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The Thudong Bhikkhu Pilgrimage: A Reflection of Relational Harmony in Indonesia's Interreligious Dialogue Discourse

Candra Dvi Jayanti 

Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies,
Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

Correspondence Author

candradvijayanti@mail.ugm.ac.id

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Abstract

Thousands of kilometres travelled by 32 *thudong* monks from Thailand to Indonesia was not only a spiritual moment for the participants but also a historical event in Indonesian interfaith relations. Given the abundance of enthusiasm, this article aims to explain the purity of interfaith harmony created by local communities and Thai monks, who also contributed to promoting interfaith dialogue discourse among grassroots communities. By delving into the internet, a netnography approach is used to get a deeper and broader understanding of the events by comparing one digital document with another. In the interfaith encounters along the pilgrimage highway, both parties exhibited reciprocal behaviours of shared feelings and kindness that encouraged them to complete the ritual mission together. They were able to dismantle the religious barriers that frequently impede harmonious interfaith relations as a result of warm acceptance, hospitable interactions, and engaging dialogue on-site and via social media.

Keywords: relational harmony, interreligious relation, Buddhist pilgrimage, *thudong* tradition, Theravada Buddhism.

Introduction

The spiritual journey undertaken by the Thailand-Indonesia *thudong* monks by walking thousands of kilometers from March to June 2023 not only provided practitioners personal benefits but also became a moment of interfaith history in Indonesia. This spiritual group has been warmly welcomed by the general public, religious leaders, and interfaith organizations that have also contributed to their journey since they arrived in Indonesia, specifically in Batam, on May 8, 2023. In welcoming the arrival and accompanying the journey of the *thudong* bhikkhu from Batam to Borobudur Temple, the enthusiasm of the Indonesian people exceeded all reasonable limits.¹ This acceptance and participation were experienced not only by Buddhists in Indonesia but by all communities along the north coast, regardless of ethnicity, religion, race, or group.

This tradition is uncommon in Indonesia but is widely practiced in Thailand, a country with a Buddhist majority. *Thudong*, or *dhutanga* in Pali, is an ascetic practice consisting of thirteen rules that cover the three primary bases of restriction: clothing, food, and shelter.² Even so, this practice is not extensively practiced by monks, and only those with a strong desire and intent to practice *thudong* are considered practitioners. The practice of *thudong* is synonymous with a more difficult ascetic lifestyle characterised by living in forests or the outdoors, limiting possessions, including monk's clothes and equipment, and journeying long distances on foot, which is a common practice of *thudong* monks.³ The essence of their asceticism is the practice of meditation, so the monks' long journey to visit sacred or historical Buddhist sites is also a meditation practice and *puja* or paying homage.

Thudong practice made interfaith encounters involving thousands of people, from extending hospitality to engaging in kindness throughout the journey, demonstrating interreligious relational harmony. This is intriguing because the plan to practice *thudong* in Indonesia has become a communal concern among relatives of monks in the Sangha in various countries due to the stigma of poor interfaith relations in Indonesia and the strong image of Muslim radicalism, so it is feared that violence will occur in the name of religion during worship.⁴ In this instance, the global image of interreligious relations in Indonesia appears to fall into three contradictory yet complementary categories: first, the appearance of harmonious and equitable interreligious relations can be attributed to the accomplishment of legal reforms and the receipt of "peace" awards by foreign institutions; second, the societal orientation is western-centered, secular, and liberal; and third, Indonesia serves as a place where various religious conflicts arise, including

¹ Regina Rukmorini, "Tiba di Candi Borobudur, Bisku *Thudong* Ingin Selalu Kembali ke Indonesia," *kompas.id*, June 1, 2023, Nusantara edition, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2023/06/01/bisku-thudong-melakukan-meditasi-dan-pradaksina-di-candi-borobudur>.

² Bhikkhu Khantipalo, *With Robes and Bowl: Glimpses of the Thudong Bhikkhu Life* (Sri Lanka: The Wheel Publication, 1986), 3-6, https://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/robes-bowl6.pdf.

³ Devinda, "The 13 Ascetic Practices," *dhammadana.org* (blog), 2007, <https://en.dhammadana.org/sangha/dhutanga.htm>.

⁴ Regina Rukmorini, "Pertukaran Kebaikan Sepanjang Jalan Menuju Candi Borobudur," *kompas.id*, June 3, 2023, Nusantara edition, <https://www.kompas.id/baca/nusantara/2023/06/02/pertukaran-kebaikan-sepanjang-jalan-menuju-candi-borobudur>.

terrorism.⁵ The reality, however, is that the response of the Indonesian people, including the majority of Muslims, is extremely enthusiastic, friendly, and open; they are even willing to provide help in any form to facilitate the Bhikkhus' spiritual journey. Thus, the moment of interaction between the *Thudong* monks and the local Indonesian community is a moment of reflection on the framing of interfaith relations, which are still constrained by their respective religious norms, which are extremely ambiguous, and on the expectation that genuine interfaith relations will have materialised as a result of their behaviour in this phenomenon.

The dynamics of interfaith relations compel the author to analyze in greater depth the interactions between *thudong* bhikkhu and the local Indonesian community in the hope that it can serve as an alternative for a broader and more dynamic understanding of interreligious relationships. Deep exploration regarding how the actions of the community can be so different from the global view of interreligious relations in Indonesia, as well as why people of different religions, in vast numbers—hundreds of people at every location in the region—are able to demonstrate natural tolerance toward other religions. Consequently, this study aims to explain the natural interfaith harmony created by local communities and Thai Buddhist monks, which also contributes to promoting the dynamic discourse of interreligious dialogue amongst grassroots people. Therefore, this study addresses how this interaction between *thudong* bhikkhu and locals reflects interreligious relational harmony and mutual understanding in Indonesia's interreligious dialogue discourse.

