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The Role of Buddhism in Promoting Peace and Harmony: A Multidimensional Review of Philosophical Foundations, Historical Applications, and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

Buddhism, one of the world's great spiritual traditions, offers a highly developed philosophical and ethical system focused on non-violence (ahimsa), compassion (karuṇā), loving-kindness (mettā), and the interdependence of all phenomena (pratītyasamutpāda). Drawing on doctrinal frameworks, historical case studies, and contemporary empirical studies, this narrative review argues that core Buddhist teachings including the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and the Five Precepts provide a systematic basis for non-violent conflict resolution, ethical governance, and social cohesion. Figures such as Emperor Ashoka, the Dalai Lama, and Thich Nhat Hanh demonstrate how Buddhist peacebuilding has been put into practice across centuries. Beyond these examples, the review examines Engaged Buddhism, the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement, mindfulness-based interventions, interfaith dialogue, Buddhist economics, and environmental ethics. It also critically investigates the tension between Buddhist peace ideals and episodes of Buddhist nationalism and ethno-religious violence in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Research gaps are identified, and future directions are suggested. The paper concludes that Buddhism presents a genuinely integrative path toward peace one that tackles the root causes of conflict through inner transformation, going beyond empathy and forgiveness, while also offering practical frameworks for social, economic, and ecological harmony.

Keywords: *Buddhism; Peace, Non-Violence; Conflict Resolution; Engaged Buddhism*

1. Introduction

The study of constructive engagement for sustainable peace has gained particular urgency at a time when war and armed conflict show no sign of relenting, social polarization is increasing, ecological degradation is pervasive, and mental health problems are widespread. Although political and legal mechanisms remain central to conflict management, scholars and practitioners have increasingly recognized the transformative capacity of religious and philosophical traditions in addressing the deeper causes of conflict and disharmony (Sivaraksa, 2005; Tiwary & Sharma, 2024). Among the world's

religious traditions, Buddhism is distinctive for its systematic and psychologically oriented teachings on the understanding and resolution of conflict.

Rooted in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) roughly 2,500 years ago, Buddhism offers one of the richest and most internally coherent peace theories in the philosophical legacy of humankind. Its core teachings that suffering (dukkha) arises from craving, aversion, and ignorance; that these mental hindrances can be addressed through ethical living, mental cultivation, and wisdom; and that all phenomena are interdependent and impermanent constitute a multidimensional foundation for both inner peace and social harmony (Bodhi, 2005; Saksana, 2010; Walpola Rahula, 1974). For more than two millennia, these teachings have shaped governance, diplomacy, social movements, and personal practice across diverse cultures.

While political and economic approaches to peace are often pragmatic and externally oriented, Buddhism addresses conflict at its psychological roots, teaching that external violence and social discord arise from the "three poisons" of greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha). By transforming these internal states and cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and ethical discipline, individuals can contribute to a more harmonious society. At the same time, Buddhist history offers concrete examples of how these principles have been applied in governance, diplomacy, community development, and global advocacy (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2000; King, 2009; Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987; Tiwary & Sharma, 2024).

Buddhism's relationship with peace, however, is not unproblematic. Countries such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand with majority Buddhist populations have witnessed severe ethno-religious violence involving Buddhist actors and institutions over recent decades, challenging simplistic portrayals of Buddhism as an inherently peaceful tradition (Chappus & Nourse, 2023; Jerryson & Juergensmeyer, 2010). A balanced scholarly account must therefore scrutinize both Buddhism's peacebuilding potential and the violent misuse of Buddhist identity.

This review paper distills historical, doctrinal, psychological, sociological, economic, and environmental aspects of Buddhism's potential for peacebuilding. It is structured around twelve thematic sections, including philosophical foundations, ethical frameworks, historical case studies, contemporary movements, mindfulness research and practices in conflict resolution, Buddhist economics and environmental ethics, interfaith dialogue, and critical analyses of Buddhist violence. The paper concludes with a critical assessment of existing research gaps and strategic recommendations for future interdisciplinary scholarship.

