

The Social Role of Chanting Tradition in Indonesia Buddhist Society

Ms. Yulianti¹

Devotion is one of essential factors in Buddhism. Although devotion in Buddhism is not similar in meaning to common devotion, such as devotion to spirit, god, and other powerful beings; but Buddhists widely practice the act of devotion. Peter Harvey defines devotion for Buddhist as an act of expressing one's faith (saddha) towards the Buddha and His teaching. (170) He emphasizes that in Buddhism the presence of Saddha (faith or trustful confidence) must be balanced with wisdom (panna). This is in order for one not to blindly believe in anything but to first check and analyze the teaching of the Buddha.

Practices of devotion commonly found in both traditions of Buddhism, Mahayana and Theravada. The places where people conduct devotional acts may be vary, from their own house to temple or even wherever they find object they revere. One of the most common objects that people show their devotion to is that the Buddha image. In many of Buddhists' houses, there are little shrine in which they perform ritual every morning and evening. During the performance of ritual most of Buddhists engage in various symbolic bodily actions, such as offering candles, incense, flowers, bowing, and chanting which to them would increase and support the meditative mind.

Among those devotional actions, chanting is to be one of pivotal aspects in Buddhism. Harvey defines chanting as relatively common vehicle for devotion or other ceremonial acts. (175) Chanting is also mentioned to aid accurate memory of the teaching of the Buddha, as it is recited in tune that brings the mind to flow on from words to word. In the ancient time, when civilization had not accustomed to writing, chanting was being used to memorize the sutta and became public medium.

While Mahayana Buddhism mostly chants in Sanskrit language, Theravada uses pali language in their chanting. Harvey says using the ancient form of language may add some sacred atmosphere to the action. The benefit of chanting itself believed to be great that it generates positive energy such as joy and calm. Such benefit also transmitted to the listeners. In relation to that, monks and nuns are mostly the most trusted persons to perform chanting in the present of lay devotees.

Nevertheless, the chanting in Buddhism cannot be equaled to prayer. Unlike in other tradition in which devotion is offered to higher power or higher being, Buddhism chanting is mostly only form of recollection of good qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha. In short, chanting in Buddhism is not considered to a form of prayer. Ven Dhammasami mentions in his short article, The practice of Chanting in Buddhism, that Buddhism chanting tradition is not a way to ask someone to save him from evil and danger nor one hoping to be given a position in celestial realm. He clearly agrees that chanting is one of the ways for the purpose of learning, teaching, philosophizing, or re-memorizing the discourse of the Buddha.

Furthermore, Venerable Dhammasami implies the tradition of reciting the sutta have been carried on since the ancient time of Buddha Era. In one of the Sutta called Dhammavihari Sutta mentions that there are several categories of people who do the chanting. The first one is called *pariyatti bahulo*, one who only keen on studying the

¹ Yulianti is a lecturer at Kertarajasa Buddhist College. She is an alumna of ITBMU for undergraduate program on Buddhism. She earned her double degrees for masters program in Religions and Cross-cultural Studies from Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia and masters in Religious Studies from Florida International University, USA. Her focus of interest is Buddhism in South-east Asian countries, particularly in Indonesia, Contemporary Issues of Buddhism.

sutta; secondly, *pariyatti bahulo*, one who only keen in preaching but effortless in practice; thirdly, *vitakka bahulo*, one whose interest is only on philosophizing the discourse; fourthly, *Sajjahayaka-bahulo*, one who enthusiastically memorizing and chanting the discourse, occasionally expecting some magical power from the chanting. Lastly, *Dhammavihari*, one who does both chanting and practicing the dhamma. Under this categorization, we actually can see that the tradition of chanting has been appeared and practiced even during the Buddha's time or at least that the Buddha had anticipated the occurrence of such phenomenon.

Although chanting tradition in Buddhism is not identical to prayer, Buddhist chanting appears to be used for several different purposes. This is indicated by the various *sutta* in which practice is chanted on different occasions. One of them is such as *Ratana Sutta* which nature of the discourse is healing and protection, and there are still many others. Such pattern is very common in Theravada Buddhism, it spreads to most of countries in which Theravada Buddhism is being practiced. This is including Buddhists in Indonesia where Theravada Buddhism flourish and observed by many.

This paper will elaborate the practice of Buddhist chanting in Indonesia, especially which is done within Theravada tradition. Later, the research will also show how chanting serves not only religious purposes but also as a mean to strengthen the social bond between Buddhists particularly in a country where Buddhism is not the predominant religion.

