

THE MIDDLE WAY:
BUDDHIST APPROACHES TOWARDS INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes two important Buddhist sources (*Sandakasutta* and *Apaṇṇakasutta*) and argues that the Buddhist way of interreligious discourse is expressed most adequately by means of the Middle Way, which should be understood as the avoidance of every kind of extreme view. The Middle Way accepts both the religious effort of the missionary as well as pluralistic or relativistic views of religion because human beings have a right to promote their own religion provided they observe moral principles. This article argues that genuine conviction (*saddhamma saññatti*) does not encourage self-aggrandizement by disparaging others. The author states that the pluralistic outlook of Buddhism is exclusivist with respect to its claim to truth but relative in relation to other religions. The canonical literature of Buddhism records numerous Buddhist encounters with the followers of other religions based on mutual respect, acceptance of the right for missionary endeavor and the preservation of an attitude of tolerance.

Keywords: Buddhist discourse, Middle Way, spiritual pragmatism, exclusive, inclusive, relative, pluralist approaches

THEORIES ABOUT INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

The Buddhist position regarding other religions and inter-religious dialogue is still a matter of debate in the Sri Lankan context. One of the early writers on this subject (1975) was K.N. Jayatilleke¹ who remarked, "The Buddhist attitude towards other religions has from its very inception been one of critical tolerance. But what is significant is that it was able to combine a missionary zeal with this tolerant outlook".² The emphasis on the religious missionary character of Buddhism is something notable in Jayatilleke's theory. In the same book, Jayatilleke identified the relativist view of

¹. Originally published in Kandy (1975). Buddhist Publication Society. Wheel Publications

². Jayatilleke, K. N. (2000). (1980). *Facets of Buddhist Thought*. Buddhist Publication Society. Kandy. 273

religion in Buddhism.³ However, he did not identify any signs of pluralism in the Buddhist inter-religious outlook.

Since the time of Jayatilleke, from the 1980s in particular, the investigations of theoretical studies of inter-religious dialogue developed in the West through the publication of two significant works by Raimundo Panikkar, as well as books by John Hick and Abraham Velez de Cea.⁴ These works promoted the pluralistic and relativistic⁵ theories of interreligious dialogue. In the Sri Lankan context, Jayatilleke's idea of critical tolerance was again cursorily mentioned by Wijebandara⁶ but his ideas were not presented in the context of inter-religious dialogue.

Asanga Tilakaratne's contribution to inter-religious dialogue is very notable and he presents a rational basis for tolerance in Buddhism. In a collection of his articles⁷ (*Inter-Religious Understanding*, 2020) recently published in Sri Lanka and edited by the present author and others, he presents his thoughts on the Buddhist position regarding pluralism, relativism and dual belonging.⁸ In short, he shows how difficult it is to understand the religions, taken as a whole, to be either pluralistic or relativist. According to Tilakaratne, religions are basically essentialist and absolute (meaning exclusivist) and are only superficially relative and pluralist.⁹ Buddhism considers each religion to be pluralistic because each religion has the right to hold a different view, which it may promote by ethical means. Relativism is not a viable option since the Buddha has said clearly that the path to liberation is found only in his teaching. Relativism, however, should not be denied because it is better than absolutism and also because it is democratic and socialist.

Tilakaratne has not paid adequate attention to the relativistic view that cultural and geographical factors shape the different morals and values of any given religion. Contrary to the assumption of relativism, the fundamental tenants of Buddhism have the same meaning in many different cultures. However, the means of religious

³. *ibid.* 289 (a later publication)

⁴. Tilakaratne, Asanga. (2020). "Buddhist Reflections on Religious Diversity and Dialogue."

"Religious Tolerance in Buddhism: Theory, Practice."

"Rationale for Tolerance - A Buddhist Critique and Reconstruction."

"Buddhism and Interreligious Harmony."

Collected Papers: Asanga Tilakaratne Volume V, Inter-religious Understanding. Colombo: Sarasavi Publishers and Sri Lanka Association of Buddhist Studies. 22-87

⁵. The acceptance of the existence of diversity of religions can make one either a pluralist (when more than one religion is accepted), an exclusivist (when there is no accommodation), or an inclusivist (when there is accommodation of other religions) or a relativist (when more than one ultimate reality is accepted).