2. Methodology

This paper employs a narrative review approach, which is well-suited to integrating a wide-ranging and multidimensional body of literature (Ferrari, 2015; Green et al., 2006; Snyder, 2019). Between November 2025 and February 2026, a systematic literature search was conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR using the following keywords: "Buddhism AND peace," "Buddhist AND conflict resolution," "ahimsa AND Buddhism," "mindfulness AND peace," "Engaged Buddhism," "Buddhist economics," "Buddhist environmental ethics," and "Buddhist nationalism AND violence." Additional sources were identified through citation tracking.

Inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) publications in English in peer-reviewed journals, academic books, or conference proceedings; (b) a clear focus on Buddhism's relationship with peace, conflict resolution, or social ethics; and (c) substantive doctrinal, historical, empirical, or theoretical analysis. Non-scholarly popular works and non-English publications were excluded. Adopting a critical lens, the literature was analyzed thematically, emphasizing both the opportunities and challenges associated with Buddhism's engagement with peace.

3. Philosophical and Doctrinal Foundations

3.1 The Four Noble Truths and Conflict

The Four Noble Truths, the foundational teaching of Buddhism, offer a diagnostic framework that is highly relevant for understanding and resolving conflict. The First Noble Truth (dukkha) recognizes that human existence is marked by suffering and dissatisfaction. The Second Noble Truth (samudāya) identifies craving (taṇhā), aversion, and ignorance as the causes of suffering. The Third Noble Truth (nirodha) takes an affirmative stance, asserting that suffering can be brought to an end. The Fourth Noble Truth (magga) prescribes the Noble Eightfold Path as the practical means to attain this cessation (Walpola Rahula, 1974).

Applied to peace and conflict, this framework implies that violence, exploitation, and social discord are not inevitable; they arise from identifiable psychological and structural factors primarily greed, hatred/aversion, and ignorance that can be progressively reduced through systematic training in ethics, mental discipline, and wisdom. By foregrounding internal dispositions that produce external conflict, the Buddhist psychological model provides an alternative lens to Western structural and institutional approaches. This analysis resonates with contemporary conflict resolution theory, which emphasizes addressing root causes rather than merely managing symptoms (Saksana, 2010; Sivaraksa, 2005; Tiwary & Sharma, 2024).

3.2 The Noble Eightfold Path

The Noble Eightfold Path Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration is a comprehensive guide to living in ways that minimize harm and maximize well-being for oneself and others (Bodhi, 2005). Three of these factors Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood constitute the ethical conduct (sīla) dimension and are directly relevant to social peace. Right Speech entails abstaining from falsehood, gossip, harsh words, and divisive talk, thereby fostering truthful and harmonious communication. Right Action involves refraining from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct, protecting the dignity and rights of others. Right Livelihood requires earning a living in ways that do not cause harm, such as avoiding involvement in the arms trade, intoxicants, poisons, and human trafficking (Bodhi, 2005).

As Tiwary and Sharma (2024) emphasize, the ethical dimension of the Eightfold Path is "intended to cultivate not merely individual virtue but a harmonious, peaceful and just social order" (p. 1391). The dimensions of mental discipline (samādhi) and wisdom (paññā) further contribute to peace through the development of focused attention, emotional regulation, and deep insight into interdependence and impermanence. Taken together, these three dimensions constitute a holistic training system that targets the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral causes of conflict (Tiwary & Sharma, 2024).

3.3 Dependent Origination and Interdependence

Buddhism's doctrine of dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda) teaches that all phenomena arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions, and that nothing exists in complete isolation. This insight has profound implications for peace and harmony: it suggests that the well-being of one individual or community cannot be separated from the well-being of all, and that harm inflicted on others ultimately rebounds on oneself (Harvey, 2000; Thich Nhat Hanh, 2008). As a cosmological and ethical principle, pratītyasamutpāda grounds an ontology of relations in which the notion of a discrete, independent self is viewed as illusory an insight that directly challenges competitive and separatist logics underpinning many forms of conflict (Jenkins, 2018).

Modern Buddhist thinkers such as Thich Nhat Hanh have articulated this idea through the concept of "interbeing," the realization that humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems are all intricately connected and that moral responsibility extends to all forms of life. This relational worldview fundamentally contests individualistic and anthropocentric assumptions that fuel conflict, exploitation, and environmental destruction (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2008).

