

Maintaining the Vihara Inside a Muslim Society: A Study on the Vihara Kwan In Thang in Pamulang, Banten Province, Indonesia

*Zaenal A. Ekoputro
Centre of Asian Studies (CENAS), Jakarta*

Nowadays, we have seen the emergence of Buddhist activities in many urban and rural areas of Indonesia where Islam has a deep rooted in this country. One piece of evidence is the establishment of monasteries in many places, although the society of the surrounding area is predominantly Muslim. We have almost never heard of Muslims confronting the establishment of a monastery. It doesn't mean that disruptions towards any monastery has never occurred: one of the latest aggravations was the plea of some Muslims in Tanjung Balai (North Sumatra Province) to remove the Amitabha Buddha Statue in the Vihara Tri Ratna in early 2011.¹

The current dynamics of Buddhism in Indonesia is not only marked by the establishing new monasteries, but also denoted by the forming of new Buddhist societies. According to Leo Suryadinata, there is no doubt that Chinese religions and Chinese Buddhism have seen a revival after the fall of Soeharto. The more democratic atmosphere has provided minority religions with a new lease of life. Nevertheless, Buddhism appears to be able to develop better than Confucianism. For one thing, many old regulations and lingering governmental prejudice against Confucianism have not been eradicated.² In these days, there have been a number of Buddhist societies conducting their activities in certain areas which are surrounded by Muslim society. Currently, Buddhists can develop their society without any intimidation from outsider, including state prohibition.

In fact, the building of many monasteries (vihara) as a symbol of the current development of Buddhism in Indonesia remains productive. One of these features can be traced back to the establishment of Vihara Kwan In Thang which is located in Betawi Muslim community in Pamulang, Banten Province. This monastery was built in early 2000, and now is vigorously active in serving dharma teachings and offers social aid. Just as many other monasteries, this monastery has never been annoyed until these days. It is unlike for example, local Muslim confronts establishing churches like what we have seen in Bekasi and Bogor in West Java Province.

I would like here to find out the way in which Buddhists could maintain the Buddha teaching inside Muslim society. And also, I would like to investigate how Muslim who settled around the monastery could accept the Buddhist community in their area. I have researched the vihara and then, it data combined with study of literatures.

Vihara Kwan In Thang in Pondok Cabe, Tangerang, Banten Province

This monastery (vihara) was built in the year of 2000 where Reformasi era had just begun in Indonesia to disalign with the prior authoritarian regime. In other words, there was a political situation shift occurring in Indonesia, leaving from totalitarian

¹ <http://www.tribunnews.com/2010/11/01>, accessed 10 August, 2011.

² Suryadinata, Leo. *Buddhism and Confucianism in Contemporary Indonesia Recent Developments*, in Lindsey, Tim and Pausacker, Helen (Ed.). *Chinese Indonesians; Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 2005. p. 90.

regime and entering into democracy. Reformasi has seen as an important part in current history of Indonesia because it was the big marker for determining the establishment of new freedom for the people, ranging from free participation over election to religious expression.

Located in Pamulang area which is subject to South Tangerang district in Banten Province, Vihara Kwan In Thang is surrounded by Muslim community which predominantly composites of Betawi ethnic. It is located in the southern part area of Jakarta metropolitan city, the capital city of Indonesia. This can be reached approximately 2 hours away from the Soekarno-Hatta Airport, Jakarta.

