

Dharma Instruction and Religious Life: Exploring Buddhist Community Practices in Lahat, Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to examine the role of Dharma teaching in shaping the religious attitudes of Buddhist communities in Lahat, South Sumatra. It explores how religious instruction not only strengthens faith and ritual practices but also contributes to social and cultural harmony in a pluralistic society.

Method: The research employed a qualitative descriptive design, focusing on fieldwork conducted in two Buddhist monasteries in Lahat, with particular emphasis on Vihara Padma Sari. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, and analyzed using descriptive-analytic techniques to capture both doctrinal perspectives and lived religious practices.

Findings: The results reveal that Dharma teaching in Lahat is delivered through sermons, discussions, face-to-face guidance, and limited “Dharma safari” programs. These practices have a direct and indirect positive influence on the religious attitudes of Buddhist adherents, enabling them to internalize moral and spiritual values in daily life. While individual levels of practice vary according to social and personal factors, the community as a whole demonstrates increased awareness of coexistence, peace, and tolerance. This indicates that Dharma functions not only as a doctrinal foundation but also as a catalyst for interfaith harmony and civic responsibility.

Significance: The study highlights the relevance of Dharma teaching in contemporary Indonesian society, showing how religious education can foster both personal piety and social cohesion. The findings contribute to broader discussions in religious studies about the role of education in shaping interreligious dialogue, cultural resilience, and peaceful coexistence within diverse communities.

INTRODUCTION

Religion has always played a central role in shaping individual and collective identities in diverse societies. As a source of moral and ethical guidance, religion provides frameworks that influence social behaviors and community values (Putnam & Campbell, 2012). In the Indonesian context, with its pluralistic and multicultural nature, religion functions not only as a spiritual system but also as a social institution that maintains harmony. Previous studies have emphasized that religious teachings shape believers' attitudes, ethics, and practices, thus contributing to nation-building (Azra, 2019). Within Buddhism, Dharma is regarded as the ultimate truth and a guiding principle for righteous living. The internalization of Dharma has been found to influence personal piety and social responsibility (Weeraratne, 2018). Therefore, understanding how Dharma teaching impacts religious attitudes is critical in both theoretical and practical perspectives. This research seeks to address that importance through the study of Buddhist communities in Indonesia.

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Buddhism has long been part of Indonesia's cultural and religious heritage, particularly in Sumatra and Java. Historical evidence shows that Buddhist communities contributed significantly to Indonesia's early civilization and educational traditions (Moens, 1986). Contemporary studies indicate that Buddhist education remains relevant in nurturing values of peace, tolerance, and coexistence (Rahmawati & Sari, 2021). Religious education, when effectively delivered, strengthens the resilience of minority groups in plural contexts. Dharma teaching, in particular, has been identified as a key factor in sustaining spiritual growth among Buddhists (Gombrich, 2006). This role extends beyond ritual practice into the realm of social ethics and civic engagement. In regions like South Sumatra, Dharma serves not only as a religious framework but also as a cultural bridge among communities. Hence, examining Dharma's influence contributes to a broader understanding of religious dynamics in Indonesia.

Religious attitudes are defined as the internalized orientations of individuals toward their faith, manifested in beliefs, rituals, and social practices. According to Glock and Stark (1965), religiosity encompasses dimensions such as ritual, doctrinal, experiential, intellectual, and consequential involvement. In Buddhist contexts, Dharma teaching fosters these dimensions by encouraging ethical behavior, meditation, and social compassion (Narada, 1993). Studies have shown that regular exposure to Dharma enhances both personal discipline and communal solidarity (Wijayanto, 2019). Moreover, religious attitudes are strongly shaped by leadership, community institutions, and modes of instruction. The presence of Dharma teachers, sermons, and community rituals creates an environment for religious values to thrive. In the Indonesian setting, this interplay is critical to sustaining harmony in a diverse society. Thus, exploring how Dharma impacts attitudes offers both theoretical insights and practical implications.

Several previous studies have addressed the role of religious education in shaping interfaith harmony. For instance, Kusuma and Prasetyo (2020) found that interfaith educational initiatives reduce prejudice and foster mutual respect among students. In Buddhist communities, Dharma teaching has been linked to values of tolerance, compassion, and non-violence (Keown, 2005). These values resonate strongly in pluralistic societies where social cohesion is necessary for peace. However, religious education can be effective only if it integrates contextual realities and addresses contemporary challenges. In Indonesia, where interfaith dialogue is increasingly vital, Dharma's role in cultivating peace-oriented religious attitudes deserves further attention (Suparlan, 2017). This highlights the broader significance of religious teachings beyond doctrinal instruction. Therefore, analyzing Dharma instruction contributes to interreligious and intercultural scholarship. This study builds upon such research while offering new insights from the field.