⁶. Wijebandara, Chandima. (1993). *Early Buddhism: Its Religion and Intellectual Milieu*. Colombo:

The Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies. 95

⁷. *op. cit.* Tilakaratne, Asanga. (2020)

⁸. *ibid.*

⁹. *ibid.* 50

expression is different due to practical and cultural factors. But it is clear that cultural and other contextual factors determine the meaning of religious teachings in a given culture and that such factors also influence spiritual and cultural progress.¹⁰ Crook has described the influence of such cultural factors on Buddhist spirituality.¹¹ In his observations, Tilakaratne has commented on the two works that I have mentioned above.

I do not intend to deal with this debate any further but I will show that the Buddhist way of inter-religious discourse openly accepts the missionary effort together with pluralistic or relativistic views of religion. I have selected two important Buddhist sources (*Sandakasutta* and *Apaṇṇakasutta*) in order to discuss these views. I will not attempt a complete presentation and discussion of the Buddhist position regarding religious harmony to be found in the canonical materials because this has already been done adequately by others.¹² I will suggest that K.N. Jayatilleke's idea of the missionary zeal of Buddhism should be essential to inter-religious dialogue.

My research leads to the conclusion that Buddhist inter-religious dialogue has an underlying moral basis. The elements of pluralism and relativism do not do justice to the Buddhist position. The missionary character as well as the tolerant approach of Buddhism is conveyed by the Middle Way, which should be understood according to all of its cognitive and behavioral aspects. Finally, my research suggests that the Buddhist approach is very pragmatic and that it proposes the creation of legal conventions to sustain harmony in the current situation of multi-religious society. I will now proceed to analyze two Discourses in the Buddhist canon.

SANDAKA-SUTTA; THE MORAL DISCOURSE

*Sandakasutta*¹³ of the *Majjhimanikāya*¹⁴ is an evaluation of religion from the Buddha's point of view. The Discourse identifies two types of philosophical position. First, there are philosophical positions that are acceptable as a basis for religious practices although they are not satisfactory. Secondly, there are philosophical positions that are totally unacceptable as a basis for religious practices. These two types of philosophical position lead to two systems of religious belief:

A. Systems of religious belief that are unacceptable (*abrahmacariyavāsā*):

¹⁰ op. cit. Tilakaratne, Asanga. (2020). 168

¹¹ Crook, John H. (2009). *World Crisis and Buddhist Humanism*. New Age Books. New Delhi.

¹² See. Premasiri, P. D. *Buddhist Principles that Promote Interreligious Harmony*. Vesak. Peace and Harmony. Nagananda International Buddhist University. Kelaniya. 105

¹³ The Discourse was delivered by venerable Ānanda to one wandering ascetic named Sandaka. Venerable Ānanda says what he said was the Buddha's position.

¹⁴ *The Majjhimanikāya* Vol. I (ed. V. Trenckner). (1979). London: The Pali Text Society. 618

1. The belief that the individual is entirely composed of material elements which vanish at death (nihilism).
 2. The belief that moral values are not effective.
 3. Systems of belief that deny causation.
 4. Systems of belief that accept deterministic salvation and thereby reject free-will.
- B. Systems of religious belief that are without consolation (*anassāsikāni-brahmacariyāni*)
1. Religions that ascribe omniscience to a teacher.
 2. Religions that are based on a tradition of revelation.
 3. Religions that are based on logical reasoning and metaphysical speculation.
 4. Religions that are inconsistent due to the ignorance and the delusion of the teacher.

The Buddha's identification of those faiths was totally based on the religious milieu of his time.¹⁵ Materialists and determinists belonged to the first category. Traditional Brahmins, Jains, the famous teacher Sañjaya Belathiputta and other wandering ascetics (*Ājīvakas*) represented the second category. The Jain tradition claimed their teacher Mahāvīra all-knowing, which meant complete knowing and seeing (*aparisesaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ*) and they thought his omniscience was present all the time (*satataṃ samitaṃ ñāṇadassanaṃ*). The Buddha rejected this idea for himself.