The vihara's people are mostly of Chinese descent who resides around the vihara. Most of them work as businessmen, selling building materials, chemicals, and foodstuff for instance. It should be added that some of its elite member themselves were not born in this area, but they migrated from many other cities which Chinese is being noted as a great number of population such as Pontianak, Palembang, Medan and many other cities. Tjeng Eddy Sastro himself, the leader of the vihara, was born in Pontianak and he admitted that his origin was Teuchew sub Chinese ethnic family in Pontianak. Previously, he was not a Buddhist. After having serious problem with his business and his family, then he had felt that it could be solved by Kwan Im's intervention, he latterly converted to Mahayana Buddhism.³

When I visited there, some people were worshipping in the main building of the vihara. Soon I smelled the joss sticks smoke which were burning from inside the main building. Cik Amoy, the person who is responsible for daily matter of the vihara, greeted me warmly and then she showed me any kind of stuff for worship. There were some fruits which put them on each plate offered before the Buddha Maitreya sculpture. She told me it was a matter of thing regarded to symbolize the respect to god.

She admitted that she came from Palembang and she had moved to Jakarta after graduating her senior high school. She had been chosen the vihara because she wanted to maintain the Chinese traditional religion. It should be added that many of the vihara people practices vegetarian. In Indonesia, vegetarian is commonly practiced by Mahayana Buddhist.

One can assume about what type of the society that tries to confirm the new land. Like Eddy Sastro, Cik Amoy herself and most of her colleagues are not local born, but they left their homeland and then moved to Jakarta for seeking better life and job. Therefore, their residences are rather mixed up with any other tribes' people instead of living exclusively with the same tribe.

She explained that as long as she involved in the vihara, there have been no objections from their Muslim neighbor, especially for conducting services in the vihara. Actually, this vihara was built in the area where Muslim is recorded as dominant number. Since it was built, it attracted the local people who have never seen vihara, particularly with it full Chinese style. Located at the edge of main road between Bogor and Jakarta, those who pass the street will definitely be amazed when observing it in terms of its stunning Chinese architecture.⁴

Actually, there is another vihara that was built next to the Vihara Kwan In Thang, the Vihara Avelokiteswara. The main feature that distinguishes between the former and the latter, while the latter provided some ordained people who have been staying in the vihara, the former does not. The former is intended for people especially for paid respect and homage to Goddess Kwan Im only. Here, it depends on which Buddhist way they

³An interview with a board of the vihara, 12 September 2011.

⁴An interview with Cik Amoy, 25 September 2011.

chose for worshipping the Buddha, but they can visit each vihara as long as they need it. Many Christians of Chinese descent also worshipped in this vihara.

When I asked another person in the vihara about whether or not he knows Muslim figures around at the vihara area for instance, he acclaimed that he know the well-known youth Muslim leader in Banten, Abdul Rozak who has visited the vihara. This figure was visiting the vihara when he invited by the vihara board in certain event. Abdul Rozak is a religious figure representing young Islamic scholars who graduated. His bachelor degree from Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic State University. His view on pluralism is an essential social capital for Indonesia made him able to visit the vihara.

Reportedly, the governor of Banten Province, Atut Chosiah has also paid her attention to the vihara. For example, she recently invited by the committee of Vaissak Day celebration from the vihara last June 2011 that was hosting a celebration of Vaissak in a meeting hall at Karawaci, Tangerang of Banten. The governor herself, who also known for her background from a family of *jawara* -a common term to refer the local strong man in Banten Province, committed that she will protect the minority religious group. In addition, the head of Religious Affair Department of Banten is also recorded has had visited the vihara, especially when he opened the inter-sangha Buddhist meeting in 2008.⁵

This well Muslim responds to the vihara is amazed me, because this vihara is not really far from the quarrel area which is Ahmadiyah Muslim community tortured by local Muslim people. In 2005, the national headquarter of Indonesian Ahmadiyah group, which was located only 40 minute by car from the vihara, was being damaged and some of its members were injured in defending their belief and their property. This is most likely the beginning of Ahmadiyah persecution that occurred in almost every place in Indonesia since then. After that persecution, other persecutions to the Ahmadiyah group have been raised and continued until it most horrible thing happened in February 2011, when six of Ahmadiyah member were murdered in Cikeusik, Pandeglang, Banten.

