



ASEAN IIDC Plenary Session 4

The Ashoka Approach:

Rediscovering and re-enlivening the principle of “unity in diversity” throughout Southeast Asia

“The ASEAN region constitutes a unique ‘civilization of civilizations.’ It is, in fact, a ‘confluence of civilizations.’ In a world riven by conflict, it can help other societies, and cultures, learn how to coexist peacefully.”

~ Dr. Timothy S. Shah

Co-founder & Director of Strategic Initiatives, Center for Shared Civilizational Values

JAKARTA, Indonesia, 7 August 2023 — The fourth plenary session of the ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (ASEAN IIDC) convened religious leaders and scholars from South and Southeast Asia for a panel discussion that explored how to reawaken the ancient spiritual, cultural, and socio-political heritage of what was once a largely cohesive Indianized cultural sphere, or “Indosphere.” Home to an immense variety of ethnic and religious groups, this region pioneered shared civilizational values rooted in the principle of “oneness amid diversity,” including religious pluralism and tolerance, long before the West began to widely embrace these values in the modern era.

Roughly co-extensive with South and Southeast Asia, the Indosphere is a vast geographic and cultural zone stretching from Pakistan to Indonesia, which was formatively and permanently shaped by great spiritual traditions — including Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism — that originated in the Indian subcontinent.

The panel was moderated by [Dr. Timothy S. Shah](#), an Indian-American scholar of Jain descent, who directs the Center for Shared Civilizational Values’ South Asian operations from an office in Bangalore, India.

In a 2021 essay co-authored with CSCV Deputy Chairman & CEO C. Holland Taylor, titled [“The ‘Ashoka Approach’ and Indonesian Leadership in the Movement for Pluralist Re-Awakening in South and Southeast Asia,”](#) Dr. Shah and Mr. Taylor wrote:

Humanitarian Islam leaders — including [NU Chairman] KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf and Indonesia’s Minister of Religious Affairs, H. Yaqut Cholil Qoumas — maintain that in order to engage in political, economic, and civilizational dialogue on the basis of equality, the nations of South and Southeast Asia must rediscover their shared civilizational legacy, whose cultural and spiritual heritage is equal to those of the “Sinosphere,” Europe, and the Middle East. By re-enlivening the region’s own spiritually informed and benevolent narratives regarding the nature of religious and cultural identity and inter-faith respect — as enshrined in Ashoka’s Major Rock Edicts

and the teachings of *Islam Nusantara* — Humanitarian Islam and the Ashoka Approach seek to strengthen the region and enable it to resist both internal and external disruptive influences.

Building on their transformative work in support of religious pluralism in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama spiritual leaders are seeking to mobilize like-minded religious and political figures throughout South and Southeast Asia to foster a renewed appreciation for the spirituality and respect for pluralism that were once defining features of the Indianized (or perhaps, “Ashoka-ized”) cultural sphere, and forge concrete avenues of cooperation between profoundly spiritual and humanitarian expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Their explicit goal is for South and Southeast Asia to re-emerge as a cohesive, vital, and proactive civilizational sphere, which functions as a powerful, independent pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon shared civilizational values.

Selected excerpts of the panel discussion, edited for publication, may be read below.

Venerable Bhante Sri Pannyavaro Mahathera — Vice President of the World Buddhist Sangha Council, President of Sangha Theravada Indonesia, and Abbot of Vihara Mendut near [Borobudur Temple](#) in Central Java — delivered remarks titled “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and *Pancasila*: Embracing Unity Amid Diversity in Indonesia”:

Indonesia possesses a rich spiritual heritage, not only from its indigenous roots but also from various religions that have been present in the country for centuries, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Taoism, Confucianism, Sikhism, and others.

The spiritual wealth of these religions has played a significant role in shaping Indonesian culture, which is uniquely characterized by its presence across thousands of islands, numerous ethnic groups, and many local languages. This cultural harmony amid differences is referred to in our national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means “Unity Amid Diversity.”

The phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* was adopted by the founders of the Republic of Indonesia from an ancient Javanese text titled *Sutasoma* — based on a *Jataka* theme from the Buddhist Canon *Tripitaka* — written by Mpu Tantular, a Buddhist poet and scholar, approximately 650 years ago.

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika fosters the spirit of *gotong royong* (“working together”), which promotes an attitude and behavior conducive to cooperation and mutual assistance among members of Indonesian society in all fields of life.

