

Buddhist Approaches towards Effective Interreligious Dialogue: A Study of the *Anguttara Nikaya*

*Le Ngoc Bich Ly*¹

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to address the question: How to make interreligious dialogue effective. It answered the question by looking into the scholarly literature on the topic and the Buddhist wisdom in the Pali Canon particularly the Anguttara Nikaya through a qualitative content analysis method. Based on literature review of scholarly views on effective interreligious dialogue, the paper grouped them into three approaches: the truth paradigm approach, the non-duality approach, and the procedural approach. Each has its own contributions to effective dialogue and its limitations. From the study of the Buddhist text, the study listed four strategies that the ancient Buddha used for effective dialogue: (1) Giving the other freedom to respond and setting rules for dialogue; (2) Avoiding the binary of criticizing other and self-exaltation by focusing on one's internal teaching; (3) Using various techniques to stimulate the other's curiosity for new truth; and (4) Speaking analytically rather than one-way and speaking with concrete criteria. The study hopes to enhance our knowledge of effective interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: *interreligious dialogue, Anguttara Nikaya, Buddha, effective dialogue*

1. Introduction

Interreligious dialogue has been argued as an important tool for building a peaceful multi-religious society since it enhances understanding,

¹ *Le Ngoc Bich Ly* is Acting Chair of the Department of Peace Studies at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. She teaches courses on religion, gender, and peacebuilding for the PhD Program in Peacebuilding. Her research and publications focus on Gender Issues, Interfaith Dialogue, Buddhism and Peacebuilding.

relationship-building across differences, and also contributes to conflict resolution (Asghar-Zadeh 2019; Abu-Nimer 2002; Smock 2002a; Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009). There is a vast body of literature produced on interreligious dialogue. Different scholars have proposed many principles on how to make dialogue more effective. Therefore, it is helpful for our understanding by systematizing them. This is the first purpose of this paper. The second purpose of the paper is to contribute a Buddhist perspective to the topic with a study of ancient Buddhist wisdom in the Buddhist Pali Canon. This paper addresses the question: How can Buddhism enhance the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue? The findings of this study hope to enrich our knowledge and skills of how to make interreligious dialogue more effective.

The Buddhist Pali Canon or the *Tipitaka* is used by Theravada Buddhism. The *Tipitaka*, ‘three baskets [of teachings],’ has been generally considered as the oldest, most original, most complete, and most accurate record of the Buddha’s teachings until today. It was orally transmitted since the time of the Buddha and first written down during the Fourth Rehearsal conducted in Sri Lanka around the year 460 of the Buddhist Era (Payutto 2003, 1–6). The Buddha’s dialogues are mostly recorded in the second basket, the *Sutta Pitaka* which contains the Buddha’s discourses or specific teachings, sermons, and explanations of the Dhamma or Norms, together with compositions, narratives, and stories of early Buddhism. The Buddha is portrayed as a dialogue expert who skillfully communicates with different types of people from different backgrounds in various situations. Through this special ability, he was able to transform the attitudes of several of his dialogue partners, even those who initially viewed him as a rival or enemy, into a positive one. With an experience of forty-five years of dialogue with people from numerous social and cultural backgrounds, he accumulates and passes down many of his dialogue insights to his disciples. Therefore, it is worth learning from the Buddha’s experiences in order to enlighten the work of dialogue in our time.

This study focuses on the fourth major collection of the *Sutta Pitaka*, or the *Anguttara Nikaya* (AN) ‘The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha’ for the analysis of the Buddha’s strategies for effective dialogue. The AN organizes the Buddha’s discourses according to a numerical scheme from one to eleven. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, the English translator of this

collection, this was a helpful technique to aid memorization when written tradition did not exist yet. It is hard to ascertain the number of *suttas* in the collection. In his own numbering, there are a total of 8,122 *suttas* and they were originally not given titles. Later editors gave them titles. AN consists mostly of short *suttas*; connected texts of a single theme are grouped together. The collection covers various themes which are not arranged in a systematic and comprehensive manner except the numerical headings. The majority of the *suttas* deal with Buddhist practice ranging from basic ethical observances for the busy layperson to the highest meditative state (Bodhi 2012, 17–63). I chose this collection for my study because the dialogue narratives cover a wide range of people from different social and religious backgrounds. This helps to see a variety of the Buddha’s dialogue strategies.

2. Interreligious Dialogue in the Buddhist Perspective

2.1. Defining Interreligious Dialogue

The term “interreligious dialogue” was used during the 1960s to describe the encounter between different religions (Swidler 2014b, 379–80). Interreligious dialogue is variously defined by different scholars from narrow to wider scope. For example, Donald K. Swearer defines dialogue as “an encounter of religious persons on the level of their understanding of their deepest commitments and ultimate concerns” (1977, 35). Some others such as Wesley Ariarajah, T.K. Thomas, and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican view dialogue as “a way of life” which is embedded in relationship and interaction of people from different religious backgrounds in all walks of life (Ariarajah and Thomas 1986, 3; Borrmans 1981, 28). There are various types of interreligious dialogue such as dialogue of life, dialogue of doctrinal exchange, dialogue of social action where people of different faiths collaborate to address a common cause, and dialogue of religious experience where people experience another religion through participating in its rituals and other religious forms.