The Buddha claimed three kinds of knowledge (clairvoyance, retro-cognition and knowledge of the destruction of defiling impulses) and these were active only when concentration was focused on them, that is, whenever he wished (*ākankhāmī*).¹⁶ Traditions of revelation provided sacred teachings and it was Brahmanism that was the most popular religious system of revelation at the time of the Buddha. No particular religion could be categorically identified that accepted logical reasoning alone as authentic. There were, however, many philosophical assumptions drawn on 'being' and on the importance of logic and reason to understand the world. In the Discourse of Net of Views, many such assumptions were introduced. Sañjaya was the well-known teacher for maintaining an inconsistent position regarding one's own views. These kinds of philosophies were like an eel which can easily escape from being caught. Similarly, these philosophies always avoided definite answers to questions.

¹⁵. Jayatilleke, (1963). *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. Kalupahana, D. J. (1976). *Buddhist Philosophy, A Historical Analysis*. Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii. 3-14

¹⁶. op. cit. *The Majjhimanikāya* Vol. I. 482

The Discourse is very direct that the views of the second category are accepted within the fold of holy life. We find it not difficult to surmise why the first four positions were regarded as a-religious (*abrahmacariya*). Those views negate holy life and they consequently cause moral degradation of the individual on one hand. On the other hand, the religions of the second category can be held responsible even though they are without consolation due to the fact that they do not lead the individual to understand that which the Buddha considered to be truly wholesome (*nārādheyya ñāyaṃ dhammaṃ kusalaṃ*). Whether or not a particular view obscures moral responsibility is the criterion for differentiating between holy and un-holy views.

The Buddha accepted the significance of the holy life whatever the faith and truth of their positions. The Discourse clearly shows that the acceptance of different religions depends on their existence as well as a relative evaluation of those religions based on truth. But a critical remark is directed to the identification of three types of religion. Firstly, the effort to lead a holy life, which is not described in the Discourse but is definitely the teaching of the Buddha. A religion can claim to being perfect in all respects. Secondly, there are religions which are not fully satisfactory but which are not necessarily wrong. These are the religions that are without consolation (*anassāsikāni brahmacariyāni*). Thirdly, there are pseudo-religions. The Buddha's reason to reject them as religions is that their views are inimical to a moral life.

It is important to note that the Buddha identified his teaching within the broader category of religion. An interesting observation is made by Malalasekera and Jayatilleke¹⁷ as to whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy. After reflecting on the same sources, the two scholars conclude that Buddhism is fully eligible to be called a religion:

The word used for religion in Buddhism is *brahmacariya* which may be translated as 'ideal life,' but it is a word used with a very wide connotation to cover any way of life which any one may consider to be ideal as a consequence of his holding a certain set of beliefs about the nature and destiny of the man in the universe. Using the term religion (*brahmacariya*) in one of the *suttas*, Ananda, one of the immediate disciples of the Buddha distinguishes the sense in which Buddhism is a religion by showing how it differs from other religions.

It is noteworthy that while accepting his own teaching as one among the religions, the Buddha describes other contemporary religions critically either as unsatisfactory and or as fake religions. While showing an exclusivist position regarding truth and values,

¹⁷. Malalasekera and Jayatilleke, (1958). *Buddhism and Race Questions*. UNESCO. 14-15

Buddhism, like most of the other religions, is tolerant of other religions. The pluralistic outlook, which is exclusivist with respect to its claim to truth and value but relative in relation to other religions, is given expression in this Discourse.

APNNAKA SUTTA: THE MORAL DISCOURSE

The Discourse (*sutta*) is in two parts and was first delivered by the Buddha to a group of householders in a village of Brahmins living in Sālā (situated in the Kosala Kingdom). These Brahmins do not seem to have had a firm faith in any religious teacher. The first part deals with the elaboration of the Buddhist position concerning unverifiable religious positions and the second part is about different types of people (for example, those who torment themselves).

In the first part of the Discourse, the Buddha presents certain moral criteria for the acceptance of unverifiable religious convictions. The criteria pertain to the following five kinds of beliefs that were being circulated at that time:

- 1) nihilism (*natthivāda*)
- 2) non-doing; that is, the inefficacy of moral conduct (*akiriyyvāda*)
- 3) non-causality (*ahetuvāda*)
- 4) non-existence of the material world
- 5) the view that beings do not cease to exist.