This spirit of cooperation, which is also deeply rooted in the spirituality of all religious traditions, has long enriched our nation's morality. It fosters humanism and national unity, playing an important role in the democratic life of Indonesia, where mutual consultation is routinely employed to promote prosperity and justice for all.

These fundamental principles are encapsulated in *Pancasila*, the five principles laid down by the founding father of our nation, Soekarno.

Cooperation, mutual assistance, and the spirit of *Pancasila* are not unique to Indonesia, but represent universal values. Through this forum, we aim to share the values of *gotong royong* and *Pancasila* with the people of ASEAN and the rest of the world.

The Ashoka Edicts and the “Ashokan” Spiritual and Civilizational Legacy of South and Southeast Asia

The worldview that historically lay at the heart of the Indianized cultural sphere was profoundly shaped by the complex interaction of various streams of spirituality that emerged in northern India during the first millennium BCE, against the backdrop of orthodox Brahmanism, including the Upanishads, Jainism, and Buddhism. This worldview posited that every human being has access within him or herself to a transcendent “ground of being,” and that different spiritual paths all lead to the same goal, which Hindus often describe as *jiwa mukti* (liberation of the self from spiritual ignorance) and Buddhists as the state of *nirvana*. In terms more familiar to contemporary Westerners, the cosmologies embraced by Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism revolve around the concept of spiritual liberation or “enlightenment.”

From this perspective, it is but a short step to acknowledge and respect the existence of other faith traditions, as well as a wide variety of religious rituals and practices. This spiritual vision found concrete socio-cultural and political expression in the 3rd century BCE Mauryan Empire. The Emperor Ashoka erected dozens of Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts around the perimeter of his vast empire, from Kandahar in modern-day Afghanistan and the Himalayan mountains in the north, to the Deccan Plateau in the south, and upon the shores of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal.

The overarching theme of these edicts is *dhamma*, the Magadhi Prakrit form of the Sanskrit term *dharma*. *Dharma* is a key concept within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In the *Rig Veda* it refers to that which, like a pillar, supports or upholds *rta*, the principle of natural order which regulates and coordinates the operation of the universe and everything in it. In Hinduism, the term thus encompasses and is often used to signify human behavior that is aligned with *rta*, including one’s spiritual, moral, familial and vocational responsibilities. Within Buddhism, the term means “cosmic law and order” and is applied to the teachings of Gautama Buddha, whose path to spiritual liberation is described as the *Dhamma*. For this reason, the term *dhamma/dharma* also came to signify the truth, essence, and/or ultimate reality, as well as the path to the realization of truth.

Like the Arabic term *shari’ah* in its etymological and spiritual sense, *dharma* thus refers to the path which leads the individual soul towards union with the transcendent ground of being. The concept of *dhamma/dharma* also corresponds to the Chinese word *tao*, which signifies “the way,” “path” or “route,” as well as the natural order of the universe, which is why the twentieth century Christian theologian C.S. Lewis used the term “the *Tao*” in his book *The Abolition of Man* (Lewis 1947).

Ashoka’s Twelfth Major Rock Edict is of particular significance, for it describes the implications of this worldview for religious pluralism and tolerance:

Raja Devānampriya Priyadarśin (“Beloved of the Gods, Who Looks Upon All Things with the Eye of Compassion,” an epithet that denotes Emperor Ashoka) is honoring all religious paths: both ascetics and householders; both with gifts and with honors of

various kinds he is honoring them. Yet Devānāmpriya does not value either gifts or honors so [highly] as [this, namely] that a flourishing of the essence (“*saravadi*”) of all religious paths (“*pāsamdā*” — i.e., schools of religious thought and practice, such as Jainism, Buddhism, Brahmanism, etc.) should take place. Yet a flourishing of the essence [of all religious paths is possible] in many ways. But its root is this: guarding [one’s] speech to avoid extolling one’s own path and disparaging other paths on inappropriate occasions, and to be moderate in this regard on every occasion. Other religious paths should always be duly honored.

If one is acting thus, he is both ensuring that his own religious path flourishes and benefiting other paths. If one is acting otherwise, then one is both diminishing the influence of one’s own religious path and wronging other paths. For whosoever praises his own religious path or blames other paths — all [this] out of devotion to his own path, [i.e.,] with the intention of glorifying his own path — if he is acting thus, in fact he severely injures his own religious path.

