

# Buddhism in Southeast Asia: A Study of Philosophy, Religion and a Model of a Multicultural Society

I Ketut Ardhana\*

Faculty of Arts Udayana University



\*Corresponding author: I Ketut Ardhana, Faculty of Arts Udayana University

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## Abstract

Buddhism, like Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism and Confucianism, has been formally acknowledged in Indonesia. In addition to this, not only have those religions been acknowledged by the state but recently there has also been recognition of the local beliefs rooted in the Indonesian archipelago.

Until now, there has been a lack of studies on Buddhism in Bali since Bali has been known as a part of the Hindu mosaic in Southeast Asia. However, it is important to understand the existence of Buddhism in Bali and its relationship with Southeast Asia in particular and Asia in general. Indeed, from the historical perspective, we know that in Bali the relation between Hinduism and Buddhism could not be separated, so finding the Buddhism contribution in shaping the Balinese multicultural society is a significant issue.

To contribute to the discussion, this paper will address some important questions: Firstly, what are the lessons of Buddhism in terms of religious and philosophical aspects? Secondly, to what extent did Buddhism spread in Bali? And, Thirdly, what was the contribution of Buddhism in the context of philosophical concepts in the making of the nation/state building in the regions? By looking at these issues, it is expected to reach a better understanding of how Buddhism has contributed significantly in the creation of a multicultural society in Asia in general and in Southeast Asia in particular.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; Philosophical concept; Cultural heritage; The nation/state building; Asia and Southeast Asia

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## Introduction

Both Hinduism and Buddhism have spread to all regions of Southeast Asia, including Bali, from India. However, this was not like the spread of Buddhism in other parts of Southeast Asia, for example, Thailand, Burma, Laos or other places. In Bali the Hindu lessons developed strongly and have continued to do so until now [1]. Therefore, it is not surprising, that Bali has become known as part of the Hindu mosaic in Southeast Asia. This does not mean, however, that there are no Buddhist influences in Bali, since the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism were strongly linked to one another.

Although it is noted that the spread of Buddhism was earlier than the spread of Hinduism in Bali, there is no clear evidence on how and when this was precisely. The unclear information about the spread of both religions in the region shows that the spread of both, in some respects, is linked to certain conflicts as well as harmonious aspects regarding the first contact between them and the inhabitants of the Indonesian archipelago, particularly in the western parts. However, at least it can be said that both Buddhism and Hinduism significantly cooperated in the creation of Asian and Southeast Asian culture [2] particularly in the context of the Balinese and Indonesian cultures that still exist.

To what extent the influences of both cultures are evidenced in the Indonesian archipelago will be elaborated more as follows: The strong influences of Buddhism in the regions of Southeast Asia can be seen in some parts of the Indonesian archipelago. In comparison between the western and the eastern parts of the Indonesian archipelago, it is commonly

believed that the western parts are strongly influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism, while the eastern parts are much influenced by the local cultures, particularly those before the arrival of Buddhism and Hinduism in “Nusantara”, which consists of 16.767 islands and has more than 250 local cultures practiced by Austronesians, most from the Asian mainland and Melanesians from Africa spreading to Asia and the Pacific regions, like Papua and Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji Islands as well as Indonesia. This is, of course, has become a great challenge in integrating all of the people to be one nation and one modern state during the colonial era in the past when the people had different cultures, traditions, languages and beliefs. Through this paper, I will highlight some significant matters regarding those issues, and discuss and analyze to what extent the influences of Buddhism and Hinduism contributed to the making of the modern state of Indonesia.

### **Buddhism in Southeast Asia: From Piracy to the Emergence of a Maritime Cultural Tradition**

Like other parts of the world, Southeast Asia in general and Indonesia in particular, already had their own local cultures as “local genius”, which exists in terms of spirituality until the present day [3]. These local cultures were much rooted in concepts of animism and dynamism to which the influences of Buddhism and Hinduism contributed to strengthen the richness of each local culture. This can be seen in the emergence of the great Buddhist kingdoms like Srivijaya in the seventh century in South Sumatra where, however, there is no firm data about the establishment of a Hindu kingdom preceding the kingdom of Srivijaya. The name Srivijaya is sometimes linked to the word *Suvarnabhumi* though the word Srivijaya itself comes from the Sanskrit words: *Sri*: fortunate, prosperous, happy and *vijaya*: victorious or excellence, most often called: The Island of Gold while in the Arabic sources, the kingdom of Srivijaya was known as *Sribuza* [4].

Meanwhile, the first Hindu kingdom was established in the fourth century in East Kalimantan on Borneo Island. There is no archeological or historical data telling us about the extent of the relationship between the Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms in the Indonesian archipelago in that early period. However, the establishment of the first Hindu kingdom, Kutai in East Kalimantan was due to the spread of piracy in the Malacca Strait during that time.