Concept of Interreligious Relational Harmony

Pilgrimage means a journey based on religious or spiritual inspiration to a place considered more sacred, seeking a transcendental encounter with a particular object of veneration to obtain spiritual, emotional, or physical benefits.⁶ The central role of pilgrimage is to express the efforts of pilgrims who travel to sacred places for spiritual purposes and to give meaning and direction to their personal existence.⁷ In Buddhism itself, pilgrimage is known as *dhammayatra* or *dharmayatra*, which means a journey to holy or historical places related to *dhamma* (Buddhism) or the life history of Buddha Gotama. Buddhist pilgrimage serves as a means to cultivate spiritual discipline, manifest feelings of reverence, and establish a connection with the noble virtues of the Buddha.⁸

The essence of pilgrimage is to approach the sacred, enter it, experience it, approach oneself close to it, touch it, internalize it, and, if at all possible, employ it as a guide in one's everyday life.⁹ Peter Margry's research, however, demonstrates the evolution of

⁵ Syahrin Harahap, "The Image of Indonesia in the World: An Interreligious Perspective," *The IUP Journal of International Relations* X, no. 2 (April 2016): 30, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2840619>.

⁶ Peter Jan Margry, "Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?," in *Shrines and Pilgrimage in the Modern World*, ed. Peter Jan Margry (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mwt8>.

⁷ Gabriel Cooney and Louise Nugent, "Encountering the Sacred," *Archaeology Ireland* 33, no. 2 (Summer 2019) (2019): 14, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26844462>.

⁸ Budi Utomo Ditthisampanno et al., "Dharmayatra: Pilgrimage and Spiritual Journey Sacred Sites in Buddhist Pilgrims in Indonesia," *ASEAN Journal of Religious and Cultural Research* 5, no. 2 (2022): 11–12, <https://so02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/ajrcr/article/view/255928>.

⁹ Margry, *Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?*, 36.

pilgrimage over time, highlighting the profound impact that Western culture has had on the perception of sacred and profane sites, thereby undermining the meaning of pilgrimage.¹⁰ Hughes and Swan posit that the sanctity of a pilgrimage site is characterized by its status as a location deserving of veneration and devotion,¹¹ wherein beings may encounter supernatural manifestations (God) experienced by feelings of affinity with the universe, whether constructed or natural.¹² The concepts of the profane and the sacred are intricately intertwined to the extent that they have blurred boundaries within the context of pilgrimage.¹³

In this research context, the bhikkhus' rituals and interfaith encounters took place along the route from Batam to the Borobudur Temple outside of a formal framework. The main goal of this pilgrimage is Borobudur Temple, which can be classified as a sacred place for Buddhists due to its historical association with the development of dhamma and the community's need to manifest sacred significance through existing symbols.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is indisputable that monks have performed pilgrimage rituals since their initial forays to their respective destinations through land, sea, and air routes. Prior investigations conducted by Izak Y. M Lattu concerning ante-sacred rooms elucidate the manner in which hospitals, which are not inherently sacred spaces, transform into areas where religious rituals and prayers, as well as interreligious encounters, transpire.¹⁵ The research demonstrates how even profane places can attain a sacred status under certain conditions conducive to prayers and encounters. Therefore, in order to analyze the interaction process during this pilgrimage, Lattu's theory can explain the role of the highway, which was previously a profane area and became a new interreligious sphere and sacred space for both the monks and the general public.

The research conducted by Kreinath regarding a shared pilgrimage site in Hatay, Turkey, demonstrates the occurrence of interrituality and its potential to facilitate interfaith encounters among Greek and Armenian Orthodox Christians with Sunni and Alawite Muslims. Interrituality refers to the arrangement of interreligious relationships in which members of various religious communities engage in conversation, resulting in ritual postures, gestures, and movements that exhibit both commonalities and distinctions. The journey itself is a ritual for bhikkhus; similarly, serving the monks and paying homage is a ritual for Buddhists. There will be some distinctions when compared to Muslims, as Islamic rituals are customarily performed through salat and dhikr. Regarding this interaction, the rituals observed by adherents of religions other than Buddhism, including Muslims, are doing good and spreading kindness in various ways.

¹⁰ Margry, *Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?*, 13-46.

¹¹ cited in Budi Utomo Ditthisamparno et al., "Dharmayatra: Pilgrimage and Spiritual Journey Sacred Sites in Buddhist Pilgrims in Indonesia," 11.

¹² Cooney and Nugent, "Encountering the Sacred," 14.

¹³ Margry, *Secular Pilgrimage: A Contradiction in Terms?*, 31-32.

¹⁴ Tri Yatno, "Candi Borobudur sebagai Fenomena Sakral Profan: Agama dan Pariwisata Perspektif Strukturalisme Levi Strauss," *Sabbhata Yatra: Jurnal Pariwisata dan Budaya* 1, no. 1 (2020): 7-11, <https://doi.org/10.53565/sabbhatayatra.v1i1.152>.