With regard to the first three points, the Buddha's position as to how someone should act is the same and he points out the issues involved in accepting these first three points. According to him, if an ascetic or a Brahmin proposes either nihilism, non-doing or non-causality, it would be evident that they were not taking due care to maintain mastery of their body, speech and mind. The Buddha then presents his position regarding these views, which is that (1) there will be a next life;¹⁸ (2) moral conduct has its efficacy; and (3) causality is a reality. The Buddha argues that if such truths are recognized and accepted then believing these truths would be called 'right view' (*sammā diṭṭhi*). Moreover, to adopt this view would be 'right intention' (*sammā saṅkappa*). When one affirms that there is a next life, one has engaged in 'right speech' (*sammā vācā*) and finally, if one makes it known to others, one has 'true conviction' (*saddhamma saññatti*). Interestingly, the Buddha says that when one has acquired 'true conviction', one does not need to exalt oneself and to disparage others (*nevattānukkanseti na paraṃ vambheti*) by thinking that only oneself is correct and that all others are incorrect (*idaṃeva saccaṃ moghaṃaññam*).

Next, the Buddha proposes the type of position that one is required to maintain concerning unverifiable moral positions. What a wise person should do is to choose the kind of practice that will make him safe here and now and in the next life (if there

¹⁸. This is so because the next life was empirically evident to the Buddha.

is a next life). The Buddha says that, if one accepts non-doing, one's view would not only be contrary to those ascetics and Brahmins who accept the possibility of a next life but such a person could experience suffering in the next life (if there is a next life). If a person accepts the next life and observes the good conduct of his body, speech and mind, he would be safe because he would not be subject to the criticism of the ascetics and the Brahmins. There would also be no suffering for him in the next life, if there is a next life. These views are called "incontrovertible practice" (*apaṇṇako dhammo*).¹⁹

Regarding the next two points, the non-existence of the material world and the cessation of beings, the Buddha says that one cannot make a decision about these matters. Instead, the wise person should accept that there is not sufficient evidence to make a decision about these matters. Hence, he should not think that only his own view is true and that everyone else is wrong (*idhmeva saccam moghamāññam*). Regarding the thesis of the immaterial world, the wise person will be of the view that he will be born in the material world if the view of the ascetics is correct that there is no immaterial world. However, he will be born in the immaterial world if the view about the existence of the immaterial world is correct. In this way, a person makes himself safe by preparing himself to be born in the immaterial world because the material world contains all types of conflicts and misery.

The same type of discussion can be applied to the point about cessation of all beings. A wise person knows that, if the view of those who deny the cessation of beings is true, he will be born again after death in the immaterial world and if the view of those who accept the cessation of beings is true, he could here and now attain *nibbāna*. The Buddha says that the wise person should consider the belief of the ascetics and the Brahmins that there is no cessation of beings as a view that leads to lust, bondage, delight in sensory pleasure, and clinging. But the view regarding the cessation of beings does not lead to such consequences. For these reasons, the Buddha accepts the view regarding the possibility of the cessation of beings.

In the second part of the Discourse, the Buddha introduces four persons as follows: 1) the person who torments himself and pursues the practice of self-torture such as an ascetic who advocates self-mortification; 2) the person who torments others and pursues the practice of torturing others such as those who follow the occupation of a butcher; 3) the person who torments himself and others and pursues the practice of torturing himself and others such as a powerful king or a well-to-do Brahmin whose slaves undergo hardship for his sake; and 4) the person who does not torment himself or others and does not pursue the practice of torturing himself and others. These are

¹⁹ *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. (2009). (trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi). Boston: Wisdom Publication. 506

the people who have set out on the noble path of liberation. The Buddha then explains the way to the practice of the noble path of liberation to this fourth kind of person.

The more pragmatic solution to many unverifiable views that are in opposition to one another is called *apaṇṇaka dhamma*, which is also translated as *sure-dhamma*²⁰ or as the incontrovertible practice.²¹ This is a practice that can definitely lead to happiness and liberation and it is illustrated in the first of the *Jātaka* tales named *Apaṇṇaka Jātaka*. In the *nidānakathā* of the *Jātaka*, the Buddha advises a group of friends of millionaire *Anāthapiṇḍika*, a person who became a follower of the Buddha by listening to his Discourse but who later ceased to be a follower as soon as the Buddha had gone away. When the Buddha heard about this, he explained to his followers how unsuitable it was for them to discard the Buddhist path that consisted of the triple gems. The Buddha emphasized that his teaching was a *sure-dhamma* leading towards liberation.