In this paper, I focus on the verbal aspect of interreligious dialogue. Based on the nature of the dialogue narratives in the Buddhist

scriptures, interreligious dialogue in the context of this study is defined as “verbal communication” between the Buddha and people of other religious views and worldviews for various purposes in which the Buddha uses his religious view to address the issues raised. In my usage, effective dialogue means that the dialogue brings people toward transformation of attitudes into more positive ones towards better understanding of the truth. Consequently, individuals who engage in dialogue experience emotional fulfillment, intellectual growth, behavioral maturity, and spiritual transformation.

2.2. Scholarly Studies of the Buddha of the Pali Canon and Interreligious Dialogue

Studies of interreligious dialogue concerning the Buddha of the Pali Canon have been few and mostly influenced by the Western Christian paradigm and philosophical debates. Scholars place the Buddha’s position toward other religions from exclusivism to somewhere between inclusivism and pluralism. For example, Richard P. Hayes (1991) argues that classical Buddhism holds an exclusive attitude toward other religions. His evidence is that the Buddha views *nibbana* (the Buddhist highest stage of liberation) and the Noble Eightfold Path as the only one ultimate goal and method of attaining it. Contrary to Hayes’ perspective, J. Abraham Velez de Cea (2013) argues that the classical Buddha holds a pluralistic inclusivism perspective. It means that the Buddha recognizes different teachings of other religions as long as they are compatible with the Dhamma and the Noble Eightfold Path. He is only exclusive of specific teachings rather than the whole tradition. Different from the above, Elizabeth J. Harris (2013) argues that the Buddha of the Pali texts responds to the religious others with five faces: respectful debate, teaching ideas that opposed those taught by others, ridicule of the ‘other’, subordination of the ‘other’, and appropriation of the ‘other’. There are few other studies exploring the Buddha’s views that diverge from the Western Christian paradigm by passingly or selectively focusing on some positive aspects of Buddhist teachings such as “deep listening”, respect for different views, non-argumentative attitude, non-dogmatism, rationality, tolerance, openness, and loving kindness (Jayatilleke 1987; de Silva 2009; Sek 2017). All the above studies are helpful to understand the Buddhist perspectives toward the religious other and Buddhist values that foster dialogue. My study is interested in specific communication strategies that the Buddha employs to make his dialogue effective.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed the Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) method to study narratives of dialogues between the Buddha and people of other faiths or beliefs in the AN. QCA is “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material” that requires some degree of interpretation. It is best suited for describing the selected aspects of the material guided by the research questions (Schreier 2012, 1–9). This method was suitable for this study because the study only focused on the Buddha’s communication strategies in his effective dialogues. Based on my survey of the *suttas*, there are a total of 46 dialogues that include the Buddha and people of other faiths or beliefs. There are 5 pairs of repetitive narratives (the content is mostly the same with little different) (AN 3.51 = 3.52; 4.39=4.40; 6.47=6.48; 10.119 = 10.167). Among the 46 dialogues, 14 dialogues do not have any stated results; and 32 dialogues have stated positive results. These 32 dialogues can be considered as effective dialogues for this study purpose. Below is the summary table of both types of dialogues.

Table 1: Summary of the Buddha’s interreligious dialogues in *Anguttara Nikaya*

Themes	<i>Suttas</i>
Dialogues without stated results (14)	3.35; 3.51=3.52; 3.54; 3.57; 3.61; 4.22; 4.39=4.40; 4.185; 5.143; 8.19; 9.38; 10.117
Dialogues with positive results (effective dialogues) (32)	3.53; 3.55; 3.56; 3.58 = 3.59; 3.60; 3.65; 4.35; 4.100; 4.111; 4.183; 4.184; 4.187; 4.193; 4.195; 5.192; 5.193; 6.38; 6.47=6.48; 6.52; 6.53; 7.44; 7.50; 7.57; 8.11; 8.12; 10.119 = 10.167; 10.176; 10.177; 10.209

4. Research Findings

4.1. Approaches to Effective Interreligious Dialogue

Literature on interreligious dialogue is complex. There are many detailed rules proposed by scholars. However, for the purpose of clarity and systematic understanding of the topic, this study simplifies the findings into three major approaches: truth paradigm approach, non-duality approach, and procedural approach. This categorization should be seen

as preliminary rather than final. Each approach has its own contributions and limitations.