4. Ethical Frameworks for Social Harmony

4.1 The Five Precepts as a Social Contract

The Five Precepts are the basic ethical commitments of lay Buddhists and function as a kind of social contract. When widely followed, they can remove many causes of interpersonal and communal conflict (Harvey, 2000). The Five Precepts include: (a) abstention from taking life (pāṇātipātā), affirming respect for the right to life and non-violence; (b) abstention from taking what is not given (adinnādānā), upholding respect for property and economic justice; (c) abstention from sexual misconduct (kāmesu micchācārā), promoting respect for relationships and bodily integrity; (d) abstention from false speech (musāvādā), fostering truthfulness and trust-based social relations; and (e) abstention from intoxicants (surāmeraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā), encouraging mental clarity, responsible conduct, and the avoidance of heedlessness that can lead to violations of the other precepts (Harvey, 2000).

These precepts cultivate inner qualities such as compassion, generosity, contentment, honesty, and mindfulness, forming an integral foundation for living harmoniously with others. They strongly resemble contemporary concepts of human rights such as the rights to life, property, dignity, and security and thus offer a distinctly Buddhist foundation for universal ethical standards. Nguyen and Kumar (2024), for example, reinterpret the Five Precepts in the context of digital ethics in contemporary Vietnam, applying them to challenges such as cyberbullying, misinformation, digital theft, and online addiction, which demonstrates the adaptability of Buddhist ethics to new social problems.

4.2 The Four Brahma-Vihāras

The Four Brahma-Vihāras (Divine Abodes) loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karuṇā), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkhā) represent the ideal emotional dispositions for Buddhists committed to promoting peace. Mettā meditation has been shown to yield prosocial outcomes that foster social harmony, as regular practice increases positive affect and reduces bias (Keng et al., 2011; Saksana, 2010; Tiwary & Sharma, 2024).

Psychological studies of compassion meditation, derived from the Buddhist notion of karuṇā, reveal that training in compassion can influence psychobiological and neural processes associated with empathic care and altruistic motivation. Weng et al. (2013), for instance, found that compassion training significantly enhanced altruistic behavior and neural responses to others' suffering, while Klimecki et al. (2014) showed that compassion and empathy training produced distinct patterns of functional brain plasticity. Collectively, such findings provide empirical support for the Buddhist claim that systematic cultivation of compassion and loving-kindness can generate measurable shifts in emotional responsiveness and prosocial conduct conducive to peace.

5. Historical Case Studies of Buddhist Peacebuilding

5.1 Emperor Ashoka

One of the most renowned historical examples of Buddhist-inspired peacebuilding is Emperor Ashoka (c. 304–233 BCE) of the Mauryan Empire. Deeply troubled by the large-scale suffering caused by the Kalinga War reported to have led to between 100,000 and 300,000 deaths Ashoka converted to Buddhism and renounced violent conquest. In his thirteenth rock edict, he described himself as "deeply pained by the killing, dying, and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered" (Gethin, 1998).

Following his conversion, Ashoka abandoned aggressive military campaigns and embraced a policy of Dhamma (right conduct), governing primarily through moral persuasion rather than coercive force. He promoted religious tolerance, established hospitals for humans and animals, supported monasteries and stupas, dispatched missionaries across Asia, and inscribed rock and pillar edicts advocating non-violence, compassion, and social welfare. He also appointed Dhamma Mahāmātras officials specifically tasked with promoting ethical governance and social harmony across diverse communities (Kumar, 2021). Ashoka's reign ushered in decades of relative peace in the Indian subcontinent, demonstrating that Buddhist ideals can be translated into political practice with tangible outcomes such as peace, tolerance, and concern for welfare (Gethin, 1998; Kumar, 2021).

5.2 The Dalai Lama

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is one of the most prominent contemporary advocates of Buddhist-inspired peace. After the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1959, the Dalai Lama adopted a path of non-violence grounded in Buddhist principles of compassion, dialogue, and global responsibility (King, 2009; Tiwary & Sharma, 2024). He has consistently argued that world peace is impossible without inner peace, and that genuine peace requires compassion, tolerance, and mutual understanding.

The Dalai Lama distinguishes between individual liberation and broader structural transformation, insisting that Buddhism cannot be concerned solely with personal salvation. He has been widely recognized for his advocacy in interfaith dialogue, human rights, and environmental protection, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 (King, 2009). In 2025, he was further honored with the Gold Mercury Award for Peace and Visionary Governance in recognition of his lifelong dedication to peace, non-violence, ethical leadership, "wisdom culture," and environmental stewardship (Gold Mercury International, 2025). His vision of "universal responsibility" is highly relevant to addressing contemporary global challenges.