¹⁵ Izak Y.M. Lattu, "Ante-Sacred-Space and the Interreligious Sphere in a Covid-19 ICU Room," in *Interconnectivity, Subversion, and Healing in World Christianity: Essays in Honor of Joel Carpenter*, ed. Afe Adogame & Aminta Arrington (London: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2023), 165, <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/interconnectivity-subversion-and-healing-in-world-christianity-9781350333406/>.

So, the concept of interrituality is used to show that through certain interactions, rituals become an integral part of the formation of interreligious relationships.¹⁶

There is interaction not only among those directly involved in the highway but also among those who follow this phenomenon on social media. The proliferation of news concerning the *Thudong* monks' journey on social media platforms facilitated dialogue, interaction, and the exchange of ideas among religious communities. Knitter employs the theoretical framework of "liberative dialogue," which comprises four tangible phases: compassion, conversion, collaboration, and comprehension.¹⁷ This framework is utilized to elucidate the dynamics of social media interactions. Consideration of the state of interreligious relations in Indonesia will thus be prompted to consider the notion of relational harmony, which is the result of the aforementioned interaction processes and theories. The term "relational" denotes the manner in which humans and humans, or humans and objects as well as the universe, are linked in a manner that transcends an intimate connection.¹⁸ Thus, the pilgrimage journey, interactions in sacred and profane spaces, interreligious dialogue, and interrituality will illuminate the broader context concerning the interreligious relational harmony pattern between *thudong bhikkhu* and the Indonesian people.

Research Methods

The author uses descriptive qualitative methods to analyze and interpret relevant data in order to reflect on the interreligious relationships that form organically between local communities and *thudong bhikkhu* during their spiritual journey in Indonesia.¹⁹ In addition, the author did a netnography of news updates and discussions on the internet to understand the events more deeply.²⁰ Moreover, data collection in qualitative descriptive studies focuses on discovering the nature of the specific events under study,²¹ so in this research, the author utilizes data materials generated in social media (videos related to *thudong* monks' encounters with local people, comments that match the data code, interviews documentaries, and discussions that occur in the comments column related to this topic), news articles about *thudong* monks, and previous research questionnaires.²² With this type of data, the author codes and categorizes the

¹⁶ Jens Kreinath, "Interrituality as a New Approach for Studying Interreligious Relations and Ritual Dynamics at Shared Pilgrimage Sites in Hatay, Turkey," *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 1, no. 2 (2017): 262, <https://doi.org/10.1558/isit.33618>.

¹⁷ Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 140.

¹⁸ Roseneil Sasha and Kaisa, "Relational Peons and Relational Processes: Developing the Notion of Relationality for the Sociology of Personal Life," *Sociology* 50, no. 1 (2016): 145, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038514561295>.

¹⁹ Delwyn Goodrick and Patricia J. Rogers, "Qualitative Data Analysis," in *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, ed. Kathryn E. Newcomer, Harry P. Hatry, and Joseph S. Wholey (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015), 561–95, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch22>.

²⁰ Camilla Vasquez and Derya Kulavuzonal, review of *Reviewed Work: Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online* by Robert V. Kozinets, by Robert V. Kozinets, *The Modern Language Journal* 96, no. 1 (2012): 147–48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41478823>.

²¹ Vickie Lambert and Clinton Lambert, "Qualitative Descriptive Research: An Acceptable Design," *Pacific Rim International Journal of Nursing Research* 16, no. 4 (2012): 256, <https://he02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/PRIJNR/article/view/5805/5064>.

²² Candra Dvi Jayanti, "Previous Research Data on 'Puja Waisak Lintas Negeri: Tradisi *Thudong*, Waisak, Dan Umat Buddha Indonesia'" (Unpublished, 2023), Research Data.

theme of reciprocal behavior and relational harmony, as well as the subthemes of mutual feelings and mutual understanding, which will later serve as the basis for in-depth analysis and interpretation of the moment.

Results

Reciprocal Behaviour Along the Sacred Road

Buddhism, which arrived on the Indonesian archipelago around the fifth century AD, is among the earliest religions in the country. The Hindu-Buddhist kingdom in the archipelago experienced a period of prominence before the advent of Islamic civilization in the 14th century.²³ Subsequently, the religion experienced a prolonged extinction lasting hundreds of years. Buddhism regained recognition in Indonesia in 1952 as a result of the endeavors of Bhante Ashin Jinarakkhita.²⁴ As of now, the documented Buddhist populace in Indonesia amounts to 2.01 million people, constituting 0.72% of the country's total population of 280.73 million people.²⁵ Particularly among the Indonesian people at large, Buddhism's practices, traditions, teachings, and rituals remain largely unknown due to the religion's relatively small adherent population. The arrival of the Thai *thudong* monks in Indonesia is evidence of Buddhism's global presence in the country. It provides the Indonesian people with a dictionary of information regarding existing Buddhist traditions. Thailand is a Buddhist nation that adheres to the Theravada, which is considered the most ancient and authentic branch of Buddhism, preserving its earliest teachings.