Despite the existing literature on religion and social harmony, specific studies on Buddhist communities in Indonesia remain relatively scarce. Much of the scholarship on Indonesian religiosity focuses on Islam and Christianity, leaving Buddhist perspectives underexplored (Woodward, 2011). Empirical research on how Dharma teaching affects religious attitudes is still limited, especially in rural and minority contexts. Previous studies often concentrate on doctrinal analysis rather than lived experiences of Buddhist adherents (Sutrisno, 2020). This lack of empirical evidence creates a significant gap in

understanding the role of Dharma in shaping religious life. Moreover, studies that highlight interfaith implications of Buddhist education in Indonesia are almost absent. Given Indonesia's commitment to pluralism, such research becomes highly relevant. Therefore, this study addresses the gap by examining Dharma teaching among Buddhists in Lahat, South Sumatra.

The novelty of this research lies in its contextual and practical exploration of Dharma instruction in a minority religious community. Unlike previous studies that emphasize doctrinal or philosophical aspects, this study investigates lived practices and their direct impact on religious attitudes. By focusing on Lahat, South Sumatra, the research sheds light on how Dharma teaching contributes to both spiritual growth and interfaith harmony in a local context. This case study enriches the broader discourse of religious studies by situating Buddhist experiences within Indonesia's pluralistic framework. Furthermore, the findings offer new insights into how religious education can serve as a vehicle for peacebuilding and social integration. Such an approach expands the relevance of Buddhist studies in contemporary society (Albani et al., 2023). Hence, the research not only fills a gap but also introduces innovative perspectives for future interreligious scholarship.

METHOD

Research Design

Dharma teaching on the religious attitudes of Buddhist communities in Lahat, South Sumatra. Qualitative research was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture in-depth meanings and contextual practices rather than relying on numerical generalizations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The descriptive design was appropriate to portray the actual process of Dharma instruction and its implications for daily religious life. The study focused on understanding experiences, values, and behaviors through natural settings. By using this design, the researcher could provide a holistic description of the dynamics between religious teachings and believers' attitudes. Descriptive analysis also enabled the identification of patterns and themes across different data sources. The research was conducted over several months to ensure data validity and contextual accuracy. Hence, the design allowed the study to highlight the social, cultural, and religious significance of Dharma instruction.

Participant

The participants of this study consisted of members of the Buddhist community in Lahat, particularly those affiliated with Vihara Padma Sari and one other vihara in the region. Key informants included Dharma teachers, monks, and community leaders who were directly involved in religious education activities. Lay practitioners who regularly attended sermons and Dharma classes were also included as respondents. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to select participants who could provide relevant insights (Patton, 2015). This approach ensured that individuals with direct experience in Dharma teaching and practice were represented in the study. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, meaning the process continued until no new information emerged. The diversity of participants enriched the understanding of how Dharma influences both ritual and social aspects of religious life. Through this composition, the study captured multiple perspectives within the community.

Instrument

The instruments for data collection included observation guidelines, interview protocols, and document analysis checklists. Observations were conducted during sermons, discussions, and Dharma teaching sessions to record practices and interactions. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore participants' experiences and perceptions in detail (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The interview questions were designed to elicit information about religious attitudes, personal reflections, and community practices. Document analysis involved reviewing records, teaching materials, and organizational archives related to Buddhist education. Triangulation of instruments was implemented to increase credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Field notes and audio recordings were systematically organized to support data management. This multi-instrument approach allowed the study to build a comprehensive and nuanced understanding. As a result, the instruments provided reliable tools to connect Dharma instruction with religious attitudes in practice.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive-analytic techniques that combined thematic coding and interpretive reflection. First, transcripts from interviews and field notes were read repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data. Second, initial codes were developed to categorize key themes such as Dharma instruction methods, personal religious attitudes, and interfaith implications (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These codes were then grouped into broader categories that reflected patterns across participants' narratives. Constant comparison was applied to ensure consistency and to refine categories until coherent themes emerged. The analysis emphasized both explicit content and underlying meanings to capture the richness of participants' experiences. Credibility was enhanced through peer debriefing and member checking with selected participants. Data interpretation was framed within the context of religious education and Buddhist studies. Thus, the analysis process connected empirical findings with theoretical insights on the role of Dharma in shaping religious life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings reveal that Dharma teaching in Lahat is conducted through multiple channels, including sermons (*dhamma desana*), small group discussions, personal guidance, and ritual participation in viharas. Sermons are delivered regularly by monks and Dharma teachers, often focusing on moral conduct (*sīla*), meditation practices (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). In addition, small group discussions provide opportunities for lay practitioners to ask questions and deepen their understanding of Buddhist values. Personal counseling is offered by Dharma teachers to address specific spiritual or ethical concerns. Observations also indicate that "Dharma safari" activities are occasionally organized, where teachers visit households to provide instruction and guidance. These diverse modes of instruction ensure that Dharma is accessible to different groups within the community. The multiplicity of methods shows that Dharma is not merely taught as doctrine but as a lived experience in everyday life.