Therefore concord (*samavāyo*, the “*power of unity*”) alone is meritorious, [i.e.,] that they [who follow different religious paths] should both hear and observe each other’s *dhamma* (“*truth/path/moral principles which lead the individual soul to union with the transcendent ground of being*”). For this is the desire of Devānāmpriya: that all religious paths should be full of learning, and of teachings that are pure and true.

And those who are attached to their respective [religious paths] ought to be spoken to [as follows]: Devānāmpriya does not value either gifts or honors so [highly] as [this, namely,] that a flourishing of the essence of all religious paths should take place.

And many [officers of the Maurya Empire] are assigned to tasks bearing upon this purpose: the *mahāmātras* [senior officials] responsible for promoting *dhamma*; *mahāmātras* responsible for women in the royal household; *mahāmātras* for cattle and pasturelands; and other classes [of officials]. And this is the fruit of these actions: the flourishing (*vadhī*) of each person’s religious path and the glorification of *dhamma*.

The primary message of the Twelfth Rock Edict is that profound spiritual dialogue between those who follow different religious paths — pursued in a spirit of mutual respect and humility, for the purpose of learning from one another — will naturally lead to the flourishing of all. In other words, the spiritual dialogue that Ashoka enjoins is intended to enhance the ability of each religious path to help its followers attain the ultimate purpose or “essence” of religion, which is personal union with the transcendent ground of being. Conversely, the “weaponization” of one’s own religious path and disparagement of others’ is self-defeating, for such behavior not only reflects a failure to grasp the very nature and purpose of religion, but directly obstructs its fulfillment and thereby nullifies its beneficial influence in society.

Ashoka’s Seventh Rock Edict discusses the societal benefits — both moral and spiritual — of not only permitting, but actually encouraging, religious pluralism throughout a kingdom:

Raja Devānāmpriya Priyadarśin desires [that people of] all religious paths should dwell in all places; [for] all these [religious paths] encourage [their adherents to develop] self-control (*sayamam*, in Sanskrit “*samyama*”) and pure consciousness (*bhava-sudhim*, in Sanskrit “*bhava-sudhi*”). But men are of various inclinations and of various passions. They may thus perform the whole or a part [of their duties]. But even one who is

generous, [but] does not possess self-control, pure consciousness, gratitude and firm devotion, is base and ignoble (University of Oslo n.d.).

Bhinneka Tunggal Ika: “Oneness Amid Diversity”

Ashoka’s Rock Edicts express, in written form, the essence of a spiritual and, indeed, civilizational worldview that gradually spread throughout Southeast Asia during the subsequent millennia to create an “Ashoka-ized” cultural sphere. Crucially, as the French scholar of Southeast Asian archaeology and history George Cœdès emphasized in his book *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, this process occurred via peaceful diffusion rather than forceful conquest and annexation. Also significant is the fact that the “Indianized” cultures of Southeast Asia did not import or adopt the rigid caste system that is characteristic of Brahmanical orthodoxy. In the absence of a rigid caste system, Indianized courts throughout much of Southeast Asia gradually embraced syncretic forms of Hinduism and Buddhism — rooted in a shared apprehension regarding the nature of ultimate reality — which also found expression in the great Mahayana Buddhist university of Nalanda in present-day Bihar, India.

As the prominent historian and Islamic scholar Kyai Haji Agus Sanyoto explains in the film *Rahmat Islam Nusantara (The Divine Grace of East Indies Islam)*, the original inhabitants of the Malay Archipelago embraced an indigenous spirituality that was often centered on “the worship of Sang Hyang Taya — The Great Void, or Absolute — as the unmanifest source of creation. Although the word ‘taya’ literally means ‘That which is Not,’ it does not imply nonexistence. True, ‘That’ does not exist on a physical plane; yet ‘That’ does exist. ‘That’ is empty, yet full. This cannot be explained in purely rational terms, which is why Sang Hyang Taya came to be described with the phrase, ‘*Tankenno kinoyo ngopo*’ — That to which nothing can be done. The mind cannot grasp ‘That,’ which lies beyond human concepts. Nor can ‘That’ be approached using any of the five senses. That’s why the ancients used the term ‘*suwung*’ or ‘*awang-uwung*’: ‘That’ is ... yet is not. ‘That’ is not ... yet is.”