As previously stated, the *thudong* tradition is not widely practiced by laypeople or Indonesian Buddhist monks. As indicated by prior research findings, a mere 19 people (35.85%) out of 53 Indonesian Buddhists were informed about the *thudong* tradition prior to its introduction to Indonesia. Furthermore, this knowledge was only strengthened through the practitioners' pursuit of information subsequent to the ritual's performance.²⁶ This percentage is derived from a minuscule sample of Buddhists in Indonesia, which also reflects the level of pre-existing knowledge regarding other religions related to Buddhist tradition. The logistics, terrain, and other preparations for this first spiritual journey in Indonesia were partly facilitated by the Maha Kassapa Thera Foundation. The *thudong* organizing foundation is based in Cirebon, West Java, and is led by Bhikkhu Kantadhammo, a single *thudong* participant from Indonesia.²⁷

The Bhikkhus' journey began on March 23, 2023, from Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand, with 27 bhikkhus from Thailand, 4 bhikkhus from Malaysia, and 1 bhikkhu from Indonesia. The group walked from Thailand to Malaysia, crossed into Singapore, and arrived in Batam, Indonesia, on May 8, 2023. They continued the journey to

²³ M. C. Ricklefs, *Mengislamkan Jawa: Sejarah Islamisasi di Jawa dan Penentangannya dari 1930 Sampai Sekarang*, trans. F. X. Dono Sunardi and Satrio Wahono, Cetakan 1 (Jakarta: PT Serambi Ilmu Semesta, 2013), 29.

²⁴ Yulianti, "The Making of Buddhism in Modern Indonesia: South and Southeast Asian Networks and Agencies, 1900-1959" (PhD diss., Universiteit Leiden, 2020), 4. <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/138130>.

²⁵ Monavia Ayu Rizaty, "Data Sebaran Penduduk Beragama Buddha Di Indonesia Pada 2023," *DataIndonesia.Id* (blog), n.d., 13 March 2024.

²⁶ Jayanti, "Previous Research".

²⁷ "Rangkaian Dhamma Yatra 32 Bhikkhu Thudong Sambut Vesak 2567," *Berita Bhagavant: Berita Buddhis Mingguan* (blog), May 20, 2023, <https://berita.bhagavant.com/2023/05/20/rangkaian-dhamma-yatra-32-bhikkhu-thudong-sambut-vesak-2567.html>.

Borobudur Temple, Magelang, Indonesia, and arrived on 1 June 2023. As the journey began and passed through the other two countries, the monks remained meditating and had little contact with the wider population. This changed when they entered Indonesia, where thousands of Indonesians greeted them with a joyful atmosphere. Batam was one of the places the monks visited, after which they flew to Jakarta and walked through Bekasi, Cikarang, Karawang, Pamanukan, Kandanghaur, Jatibarang, Cirebon, Losari, Tegal, Pemalang, Pekalongan, Batang, Kendal, Semarang, Ambarawa, and Magelang. Along this north coast route, the monks never ceased interacting with local people of various religious backgrounds, as well as local government and interfaith organisations or figures, such as Nahdlatul Ulama Branch Management (PCNU) Kendal, Ansor youth movement (GP) Tegal, PCNU Tegal, nuns and pastors of churches, Laskar Macan Ali troops who accompanied them on their journey, and many others.

The highway, which is typically empty or crowded with only vehicles and people in motion, witnessed the history of interfaith relations in Indonesia at this time. Why wouldn't it be? Along the route walked by the group, locals greeted the monks with various motivations and ways. Some scattered flowers as if they were honored guests; others were greeted with enthusiasm; others were invited to grasp hands; others suddenly hugged, wept, or offered help with service and things. With such an enthusiastic greeting, the monks are unable to disregard it. They are smiling and interacting joyfully as they continue their spiritual journey. It is not just confined to everyday encounters. Still, from this point forward, there is reciprocal behaviour between *thudong* monks and the community, regardless of the religious background of the individuals involved.

In this instance, the author identifies mutual feelings and the exchange of kindness as a form of reciprocal behaviour between the two, regardless of whether they interact directly or follow the journey via social media. From this brief history, it is clear that the advent of these practitioners is indeed a rare event, as there are not many monks who practice, let alone laypeople who see or are unaware of the existence of this tradition. In addition, the "extreme" quality of walking thousands of kilometres in the eyes of ordinary people inspires admiration for the practice itself. From the perspective of the community as a whole, I can conclude that they are touched by the struggle of monks who endure all climatic and physical conditions in order to continue walking to their destination. Most of those involved felt this way, particularly when the monks reached their destination, the Borobudur temple, without incident. "*Alhamdulillah*, thank God for protecting *our brothers* on their way to their destination. Please protect them until they return to their origin when they go home... *Amien*"²⁸ is an expression of gratitude for the monks' safe arrival, written by the Instagram account @lukman_basuki_ in the @youngbuddhistassociation post.²⁹

The expression of gratitude demonstrates the Indonesian people's emotional

²⁸ "*Alhamdulillah* terima kasih Tuhan engkau sudah melindungi saudara kami dalam perjalanan sampai tujuan. Lindungilah mereka sampai kembali lagi ke asalnya ketika balik pulang nanti. Dan berikan kesehatan pada para biksu dan semua keluarganya... *Amien*"

²⁹ @youngbuddhistassociation, Instagram, June 1, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cs87LyzL45x/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

involvement in their journey. In addition, numerous individuals reported being profoundly inspired and motivated by the spiritual journey and by seeing the spirits of the monks, some of whom were elderly and fearless of the ritual. The use of *alhamdulillah*, which is a term of thanksgiving for Muslims, is another aspect that the author observes in the expression above, demonstrating that Buddhists and people of other religions share similar feelings. The individuals directly involved were quite welcoming, joyful, and touched by the same feelings. In a *Kompas.id* news interview, Bhante Nathanpong remarked that the warm reception he received from the locals and their compassionate gaze made his journey very comfortable.³⁰ In this instance, there is a common thread: the monks' journey touched the hearts of the Indonesian people, and the monks themselves felt at ease and enthusiastic about their spiritual journey. This shared emotion will inspire subsequent actions in the form of reciprocal behaviour.