The results also demonstrate a clear positive influence of Dharma instruction on the religious attitudes of Buddhists in Lahat. Participants reported increased awareness of ethical responsibilities, stronger commitment to daily rituals, and deeper spiritual reflection. Dharma teachings encourage individuals to apply compassion, honesty, and tolerance in their social interactions. Interviews revealed that many practitioners felt more confident in practicing their faith in a pluralistic society after receiving systematic Dharma instruction. Moreover, Dharma learning has enhanced participants' sense of communal solidarity, as shared rituals and discussions strengthen bonds within the community. While the level of practice varies according to education, age, and social position, the overall trend indicates that Dharma positively shapes religious life. The evidence suggests that Dharma teaching bridges the gap between spiritual ideals and social practice. This highlights its relevance in fostering harmonious coexistence within a diverse society.

Despite these positive outcomes, variations in the impact of Dharma instruction were also observed. Some participants demonstrated high levels of internalization, applying Dharma consistently in personal and social contexts. Others, however, showed more limited application, often constrained by work demands, limited access to instruction, or lower educational background. In addition, the study identified challenges such as the lack of qualified Dharma teachers, limited financial resources for community programs, and the need for contextualized teaching methods. These challenges sometimes hinder the full implementation of Dharma's moral and spiritual values. Nevertheless, even within these constraints, the general pattern reflects a gradual but meaningful improvement in religious attitudes. Importantly, the findings underline that Dharma functions not only as doctrinal knowledge but also as a practical guide for ethical living. This dual role positions Dharma as both a religious foundation and a social force for harmony in plural Indonesia.

Table 1. Summary of Research Findings

Aspect	Findings
Modes of Dharma Teaching	Sermons, group discussions, personal guidance, ritual practice, Dharma safari
Impact on Religious Attitudes	Increased ethical awareness, stronger ritual practice, enhanced social tolerance
Community Effects	Greater solidarity, strengthened interfaith harmony, improved civic responsibility
Challenges	Limited qualified teachers, resource constraints, unequal access, need for contextualization

Discussion

The findings indicate that Dharma teaching significantly influences the religious attitudes of Buddhist communities in Lahat. This supports the notion that religious education plays a central role in shaping moral behavior and spiritual resilience (Glock & Stark, 1965). Regular exposure to Dharma fosters not only ritual practices but also the cultivation of compassion and tolerance. Such outcomes demonstrate the practical relevance of Dharma as both doctrinal guidance and ethical framework. Previous studies on Buddhism emphasize the importance of Dharma in integrating spiritual life with daily practices (Gombrich, 2006). The present research confirms this relationship within the

Indonesian context, particularly in minority communities. By highlighting how Dharma enhances personal and communal religiosity, the study enriches our understanding of Buddhist educational practices. Thus, Dharma teaching emerges as a catalyst for sustaining ethical and spiritual values in contemporary society.

Another important implication of the findings is the role of Dharma in building community solidarity. Participants emphasized how shared rituals, discussions, and Dharma classes strengthened bonds among members. This aligns with previous studies that identify religious education as a means of fostering collective identity and social cohesion (Azra, 2019). In Lahat, where Buddhists coexist with other religious groups, solidarity within the community provides a foundation for broader interfaith harmony. Dharma teachings that emphasize compassion and non-violence contribute directly to peaceful social relations. Similar research in Thailand and Sri Lanka also demonstrates how Buddhist education strengthens community resilience against social tensions (Weeraratne, 2018). The Lahat case study, however, adds a localized perspective by showing how solidarity develops in a minority context. This finding underscores the broader social role of Dharma beyond personal spirituality.