5.3 Thich Nhat Hanh

Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Thiền (Zen) Buddhist monk, popularized the term "Engaged Buddhism" during the Vietnam War and became one of the most influential Buddhist peace activists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He maintained that authentic Buddhist practice cannot be separated from social engagement: "When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time" (Queen & King, 1996; Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987).

Thich Nhat Hanh's approach emphasizes the integration of mindfulness practice with non-violent social action and rejects any separation between the transformation of individual consciousness and the transformation of society. His notion of "interbeing," a contemporary reformulation of dependent origination, provides a conceptual framework for understanding the interconnection of personal peace, social justice, and ecological sustainability. Through the founding of the Order of Interbeing and the Plum

Village community, he established institutional models that link contemplative practice with social activism, inspiring communities worldwide (Queen & King, 1996; Thich Nhat Hanh, 2008).

6. Engaged Buddhism and Contemporary Movements

6.1 The Engaged Buddhism Movement

Since the mid-twentieth century, Engaged Buddhism has emerged as a global movement encompassing diverse social, political, and environmental initiatives grounded in Buddhist principles. Prominent figures include Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, who promotes democratic governance and social justice; Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, who emphasized the social dimensions of Buddhist liberation; Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in India, who led mass conversions to Buddhism as a strategy for Dalit emancipation; and Bernie Glassman, who founded Zen Peacemakers International and introduced "bearing witness" retreats at sites of historical suffering (Queen & King, 1996; Sivaraksa, 2005).

Engaged Buddhist activism creatively balances non-violence with efforts to transform structural injustices, blending traditional Buddhist teachings with modern theories of systemic social change. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), founded in 1978, integrates contemplative practice with progressive political engagement and has developed distinctive approaches to conflict resolution based on Mahāyāna principles of compassion and interdependence (Queen & King, 1996; Sivaraksa, 2005).

6.2 The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka, founded by A. T. Ariyaratne in 1958, is now the largest indigenous Buddhist-inspired development and peace organization in the country, working with approximately 15,000 villages. Its name combines sarvodaya ("awakening of all") and shramadana ("gift of labor"), reflecting its Gandhian and Buddhist ethos (Ariyaratne, 2000).

Sarvodaya represents a holistic approach to peacebuilding that integrates economic self-reliance, community development, spiritual practice, and direct mediation. Its Peace Meditation program, launched in 1999, attracted more than 170,000 participants at its inaugural event and has since engaged over a million Sri Lankans from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. The Shanthi Sena (Peace Brigade), established within Sarvodaya, has become the largest peace organization in Sri Lanka, providing conflict mediation, post-tsunami reconstruction, and reconciliation services (Ariyaratne, 2000; Hayashi-Smith, 2011).

Zalta (2022) characterizes Sarvodaya's methodology as "dual awakening" simultaneous transformation at the level of individual consciousness and social structures highlighting one of its major contributions to global peacebuilding theory. However, the movement's effectiveness is constrained by its embeddedness within a predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist social context, which raises questions about its capacity to bridge deep ethnic divisions (Hayashi-Smith, 2011).

7. Mindfulness, Meditation, and Inner Peace

7.1 Meditation as a Foundation for Peace

Buddhism teaches that authentic peace must first be realized within the individual mind. The development of mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and insight (vipassanā) is crucial for releasing the mental afflictions that generate conflict and suffering. Through meditation practice, reactivity toward thoughts, emotions, and sensory experiences is transformed into non-reactivity, weakening habitual patterns of

craving, aversion, and delusion (Goldberg et al., 2018; Keng et al., 2011; World Health Organization, 2022).

A detailed review by Keng et al. (2011) found that mindfulness meditation leads to various beneficial psychological outcomes, including greater subjective well-being, fewer psychological symptoms, reduced emotional reactivity, and more adaptive behavioral regulation. These outcomes directly support more peaceful interpersonal relationships and less reactive responses to conflict.

7.2 Neurobiological Evidence

In recent years, neuroscientific research has substantially expanded the evidence base for the effects of Buddhist-derived meditation practices on brain and behavior. Calderone et al. (2024) reported that Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) enhances activity in brain regions associated with emotional processing and sensory perception, improves psychological variables such as anxiety and depression, and reduces pain intensity and unpleasantness through mechanisms distinct from placebo.