Motivated by such feelings, the directly involved Indonesians along the road did not hesitate to interact with and assist the priests despite their religious differences. As Bhikkhu Khantadhammo testified in *Kompas.id* news interview, "People came together to provide various items, ranging from food, drinks, and sandals to offering their homes as a place to stop or stay."³¹ In addition, according to the caption of an Instagram post featuring a video of this act of kindness, in which a woman wearing a hijab gives bottled mineral water to passing monks, people living there were willing to gather in the blazing sun and give them a drink even though they were of different faiths and had never met.³²

Pindapata from the Pali language, which means receiving alms food into their bowl (*pata*), is the Buddhist term for monks' dependence on offerings from the laity for food and drink. It can be classified as a practice in the relationship between the laity and monks, as well as the spiritual practice of donating to the four requirements of monks (food, robes, medicine, and shelter), in which the laity demonstrate devotion to the monks who have provided spiritual guidance. However, in this context, the *pindapata* conducted by interfaith devotees is understood as an act of kindness that should be shown to fellow human beings regardless of their religion, and the monks are in a position that they consider requires help or support in any form.

As stated previously, monks provide Buddhists with spiritual guidance as a natural form of reciprocity. In this context, the exchange provided by the monks consisted of spreading practices of lovingkindness (*metta*) through friendly interactions with the locals. The monks' affection is also demonstrated by the fact that they distribute a portion of the charity they receive to people such as street sellers, small business owners, and young kids. Rifah, a resident of Magelang who wanted to watch the *thudong* receive alms, was startled when the monks gave her two twins a snack package and an envelope containing money.³³ In addition, interfaith organisations, communities, and religious leaders such as Habib Lutfi,³⁴ PCNU Kendal, and others provided sanctuary and rest for

³⁰ Rukmorini, "Pertukaran Kebajikan Sepanjang Jalan Menuju Candi Borobudur."

³¹ Rukmorini.

³² @youngbuddhistassociation, Instagram, May 25, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CsplcVEuKfG/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

³³ Rukmorini, "Pertukaran Kebajikan Sepanjang Jalan Menuju Candi Borobudur."

³⁴ Chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council of Central Java

the group, while monks offered prayers and blessings to the residents who assisted and all beings. The residents of Ambarawa were so excited to see *thudong* bhikkhu that they were prepared to wait for about four hours on General Sudirman Street and in the Hok Tik Bio Temple courtyard for their arrival. The monks also conducted the blessing from the second floor of the temple in an effort to reach the hundreds of people who were coming to greet them.³⁵

The shared feelings and acts of kindness throughout this journey indicate interfaith relationships among Indonesians that can promote reciprocal concern and reflection. These interfaith encounters did not occur in monasteries, mosques, churches, or other formal settings; rather, they occurred on the highway. Along the tens of thousands of kilometres passed by Indonesia, monks and Indonesians of various religions interact and connect in order to complete the spiritual journey. They prayed for one another, assisted one another, and cared for one another, which affected them as well. That not only do ritual participants interact with one another at these sites (highway context), but also the ritual traditions they perform are coordinated and implicated within the context of social interaction.³⁶ In addition, some Indonesians recognise this as a ritual and refer to the monks as "holy people". They recognise this as a religious activity, so the highway becomes a new sacred space where this interfaith encounter occurs. This highway becomes a new sacred space and a representation of the broader interreligious sphere with an organic form of tolerance from both parties of the conflict, faith, spirit, and culture that are exchanged.

Interreligious Mutual Understanding

Before Vesak Day, which falls on June 4, 2023, the determination to perform the *dhutanga* ritual of walking thousands of kilometres from Thailand to the Borobudur Temple in Indonesia is a sign of reverence for the Buddha. Vesak Day, the day of Gautama Buddha, is a significant time for Buddhists to reflect on and imitate the noble qualities and way of life of the Buddha and his disciples. The rituals performed by *thudong* monks spread and became important for Buddhists to reflect on in order to redepict the noble qualities of their great teachers.³⁷ It turns out, however, that this distribution of meaning also applies to individuals of other faiths from various perspectives, such as self-reflection, enthusiasm, the motivation to increase faith and tolerance.

The Instagram account @arie_jantik commented on a video posted by @injourney.id, stating, "very touched, although I have different beliefs but I am happy and salute to see the persistence of these monks, they are really unpretentious, I feel ashamed of myself feeling far not perfect my life is seeing their simplicity that does not

³⁵ @youngbuddhistassociation, Instagram, May 29, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cs1L5Jzuaok/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFiZA==.

³⁶ Kreinath, "Interrituality," 262.

³⁷ Candra Dvi Jayanti, "Puja Waisak Lintas Negeri: Tradisi *Thudong*, Waisak, Dan Umat Buddha Indonesia," *CRCS UGM* (blog), June 4, 2023, <https://crs.ugm.ac.id/puja-waisak-lintas-negeri-tradisi-thudong-waisak-dan-umat-buddha-indonesia/>.

pursue worldly affairs.”³⁸ He contemplated the personalities and rituals he observed in relation to himself, who felt he was still far from spiritual perfection. Then, in the spirit of tolerance, Devi said, “it turns out that we can help each other and support religious events so that we can live together, love peace,” in a video interview, which explains that from that moment on, she realized the importance of helping each other and supporting religious events or other activities to achieve living together in harmony.³⁹ The ritual was able to help individuals from various strata and backgrounds comprehend tolerance in a deeper manner. This ritual is understood broadly because of the forms of ritual interaction can occur at a variety of times and places and are crucial to the formation and transformation of interreligious relations.⁴⁰

One of the Buddhist respondents straightforwardly expressed his opinion regarding the nature of interfaith relations.