4.1.1. The truth paradigm approach

Since modern interreligious dialogue began with the Western Christian awakening of the reality of religious plurality, interreligious dialogue has been shaped and influenced by the development of Christian theology of religious pluralism. This theology classifies the relationship between Christianity and other religions into three truth paradigms: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Exclusivism asserts that only Christianity is the true religion and others are wrong. Inclusivism espouses that Christianity has the fullest truth while other religions have partial truth. Pluralism affirms that Christianity is one equal and among different ways of expressing the ultimate truth. These three views are present in other religions as well. Within Christianity, the first view is popularly held by the conservative circles; thus, interreligious dialogue is mainly for the purpose of evangelism. The second view is the most favorable among mainlined churches; interreligious dialogue is most sustainable here in practice. The third view is the least popular and confined to academic circles. These are just simplified positions while reality is more complex. These positions intersect, overlap and blur (McCarthy 2000). Richard Penaskovic observes that these positions have dominated interreligious dialogue theory and practice in the past fifty years (2016, 31). The truth paradigm approach believes that the possibility of interreligious dialogue engagement is determined by the individual's truth perspective. The more inclusive the view is, the more open the person is for dialogue. Therefore, most scholarly works under this approach focus on developing theology of religious pluralism and comparative theology (Hick 2004; 1982; Panikkar 1964; Perry 2017; Knitter 1996; 2013; Fleming 2002; Abe 1995). Some scholars also propose guidelines for dialogue practice (*Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies* 1979; Cobb 1998; Suwanbubha 2004; Swidler 2014a; 2000).

In my reflection, the truth paradigm model is most effective when it has a top-down approach. When the religious institutions embrace inclusivism and pluralism and promote the dialogue practice, this will create a favorable environment for the enthusiastic believers to freely

practice dialogue with the religious others. It can foster confidence and a culture of dialogue for the religious community. However, if we look deeply at the individual level, it might not be true that a person with inclusivist or pluralist religious view is more effective in dialogue than a person with an exclusivist view. Being able to engage in a deep and transformative dialogue depends on many factors including knowledge, attitudes, communication skills, and a special factor which Buddhists call the right condition for the heart to change. The Buddhist Pali Canon has many stories about dramatic transformation of religious view and conviction of people with exclusive truth paradigm after a dialogue with the Buddha. The individuals who approach the Buddha for dialogue have various motives, ranging from intending to insult and defeat him, to accusing him, to debating with him on particular religious views, to showcasing their own beliefs and challenging the Buddha to respond, to seeking his judgment on certain religious views, and even to finding the truth amid confusion and doubt. However, after the encounter with the Buddha, they experience conversion. Therefore, being effective in dialogue depends on more factors than just a religious truth paradigm.

4.1.2. Non-duality approach

While the truth paradigm approach implies the attachment of a person to a religion, the non-duality approach assumes a free human subject who goes beyond any religious form and uses religion as a tool to serve his or her own purpose of emancipation. This approach is often held by advanced spiritual leaders especially from Buddhism such as Sotaesan (1891-1943) of Korean Won-Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) of Vietnam, and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) of Thailand.

This view holds that all religions, despite their different expressions sometimes to the point of contradiction, have a highest common essence which Buddhadasa calls “Dhamma” or the stage of “no religion”; Thich Nhat Hanh and Sotaesan refer to it as the reality of “non-duality”, “interconnectedness”, or “no-self”. The differences between religions are viewed as different manifestations of this same essence. People tend to view different religions as distinct and sometimes even as adversaries because they have yet to comprehend or reach the highest level of their own religion. Once they have reached this highest

level, the problem of religious differences and conflict will be solved. People of this level will be able to penetrate the superficial different forms of religions to appreciate and embrace the best values of all. All these religious leaders believe that authentic and successful dialogue must begin with the self-awakening of the individual to this ultimate reality by living deeply in one's tradition. Therefore, interreligious dialogue must first start with the self-transformation (Song 2012, 381–87; Thich 1995, 2–10, 194–97; Bhikkhu 2532, 3–6).

Thich Nhat Hanh sees that the truth paradigm approach does not make people free. He argues that people should come to dialogue with a free heart or an attitude of “non-self” to be able to listen deeply to each other and allow oneself to be transformed by the best values of the other tradition (1995, 6–9, 35).

In my opinion, the non-dual approach holds promise as it enables individuals to engage in deep and meaningful dialogue. When one has thoroughly explored and delved into the tenets of their own religion, they become capable of expressing it fully to those of other religions. However, this approach is only feasible for a select few who have the necessary conditions to examine their religious values and practice rationally. For most religious adherents, their lives are preoccupied with various worldly issues, leaving little time for religious contemplation and reflection.

4.1.3. The procedural approach

Unlike the above approaches that center around truth issue, the procedural approach focuses on the process and procedure of organizing effective dialogue. This approach is mostly found among scholars of interreligious peacebuilding which is an emergent field. Based on literature written by scholars of this field, principles for effective dialogue concern the following issues. The principles are not fixed answers but remain issues of debate.

- (1) **Purpose:** This revolves around the debate of whether the purpose of interreligious dialogue should be explicitly defined and structured, as well as determining what that purpose should

entail. For some people such as David Bohm, dialogue should not have a set purpose or agenda because people should be free to communicate (1996, 16–17). In contrast, David R. Smock argues that “dialogue sessions that do not have a clearly defined purpose are almost inevitably doomed to ineffectiveness” (2002b, 7). Most scholars assert that the purpose of dialogue is for mutual learning, understanding, and transformation (Kozlovic 2003; Swidler 2014a; Clapsis 2016).

