

## **Religion and cultural effects in the ASEAN community**

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The Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established to unite various countries in South-east Asia for mutual benefit. One purpose that ASEAN has emphasized is to 'promote...collaboration and mutual assistance on...economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields'. From these factors, we must realize that all development of ASEAN starts from social and cultural foundations because ASEAN is made up of nations, which are distinguished by their social and cultural identities from each other. Understanding who these nations are today requires a look at their histories. Much of the social values that ASEAN countries share can be traced to the early influences of Chinese and Indian cultures. As a Buddhist monk, my study and interactions with these cultures has been through religion, so I will put forth my understanding of ASEAN nations accordingly to anticipate its history and its future challenges.

### **Buddhist influence on Asian history**

The beliefs of a population can be more indicative of cultural identity more than their political designation. Some countries have only been in existence for less than a century, but they have groups that have had beliefs for centuries, including some of the present nations that participate as part of ASEAN. A traditional way of cultural belief is through religion, and

Buddhism is a major part of Asian history. Theravāda Buddhist teaching and practice came from India, and Mahayana Buddhist teaching and practice came from China. Although their cultures were different, they shared teachings from the Buddha, which has offered sound principles in the past and in the present day. Twenty-three centuries ago, King Asoka of India sent missionaries to many Asian countries. These missionaries introduced Buddhism to people who had indigenous beliefs and Hindu beliefs; consequently, these people adopted Buddhist culture in their daily lives without any clashes. Because of the acceptance of Buddhism without any resistance, Buddhists and non-Buddhists in these places coexisted peacefully. Local communities and their kings gave support to build temples. For example, Angkor Wat was an important religious site in Cambodia. Buddhism was accepted in this community, so Buddhists also practiced with non-Buddhists here. Since then, Angkor Wat has become more popular as a Buddhist temple. Buddhism also spread to other countries, such as Indonesia and Myanmar, where the ancient monuments of Borobudur and Bagan respectively were erected while other religions were also active. Nakhon Pathom in Thailand is famous for being Thailand's oldest city, and it is where Buddhism was introduced to the Thai people. It is also interesting to see that Indian folk stories and Buddhist stories are painted on the walls in Buddhist temples in Thailand. Images of Hindu gods can also be seen there. When we travel to these historical places, we can see the strong support that their countries had for Buddhism by seeing magnificent structures that exist to this day. We can also see Buddhist influence in the past and present languages in ASEAN countries, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, where words were and still are used in their daily lives. These languages can be traced to the ancient Pāli and Sanskrit languages that the Buddhist missionaries introduced.

## **Principles of Buddhism**

One reason that Buddhism has been popular in Asia is in its non-violent attitude and easy acceptance with local beliefs. For twenty-five centuries, Buddhism has had no aggressive recruitments or invasions using religion as a justification. All levels of people from kings to laborers accepted and respected the teaching. They found that the teachings of the Buddha ensured justice and equality. For the Buddha, everyone was equal. He said that people should not be judged by the environments that they are born into but by their actions. This open attitude has made Buddhism appealing to many people of various cultural backgrounds.

Learning to work and live together with people from different cultures strengthens cooperation. Religious differences have been obstacles to peaceful coexistence in many parts of the world where people have been struggling to live in peace. Fortunately, Buddhism's presence in many of the ASEAN nations did not cause religious conflicts that other areas in the world have experienced for centuries. Buddhism has basic teachings of acceptance of conditions and understanding that can give momentum to the principles that govern peaceful resolution. Buddhism teaches us how to develop friendliness, compassion, harmony, and peace. It does not accept caste systems or creeds. It teaches us that spiritual development can help us to overcome our unsatisfying craving and desires, which cause suffering. It offers methods of training one's thoughts to lead a harmonious life. Its ethical teachings add social value where people respect each other. Buddhist teaching emphasizes respect also for the environment because we are all interconnected. Such principles can guide communities and nations to find common ground.