The actual location of Srivijaya itself became debatable although its presence at that time shows us how the kingdom had successfully civilized the local people who had no religious beliefs apart from their local beliefs based on animism and dynamism. According to archaeological and historical data, there were strong social and cultural relationships between the kingdom of Srivijaya and certain kingdoms in Southeast Asia and China. In addition to this, it is said that the Chinese who wished to study Buddhism in India, had learnt the Buddhist lessons and Sanskrit in Srivijaya where many ethnic

groups such as the Chinese, were also involved. (About the Chinese influences in Bali, see: Gottowik [5]. From this, it can be said that the kingdom of Srivijaya played a major role not only in terms of social and cultural activities, but also in terms of economics and trade in the famous commodities such as camphor, pepper, betel nut, cardamom, nutmeg and the like, in the surrounding regions particularly in the Malacca Strait, at that time, despite the disturbances from piracies [6]. It was assumed that whoever could seize the Malacca Strait would be able to also colonize the Southeast Asian regions. The famous harbor at that time was Barus in modern Malaysia, which played a dominant role in connecting and facilitating many traders from India, Persia and the Middle East in the years 844 and 848 [7]. This became significant also regarding the trade relationships between the Indian Ocean, already well established for a long time of Indian history or South Asia and the Malacca Strait in Southeast Asia [8]. The significant role of the kingdom of Srivijaya was that this kingdom had been successful in forming a maritime culture in the Indonesian archipelago and later becoming an identity for the people in that area [9].

At least it can be assumed that through the Buddhist lessons Buddhism played a dominant role in civilizing the people and creating regional networks amongst people in Southeast Asia such as Thailand, Burma, Laos, etc. In other words, it means that Buddhism had become the way of life amongst the people of what later became known as an early Buddhist kingdom in Indonesia. Although there is no clear evidence about this kingdom, it was mentioned that the political efforts to conquer Bali had been made in the later period of classical Balinese history, particularly in the reign of King Udayana, sometime from the 9th to the 11th century [10], meaning that the Srivijaya kingdom had tried to expand its power not only in Sumatra itself but also to other regions in the Indonesian archipelago and Southeast Asia.

This can be seen in the Srivijaya influences in Semenanjung, Kedah and Tanah Genting Kra in Malaysia. One of the archaeological sites, the Ligor Inscription, found in Genting Kra, mentions that certain regions in Malaysia acknowledged the kingdom of Srivijaya showing on the A side of the inscription that a king or “Datu Srivijaya” had asked to build a *trisamaya caitya* for Padmapani, Sakyamuni and Wajrapani on 15 April, 775. While side B (no date) of the inscription says that King Wisnu titled, *Sarwwarimadawimathana*, was a killer of greedy enemies. From these, some scholars argue that the Buddhist king had successfully defeated the pirates in the region of Genting Kra in Malaysia. However, there is not much evidence to show us that Srivijaya successfully occupied both Ligor and Genting Kra in Malaysia. From the Indonesian historians’ perception, it seems that it could be only that the King of Srivijaya asked people to build a small shrine *trisamaya caitya* to indicate a friendship between the King of Srivijaya and the Malaysian rulers at that time [11].

Here we need to have further studies in order to be able to understand the broad claims of the Srivijaya kingdom in Indonesia in particular and in Southeast Asia in general [12]. Hopefully this study will contribute to our understanding of the maritime studies in accordance with the concept of Southeast Asian cosmology from the traditional or classical period to the modern and even the postmodern periods of Southeast Asia.

### **Buddhism in Southeast Asia: Cultural Heritage, a Model of a Multicultural Society, and Pancasila**

It is not yet clear how we can define that there was a change from the maritime to the mainland world. Srivijaya, a maritime kingdom, was continued through the establishment of the later Buddhist kingdom in Central Java in the 8th century under the reign of Samarottungga who was believed to have built the big Buddhist shrine very close to Yogyakarta, called Borobudur, in the ninth century.

The Dynasty of Syailendra is very well known in the context of the development of Buddhism in Indonesia. It seems that it could have happened also with Hinduism, with all the Buddhist lessons learned by the high priest or Brahmins instead of the common Javanese people as all of the Hindu or Indic lessons were still in the Sanskrit Language and Pallava or Indic or Indian scripts. Therefore, this could have been the reason for it being difficult for the common Javanese people to practice the Buddhist lessons in their daily lives at that time. That lasted until the end of the 10th century, when the Sanskrit Language and the Pallava script were translated into the Old Javanese Language of Bahasa Kawi still known in present day Bali.

