should he take over his sister’s business? His sister has left a daughter by a Muslim man who lives on the Malaysian side of the border.



Poster, *OK Battong* (2003), written and directed by Nonzee Nimibutr

(Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Okbaytong.jpg>;
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Should Tum try to take a greater role in the raising of the child? But first, Tum must figure out how to zip up his trousers without hurting himself. It’s only one of the many new things to the young man, who has worn a Buddhist monk’s robes

for most of his life. He also encounters romantic (and physical) feelings when he develops a relationship with a neighbouring lady, who was a friend of his sister. In addition, Tum must reconcile the feelings of hate and rage that sometimes come into his head when he thinks about Muslims, and especially the Malay insurgents who were responsible for his beloved sister's death.

In closing, perhaps it is about time that Muslims and Buddhists read their scriptures once again (and perhaps more thoroughly), keeping 'tuned' their 'spiritual antennas' in order to understand properly the all-encompassing objectives of religiosity. In the case of Islam, it is the view of this writer that the qur'anic expression 'People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb*; see 2:62; 3:64; 3:199; 3:113–15; 29:46; see also 22:17) could also be extended to include people who believe in some higher abstract principle of ethics and morality which, in a sense, created or continues to order the world.

Notes

1. Theravada Buddhism is also dominant in Burma/Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and – outside Southeast Asia – Sri Lanka, not, however, in Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore, countries where *Mahāyāna* (Sanskrit for 'Great Vehicle') is prevalent among the Buddhists.
2. Christoph Marcinkowski, "'Kidnapping' Islam? Some Thoughts on Southern Thailand's Muslim Community between Ethnocentrism and Constructive Conflict-Solution", *Islamic Culture* 78, no. 2 (2004), 79–86. An earlier version is also available online at <http://mis-pattani.pn.psu.ac.th/registra/grade/temp/speech/20020823/Panel18%5B1%5D.doc> (accessed on 6 December 2010).
3. On some of those misconceptions from the part of Muslims, see Christoph Marcinkowski, "'Holier than Thou': Buddhism and the Thai People in Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim's 17th-Century Travel Account *Safineh-yi Sulaymani*", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 156, no. 2 (2006), 407–19.
4. Recently, the *Muslim World* journal (Hartford CT, United States) has published a Special Issue on Islam and Buddhism (vol. 100, nos. 2–3, April–June 2010). There is also Reza Shah Kazemi's (ed.), *Common Ground between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville KY: Fons Vitae, 2010), a work, which carries introductions by the Dalai Lama, Professor Mohammad Hashim Kamali, and Prince Ghazi of Jordan.
5. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 173–4.