Another *Jātaka* tale relates the story of two merchants who were engaged in trade in faraway places and who had to travel along desert routes. On one occasion, when the two merchants were getting ready to cross a desert, one merchant was concerned about the danger of crossing the desert and requested the other, the Bodhisattva, to let him go first. After considering the advantages and disadvantages of crossing the desert second, the Bodhisattva did not reject his companion's wish to be the first to cross the desert. In this story, we see an example of the incontrovertible behavior of the Bodhisattva. The *Jātaka* tale is named *apaṇṇaka Jātaka* either because the teaching of the Buddha in the first part of the story points clearly to the path of liberation or because the Bodhisattva showed incontrovertible behavior in response to the proposal of the other merchant. The commentary on the *Apaṇṇaka Jātaka* suggests both these meanings of the term 'incontrovertible' (*aviruddham*) and 'sure' (of leading to happiness and release) (*nīyāṇikaṃ ekantahitasukhāvaha*).²²

'Incontrovertible' practice seems to depend on the moral nature of the context. In the *Saṅkhaṇḍaka Jātaka*.²³ in which the term occurs again, the king serpent was not revengeful towards his tormenting hunters. 'Incontrovertible' practice is a moral position that is devoid of conflict at a moment of crisis or challenge. In short, the following are the important views contained in the Discourse of *Apaṇṇakasutta*.

²⁰ *The Collection of Middle Length Sayings (Majjhimanikāya)* III (trans. I.B. Horner). (1975). London: The Pali Text Society. 72

²¹ *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* I (trans. Robert Chalmers). (1973). London: The Pali Text Society. 1

²² *Jātakaṭṭhakathā*, I. (ed. Vidurupola Piyatissa). (1926). Colombo: Simon Hewawitharana Bequest Publications. 97

²³ *The Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births* V (trans. H.T. Francis). (1973). London: The Pali Text Society. 84

- There are religious views that are intellectually unverifiable. In such a situation, a more pragmatic solution is prescribed under the name of *sure-dhamma* or ‘incontrovertible’ practice.
- While some religious views seem to be metaphysical, they are not metaphysical for the Buddha because he could empirically affirm such views – not by ordinary perception but by way of supra-sensory (*atindriya*) perception. When the truth was empirically evident, the Buddha was right to include it in his Discourse. It is clear that the Discourse about the empirically-evident truth is connected with the eight-fold noble path. Being convinced about the truth is Right View (*sammā diṭṭhi*); confirming that view is Right Intention (*sammās saṅkappa*) and articulating that view is Right Speech (*sammā vācā*). Communicating that view is based on ‘true conviction’ (*saddhamma saññatti*). In the pursuit of ‘true conviction,’ it is not correct to exalt oneself by disparaging others.
- In the second part of the Discourse, the Buddha highlights the non-violence of his teaching regarding the four-fold division of those who engage in tormenting others and those who refrain from doing so. The ‘incontrovertible’ practice is an expression of non-violence and is, therefore, associated with tolerance.

The conclusion to the fore-going explanation is that some Buddhist views are sympathetic and others are critical regarding teachings that are not truly moral in nature. This explanation does not only highlight the freedom of a person to identify with any morally acceptable religious belief but also affirms the right of each person to convey his belief to others in a suitable way.

From the Buddhist point of view, the truth is acceptable irrespective of whether it is found in nihilism, moral efficacy, or causality. Buddha also accepted partial truths or individual truths. Commenting on partial or individual truths in relation to the parable of the blind men and the elephant, Jayatilleke says “they have elements of truth but are deluded in ascribing to the whole of reality what are true only of the parts or, in other words, what is partially true”.²⁴ Even though a particular system of belief as a whole is found to be incompatible with one’s own beliefs, certain dimensions of this system can be accepted. In this way, the Buddha was able to accept many contemporary religious beliefs and practices. For instance, many techniques of concentration and meditation that the Buddha considered to be of vital importance in

²⁴. op. cit. Jayatilleke. K.N. (1980). 354

the path of liberation were unknown to the pre-Buddhist ascetics but the Buddha made use of such methods and beliefs after having made certain modifications.

To conclude, *Apaṇṇakasutta* is a very relevant and effective guide in modern circumstances because it proposes a way of overcoming harmful confrontation with those who hold religious views that are in opposition to our own views.

THE MIDDLE WAY IN A MULTI - RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

The foregoing discussion clarifies the Buddhist position regarding relations with other religions. We could summarize the various possibilities discussed so far as follows.