## **Experiencing cultural mixing**

Today, the world is more mixed in race and religion through international influence from travel, communication, and other widespread interactions. South-east Asia is a special case because there is no other region on this planet with languages of French, English, Dutch, and Spanish as well as a wide variety of religions, such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Taoism. Indian, Chinese, and local cultures blend in folk religions, beliefs, food, clothing, and architecture. I have first-hand experience with the ASEAN region as I travel there almost every month, so I see changes on a regular basis. I have travelled through ASEAN countries for more than 40 years and lived in the region for about a decade. I have encountered people who have practiced different religions and spoke different languages within the same family. I have talked to people from increasingly differing backgrounds whether they are locals or travelers as I am, so it is interesting to discuss with them the direction that ASEAN is taking in becoming an active contributor to our global economy.

## **Growing pressures of diversity**

We know that the histories of this region involved colonial powers for a long time before becoming independent countries. Foreign rulers brought their religious and ethnic groups to the native population, which mixed and diversified their cultures. These people lived in harmony despite differences in culture in the family and in the community. For example, in Malaysia and Singapore, we can see clear diversity and complexity. Here also are Malay, Chinese, Indians, and Europeans; religions include Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Chinese religions; languages include Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English. Although these people seem to coexist well in a mixed environment, animosities have arisen, which has affected security and economic stability.

### **Cultural identity through religion**

One polarizing facet among different communities is the influence of religion. It can divide communities and countries, resulting in hatred, violence, and wars. On the other hand, religion can unite different communities and countries by creating a harmonious environment. For example, we can see what happened to the island of Timor, which is now divided because of religious differences. In the Philippines, different religious groups fight for land and power. In southern Thailand, there are conflicts and violence influenced by religious or cultural differences. In Indonesia, the Aceh community is trying to be independent to preserve their cultural identity. However, as tumultuous as these areas are, they also manage to cooperate with other nations, which ASEAN is an example of. Neighboring countries, such as Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, are friendly with each other and respect each other's cultures. Nations that have developed into different identities still manage to find ways to get along for mutual prosperity.

### **Losing morality for personal gain**

As a Buddhist monk, it is natural for me to think of these various cultures in terms of their religions. When ASEAN was established in 1967, it did not make any comments about religion. Maybe the founders did not expect religion to be an essential factor in peace-building in this region. However, the countries that were and are part of ASEAN have had various faiths and religions, including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and others. With such a complex history and cultural identity, we must be mindful of the diversity of each country in terms of people before we can consider their financial prosperity. Cultural and religious issues are much more important than money-making programs. Countries should not be only suppliers of goods and services. We should pay more attention to the well-being of their citizens, which cannot be imported. I remember that the former president of Taiwan said that the Taiwanese government paid so much attention to build infrastructure but neglected ethical values and social engagement. As a result, citizens have developed a desire towards personal, material gain instead of strengthening the community. I believe that the effect of such thinking will result in a loss of material gain because an unstable community cannot provide for itself or its citizens, so we must look beyond what is emotionally appealing and instead understand the long-term effects of our decisions.

### **The price of mismanaged priorities**

ASEAN countries cannot forget the moral basis that established their cultures because a place without order is a place that is unstable. Science and technology can help us to improve our quality of life, but if there is moral decline and growing obsession with money and materialism becomes prioritized, then these things will destroy peace of mind and relationships with the community. ASEAN countries have a long history of major world religions and deep-rooted cultures. Therefore, these issues cannot be ignored. All the religious leaders have to work closely with politicians and businesses of society to avoid conflicts among diverse communities and loss of security. We all have to work together for peaceful coexistence. Until we make constructive efforts to study root causes and understand the role of religious communities and their influence in different ways, the goal of a peaceful community cannot happen. Ignoring these issues may create great challenges to national and regional peace.