Those familiar with the precepts of mysticism, such as “the belief that direct knowledge of God, spiritual truth or ultimate reality can be attained through subjective experience” (Merriam-Webster), will immediately recognize a description of the Divine essence not unlike that expressed by mystics from all the world’s major religious traditions. When Hinduism and Buddhism arrived during the early centuries of the Common Era, many inhabitants of the East Indies readily embraced these new religions, which they regarded as different paths leading individuals to the direct experience or “consciousness” of a single Transcendent Reality, or Truth, which was already long familiar to them.

The 14th-century Javanese court poet Mpu Tantular — a nephew of King Rajasanagara of the syncretic Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit Empire — composed the epic poem *Sutasoma*, from which the Republic of Indonesia’s national motto, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, “Oneness Amid Diversity,” is derived. This ancient Javanese *kakawin* (book of poetry) promotes mutual understanding and tolerance between Buddhists and Hindu followers of Shiva. The phrase *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* appears in chapter 139, verse 5:

*Rwāneka dhātu winuwus Buddha Wiswa, Bhinnêki rakwa ring apan kena parwanosen,
Mangka ng Jinatwa kalawan Śiwatatwa tunggal,*

Bhinnêka tunggal ika tan hana dharma mangrwa.

*It is said that Buddha and Shiva are two distinct substances (or entities).
They are indeed different, yet it is impossible to regard them as fundamentally different
[when one apprehends the underlying Unity of existence].*

*For the Essence (Truth) of Buddha and the Essence of Shiva is One (tunggal).
[The diverse forms of the universe] are indeed different, yet simultaneously One
(bhinneka tunggal ika), for Truth (dharma) is indivisible.*

The underlying message of Ashoka's Rock Edicts and Mpu Tantular's *Sutasoma* is identical, although they were composed nearly 1,600 years apart. This demonstrates the remarkably coherent civilizational worldview that pervaded the Indianized cultural sphere, rooted in a shared perception regarding the ultimate nature of reality — the transcendent ground of being. This profoundly spiritual worldview produced a high degree of tolerance and respect for religious pluralism, for it was rooted in the conviction that all genuine religious paths converge upon an ultimate “essence.”

One of the things that makes Islam in Indonesia (*Islam Nusantara*) distinctive is that it did not and does not despise, reject, or seek to destroy the preexisting civilizational heritage of the Indianized cultural sphere. Rather, the *Wali Songo* (Muslim saints who proselytized Islam in Java 500 years ago) and their spiritual heirs have consciously and deliberately built upon the region's millennia-old traditions of rich spiritual and theological insight.

In his 2015 article “[How Islam Learned to Adapt in ‘Nusantara,’](#)” Nahdlatul Ulama General Chairman Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf states that Indonesian Muslim scholars have traditionally “position[ed] Islam as an equal citizen within a highly pluralistic society, rather than as the beneficiary or carrier of a violent, supremacist ideology.” He further observes that “In Nusantara, Islam arrived as a guest and was later adopted into the family. In turn, Nusantara Islam developed a distinct character, which is quite different from that manifested by Islam in other regions of the Muslim world.”

Dr. Teresita Cruz del Rosario, Senior Research Associate at the National University of Singapore's Asia Research Institute and author of numerous books on political sociology and public policy, delivered the session's third speech, titled “Historical processes that contributed to the collapse of Southeast Asia's ancient civilizational unity.”

Between the tenth and sixteenth centuries C.E., a complex array of forces undermined and ultimately destroyed the de facto civilizational unity of the Ashoka-sphere. This decline and collapse of the historic Indianized cultural sphere — due to military incursions from the Middle East and the Sinosphere — was followed by centuries of European colonialism, which deepened and perpetuated the de facto “atomization” of what was once a civilizational unity unified and largely peaceful region that is home to over one-third of the world's population.

As Dr. del Rosario observed:

The spread of Hinduism and Buddhism to the Philippines occurred as early as the 7th century C.E., via travelling merchants and monks who introduced a syncretic variety of these religions to the region. Their profound influence may be seen in the fact that 25 percent of the vocabulary in Tagalog, our national language, is derived from

Sanskrit and other Indic languages. This includes many words used in daily conversation, such as *dukkha* (“suffering”); *bodhi* (“knowledge”); and *mukha* (“face”).

Just as the Islamic conquest of Northern India disrupted the Indianized civilizational sphere in the West, the arrival of Ferdinand Magellan and the Spanish conquest of the Philippines in the 16th century had a profound effect upon the region’s eastern-most islands.