- (2) **Participant:** This is concerned with the questions: Who are qualified to participate in the dialogue? What are the specific qualifications? How to identify them and get them involved? For example, David Steele argues that dialogue participants should be well selected. They must be people who are willing to participate in dialogue, being open-minded and committed to dialogue. It is best to have middle-level people since they can influence both the top and grassroots levels; individuals are better than representatives of organizations (2002, 76). Smock also agrees that the right participants should be selected for dialogue. They should have the qualities of sincerity, commitment for peace, good listener, and having an influential position in their wider faith committee (2002a, 129).
- (3) **Content:** This includes the debate of what should be discussed during the dialogue. All scholars agree that discussing common universal peace values in different religious traditions is a good start. Some scholars argue that differences, biases, and prejudices should be dealt with in order for the dialogue to be deeper. Some others believe that doctrinal dialogue should move from addressing individual issues to social issues of justice and peace (Abu-Nimer 2002, 18–26; Cilliers 2002, 49–50; Smock 2002a, 129–30).
- (4) **Method:** This involves the issue of what approach to take such as workshop, scriptural study meeting, camps, and so on; the extent of the third-party’s involvement, i.e., the facilitator or organizer of the dialogue; and the issues of whether or not the dialogue should be designed, how to deal with problems

during the dialogue, how to lead dialogue to reach the desired goal, and so on (Abu-Nimer 2002, 21–26; Smock 2002b, 7–8; Ochs 2015).

- (5) **Process:** This is concerned with interaction during the dialogue and the procession of the dialogue: what are the phases; how to plan each phase and what are expected to happen in each phase for an effective dialogue (Abu-Nimer 2002, 24, 27–29).
- (6) **Effects:** This is concerned with the impact of the dialogue on the participants such as what kinds of changes taking place in attitude, behavior, interpersonal relationship, and communal action (Abu-Nimer 2002, 15; Ochs 2015, 494; Cilliers 2002, 47–48, 50–55; Steele 2002, 76–84).

This procedural approach is helpful for the third party as organizer of interreligious dialogue rather than individual practice of dialogue. Interpersonal dialogue often takes place naturally rather than planned.

In summary, each of the three approaches mentioned above offers valuable insights into understanding and resolving issues related to interreligious dialogue, ultimately leading to a more effective and meaningful dialogue. Each approach has its own limitations and needs more reflection to improve practice. Since the factors that lead to the effectiveness of interreligious dialogue are complex and even mysterious (which can be called “the way of the heart”), this study will contribute some more knowledge on effective dialogue from a Buddhist perspective. Below are some of Buddhist strategies for effective interreligious dialogue as found in the *Anguttara Nikaya*.

4.2. The Buddha’s Strategies for Effective Interreligious Dialogue

Based on the research findings, there are many communication strategies used by the Buddha in the dialogue narratives. This paper will present four strategies: (1) Giving the other freedom to respond and setting rules for dialogue; (2) Avoiding the binary of criticizing

other and self-exaltation by focusing on one's internal teaching; (3) Using various techniques to stimulate the other's curiosity for new truth; and (4) Speaking analytically rather than one-way and speaking with concrete criteria.

4.2.1. Giving the other freedom to respond and setting rules for dialogue

A common characteristic of the opening of the Buddha's dialogues with people of other faiths is that the Buddha gives freedom to his dialogue partner to answer his questions as they see fit. For example, in *Sangarava Sutta*, AN 3.60, the brahmin Sangarava comes to see the Buddha and criticizes the Buddha's path of practice as selfish. The Buddha replies to him, "Well then, brahmin, I will question you about this matter. You should answer as you see fit. What do you think, brahmin?" (Bodhi 2012, 262). By giving freedom to the other to respond, the Buddha allows his dialogue partner to feel comfortable and respected for their opinion.

However, giving freedom to the other to respond does not mean that everything goes. The findings also show that the Buddha has his own rules for the type of dialogue that he feels worthy and meaningful to get engaged. The Buddha is known by his religious contemporaries as someone who does not participate in dialogue involving metaphysical questions because in his view, such a dialogue is unprofitable and does not lead to the purpose of tranquility and liberation (*Uttiya Sutta*, AN 10.95). Therefore, one of his dialogue rules is that discussion of truth must be based on honesty, reality, and rationality. For example, the *Vappa Sutta* (AN 4.195) relates a situation with Vappa who is a disciple of the *Niganthas* or the Jains. He has a view that a completely self-controlled person or an enlightened person would still suffer because of past *kamma*. Before proceeding the dialogue, the Buddha says to him, "If, Vappa, you would admit what should be admitted and reject what should be rejected; and if, when you do not understand the meaning of my words, you would question me about them further, saying: 'How is this, Bhante? What is the meaning of this?'; then we might discuss this" (Bodhi 2012, 572). By telling this to Vappa, the Buddha sets the requirements that Vappa must be honest as to what he is able to

accept and what wishes to reject. In addition, he must intend to reflect rationally on what the Buddha says to him. If he does not understand something, he should ask the Buddha for clarification. Without the other's acquiescence to these rules, the Buddha would not proceed. This shows that these principles secure the dialogue toward the inquiry of the truth based on reality as the primary purpose. On occasion, when appropriate, the Buddha implements rules during dialogues, such as quieting the audience to prevent interference or exerting pressure on others to answer foundational questions at the appropriate moment (*Ambattha Sutta*, *Digha Nikaya* 3).