- The Buddha never denied the possibility of religious pluralism. In fact, he recognized the right to hold different religious views.
- The Buddhist position can also be seen as inclusivist because it understands any particular teaching in the context of other religions (*brahmacariya*).
- However, the Buddhist position is exclusivist by its claim to truth. Every teaching other than its own is considered either to be without a clear foundation or to be simply wrong.
- Human beings have the right to discuss truths that seem evident to them.
- Buddhism promotes non-violence and tolerance.
- Human beings have a right to promote their own religion provided they observe moral principles. But genuine conviction (*saddhamma-saññatti*) does not encourage self-aggrandizement by disparaging others.
- Human beings may be critical in their evaluation of other religions.

Each of these aspects of the Buddhist viewpoint has a contribution to make in the context of multi-religious society. The Buddha never denied the possibility of religious pluralism.

In fact, the whole of Buddhist practice is based on what is called the Middle Way. Individual practice as well as communal practice can both be expressions of the Middle Way (*majjhima paṭipadā*), which should be understood as the avoidance of extreme views in all cognitive and behavioral aspects. The Middle Way avoids both self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*) and self-indulgence (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) and presents the eight-fold noble path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*) as the correct path. Moreover, the Middle Way has different forms in different contexts.

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- The appearance of psychological and physical phenomena is dependent on many other phenomena.²⁵ The Middle Way refers to this reality as the dependently-co-arising.
- In the political arena, the Buddha did not support either monarchy or federation but favored the right implementation of both forms of governance.
- As far as the monastic life is concerned, the Buddha did not deny the physical comforts of life for his disciples but only advised them against desiring objects of pleasure.
- With regard to epistemology, the Buddha denied both idealism and materialism and analyzed the psycho-physical combinations that lead to perception.
- Finally, the Buddha denied both materialism and re-incarnation. Instead, he advocated re-becoming, by which he meant the continuation of life and the re-appearance of a changed individual.²⁶ The Buddha also rejected determinism and the idea that events occurred without any cause.

The Middle Way or the Middle Path is described in various kinds of Buddhist discourse. It explains how to avoid all types of extreme positions and encourages us to recognize the many factors that cause social or psycho-corporeal phenomena. The most effective way to understand the Buddhist approach to inter-religious dialogue is to view it from the perspective of the Middle Way.

CONCLUSION

I have not discussed the complexity of the Buddhist positions regarding inter-religious dialogue as presented in scholarly literature. Inter-religious encounters or formal dialogue should be undertaken by observing the basic Buddhist practice of the Middle Way. In this article, I have argued that inter-religious dialogue is accepted by every open-minded, unbiased, moderate form of Buddhism.

All the major religions today are missionary religions with millions of followers spread all over the globe. Attracting followers and gaining the recognition and support of others has been a fundamental urge within the Buddhist tradition. The practice of religion has also become more significant in the technological world which pushes and pulls human beings in different directions. The missionary urge of different religions is part of this modern reality.²⁷

²⁵. Karunadasa, Y. (2015). *Early Buddhist Teachings. The Middle Position in Theory and Practice*. Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies. 23

²⁶. Kalupahana, D. J. (2006). *Karma and Rebirth, Foundations of Buddha's Moral Philosophy*. Dehiwala: Buddhist Cultural Centre. 157-58

²⁷. Jones, K. (2003). *The New Social Face of Buddhism*. Boston: Wisdom Publication. 95

Scholars have discussed the fruitless discussions between the followers of the Buddha and the founders of other religious traditions in India through which the latter have tried to suppress or defeat the former in debate or in other unacceptable ways. However, the friendly encounters between the Buddha and the followers of other religions have also been recorded in the canonical literature of Buddhism.²⁸ These records suggest that Buddhist encounters have been based on mutual respect, acceptance of the right for missionary endeavor and the preservation of an attitude of tolerance. The Buddhist approach presents a logical, pragmatic and humane base for the development of inter-religious harmony.

At a time when different religious institutions and their followers were abundant, interreligious harmony still existed in Buddhist societies despite occasional challenges. In the present day, good relations between religions should be promoted not merely through social conventions but also by means of policies and legal practices. But without respect, love and understanding, any number of legal conventions will not be effective.²⁹ ■

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²⁸. op. cit. Premasiri. (2015). 105-120

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