As an Indonesian citizen, I was hit by a great slap from the monks' journey. In Indonesia, we are busy with racism and intolerance. It turns out that at the grassroots, or the lowest level of society, even though we are different religions, ethnicities, and even nations, we can still and consistently have noble human values, namely mutual respect, appreciation, motivation, and outward and inward support. All phenomena about this noble positive value should be emulated by all groups. One word against the *Thudong* phenomenon is *WE MISS A PEACEFUL AND HONORABLE INDONESIA* [emphasis added].⁴¹

From this statement, the author identifies several variables, such as reflection, framing interreligious relations in Indonesia as racist and intolerant, the movement of tolerance by grassroots communities, and the possibility of improving interreligious relations in Indonesia.

As previously stated, Indonesia displays a dualistic image concerning interreligious relations: while they are generally harmonious, they are also marred by numerous religious conflicts. The aforementioned response provides unequivocal proof that dualism exists. This is shown by the natural or natural tolerance attitude that occurs at the grassroots community without bluff. On the one hand, the reality of intolerance conflicts in Indonesia remains quite severe, ranging from the rejection of the establishment of houses of worship, hate speech, the destruction of places of worship, the prohibition of worship, the prohibition of congratulating adherents of other religions on the observance of holidays, identity politics, and so forth. This moment is an opportunity

³⁸ @injourney.id, Instagram, May 29, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cs8Ve5UubGY/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

³⁹ BBC News Indonesia, “*Thudong*, Jalan Kaki Para Biksu Dari Thailand Ke Borobudur, Membawa Nilai Toleransi - BBC Indonesia,” video, 8:03, Youtube, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HwDqufhmCo&ab_channel=BBCNewsIndonesia.

⁴⁰ Kreinath, “Interrituality,” 261.

⁴¹ “.... Saya sebagai warga negara Indonesia seperti kena tamparan hebat dari para Bhikkhu tersebut di mana di Indonesia kita sibuk dengan rasisme dan intoleransi. Ternyata di akar rumput atau masyarakat paling bawah menunjukkan bahwa walaupun kita berbeda agama, berbeda suku, bahkan berbeda bangsa, kita sebagai WNI masih tetap bisa dan konsisten memiliki nilai-nilai luhur kemanusiaan yaitu saling menghormati, saling menghargai, memberikan motivasi, mendukung lahiriah maupun batin. Semua fenomena yang viral tentang nilai-nilai positif yang luhur ini haruslah dicontoh oleh semua kalangan. Satu kalimat untuk fenomena *thudong* ini ialah KAMI RINDU INDONESIA YANG DAMAI DAN SANTUN.” Jayanti, “Previous Research Data on ‘Puja Waisak Lintas Negeri: Tradisi *Thudong*, Waisak, Dan Umat Buddha Indonesia.’”

for the respondents, and all levels of Indonesian society as a whole, to reflect on how noble human values are maintained despite the ill-defined boundaries of religious blindness. As a result, it is necessary to report and use the general public's actions as an example to promote tolerance that prioritizes humanity.

There were discussions, such as the one between the Instagram account @aryaliberty and @ekoariusmulyono (Muslim) in a video posted by @youngbuddhistassociation regarding the statement that such a lively welcome would be a spiritual struggle for the monks.⁴² After all, the long journey was a meditative practice they were supposed to experience in silence and contemplation of their intentions. Nonetheless, this intense enthusiasm "interfered" with their spiritual practice. Thus, the two accounts argued in this discourse before reaching the conclusion that they concurred with the spiritual challenge while also recognizing the community's warm and well-intentioned attitude as having positive attributes. In relation to this discussion, Bhikkhu Kanthadhammo stated in a news interview that meditation should be practiced throughout the journey, but in Indonesia, this is a challenge in and of itself, and interaction activities with locals are also part of worship to spread love and the spirit of tolerance so as not to compromise the monks' spiritual resolve.⁴³

Another example of discussions came from the accounts @ripz_man, @youngbuddhistassociation, @theprotagonist00, and @chickysucipto in another @youngbuddhistassociation video post that showed a girl giving mineral water and then bowing to the monks, inviting questions related to whether it is permissible for humans to worship fellow humans because in @ripz_man's beliefs this isn't allowed. Only to God should we worshipping.⁴⁴ It can be argued that @ripz_man adheres to the teachings of Islam, which prescribe only the worship of Allah. This is unambiguously stated in verse 36 of surah An-Nisa (4:36): "Worship Allah 'alone' and associate none with him..."⁴⁵ Meanwhile, bowing in Buddhism is understood not as worship but as a form of honor that can be done to anyone who is honored. In this case, monks with higher morality practices than ordinary people and who have contributed to Buddhism and Buddhists deserve reverence. Namaskara, or the act of prostration, may also be performed toward deserving individuals such as parents, teachers, Buddhist symbols, or others. This is also associated with variations in the conceptualization of divinity, as Buddhists hold a distinct view regarding this matter compared to Abrahamic religions; consequently, the manner or interpretation of bowing also differs. As a result, the questioner acquired a new comprehension of Buddhism due to this dialogue, and both the questioner and the respondent could dispel the negative impression associated with it by embracing its various teachings.