Theravada Buddhist Chanting Tradition in Indonesia

The discussion on the Theravada Chanting Tradition can bring one to go back to as far to much early time of development of Buddhism in Indonesia. After the fall of Majapahit kingdom, Buddhism an institutionalized religion came to its disappearance. During that interval, Buddhism was only alive traditionally, lived in the heart of the people as some kind of heritage handed down from generation to generation quietly. It appeared that although Buddhist practices were not overtly implemented but the belief on Buddhism was still taken its root among Indonesian and blended in local cultures. (Rasyid, 1)

In the second arrival in Indonesia, the group of Theosophists brought Buddhism back into existence. Since then various Buddhist organizations had been established. The first Buddhist organization was called Java Buddhist Association that is said to be part of "The International Buddhist Missionary" which central was in Thaton, Myanmar. However, due to the heightened political cohesion in Indonesia, i.e. due to Japanese colonialization in Indonesia, most of Buddhist organizations were called in to termination. Nevertheless, when Japanese authority upon Indonesia came to an end, Buddhist organizations, for the second time, started mushrooming in the country. Among many organizations, *Gabungan Tri Dharma Indonesia (GTI)*—Association of Indonesia Tri Dharma-- and *Perhimpunan Buddhis Indonesia (PERBUDHI)*—Association of Indonesia Buddhists-- and *Buddhis Indonesia –Buddhists Indonesia Organization--* were among the prominent.

As Buddhism gained its popularity, the discussion over serious issues pertaining way of practice of Buddhism was called into present. It was on May 20-22nd, 1967 that a grand meeting called *Musyawahar Besar I Federasi Umat Buddha Indonesia* was hailed. One of the declarations of the grand meeting was that every religious ritual, referring to Theravada Buddhism, must at the very least use *paritta* (in pali language). Thus for the first time in Indonesia, the term *paritta* was coined and the usage was formally acknowledged widely since then.

Today, Indonesia is the home of approximately two millions Buddhists from total number of population of Indonesia. The two Buddhist traditions, Mahayana and Theravada share the number of follower almost equally. They both spread nationally across the country sporadically. However, the spread of Theravada Buddhism appears to have set its influence as both in cities and rural areas.

Paritta Chanting in Indonesia

Speaking about Theravada Buddhism in Indonesia, the first thing for one to acknowledge is that there are many different organizations under which some Buddhist prefer to join with. To mention just a few of them, there are STI (Sangha Theravada Indonesia), WALUBI (Perwalian Umat Buddha Indonesia), and MBI (majelis Buddhayana Indonesia). However, since this paper is designed as an introductory purpose, I would like to specially study the chanting tradition observed by the group that is under the umbrella of Sangha Theravada Indonesia (STI).

Like any other Theravada Buddhist organization in Indonesia, STI also calls the collection of chanted sutra as Paritta with occasionally refers it as Palivacana. In 1983, the first copy paritta (of STI) edition was published and soon widely used by Buddhists in Indonesia. The content comprises numerous numbers of suttas and gathas. These *gathas* and *suttas* are organized in such way in order to meet different occasions for which recitation is dedicated to.

The chanting of paritta within Theravada context in Indonesia is basically classified into several occasions. The first category is when paritta are chanted on the ceremonial event that is to mark significant domestic events such as to mark 7th month of women pregnancy, birth, birthday, hair cutting ceremony, house blessing, blessing for the sick, planting/harvest seasons, taking oath for newly appointed authority, marriage, death and death anniversary.

The second category is called as guide to *Puja Bhakti*. Puja Bhakti is a term used to imply to a series of ritual involving all devotional manners. This is the most common form that is practiced by most of Buddhists. Normally, Buddhists in Indonesia do *puja bhakti* as routine ritual in their daily life both individually and communally. The *paritta* chants for this occasion starts with *Namakhara Patha* (homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha) and then ended with *ettavatadipatidana*.

The third section is *paritta* chants for the purpose of giving blessing (*Mangala patha*). For this kind of ceremonial chanting, there are numerous *parittas* being read. Among them there are some significant *parittas* as follow: mangala sutta, ratana sutta, sumangala gatha I & II, etc.² These *parittas* are read during special happy occasions such as birth, birthday, house blessing, taking oath, marriage, etc. The chanting of those *gathas* and *paritta* is for the purpose invoking more blessings and positive energy for the concerned people to whom the chanting is directed.