Besides the explicit rule the Buddha requires of his dialogue partner, he also has some internal rules and insight to help his disciples become wiser in dialogue. For example, in 'Bases of Talk' (AN 3.67), the Buddha describes in details signs to recognize who is fit or unfit to talk. The first way to recognize them is by how they answer to different types of questions: a question that requires a categorical answer, a question that should be answered after making a distinction, a question that should be answered with a counter-question, and a question that should be set aside. If a person does not answer these questions according to what the questions require, this person is unfit to talk. The opposite is fit to talk. Besides this method, there are other signs to recognize the person unfit for talking: (1) avoiding the question by asking another question; (2) changing the topic; (3) showing anger, hatred, disappointment; (4) responding to a question with cursing, beating, insulting, and taking advantage of the weakness of the other; (5) talking with hatred, prejudice, and pride; (6) self-assertion; (7) not paying attention; (8) being interested in finding faults, and listening to gossips about people who are cheated, confused, defeated and harmed.

From the same *sutta*, the Buddha also describes characteristics of people who are learned and capable of dialogue: (1) knowing the right time; (2) talking about things relevant to the purpose and holy stories; (3) having no hatred, no pride, no prejudice, no self-assertion; (4) having full attention; (5) speaking out right view; (6) being happy with nice words, and not happy with bad words; (7) not criticizing, not taking advantage of people's weaknesses; (8) not cursing, not speaking words without purpose, not beating; (9) teaching with joy; and (10) speaking with humility.

The Buddhist wisdom of employing external and internal rules to initiate and evaluate the continuation of dialogues is advantageous for promoting effective interreligious dialogue in contemporary times. The absence of this wisdom may lead to unfavorable outcomes, rendering the dialogue a futile exercise. For instance, if our dialogue partner exhibits signs of being unsuitable for conversation, such as demonstrating hateful, prejudiced, or arrogant attitudes, without the requisite knowledge to identify these characteristics, we may find ourselves being drawn into a negative discussion replete with debates and heightened emotions. This negative outcome will adversely impact both individuals instead of achieving any positive outcome. Conversely, if we possess the expertise and discernment to identify unsuitable dialogue partners, we can approach them cautiously and discontinue the interaction when the situation appears to be devolving into negativity. Buddhism regards this as a discriminating wisdom that is necessary for preventing unwholesome states and suffering.

4.2.2. Avoiding the binary of criticizing the other and self-exaltation by focusing on one's internal teaching

The second strategy that the Buddha employs is avoiding the binary of criticizing the other's belief and self-exaltation of one's own by focusing on one's internal teaching. This strategy is explicitly revealed in the Buddhist text through the mouth of a disciple of the *Ajivakas*, a contemporary religious sect during the Buddha's time, recorded in the *Ajivaka Sutta* (AN 3.72). In this *sutta*, a householder and disciple of the *Ajivakas* approaches the Venerable Ananda, who is the Buddha's favorite disciple. This householder asks the Venerable Ananda, "Bhante Ananda, whose Dhamma is well expounded? Who in the world are practicing the good way? Who in the world are the fortunate ones?" Instead of answering the question directly, Venerable Ananda presents the Buddhist Dhamma and those who achieved the Dhamma or enlightened Buddhists, and asks the householder to judge if the Buddhist Dhamma and the achievers of the Dhamma with such qualities meet the standards of the questions. The householder acknowledges that both meet the standards of his questions. The householder then makes a statement: "It is astounding and amazing, Bhante, that there is no extolling of one's own Dhamma nor any denigration of the Dhamma of others, but just the

teaching of the Dhamma in its own sphere. The meaning is stated, but one does not bring oneself into the picture” (Bodhi 2012, 304–5). This communication strategy is employed by the Buddha in some *suttas* such as the *Kesaputtiya Sutta* (AN 3.65), the *Vassakara Sutta* (AN 4.35), and the *Potaliya Sutta* (AN 4.100).