A 2025 review in *Frontiers in Psychology* suggests that Buddhist meditation promotes flexible restructuring of neural pathways, particularly within the default mode network (DMN), which is associated with self-referential thought. Long-term practitioners display distinctive patterns of neural connectivity, stronger meta-cognitive abilities, and improved emotional regulation (Wang, 2025). Mettā (loving-kindness) meditation in particular appears to increase prosocial motivation while reducing self-criticism. Complementary research on dispositional mindfulness has found robust cross-cultural evidence that mindfulness enhances prosocial behavior, with perspective-taking and empathic concern serving as mediators (Li et al., 2024).

7.3 MBSR and Applied Peace

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979 and derived from traditional Buddhist meditative practices, is one of the most widely implemented secular programs rooted in Buddhist contemplative traditions. It is an eight-week, evidence-based intervention that combines mindfulness meditation, body awareness, and gentle movement to help participants cope with stress, pain, and illness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

In contemporary peacebuilding, Buddhist-inspired mindfulness and meditation programs have been incorporated into dialogue-based conflict resolution workshops and trauma-healing initiatives, fostering empathy, emotional regulation, and mutual understanding among participants. Buddhist principles have also influenced the frameworks of international organizations, including the United Nations, which has drawn on mindfulness and compassion-based approaches in select peacebuilding and mental health initiatives (Sivaraksa, 2005). These examples highlight the tangible links between Buddhist contemplative traditions and modern secular frameworks for peace.

8. Buddhist Approaches to Conflict Resolution

8.1 Core Principles

Buddhist approaches to conflict resolution emphasize addressing root causes rather than symptoms, with particular attention to non-violence (ahimsa), compassion (karuṇā), mindful communication, the Middle Way, and interdependence (Harvey, 2000; Tiwary & Sharma, 2024). Recent studies of Buddhist practices of apology and forgiveness (khamāpana) have revealed structured monastic reconciliation rituals that may be relevant to secular conflict resolution processes (Rakhitha & Singh,

2025). Moreover, aspects of International Humanitarian Law resonate with the Middle Way's emphasis on avoiding extremes and reducing suffering (Sivaraksa, 2005).

8.2 Buddhist and Western Approaches Compared

The following table contrasts core dimensions of Buddhist and mainstream Western approaches to conflict resolution:

Dimension	Buddhist Approach	Western Approach
Primary focus	Inner transformation of attitudes	Structural and procedural solutions
Root cause analysis	Greed, hatred, and delusion	Power imbalances, institutional failures
Key methods	Mindful dialogue, compassion cultivation, moral reform	Negotiation, treaties, legal instruments
Role of emotion	Cultivating positive emotions as prerequisites for peace	Often treated as obstacles to rational negotiation
View of adversary	Fellow beings deserving compassion	Opposing parties with competing interests
Scope	Holistic: personal, social, ecological	Primarily political, legal, and institutional

Integrating Buddhist principles into Western diplomatic and legal practices can yield deeper resolutions that address underlying psychological and relational dynamics, not merely surface-level agreements (Sivaraksa, 2005). Mahāyāna non-dualistic thinking, in particular, offers alternatives to binary "us versus them" narratives that often perpetuate cycles of violence (Fox, 2019).

9. Buddhist Economics and Sustainable Harmony

In his influential book *Small is Beautiful*, Schumacher (1973) coined the term "Buddhist economics," arguing that economies should prioritize human happiness, environmental health, and spiritual enrichment rather than the endless pursuit of material accumulation. He emphasized that "the ownership and the consumption of goods is a means to an end, and Buddhist economics is the systematic study of how to attain given ends with the minimum means" (Schumacher, 1973, p. 56).

The most widely cited real-world example of Buddhist economics is Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH). GNH, explicitly inspired by Buddhist principles, rests on four pillars: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, preservation of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment, and good governance (Ura et al., 2012). Its framework combines conventional socio-economic indicators with measures of psychological well-being, cultural resilience, community vitality, and ecological diversity, attracting global attention as a model for alternative development (Masaki & Tshering, 2025).