In this sense, I am very interested in the people of vihara on how they could maintain their group and conduct their services within the certain kind of Muslim features. In addition, I am also interested in why another Muslim could tolerate the vihara and its people.

The Doctrine of *Welas Asih* (Compassion)

The most obvious thing that can be learnt from this vihara is how the vihara people could cultivate self-awareness in their daily life. From Buddhist perspective, there is an important concept for Buddhists to restrain oneself in order to avoid any kind of destruction acts to all human beings through sharing love and compassion in everyday life or *welas asih*. By spreading love and compassion to all human beings, anybody will attain self awareness and calm mind.

Cik Amoy admitted that compassionate to all human being, including to the Muslim neighbor is the key factor in maintaining a good relationship. To be compassionate to other must be cultivated through fully understand it. Thus, to be compassionate in practice depends on oneself how to show his or her caring to others. It means she and her vihara' colleagues should be immensely warm and become a friendly person to non-vihara members. It is very useful for them to build network with other religious follower in that area.⁶

Here, the essential point of compassion within the Mahayana tradition have also outlined by Armstrong. She described the Mahayana who revere the Buddha as an eternal

⁵ Interview with the former of the Head of Religious Affair of Banten, Romly, July 2011.

⁶ An interview with Cik Amoy, Ibid.

presence in the lives of the people and as an object of worship, have preserved other values that are just as strongly emphasized in the Pali texts, particularly the importance of compassion.⁷ Whereas another essay explains the compassion could be outlined here under.

Karuna or Compassion is considered by the Mahayana to be as important as Wisdom. They are the Supreme Combination. Compassion may be considered as feeling the sorrows of others as one's own with the wish that one could take them on to oneself to relieve that suffering in others. Skill in Means is the ability to use the appropriate means to help each individual case. It is a case of the end result justifying the means employed.⁸

Moreover, to understand the meaning of compassion is limitless. To compassionate other means to welcome other in any kind of situation. Preece have written on the limitless of compassion. According to him,

We need a deep-rooted compassion for ourselves in order to allow for our fallibility and vulnerability on the path. There is little point in trying to base our lives on unreal ideals that only cripple us. My experience has led me to conclude that a fundamental aspect of the journey is the uncovering of our personal spiritual pathology and its gradual resolution. At each stage on the path, new aspects of pathology may emerge, and their resolution will enable us to move forward. Our willingness to learn and grow from this process is perhaps one of the most extraordinary qualities of our human nature. Considerable wisdom comes from our state of imperfection.⁹

In this sense, we should understand the very essential meaning in Preece' writing about compassion. He continued that compassion is also much linked with our acceptance. He reckons as follows:

Compassion does not arise from ideals of perfection but from a recognition of and concern for our own fallibility. At the heart of our potential for health and wholeness is the need for a fundamental quality of acceptance, an unconditional compassionate presence. Without this capacity either for ourselves or for others, even our spirituality can become harsh and uncompromising.¹⁰

The people of Vihara Kwan In Thang in Pamulang, Banten have shown their compassionate to other people, especially for non vihara members. This doctrine made them able to contact to one another easily in the area. Their keeping in touch with another faith is not only shown by their caring to common people, but also their close relations with the local political leaders. Hence, they admitted that this way has been a very useful in doing service in the vihara, because the Muslim neighbor could also share their warm and respect to the Buddhist accordingly.

⁷ Armstrong, Karen. *Buddha*. London: Penguin Books. 2004. p. 21

⁸ <http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/maha2.htm>, accessed 12 August, 2011.

⁹ Preece, Rob. *The Wisdom of Imperfection: The Challenge of Individuation in Buddhist Life*. Itacha, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2006. P. 14

¹⁰ Preece, Rob. *Ibid.* p. 57.

This feature will lead us to observe their method in conducting network with other faith. The following part is discussed about their service in the vihara that enables other religious people to attend the service.