The Humanitarian Islam of the East

In Southeast Asia, Khmer and Javanese civilizations are perhaps unique in that both retain a strong, continuous, and unbroken link to the region’s ancient Ashokan heritage. Forty percent of high Javanese vocabulary is derived from Sanskrit, and the traditional Javanese worldview is deeply rooted in the principle of “oneness amid diversity.” Significantly, the center of gravity of the world’s largest Muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, lies within the Javanese linguistic and cultural sphere.

Reflecting this civilizational heritage, and in order to preserve and strengthen the existing rules-based international order and facilitate its acceptance by Muslims worldwide, Nahdlatul Ulama has established a theological framework to “address obsolete and problematic elements within Islamic orthodoxy” (*Nusantara Manifesto* 2018, point 11). As a central component of this effort, NU leaders are developing an “[Islamic jurisprudence for a global civilization](#), whose constituent elements retain their distinctive characteristics” (*fiqh al-hadārah al-‘ālamīyah al-mutasahirah*). These spiritual leaders, who guide the world’s largest Muslim organization, seek to “address the need for social harmony at a global level and in each of the world’s regions where Muslims actually live and work, through a process of recontextualizing and ‘indigenizing’ Islam, as historically occurred in *Nusantara* (the Malay Archipelago)” (*Nusantara Manifesto*, points 7 and 37-39).

These Nahdlatul Ulama leaders have established multiple vehicles to further this objective. One of these, Humanitarian Islam, is a global movement that seeks to restore *rahmah* (universal love and compassion) to its rightful place as a primary message of Islam. Others include Bayt ar-Rahmah, the Center for Shared Civilizational Values, the G20 Religion Forum (R20), and the newly established ASEAN Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Conference (ASEAN IIDC).

Integral to this effort is a regional strategy called the “Ashoka Approach.” This strategy seeks to reawaken the ancient spiritual, cultural, and socio-political heritage associated with Ashoka, Emperor of the Maurya Dynasty on the Indian subcontinent from 268 to 232 BCE. During the course of his reign, the Buddhist Ashoka came to renounce armed conquest and thereafter championed compassion, extensive dialogue and interchange among followers of diverse spiritual paths, inter-faith tolerance, mutual understanding, and respect for the dignity inherent in others.

As noted above, these ideas contributed to the emergence of a civilizational worldview that came to be shared by peoples and cultures throughout much of South and Southeast Asia,

thereby fostering an Indianized civilizational sphere that overlaps with a geographical region that some scholars have referred to as the Indosphere. An alternative label for this region — one less conventional but perhaps also less likely to be misinterpreted — might be the “Ashoka-sphere.”

Professor Nadirsyah Hosen — Deputy Associate Dean at Monash University’s Faculty of Law in Melbourne, Australia — is an internationally renowned expert in Islamic and Indonesian law and a prominent figure within Nahdlatul Ulama. He delivered remarks titled “ASEAN’s role in re-enlivening the principle of ‘unity amid diversity’ in Southeast Asia.”

Established in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations represents a potentially powerful though under-utilized mechanism for re-establishing civilizational ties among its ten Member States, which dominate mainland and maritime Southeast Asia. While ASEAN fosters extensive cooperation in the realms of politics, security, and economics, the potential of religious and cultural leaders to contribute to a greater and deeper sense of regional unity has remained largely untapped.

Nahdlatul Ulama established the ASEAN IIDC during Indonesia’s 2023 Chairmanship of ASEAN, in order to address this gap within the framework of ASEAN cooperation.

Dr. Hosen’s remarks focused on the very real challenges facing efforts to achieve regional integration. Specifically, Dr. Hosen identified five obstacles to achieving unity amid diversity in ASEAN:

1. The lack of any common language, other than English, that would enable ASEAN Member States and their 630 million inhabitants to communicate with one another. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that most inhabitants of ASEAN do not speak English;
2. The enormous economic disparity between ASEAN Member States, whose GDP per capita ranges from US \$1,096 in Myanmar and \$2,088 in Laos, to \$37,153 in Brunei and \$82,807 in Singapore;
3. The corresponding discrepancy in purchasing power among national currencies issued by the various ASEAN Member States;
4. An enormous discrepancy among legal systems and philosophies of law employed by ASEAN Member States, which range from common law, indigenous law (e.g., Thailand), Western-derived legal codes (in the Philippines and Singapore), Islamic law (Brunei), and Marxist-Leninist legal systems (in Laos and Vietnam); and
5. A common tendency of governments to employ the concept of harmony to enforce social, cultural, religious, and/or political conformity.