One last example is a discussion related to the rules of the monks (vinaya) about the prohibition of physical contact with people of the opposite gender, proposed by @anggita59 and responded to by @suryadarmahendraa, @irmaksanti, @triy_a_280, and

⁴² @youngbuddhistassociation, May 29, 2023.

⁴³ Rukmorini, "Pertukaran Kebaikan Sepanjang Jalan Menuju Candi Borobudur."

⁴⁴ @youngbuddhistassociation, Video, *Instagram Post*, May 29, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Csz2dZ7LKZ1/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

⁴⁵ Mustafa Khattab, trans., "Surah An-Nisa (4:36)," Quran.com, n.d., <https://quran.com/4?startingVerse=36>.

@youngbuddhistassociation.⁴⁶ One of the tenets of renunciation observed by monks who identify as Buddhists is the refrain from brahmacharya, or unholy conduct, which includes physical contact with the opposite sex, in light of the fact that monks adhere to the Theravada school, which has extremely stringent regulations regarding monastic conduct, even the act of light touching forms a rigorous violation of this rule. In order to prevent the exchange of bodies, monks would typically receive food and drink offerings through a piece of fabric if the donors were of the opposing gender. Nonetheless, many individuals from non-Buddhist circles and the crowded assembly were undoubtedly unaware of this and had no intention of disrupting the monks' practice. Based on that discussion, it becomes an education that the rule is true in the tradition of Buddhism and should be understood by people of other religions as a concern for how to interact with the bhikkhus.

From the discussions and dialogues that took place in the social media sphere, some of them experienced mutual understanding up to the stage of perspective shifting. Examples that correspond to Buddhist pre-concerns are represented by @yantipauline798, who experienced a shift in perspective when, at first, she feared for the safety of the *thudong* monks in Indonesia if she imagined they would be subjected to harassment or threats of violence by Muslims in Indonesia.⁴⁷ However, after witnessing their encounter, she was moved because, unexpectedly, Muslims were very generous in their treatment of monks. It appears that in-person and social media expressions, interactions, and discussions are a forum for fostering mutual understanding and acceptance of diverse religious teachings. As a result, through their interreligious engagements with *thudong* monks, the Indonesian populace naturally gains and experiences mutual understanding; this may indicate the harmonious nature of interfaith relations in Indonesia.

Discussion

Liberative Dialogue as Interreligious Relational Harmony

In the discourse on interreligious dialogue in Indonesia, the arrival of bhikkhu *thudong* solely is an extraordinary view. Still, the enthusiasm of locals who demonstrate tolerance is an even more intriguing phenomenon to be discussed. The author argues that this booming enthusiasm results from limited knowledge about other religions—in this case, other religious traditions—combined with a narrative of struggle so affecting that it can motivate people to cross the boundaries of originally formed religious narratives. The limited religious knowledge stated by the author is the reluctance to learn about other religions, whether due to beliefs, practices, or the prominence of each religion.⁴⁸

Religion can also provide beliefs that can penetrate into life issues and produce extreme pro-group behavior that can cause or eliminate prejudice, including violence—read restrictions—against other religious groups.⁴⁹ Thus, the explosive response to new

⁴⁶ @andfossil, Video, *Instagram Post*, May 28, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CsyYD_nuLur/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==.

⁴⁷ @youngbuddhistassociation, June 1, 2023.

⁴⁸ Tery Setiawan et al., "The Relation between Religiosity Dimensions and Support for Interreligious Conflict in Indonesia," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 42, no. 2 (2020): 244–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0084672419878824>.

⁴⁹ Setiawan et al., 247.

information demonstrates that interfaith knowledge in Indonesia is still extremely limited and tends to be centered on their respective groups. In addition, with a majority of Muslims and other religions and beliefs that are classified as minorities, Indonesia has a tendency toward religiocentrism and exclusivism that is still strongly felt in the social relations of religious people.⁵⁰ Associated with religious groups contributes to the lack of a place or opportunity for mutual learning in matters of religion or related traditions, particularly for the Indonesian general populace.

These aspects also refer to the discourse of interreligious dialogue and the framing of interreligious relations in Indonesia, which influence global opinions about “unsafe” images, such as the concerns of the *Sangha* relatives that I mentioned at the initial of this introduction. Suspicion leads to the implementation of interfaith meetings that are only accessible to elites through formal dialogues and rarely involve grassroots communities, who are, in fact, “victims” of the setting up of interreligious relations emerging from these kinds of dialogues. The general populace is labelled “victims” because, in essence, they can demonstrate harmonious relationships in environments devoid of human value frameworks, as evidenced by the aforementioned behaviors. Nevertheless, these narratives may limit interreligious relations due to their interference with formal religious or interreligious discourse. Thus, a barrier arises in the next suspicion. Despite completing formal dialogues, interreligious relationships continue to be limited by their respective religious boundaries, so relationships are not formed properly.

Inasmuch as Indonesia aspires to become a nation with valuable interreligious relations, this moment may indicate that the religious moderation that has been advocated for years is able to be realized. Under the supervision of Lukman Hakim Syaifuddin, the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs has made religious moderation a priority program since 2019.⁵¹ Religious moderation refers to a religious approach that avoids being overly extreme or excessive in its practice, as this could potentially disrupt interfaith harmony in Indonesia.⁵² The notion, which is frequently deliberated and scrutinized by the privileged through formal discourse, scholarly research, orations, and the like, occasionally eludes the comprehension of the general populace. However, the vision of religious harmony that *Thudong* envisioned during his few weeks in Indonesia appeared to have materialized at this juncture; what remains is the sustainable implementation of this situation. Thus, in order for that journey to catalyse a possible form of interfaith relations in Indonesia, tolerance must be promoted as its vitality.