The next classification is *paritta* for *Avamangala* ceremony (obituary events). In Indonesia, obituary involves a series of ceremonial event. This starts from the time of funeral, and then continue to several more times, that are three days after the passing away of the person, seventh day, fortieth day, hundredth day, thousandth day and yearly

² Complete enumeration of the number of paritta chanting during Mangala ceremony are as follow: *Devata-aradana, vandana, saranagamana patha, namakarasiddhi gatha, saccakiriya gatha, mahakarunikonathotiadi gatha, namokaratthaka gatha, mangala sutta, ratana sutta, karaniyametta sutta, khandha paritta, vattaka paritta, Buddhanussati, Dhammanussati, sanghanussati, angulimala paritta, bojjhanga paritta, atanatiya paritta, Abhaya paritta, Dhajagga paritta, mora paritta, Devatauyyojana gatha, sakkatvatiadi gatha, mahajayamangala gatha, Buddhajamangala gatha, jaya paritta, sabbarogatiadi gatha, samannanumodana gatha, Aggappasada sutta gatha, Bhojanaumodana gatha, So atthaladdhotiadi gatha, Culamangalacakkavala gatha, Ratanattayanubhavenatiadi gatha, Sumangala gatha I, sumangala gatha II, pattidana.*

anniversary in memory of the deceased. Unlike the paritta for *Mangala* ceremonial, the recitation of *paritta* Avamangala is to pour in blessing and thus may condition the deceased to reach a happy state of afterlife. These rituals are usually being performed in the house of the deceased family. Other Buddhists and encounters would come together on an appointed time to perform chanting together. In the case of Indonesia, the ritual may or may not be done in the presence of monks and nuns. In case there is no monk or nun could present in the event, laymen and laywomen may proceed to lead the chanting.³

Besides the above-mentioned occasions, there are also several special occasions in which paritta chanting are done collectively. (STI, xxvi) These are when on the occasions of Asalha Puja day⁴, Magha Puja Day⁵, Vesak Day⁶, Atthami Vesak Day⁷. Especially for these gathas and parittas, the recitations are collectively done in the form of congregation in a vihara. As this is to mark important Buddhist events, a monk usually leads the chanting.

Moreover, within Indonesia context, chanting is one of essential aspects that encircle Buddhists religious life. Besides, communal activities done by member of community also plays important role even in religious activities, including within Buddhist community. As it is mentioned previously, that monks and nuns living in the monastery consider chanting as part of their daily routine. Although there is no such actual rule says that chanting must be done collectively but it is the most common thing especially where monks, nuns, and novice (*samanera*) stay at a monastery together.

To emphasize, although there is chanting, which is held communally, but In Indonesia individual chanting is also common. The later is very reasonable since Buddhist in Indonesia could hardly stay in one place as community with the exception when there is special occasion or big days in Buddhism. However, in some places—rarely though-- where Buddhists concentrate in one place, Buddhists has communal chanting program. One of the unique activities that Buddhists make is they conduct an activity called *Anjangsana* which refers to Buddhist regular social gathering and communal chanting at one of their fellow Buddhist's house.

Thus for these reasons, we can draw some important facts that Buddhist chanting is a form of daily routine for those who want to practice it. Although we can see that this practice may become the tenet in Buddhism, but it is distinctly flexible, as there is no such obligation to do it nor that the practitioner must do it communally.

Communal Chanting by Buddhist lay people in Indonesia

As it has been described in the earlier section that chanting is one of the most common practice among the Indonesian Buddhist. However, one of the most uniquely practiced is communal chanting which takes place in the house of the Buddhist. This practice is particularly widely practice among Theravadin community spread ranging from country to town. Never-the-less, in this occasion I would like to take a study case in which place the Buddhist practices this sort of communal practice. This example expects to deliver a message that the tradition of communal practice has some reasons become a social phenomena among Buddhist, especially how it works to bound the scattered Buddhists into one solid Buddhist community. In order to make my point clearer, I would

³ Name of parittas chanting for obituary ceremony are *vandana*, *saranagamana patha*, *pabbatopama gatha*, *ariyadhana gatha*, *Dhammaniyama Gatha*, *Tilakkhanadi Gatha*, *Pamsukula Gatha*, *Adiyasutta Gatha*, *Catutirokuddakanda Gatha*, *Ettavatatipattidana*. (STI, 2005: xxvi) ;

⁴ Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Asalhapunnamipuja Katha

⁵ Ovadapatimokkhatpatha, Maghapunnamipuja Katha

⁶ Bala Sutta, Saraniyadhamma Sutta, Visakhapunnamipuha Katha

⁷ Dhammaniyama Sutta

like to draw one example of a small village in which area Buddhist social gathering is regularly undergone.