It is significant to highlight what was happening in the era of classical Balinese history when Buddhism and Hinduism played a dominant role in the context of negotiations regarding the religious beliefs from the 9th to the 11th centuries. This can be seen in the archaeological and historical evidence that shows the social, cultural and political developments of the classical Balinese history period starting at the beginning of the 8th to 11th centuries, clearly much influenced by the philosophical, religious and political ideas of Buddhism and Hinduism. The influences of both of these teachings are significant in understanding the idea of a multicultural society in Bali [13].

The historical notes mention that there were some efforts made by the rulers of Srivijaya to expand its power to Bali during the classical Balinese history period when Bali entered its historical period in the 8th century as shown in the findings of yete mantra, a Buddhist mantra or holy words consisting of Buddhist lessons, indicating that it could be true that Buddhism touched Bali earlier than Hinduism. However, it could be important to note that at that time the Balinese king named Dharmodayana Warmadewa was in power and he himself was a Hindu or Wisnu follower. In addition

to this, his wife was a Javanese from Central Java who is believed to have been a Durga follower. The two of them are considered to have been "twin kings" that ruled Bali in the classical Balinese history period. Since the Goddess Durga is the partner of the God Shiva [14] it seems clear that Shivaism had already penetrated Bali during the classical Balinese history period.

Though it is unclear whether there was a conflict between Buddhism and Shivaism, the story of Udayana tells us that during his reign, the King of Srivijaya sent his troops to unsuccessfully conquer Bali. There are two interpretations of this issue, which on the one hand, due to Srivijaya's attack against Bali is evidence that Bali was not a Buddhist kingdom, but rather under Wisnu (Wisnuism) and Shiva (Shivaism) influences from the Hindu lessons. On the other hand, it could be Buddhism had already developed though there were certain limitations from the Wisnuism and Shivaism adhering rulers at that time [15].

In addition to this, it can be said that Buddhism that had already developed in Bali during the classical Balinese history was centered in the present day Gianyar where two important rivers flow from the mountains to the sea. Many archaeological and historical sites along those rivers were built using the padas rocks as can be seen along the Rivers Pakerisan and Petanu, particularly along the Pakerisan River. In comparison to the later Majapahit period in the fourteenth century, the buildings that had been built were not the same as in the Buddhist era in Gianyar, which used rocks (batu bata). Today these archaeological and historical sites have become more significant in Balinese cultural heritage that needs to be maintained and preserved not only in the present time, but also for the future Balinese and Indonesian culture, meaning that through the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism at that period there were social changes and continuities when the local culture before the arrival of those religions was still maintained. In other words, it means that not only those religions that have been acknowledged in the government decree of the Indonesian state but also the recent recognition of the local beliefs that have been rooted in the Indonesian archipelago should be taken into consideration.

What was the role of the twin kings in solving the problems of certain issues related to the various or different beliefs in religions particularly amongst the religious leaders of that period? Certain sources of Balinese history mention that there was conflict particularly between Buddhism and Shivaism as the hegemonial powers during the reign of the twin kings Udayana and Mahendradatta. When Udayana married Mahendradatta with their different ethnicities, Udayana a Balinese man and Mahendradatta a Javanese woman, they showed to the Balinese that was how to learn about the differences amongst them, since both of them who had different cultural traditions (which in modern Java could be called Kejawen), languages (the Old Javanese and the Old Balinese languages), (Wisnuism and Shivaism) religions and the like. In

this context, it can be said that on the one hand, the Balinese who were perhaps Hindu, namely, Wisnuvite, particularly during King Udayana's reign and Mahendradatta's followers as Shivaites and on the other hand, Buddhism as the major group and other small local beliefs had faced many challenges on how to understand the concept of multiculturalism in which one had to understand the other even if a minor group [16].

This was done by inviting the conflicting religious figures to a holy temple, the Samuan Tiga Temple (today in the Gianyar Regency, Bali Province). The Samuan Tiga from the Balinese means the meeting of the three factions: Wisnuism, Shivaism and Buddhism. The significant aim of the meeting was to unite or integrate the different religious ideologies, particularly Shivaism and Buddhism to be acknowledged as one in unity or *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* of which a Balinese poet, Mpu Tantular, wrote in his work *Kakawin Sutasoma*. [17] as follows:

“Rwaneka dhatu winuwus war-a Budha  
 Wiswa Bhineka rakwa ringapan kena  
 Parwanosen, mangkang jinatwa kalawan  
 Siwatwa tunggal  
 Bhineka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangra”

It can therefore be understood that the sentence *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* was created long before the establishment of the Indonesian independent state. *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is a phrase in Old Javanese literature, *Kakawin Sutasoma* of the 14th century. *Kakawin* means *Syair* (poem) in ancient Javanese in an essay by Mpu Tantular written using ancient Javanese language with Balinese script. This *Kakawin* is special because it teaches tolerance between the Hindu Shivaites and Buddhists. Citation of the phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is found in the passage of verse 5 of *Kakawin Sutasoma*. When we translate each word, *bhinneka* means various, different, variegated, *tunggal* means one and *ika* means unity. So, the notion of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* is different but still one (unity in diversity). It is not surprising that until the present day in Bali in certain religious rituals and ceremonies two priests take part, a Shiva priest and a Buddhist priest, side by side. As in the biggest Hindu temple in Bali, the Temple of Besakih [18].