As urgent as some places in the ASEAN region need help, we must be mindful of the help that these people receive. In looking at political, economic, and religious aspects of society, religion is most vulnerable to impulsive action. Once religiously attached people become involved heavily in politics, foreign countries or foreign

religious groups can influence and dominate them with harmful ideologies. Political, ethnic, or religious conflicts destroy harmonious co-existence. Once this kind of conflict begins in one country, it can spread across regions and become detrimental to national unity and regional cooperation. There are many insurgent movements in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Myanmar. Frequent social unrest and violence can be seen and heard increasingly these days. These movements can grow and affect other countries, which will develop more tension on a regional level.

With all of these cultural challenges, creating a peaceful community is not an easy task. ASEAN has focused on building economic development, but there is more than looking for money, buildings, roads, and modern equipment. It is important for society as a whole to be concerned with the health of each person's body and mind. Social conflict begins when citizens do not have healthy minds. Educating the general public about social differences, including cultural and religious beliefs and practices will improve good communication and strengthen economic development.

### **Education and collaboration**

Educating each other about cultural differences in a multi-cultural society is very important. This is true for not only the ASEAN region but also for the rest of the world because we have become a global community. Travelling and living in different cultures have become easier to do than ever before. We can learn from other parts of the world to see how they have succeeded with complicated social conditions. I have talked about my understanding of ASEAN; now I would like to talk about my experiences from other parts of the world. The United States is another multi-cultural and multi-religious society that I am active in. I work with members of other religions to address concerns and issues of our community. Since 1980 in southern California, especially in the Los Angeles area, I and other religious leaders have developed friendliness and mutual respect for each other's religions. We participate in religious services and conduct joint activities. As an interfaith group, we work together when there is an issue or a disaster. For example, when tsunamis hit Asia, the religious communities in Los Angeles got together to raise funds to support affected areas. Los Angeles had its own problems with riots in the 1990s, but religious leaders worked with politicians and law enforcement to put local communities in order. Although we come from different faiths, we still come together to support each other and resolve problems. Religious leaders show unity, which gains acceptance and respect from elected officials and faith communities.

### **Moving forward as a group**

We cannot exist alone; globalization has made it clear that we are interdependent on each other. The influence of varying cultures, differing socio-economic environments, and political diversity mean that Buddhist principles are needed more than ever for peace, which is essential for economic stability and ASEAN's goals. The teachings of self-reliance, self-responsibility, and contentment are not a threat to any political ideologies. The history of South-east Asia is replete with conflict, including religious differences and cultural disharmony. Violence has often been the result. ASEAN has represented a unified effort of involved nations to effect peaceful resolution and harmonious relations. Some promises of a better life for citizens have been achieved, but in many cases, there is still much work to be done.

I believe that Buddhist principles can be applied where political hatred, religious intolerance, and territorial disputes exist. Those situations can create unfriendly, war-like environments. A culture that is enriched by Buddhist teachings can minimize conflict and promote relationships with different communities. A key concept in

Buddhism is karma, which says that every action is linked through cause and effect. The interconnected world at present demonstrates this connection every day. Local causes can produce effects far away, so we must be mindful of the consequences that result from our actions. However, the problems of the world are too big of a responsibility for only Buddhists or members of any religion to address. Unity among all people is necessary for society to be stable. Without unity, conflicts arise. We can achieve unity through acceptance. Buddhism offers an attitude of acceptance, but people cannot practice religion peacefully in times of aggression. Acceptance requires mutual agreement. Governments can enforce this with legal authority. Religious leaders can do their part by talking to the community and possibly prevent conflicts from being serious enough to warrant governmental action. All of us can do our part towards achieving peace and harmony.

There have been efforts worldwide to address these issues, of which we can see ASEAN as an example. I was involved recently with ASEAN when it called on leaders from various faiths to attend its First Interfaith Dialogue on Religious Tolerance in 2014. This event was an example of global cooperation, which we can apply to our local communities as well. Whether people gather to represent their religions or nations, I believe that cooperation through dialogue is essential for this peace-making process. The more that we can understand others, the more we can respect each other and work together without enmity. We should not separate ourselves because of our differences but instead treat each other as members of a global community.