Ngandat is a name of a village in which about 300 of Buddhists live. In this village, there is also a vihara called Padepokan Dhammadipa Arama in which live a number of Buddhist monks, student novices, and *atthasilani* (a sort of Buddhist nun but keeping 8 precepts). Vihara (Buddhist monastery) functions as a central of Buddhists activities for Buddhists live nearby as well as for Buddhists in East Jawa in general. In fact, the monastery is one of the largest Buddhist monasteries in Indonesia whose role was significant for the early development of Buddhism in Indonesia.

Buddhists lay people live around the monastery are regularly holding chanting every weekend. However, a part from that schedule of chanting held in the monastery, the people also form another gathering in which day they do chanting together at their fellow Buddhists' home. Chanting is done once in a week every Wednesday evening. The chanting in this context is a form of Buddhists regular social gathering in which occasion Buddhists in the area get together and do activities together. The chanting usually take about just a half an hour but the actually gathering would take up to an hour and a half of time that is starting from 6.30 PM up till 8.00PM. For this program they call it as *Reboan*, refers to activity, which is done on Wednesday.

The Buddhists who frequently come to this occasion usually around 30 people, female and male, young and elders (I myself have decided to joint this group recently and be part of the community). As I observe the program, it is actually consisting of not only chanting but also several others. At least, there are three main agenda in this program, i.e. Chanting, *Arisan*⁸, *Tabungan simpan pinjam*⁹. These agendas are made with the purpose to make the activity livelier and most of all to strengthened the bond among every member.

According to the people engage in the activity, the communal chanting in the village has started since about 7 years ago. The idea came when the Buddhist villager became aware there are actually many Buddhists live in their place. At the first hand, most of the Buddhists agree that the communal chanting has successfully overcome the feeling of aloneness for being a Buddhist in the place where most of the people were of other different religion, Muslim as mostly.

Arisan and *Tabungan simpan pinjam* are another inserted programs to particularly aimed to give each member to feel the stronger bond and to get more benefit from the gathering. Practically speaking, these two additional agendas have the functions to give more drive and motivation to the members to come to the gathering. Thus it raises the sense of belonging to each other. According to them, the most important of all it is all about how to make such a program could last forever and it is crucial for Buddhists which population is only a few to not feel alone by having solid community base activity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, chanting in Indonesia has become one of essential part of religious life style that is carried on by most of Buddhists. Although Chanting is not obligatory in nature, but most of Indonesian Buddhists spare their time to do the chanting, both individually and communally. Unlike in any other religions, where the leader of a ritual determined under certain qualification, Buddhism in Indonesia does not follow that same pattern. Every Buddhist appears to be equally potential to act as chanting leader.

⁸ Part of social gathering in which the member collect the same certain amount of money in every meeting and later they make lucky draw to decide which of the member would get the collected money. This is done in such order that all the member would get their turn.

⁹ Money deposit which also serve as a mean of Saving and Lending for those in the community

In Indonesia, chanting is not only practiced in a vihara but also at the house of Buddhists community members. In the course of practice, the leading person must call for invitation for every sutta they are about to read. This invitation lines are called either in Pali or Bahasa Indonesia. At last, chanting has vividly become important for Buddhist and finally for the sustain of the The teaching of the Buddha. Chanting has also indicated to be one of social gathering, in which sporadic Buddhist in Indonesia could enjoy social relation with their fellow Buddhists.

Bibliography

- Dhammadhiro, Bhikkhu. *Paritta Succi*. Sangha Theravada Indonesia, Jakarta, 2005.
- Dhammasami, Bhikkhu. <http://www.viet.net/anson/ebud/ebdha198.htm>. Accessed, May 10th, 2011.
- Harvey, Peter. *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom, 2000.
- Rashid, Teja. S.M. *Sejarah Perkembangan Agama Buddha Di Indonesia*.
- Sucitto, Ajahn & Candasiri. *Buddhist Ritual and Observances*. www.amaravati.org/abm/english/documents/RitualsObservances.pdf - Accessed, May 10th, 2011
- Walpola Rahula. *What the Buddha Taught*. Grove Press. New York, 1974