The Vihara Services

Since the beginning, the elite vihara member has always been maintained a well relationship with other faith group, specifically for the people who resides around the vihara compound area. Again, it is the way to express the Buddha teaching on *welas asih* to all human being. To express love and compassion to other people, the local Buddhists have enormously been carried out a number social works that pretend to invite other people to attend.

The main social service that enables the vihara involving other people is food alms distribution. Annually, the vihara invites people from around the vihara compound area to attend this event which is taken place in the compound area of vihara. A thousand coupons distribute every year to the proper group of people whose economically are deprived. When they come to the vihara, they will have to show the coupon for being substituted by food offering package. The vihara people in collaboration with the local Muslim leader and local police officer are ready to distribute the food. Commonly, food alms is provided in one bag which consists mainly of cooking stuff such as rice, sugar, vegetable oil, and other similar thing.

In this year, the event was held in a time when the vihara people celebrated Ulambana festival, which was occurred during fasting month of Muslim concurrently. Ulambana is celebrated throughout the Mahayana tradition from the first to the fifteenth days of the eighth lunar month. It is believed that the gates of Hell are opened on the first day and the ghosts may visit the world for fifteen days. Food offerings are made during this time to relieve the sufferings of these ghosts. On the fifteenth day, Ulambana or Ancestor Day, people visit cemeteries to make offerings to the departed ancestors. Many Theravadins from Cambodia, Laos and Thailand also observe this festival.¹¹

Therefore, food offering in Ulambana time along with time of Ramadhan is deemed a great advanced for the vihara people in sharing the food alms because their food offering will be distributed in appropriate time when Muslim facing Iedul Fitri festival. Fortunately, the foodstuff offering during Ramadhan time is a common feature in many part of Indonesia. No matter how and where food offering is distributed, crowd of people will always be featured. Perhaps, it is not merely the problem of religious virtue itself, but also the problem of poverty.

The vihara was used to serve a medical assistant for the people of vihara neighbor. But, now the medical service is no longer active because the doctor had moved to another place. Until now, there is no available doctor yet to be able to assist the program. And since the last 2 years, the program has been closed.

Building Mutual Understanding to Other Faith

Although it built inside of Muslim society, the vihara have never been threatened in terms of escalating a religious sentiment. Reportedly, even some Muslim students frequently visit the vihara. The uniqueness of Chinese culture and its mixed up with Buddhist doctrine have deemed as a spiritual way of living for the vihara people that need to be studied.

For example, another vihara board told me that the student from Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University of Jakarta have regularly visited the vihara for

¹¹ <http://www.buddhanet.net/festival.htm>, accessed 10 October 2011.

observing the building and the Buddha doctrines as well. They come to the vihara to seek any information about Buddhism and Chinese culture at the same time. The vihara board thinks it is a good thing to be exposed when people from non Buddhist could be able to study the Buddha teaching. In contrary, the Buddhist should also be able to study other religious teaching in order to get mutual understanding within a multicultural society.

The former of the head of Religious Affair of Banten once have said that the vihara board had shown their eager to develop a good relation with other faith group. Specifically, the representative of vihara has been participated in a new institution, namely *Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama* (FKUB, or Religious Harmony Forum) that facilitated by the local government. Moreover, its delegate has always come to attend the invitation which is sent by government. Since there are eight Buddhist school in Banten, the government has invoked a forum to accommodate each of school. And thus, the forum was established, namely *Forum Umat Buddha* (FUB, or Buddhists forum) where it secretariat is located in the vihara.