Buddhist economic concepts such as Right Livelihood, sufficiency (santutthi), and balance between economic activity and ecological integrity offer ethical guidance for corporate social responsibility and sustainable business practices concerns increasingly salient in the context of climate change, resource depletion, and rising inequality (Zinchenko & Boichenko, 2022). Emerging movements

toward mindful business models, ethical supply chains, and well-being-focused economics can be viewed as partial realizations of Schumacher's Buddhist-inspired vision.

10. Environmental Ethics and Ecological Harmony

Buddhist philosophy provides a rich foundation for environmental ethics, grounded in the doctrines of interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda), non-self (anattā), impermanence (anicca), and compassion (karuṇā). These teachings support a worldview in which all beings human, animal, and ecological are interconnected through intricate webs of causation and mutual dependency (Harvey, 2000; Thich Nhat Hanh, 2008). The principle of non-harming (ahimsa) encourages lifestyles attuned to ecological limits, and the First Precept's prohibition against killing extends moral consideration to all sentient beings, providing a basis for biodiversity conservation and animal welfare (Harvey, 2000; Kaza, 2017).

These themes have been developed by contemporary Buddhist thinkers and communities into what is sometimes called "spiritual ecology," emphasizing a sacred, affective relationship with nature. Practical expressions include reforestation projects, "tree ordination" ceremonies in Thailand during which monks ritually "ordain" trees to protect them from logging eco-temple movements in Japan, and "green Buddhism" advocacy in Western contexts (Barnes, 1992). Recent scholarship has also advanced the concept of "mindful sustainability," which incorporates Buddhist ethical and contemplative principles into debates on climate justice, reframing environmental stewardship as a collective karmic responsibility rather than solely a political or technical issue (Sohaib & Aktar, 2025). These developments demonstrate that Buddhist environmental ethics can function not only as a philosophical framework but also as an active paradigm in global sustainability discourse.

11. Interfaith Dialogue and Global Cooperation

As a tradition that emphasizes compassion, tolerance, and mindful awareness of diverse perspectives, Buddhism is a natural partner in interfaith dialogue. The Dalai Lama and other Buddhist leaders have vigorously promoted interfaith understanding, arguing that major world religions share fundamental humanitarian values and that dialogue can help build "a viable consensus on basic spiritual values that…touch every human heart" (King, 2009; Ramli et al., 2023). Empirical studies indicate that structured, inclusive, and institutionally supported interfaith encounters can reduce prejudice and deepen mutual understanding. When such dialogues draw on Buddhist resources, they often highlight common commitments to compassion, non-violence, de-escalation, and the alleviation of suffering (Ramli et al., 2023).

Buddhist ideas have also begun to influence the formal norms of international organizations. For example, the United Nations' recognition of Vesak (Buddha Day) in 1999 as an international day of observance reflects global acknowledgment of Buddhism's contributions to peace and cultural understanding (Sivaraksa, 2005). Buddhist leaders and organizations participate actively in international discussions on human rights, disarmament, climate change, and interfaith cooperation, offering perspectives rooted in non-violence, compassion, and the universality of human dignity (King, 2009; Sivaraksa, 2005).

12. Critical Perspectives: Buddhism, Nationalism, and Violence

12.1 The Paradox of Buddhist Violence

To critically assess Buddhism's relationship to peace, it is essential to confront instances where Buddhist symbols, institutions, and identities have been mobilized to justify violence. "Buddhist nationalism" refers to the instrumentalization of Buddhist identity to support exclusivist, ethno-nationalist projects, often in the context of the modern nation-state (Jerryson & Juergensmeyer, 2010; Walton, 2023). Such movements reveal that religious teachings, including those of Buddhism, can be selectively interpreted and appropriated in ways that contradict their core ethical principles.

12.2 Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand

The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine State, Myanmar, is one of the most extreme recent examples of violence associated with Buddhist nationalism. Beginning in 2012 and peaking in 2017, attacks by Buddhist mobs, combined with state-sponsored operations, triggered mass displacement and atrocities that the United Nations has described as ethnic cleansing. Monks such as Ashin Wirathu and movements like the 969 Movement exemplify how monastic authority can be co-opted for anti-Muslim incitement. Framing their actions as "defending the sāsana" (Buddhist dispensation), Buddhist nationalists have invoked religious obligation to legitimize exclusionary policies and violence (Chappus & Nourse, 2023; Walton, 2023).