The study also reveals that Dharma instruction fosters tolerance and mutual respect, which are crucial in Indonesia's pluralistic setting. This is consistent with Kusuma and Prasetyo's (2020) findings that interfaith education reduces prejudice and promotes inclusivity. By teaching values such as compassion and honesty, Dharma equips Buddhists with tools to engage constructively with others. This relevance is heightened in South Sumatra, where Buddhists live alongside Muslims, Christians, and Hindus. Previous scholarship has often emphasized Islam and Christianity in Indonesian interfaith relations (Woodward, 2011). By focusing on Buddhism, this study fills an important gap and broadens the discussion. It shows that Buddhist education can serve as a model for fostering harmony in multi-religious societies. Thus, Dharma functions not only as religious instruction but also as an instrument for interfaith dialogue.

Despite its positive impact, the study identifies several challenges in implementing Dharma teaching. The lack of qualified Dharma instructors remains a critical issue in sustaining religious education. This echoes Sutrisno's (2020) observation that Buddhist communities in Indonesia often struggle with limited resources and institutional support. Furthermore, uneven access to Dharma teaching, especially for younger practitioners, reduces its overall effectiveness. Similar problems have been reported in rural Buddhist communities across Southeast Asia (Rahmawati & Sari, 2021). These challenges highlight the need for innovative and contextualized teaching methods. Digital media, for example, could be used to expand access and reach wider audiences. Addressing these issues is essential if Dharma teaching is to fully realize its transformative potential. Therefore, the study contributes practical insights into the improvement of Buddhist educational strategies.

This research addresses a significant gap in Indonesian religious studies, where Buddhist perspectives remain underrepresented. Most studies on Indonesian religiosity focus on Islam, with little attention to minority traditions (Suparlan, 2017). By situating Dharma teaching within the lived experiences of Buddhists in Lahat, this study provides new empirical evidence. It contributes to theories of religious education by demonstrating

how instruction affects both personal piety and social harmony. In contrast to doctrinal analyses, the research emphasizes lived practices and community experiences. This shift aligns with contemporary approaches that highlight religion as a lived and embodied phenomenon (McGuire, 2008). The theoretical contribution lies in positioning Dharma not only as a doctrinal framework but also as a driver of social ethics. Hence, the study enriches both Buddhist studies and broader discussions in religious education.

Beyond theory, the study offers practical implications for policymakers, educators, and interfaith practitioners. In Indonesia, where pluralism is both a challenge and a strength, Dharma teaching can inform strategies for building tolerance and civic responsibility. Religious leaders can draw from these findings to design programs that emphasize both ritual devotion and social ethics. Comparative insights suggest that such approaches could also be applied in other multicultural societies. Similar to Albani et al. (2023), who highlight the role of education in peacebuilding, this research confirms the value of religious instruction as a vehicle for harmony. The global significance lies in showing how minority traditions contribute to broader social integration. By documenting the case of Lahat, the study illustrates how localized practices resonate with universal concerns. Thus, Dharma teaching emerges as both a local practice and a global contribution to interreligious dialogue.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Dharma teaching plays a crucial role in shaping the religious attitudes of Buddhist communities in Lahat, South Sumatra. Dharma instruction, delivered through sermons, discussions, personal guidance, and community programs, positively influences both individual piety and collective solidarity. The findings highlight that Dharma not only strengthens spiritual practices but also fosters tolerance, compassion, and interfaith harmony in a pluralistic society. Despite challenges such as limited resources and qualified instructors, the overall impact of Dharma teaching remains transformative for personal and social life. The research addresses a gap in Indonesian religious studies by providing empirical insights into Buddhist educational practices. Moreover, it contributes theoretically to the discourse on religious education and practically to the promotion of social cohesion. Thus, Dharma teaching emerges as both a spiritual foundation and a social force for harmony in contemporary Indonesia.

AUHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Nanang Khairiri responsible for conceptualizing the research design, conducting fieldwork, and collecting primary data through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Also contributed to the initial drafting of the introduction, method, and result sections.

Hermawati contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and critical review of related literature. Also played a significant role in drafting the discussion, revising the manuscript, and ensuring compliance with the journal's formatting and submission requirements.

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