As a reaffirmation, I will recall the global concern regarding the tolerance crisis in Indonesia. How this image is constructed may be limited to elite figures who frequently appear in the news and political arenas. Radical actions that cannot be denied represent a significant challenge for the Indonesian people. Swidler and Mojzez assert that interfaith initiatives cannot be carried out solely by scholars and leaders of the world's

⁵⁰ Setiawan et al., “The Relation between Religiosity,” 247.

⁵¹ Insan Khoirul Qolbi, “LHS Dan Moderasi Beragama,” *Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia* (blog), September 5, 2019, <https://kemenag.go.id/opini/lhs-dan-moderasi-beragama-lf0fyj>.

⁵² Tim Penyusun Kementerian Agama RI, *Tanya Jawab Moderasi Beragama* (Jakarta Pusat: Badan Litbang dan Diklat Kementerian Agama RI, 2019), 2.

religions; the voices and concerns of grassroots communities must also be heard.⁵³ Projects will fail without the participation of scholars, leaders, and grassroots communities, so each role must be strengthened. Within this particular framework, the community may serve as a model and prototype for all groups layer; however, in order to maintain this behavior, it is imperative that policymakers and academics engage in advocacy efforts on its behalf.

The interaction between the *thudong* monks and the Indonesian community exemplifies the liberative dialogue in order to establish harmonious interreligious relations. He explained that the dialogue begins with non-religious issues and then reflects on community issues.⁵⁴ In this context, the dialogue is not founded on a reflection of the problem but rather on a moment of interaction that enables the implementation of this liberal dialogue. In discussing the previous point, the author implicitly demonstrated Knitter's four stages through the discussion in the social media sphere.

The first stage is compassion, or the stage in which both parties experience shared feelings, experiencing what the other party feels; in this context, the local community also feels sympathy for the struggle fought by the monks. Similarly, the monks were deeply touched by the gracious greeting and benevolence offered to them. The conversion stage occurs when one party transforms its life or idea of life with the other party, which in this context means that locals are able to cross their respective religious boundaries, eagerly desiring to know, appreciate, and accompany the monks on their spiritual journey. Clarity and dismantling of preconceived notions that were previously inaccurate are the results of direct or indirect interaction and discussion. During this phase, individuals gain insight into a Buddhist tradition that was previously confined to prejudice through open dialogue. Additionally, the monks' apprehension regarding the threat of the majority religion is dispelled. The third stage is collaboration, in which the Indonesian people voluntarily participate in welcoming and helping the ritual mission of the *thudong* monks until its completion. And the final stage that becomes a benchmark for optimizing the results of implementing liberative dialogue is the comprehension stage. In this dialogue, religion begins to be openly discussed, with participants discussing religious teachings that can support their actions.

Due to time constraints and the monks' concentration on rituals, it is unlikely that members of the general public who interact directly with monks will discuss religion. Specialized for the fourth stage is more prevalent in the social media interactions of Buddhists and non-Buddhists who follow the spiritual journey of the *thudong* monks from internet space. In numerous video posts about *thudong* monks, there are always expressions of feelings from adherents of other religions and discussions of religious issues associated with this tradition. The religious discussions that flowed in the Instagram comment section became a manifestation of the comprehension stage, in which Buddhists and adherents of other religions posed questions to one another and fostered mutual understanding. Interreligious dialogue experts frequently promote and emphasize mutual understanding, and at this point, interfaith relations can achieve

⁵³ Leonard J. Swidler and Paul Mojzes, *The Study of Religion in an Age of Global Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 181.

⁵⁴ Knitter, *One Earth*, 140-141.

optimal levels of openness and acceptance. This also occurs to those engaged in the interaction; upon witnessing or discussing this phenomenon, they also undergo a shift in perspective. Therefore, it can be deduced that the present state of organic interaction among all involved parties represents a form of interreligious relational harmony, which has the potential to dismantle inflexible religious connections and foster ones that are more fluid and organic in nature.

Conclusion

Indonesia has a global dualism perspective regarding interfaith relations that is highly tolerant of diversity but also extremely radical and risky for the practice of religious rituals outside the majority religion. The problem of religion and the issue of intolerance are, without a doubt, crucial issues for the Indonesian nation. The moment of interaction between Thai Buddhist monks on a spiritual pilgrimage to Indonesia and local communities from various spheres became a reflection of the expected harmony of interfaith relations across the country as a whole. In this interreligious encounter that took place along the highway of the pilgrimage route, both parties exhibited reciprocal behavior with shared feelings and acts of kindness that required them to work together to complete the ritual's mission. They were able to dismantle the religious barriers that frequently impede the harmony of interfaith relations due to the warm acceptance, the highly hospitable interaction, and the engaging dialogue. In this instance, religious boundaries include an openness to dialogue with adherents of other faiths, a curiosity regarding the teachings and traditions of different beliefs, a readiness to foster amicable relations between religions, and the capacity to dispel the negative stigma associated with other beliefs through dialogue and interaction. As a result, this moment provides a reminder and reflection that the noble values of the Indonesian nation are based on humanity that is not limited by identity boxes, that interfaith harmony can be effectively implemented, and the need to strengthen the role of various lines, including community resources at the grassroots level, in the formation of interreligious social relations in Indonesia.

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