Similar dynamics have appeared in Sri Lanka, where the 26-year conflict between the predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist state and Tamil separatists had important Buddhist nationalist dimensions. Groups such as Bodu Bala Sena ("Buddhist Power Force") have fostered anti-Muslim sentiment and violence in post-war Sri Lanka (Chappus & Nourse, 2023). In southern Thailand, conflict between the Buddhist-majority government and Muslim separatists has led to more than 6,000 deaths, with religious identity playing a central role in the escalation and framing of violence (Jerryson & Juergensmeyer, 2010).

These cases underscore several analytical points. First, Buddhist nationalism is shaped by complex intersections of colonial history, ethnic identity, political rivalry, and economic anxiety, rather than by religious doctrine alone. Second, relationships between military institutions and religious establishments are crucial in determining whether inter-religious violence is enabled or constrained. Third, Western romanticization of Buddhism as inherently peaceful can impede critical scrutiny of these dynamics (Chappus & Nourse, 2023; Walton, 2023). Mature scholarship on Buddhism and peace must therefore confront both Buddhism's genuine resources for peacemaking and its vulnerability to violent co-option.

13. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although Buddhism provides abundant philosophical resources for peace and harmony, the scholarly literature exhibits several important limitations. Much existing work is descriptive or normative, extolling Buddhist ideals without systematically assessing their impact in concrete peacebuilding contexts. While mindfulness has received considerable empirical attention over the past three decades, it is often treated in decontextualized and secularized ways that neglect its ethical, communal, and soteriological dimensions. Furthermore, scholarship has been criticized for overemphasizing prominent leaders at the expense of grassroots Buddhist peace practices (Keng et al., 2011; Tiwary & Sharma, 2024).

Future research should pursue multiple lines of inquiry, including: (a) mixed-methods studies integrating quantitative peace outcome measures with qualitative analyses of specific Buddhist peace practices; (b) investigations of grassroots-level Buddhist peacebuilding, such as village meditation initiatives, monastic mediation, and lay community organizing (Ariyaratne, 2000; Hayashi-Smith, 2011); (c) mechanism-oriented research that clarifies how particular Buddhist practices generate measurable reductions in conflict-related behaviors; (d) comparative studies examining Buddhist approaches alongside other religious and secular peacebuilding frameworks (Ramli et al., 2023); (e) critical analyses of conditions that enable versus inhibit Buddhist nationalist violence (Chappus & Nourse, 2023; Walton, 2023); and (f) explorations of Buddhist contributions to emerging challenges such as artificial intelligence ethics, digital well-being, and climate justice (Nguyen & Kumar, 2024; Sohaib & Aktar, 2025).

Such research would help move beyond idealized or romantic narratives by situating Buddhist teachings within their complex historical and sociopolitical contexts and by rigorously evaluating their practical effects in diverse settings.

14. Conclusion

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This review has shown that Buddhism offers a uniquely holistic and integrative approach to peace and harmony, addressing both the innermost psychological causes of conflict rooted in greed, hatred, and ignorance and the outer structures of ethical behavior, social relations, economic systems, and ecological conditions. From foundational teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, through the ethical guidance of the Five Precepts and the Four Brahma-Vihāras, to historical exemplars like Ashoka’s reign and contemporary movements such as Engaged Buddhism and mindfulness-based interventions, Buddhism presents a rich repertoire of resources for peacebuilding at individual, communal, national, and global levels.

At the same time, critical engagement with Buddhism’s entanglement in violence, as seen in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, demonstrates that no religious tradition is immune to instrumentalization for political and ethno-nationalist ends. Scholars, practitioners, and international organizations are increasingly recognizing Buddhism’s relevance to contemporary challenges, including armed conflict, social polarization, economic inequality, ecological crisis, and the mental health epidemic. Realizing the full peacebuilding potential of Buddhist thought and practice will require not only expanded empirical research but also a willingness to grapple honestly with the tradition’s internal tensions and historical ambiguities.

Future scholarship that combines rigorous methodology with sensitivity to cultural and doctrinal nuance will be essential for advancing this emerging field. Such work can help clarify how Buddhist insights may contribute alongside other religious and secular perspectives to the development of more effective, compassionate, and sustainable approaches to peace in an increasingly interconnected world.

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