Then, what should be noted from the description above concerning about the vihara people and their effort in maintaining the vihara service. I think there are at least two points could be taken here. *Firstly*, it is true as what Imtiyaz Yusuf have written that historically, Islam and Buddhism have engaged in a religious interchange in the course of their encounters in Central, South and Southeast Asia. Their early encounters were followed, in some instances, by conversion of Buddhists to Islam as happened in Central and maritime Southeast Asia. Yet there were also other regions where Buddhism and Islam continued to exist side by side for long as happened in India and also mainland Southeast Asia.¹²

Secondly, from the political and sociological perspective, the way in which the vihara people engage them in social network in their area is somewhat linked with the civil society movement in Indonesia. Edward Aspinall has written about civil society organization in Indonesia. He described civil society as follows:

In a civil society where actors moderate their most ambitious goal for remaking state and society and no longer view each other as their primary adversaries, by contrast, the political environment is likely to be more conducive to democracy. Key conditions for such an outcome include minimal societal consensus about the desired nature of the societal and political order, and at least some civil society organizations that cut across, rather than reinforce, cleavages in society.¹³

In the case of Indonesia, Aspinall observed that in the 1990s, civil society became an arena where many groups attempted to expand space for political participation, constrain the state, and promote democratization.¹⁴ By citing Aspinall, it can be found that the vihara people promote civil society movement, where they have been relentlessly active to build the political environment which is to be more conducive to democracy.

Conclusion

The current dynamics of Buddhism in Indonesia is not only marked by the establishing new monasteries, but also denoted by the forming of new Buddhist societies. In fact, the building of many monasteries (vihara) as a symbolical of the current

¹² Yusuf, Imtiyaz. *Dialogue Between Islam and Buddhism through the Concepts Ummatan Wasatan (The Middle Nation) and Majjhima-Patipada (The Middle Way)*. Journal of Islamic Studies 48:3 (2009). p. 368.

¹³ Aspinall, Edward. *Indonesia; Transforming of Civil Society and Democratic Breakthrough*, in Alagappa, Muthiah (Ed.), *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia; Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2004. p. 62

¹⁴ Aspinall. *Ibid.* p. 89.

development of Buddhism in Indonesia remains productive. One of these features is the establishment of Vihara Kwan In Thang which is located in Betawi Muslim community in Pamulang, Banten Province. This monastery was built in early 2000, and now is vigorously active in serving dhamma teaching and offer social aid. Until now, there have been no objections from their Muslim neighbor, especially when they are conducting services in the vihara.

The most obvious thing that can be learnt from this vihara is how the vihara people practicing the concept of *welas asih* (compassion) in their daily life. By spreading love and compassion to all human beings, anybody will attain self awareness and calm mind. And to express love and compassion to other people, the local Buddhists have enormously been carried out a number social works that pretend to invite other people to attend.

There are at least two main points here that can be taken from the vihara people in maintaining service inside Muslim society. *Firstly*, it is true that historically, Islam and Buddhism have engaged in a religious interchange in the course of their encounters in Central, South and Southeast Asia. *Secondly*, from the political and sociological perspective, the way in which the vihara people engage them in social network in their area is somewhat linked with the upholding civility in Indonesia.

References

Armstrong, Karen. *Buddha*. London: Penguin Books. 2004.

Aspnall, Edward. *Indonesia; Transforming of Civil Society and Democratic Breakthrough*, in Alagappa, Muthiah (Ed.), *Civil Society and Political Change in Asia; Expanding and Contracting Democratic Space*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2004.

Preece, Rob. *The Wisdom of Imperfection: The Challenge of Individuation in Buddhist Life*. Itacha, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2006.

Suryadinata, Leo. *Buddhism and Confucianism in Contemporary Indonesia Recent Developments*, in Lindsey, Tim and Pausacker, Helen (Ed.). *Chinese Indonesians; Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 2005.

Yusuf, Imtiyaz. *Dialogue Between Islam and Buddhism through the Concepts Ummatan Wasatan (The Middle Nation) and Majjhima-Patipada (The Middle Way)*. *Journal of Islamic Studies* 48:3 (2009).

Internet Sources:

<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhistworld/maha2.htm>, accessed 10 August, 2011 and 10 October 2011.

<http://www.tribunnews.com/2010/11/01>, accessed 10 August, 2011.