This strategic approach is prudent because it mitigates various problems that may arise during interreligious dialogue. Firstly, criticizing another’s beliefs can elicit a strong defensive response, resulting in emotional reactions that hinder critical thinking and attentive listening, even if the critique is logical and valid. Secondly, in contemporary times, it is unclear who possesses the authority and moral standing to pass judgment on another’s beliefs. In the past, the Buddha was revered for his impeccable wisdom and virtue, yet he exhibited great caution when addressing the religious beliefs of others. The Buddhist texts have some narratives in which the Buddha confronts and criticizes the other’s religious beliefs such as in a number of *suttas* in the *Majjhima Nikaya* (MN 7, 14, 74, 79, 80, 96, 101, 152). In these *suttas*, the Buddha employs reasonable criticisms grounded in his direct enlightened knowledge and religious virtue, demonstrating his skillful approach to sensitive issues. In accordance with Buddhist standards of virtue, wisdom, and skillfulness, it is a daunting task for anyone wishing to criticize another religious belief. Conversely, self-exaltation is already an action not favored by the knowledgeable.

In Buddhism, a distinction is made between “self-exaltation” and “self-confidence”. Self-exaltation refers to the act of praising oneself while belittling others and is considered a defilement that satisfies one’s ego while making others uncomfortable or offended. As such, it should be avoided. In contrast, “self-confidence” involves a clear understanding of oneself and the ability to accurately and rightfully speak of one’s own merits based on concrete wholesome criteria and evidence, with the purpose of edifying others rather than gratifying one’s own ego. This was the approach taken by the Buddha when speaking of himself, his teachings, and his community of disciples. He always presented a framework and specific criteria before drawing a conclusion about his own qualities and achievements. This type of expressing “self-confidence” can be found in a number of *suttas* such

as the discourse of Sexual Misconduct (AN 7.50), *Kassapa-Sihanada Sutta* (The Naked Ascetic) in *Digha Nikaya* 8, *Pasadika Sutta* (The Delectable Discourse) in *Digha Nikaya* 29, and *Cuḷa Hatthi-Padopama Sutta* (Lesser Discourse on the Simile of the Elephant's Footprint) in *Majjhima Nikaya* 27. This means that self-praise can enhance the effectiveness of a dialogue if a person can fulfill the above conditions according to Buddhism. Otherwise, focusing on one's internal teaching by presenting its best qualities for the other to judge is the middle way to avoid negative consequences that may arise from criticizing the other and exalting oneself.

4.2.3. Using various techniques to stimulate the other's curiosity for new truth

The third strategy employed by the Buddha is stimulating the other's curiosity to know more about the new truth by using various techniques. The Buddha is the one who admits possessing the wonder of instruction (*Sangarava Sutta*, AN 3.60). According to the Buddha's view in *Lohicca Sutta* (*Digha Nikaya* 12), a praise-worthy teacher is the one who does not only achieve the higher spiritual fruit himself but also skillfully conveys the path and successfully trains others to achieve the same fruit. For the Buddha, a teacher who lacks the skillfulness in conveying the teaching is blameworthy. Some scholars in the field of Education have explored the Buddha's teaching methods to benefit education. They have found several methods such as lecture, discussion, gradual or step method, problem-solving, adaptation, illustration, analytic, practical, question and answer, logical explanation, and seminar (Ong Puay Liu and Ong Puay Tee 2014; Rev. Mediyawe Piyarathana 2019; Thero 2019). Here I will present the method of stimulating curiosity for new truth in interreligious dialogue. In this study, I also found a similar method (question and answer) and various ways of using language: the use of elicitive language, strong and even shocking language, and playing with negative language to convey positive meaning (AN 8.11, 12).

An example of using question and answer as the method to stimulate curiosity to learn new truth is *Siha Sutta* (AN 7.57). In this *sutta*, Siha who is an army general, comes to ask the Buddha a question: "Is

it possible, Bhante, to point out a directly visible fruit of giving?” The Buddha does not give a lecture as he often does but uses the question-and-answer method to help Siha learn the truth. Below is an extract of their dialogue:

“Well then, Siha, I will question you about this matter. You should answer as you see fit.”

“What do you think, Siha? There might be two persons, one without faith who is miserly, mean, and abusive, and another endowed with faith, a munificent giver who delights in charity. What do you think, Siha? To whom would the arahants first show compassion: to the one without faith who is miserly, mean, and abusive, or to the one endowed with faith, a munificent giver who delights in charity?”

“Why, Bhante, would the arahants first show compassion to the person without faith who is miserly, mean, and abusive? They would first show compassion to the one endowed with faith, a munificent giver who delights in charity.”

(Bodhi 2012, 1054)

The above *sutta* shows that the question-and-answer method can help to stimulate critical thinking and curiosity to learn new truth by engaging oneself in the process skillfully led by the Buddha.

Besides the question-and-answer method, the use of elicitive language is another technique to stimulate interest and curiosity for the dialogue partner. Some elicitive words that the Buddha employs are “difference” and “but there is/are also...”. For example, in the *Tikanna Sutta* (AN 3.58), the brahmin Tikanna is proud of sharing the brahmin’s threefold knowledge to the Buddha. After listening to the brahmin’s sharing, the Buddha says to the brahmin: “Brahmin, a master of the threefold knowledge in the Noble One’s discipline is **quite different from** a brahmin who is a master of the threefold knowledge as the brahmins describe him” (my emphasis in bold). When hearing this, the brahmin becomes curious and asks the Buddha: “But in what way, Master Gotama, is one a master of the threefold knowledge in the Noble One’s discipline? It would be good if Master Gotama would teach me the Dhamma in such

a way as to make clear how one is a master of the threefold knowledge in the Noble One's discipline." (Bodhi 2012, 257).