This is the early introduction of the concept of “*Shiva and Buddha adalah tunggal*” meaning one and implying unity and diversity. Both sides accepted this solution in order to avoid any conflicts and be able to live side by side in a peaceful and harmonious life amongst different religious beliefs in Bali. Since that classical Balinese time until now there have no longer been big conflicts amongst them.

Entering the modern Balinese or Indonesian period, since 1500, when the foreign influences of the Spaniards, Portuguese, Dutch, British and Japanese entered the Indonesian archipelago, particularly after the end of the colonial era, there have been on

the one hand, some changes and continuities in which not only Shivaism (Hinduism) and Buddhism (Mahayana or Hinayana) have been acknowledged by the modern state of Indonesia but also other religions such as Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism and Confucianism and on the other hand, certain continuities in terms of how to live side by side between one religion and other religions and local beliefs strongly rooted over a long time in the Balinese in particular and in the Indonesian history in general.

Though there were many foreign influences in the regions exerting both negative and positive impacts, this does not mean those influences while ineffective were nevertheless meaningful in terms of the creation of the Indonesian modern state. This can be seen in the former outstanding figure of Indonesia, Soekarno. He was “mixed” in terms of ethnicity and different religions between a Javanese father who was a Muslim and a Balinese mother who was Hindu. This means that he knew about the Javanese and Balinese cultural traditions. While studying engineering he came across many references to world religions particularly to the philosophical and political ideas from India such as those of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore and the like. During the Dutch colonization of Indonesia, he was exiled to Ende, a place in Nusa Tenggara (southeastern islands of Indonesia). Therefore, it is not surprising, if he learnt much about the concepts of *ahimsa* (no killing), *swadesi* (independence), and *satyagraha* (loyalty). That was the reason why he did not want to cooperate with the Dutch and instead struggled through non-cooperative ways against the colonial powers during the Indonesian movement and the revolution era.

In his exile in Ende, he met many religious figures not only from Islam but also Catholic and Protestant pastors when he was asked about the philosophy of the modern Indonesian state were Indonesia to be freed from Dutch colonialism. He tried to imagine what kind of possibilities there were since all the ethnic-groups had many different religious beliefs and he was aware of religious differences since his father, Soekemi Sosrodihardjo and his mother, Ida Ayu Rai also had initially different religions and different ethnicity between the Javanese and the Balinese [19]. He understood what had happened in the classical Balinese history period when there was a meeting at the Samuan Tiga Temple, particularly about the idea of unity and diversity, called *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika tan hana dharma mangwa* as already mentioned. That is a significant reason why Soekarno finally decided to formulate the concept of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and his outstanding concept of *Pancasila* (the five basic principles of the Indonesian state). All the Indonesians who were Muslim as the major religion, Buddhist, Catholic, Confucianist or Protestant, have agreed to commit to the concept of *Pancasila* as the basic ideology of the Indonesian state.

The *Pancasila* consists of First: Belief in God, Second: Humanism, Third: Indonesian Integration, Fourth: Democracy, and Fifth: Social Justice. The *Pancasila* ideology is very significant in integrating Indonesians who are different in terms of ethnicity, religion, local

languages, and traditions but have one political consciousness due to the same fate under western colonization in the past of the Indonesian history [20].

From this description we can see the extent of the role of religions particularly Buddhism and Hinduism in the early or the classical period, then Islam, Confucianism, Catholicism and Protestantism in the modern period and the local beliefs as well, as we can see in the building of Puja Mandala in strengthening the tolerant attitudes amongst the people in the context of Indonesian unity [21].

## Conclusion

To sum up it can be said that Buddhism has played a major role not only in classical Balinese history in particular and in Indonesian history in general, but also in the later modern period of the Indonesian state. The philosophical ideas of Buddhism have strongly enriched and strengthened the Balinese and the Indonesian cultural heritages. Not only in terms of social and cultural aspects, but also in terms of political aspects such as the concept of multiculturalism and unity and diversity which have played a significant role in the government policies in the context of nation/state building in Indonesia.

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