The Buddha uses this technique in other dialogue narratives (AN 10.167; 10.176). In the *Fearless Sutta* (AN 4.184), the Buddha uses a different phrase "but there are also" to stimulate desire in the other to discover something new. In this *sutta*, the brahmin Janussoni comes to the Buddha and says, "Master Gotama, I hold the thesis and view that there is no one subject to death who is not frightened and terrified of death." To the brahmin's surprise, the Buddha replies, "Brahmin, there are those subject to death that are frightened and terrified of death, but there are also those subject to death that are not frightened and terrified of death" (Bodhi 2012, 550). Certainly, this stimulates the brahmin's curiosity to learn something beyond his knowledge. Another advantage is that this method does not offend anyone but leaves the comparison and judgment to the listeners.

Concerning using strong and shocking language to stimulate the other's curiosity to learn new things, the *Kesi Sutta* (AN 4.111) is an example. In this *sutta*, the Buddha has a dialogue with Kesi, a horse trainer. The Buddha opens the conversation by asking Kesi how he trains his horses. Kesi replies that he uses four methods: gentle, stern, gentle and stern, and killing the horse if it is untamable. Then Kesi asks the Buddha how the Buddha disciplines a person to be tamed. The Buddha replies that he also employs similar methods: gentle, stern, gentle and stern, and killing the person if the person would not submit to any of the first three methods. When hearing that the Buddha would "kill" a person, Kesi is shocked and does not understand. He asks the Buddha, "But, Bhante, it isn't allowable for the Tathagata to destroy life. Yet he says, 'Then I kill him.'" To this, the Buddha explains that the meaning of "killing" implies that the person is not worthy being "spoken to and instructed" (Bodhi 2012, 493–94).

The last language technique the Buddha uses is playing with negative language to convey positive meaning. The two *suttas*, *Veranja Sutta* (AN 8.11) and *Siha Sutta* (AN 8.12) are examples. These two *suttas* have similar dialogue content but are different in contexts. In the first *sutta*, the Buddha dialogues with the brahmin Veranja who uses all negative words to accuse the Buddha and his teachings such as "tasteless", "not convivial", "non-doing", "annihilationist", "repeller",

“abolitionist”, “tormentor”, and “retiring”. To the brahmin’s surprise, the Buddha admits it first but then explains how such negative terms are applied in his teaching to abandon all unwholesome states. Finally, the brahmin changes his attitude, praises the Buddha, and wants to become a lay follower. In the *Siha Sutta*, it is the dialogue between the Buddha and Siha, a lay leader and disciple of Nigantha Nataputa (founder of the Jains). Siha has heard good reports about the Buddha, so he is curious to meet the Buddha. But he is prevented by his teacher three times. However, he decides to meet the Buddha regardless of his teacher’s objection. He meets the Buddha and clarifies the rumor that the Buddha taught about non-doing. The Buddha also plays with negative words and gives a full picture of the Dhamma teaching: negative for unwholesome things and positive for wholesome things. After having heard the explanation, Siha praises the Buddha and converts.

Whether or not the responses of the characters in the dialogue narratives are historical is beyond the scope of this paper. What we can learn from the Buddhist dialogue narratives is some helpful strategies to make dialogue more effective. The two methods, question and answer, and the use of elicitive, strong and shocking language and playing with negative language to convey positive meaning are helpful tools for modern dialogue practitioners.

4.2.4. Speaking analytically rather than one-sided and speaking with concrete criteria

The fourth strategy used by the Buddha to make dialogue effective is his capacity to speak analytically and speaking with concrete criteria. The Buddha is the one who refers to himself as an ‘analytic speaker’ or a speaker of reason (*vibhajja-vadi*). Analytic speech (in Pali: *vibhajja-vada*) means “discerning speech”, “discriminative speech”, or an “analytic system of teaching”. According to Venerable Payutto, analytic thinking or speaking has the distinctive attribute of expressing the truth “by analyzing all aspects and features of specific phenomena” rather than only grasping a single aspect or a limited number of aspects in order to draw a conclusion. This type of speaking also avoids hastily judging something by just looking at a single feature or at limited features. The opposite of analytic speaking is ‘one-sided speech’ (*ekamsa-vada*)

in which the speaker only looks at one aspect or part of a phenomenon and then draws a conclusion about the entirety of the phenomenon. It also means speaking based on stereotypes. The Buddha provides concrete frameworks and criteria for analytic thinking. Venerable Payutto lists seven frameworks for reflection: (1) on perspectives of truth; (2) on component factors; (3) on sequence of momentary events; (4) on interrelationship of causes and conditions; (5) on prerequisites and qualifications; (6) on alternatives and other possibilities; and (7) detailed analysis as a response to questions (Payutto 2018, 1156–64). This way of thinking and speaking in dialogue will avoid deadly mistakes of generalization, hasty judgment, biases, prejudices, and stereotypes. With concrete framework and criteria, the dialogue can provide a direction for deep reflection and engagement. The *Vassakara Sutta* (AN 4.183) is an example. In this *sutta*, the brahmin Vassakara approaches the Buddha and they engage in a dialogue:

“Master Gotama, I hold the thesis and view that there is no fault when one speaks about the seen, saying: ‘Such was seen by me’; no fault when one speaks about the heard, saying: ‘Such was heard by me’; no fault when one speaks about the sensed, saying: ‘Such was sensed by me’; no fault when one speaks about the cognized, saying: ‘Such was cognized by me.’”

“I do not say, brahmin, that everything seen should be spoken about, nor do I say that nothing seen should be spoken about. I do not say that everything heard should be spoken about, nor do I say that nothing heard should be spoken about. I do not say that nothing sensed should be spoken about, nor do I say that nothing sensed should be spoken about. I do not say that everything cognized should be spoken about, nor do I say that nothing cognized should be spoken about.

“For, brahmin, if, when one speaks about what one has seen, unwholesome qualities increase and wholesome qualities decline, I say that one should not speak about one has seen. But if, when one speaks about what one has seen, unwholesome qualities decline and wholesome qualities increase, I say that one should speak about what one has seen.” (Bodhi 2012, 549–50)

The preceding dialogue showcases two distinct modes of thinking and communicating: the brahmin has a one-sided approach, whereas the Buddha employs an analytic approach that involves a concrete framework for reflection. The brahmin believes that honesty in expressing what one perceives, hears, feels, and thinks is not inherently wrong, without considering the potential consequences of such speech. The Buddha, on the other hand, employs a moral cause-and-effect perspective. He believes that one should reflect and discern what to speak based on a framework: speech that results in more negative than positive outcomes should be avoided, while speech that leads to more positive than negative results should be spoken. When religious beliefs are discussed, it is easy for individuals to become biased and attached to their own views, treating them as absolute truths. This is known as one-sided speech, which can lead to extremes such as self-pride and self-defense. Therefore, employing an analytic approach with a concrete framework and criteria for reflection is a useful tool for effective dialogue when expressing one's beliefs.

The Buddhist approach to effective interreligious dialogue remains pertinent in our contemporary world. Despite its development over the past century, interreligious dialogue remains a challenging practice fraught with difficulties. As it addresses individuals' deepest religious convictions, it is prone to triggering intolerance, prejudices, resistance, and defensiveness from participants of one religious group towards those of another during the dialogue process. (Smock 2002a, 128). Tensions between religious groups are high when they get involved in confrontational dialogues or doctrinal debates (Smith 2007, 64–65). David Bohm observes that religious people are the hardest to get together and once they are divided, they hardly get together again (1996, 12). Another obstacle for participating in dialogue is the fear of losing the zeal of evangelism, of syncretizing one's faith, and of being the target of evangelism through interreligious dialogue (Ariarajah and Thomas 1986, 3–11; Smith 2007, 70–74). Smith's study also shows that most people respond to doctrinal dialogue with avoidance and see it as the job of religious leaders, or they are simply not interested and regard it as a waste of time (2007, 70–74, 86–95, 149).

The Buddhist approaches to effective dialogue can contribute to addressing some of the above problems. Buddhism offers a valuable

approach to reducing tensions in doctrinal dialogue through the avoidance of binary criticism and self-exaltation, instead emphasizing internal truth and allowing the other to experience it for themselves. Employing analytical and concrete criteria can facilitate rational and objective discussions of truth, preventing the propagation of prejudice and generalization. Additionally, techniques designed to pique the other's curiosity and promote the pursuit of new truths can foster interest in interreligious dialogue. However, without learning and practicing these strategies, individuals may struggle to implement them. Fortunately, Buddhism's dialogue skills can be leveraged as a resource for training interreligious dialogue competency.

5. Conclusion

This study has endeavored to answer the question of how to facilitate effective interreligious dialogue through a systematic analysis of scholarly literature and Buddhist scripture, specifically the Anguttara Nikaya. Drawing from the former, three distinct approaches have been identified: the truth paradigm approach, the non-duality approach, and the procedural approach. Each approach posits unique solutions for promoting effective dialogue, as well as limitations. The study of Buddhist texts has yielded four strategies for facilitating effective dialogue: (1) Allowing the other party freedom to respond and establishing dialogue rules; (2) Prioritizing internal teachings over binary criticism and self-exaltation; (3) Employing a range of techniques to stimulate the other's curiosity for new truths; and (4) Using analytical language and concrete criteria to promote rational and objective dialogue. These strategies represent applicable methods that can be implemented across different religions and contexts. The findings of this study are intended to expand knowledge and skills for more effective interreligious dialogue in the future.

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