

Implementing Theravāda Buddhist Teachings in Community Life: A Study of Sampali Village, Percut Sei Tuan District, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra

Susiwati¹, Ida Ayu Komang Arniati², Ni Ketut Riska Dewi Prawita³
Program Doktor Ilmu Agama dan Kebudayaan, Universitas Hindu Indonesia, Denpasar
Email: susiwati.tay@gmail.com¹, idaayuarniati@gmail.com², riskadewiprawita@gmail.com³

ABSTRACT

This study highlights the suboptimal implementation of Theravāda Buddhist teachings in the lives of Buddhists in Sampali Village. The implementation of *Theravāda* teachings includes the understanding and application of these teachings in the lives of Buddhists, along with various challenges in their execution. This research employs three theoretical approaches: phenomenological theory to understand how the teachings are experienced and practiced; yoga theory, which highlights the similarities in spiritual approaches found in yoga practices; and reception theory to examine how these teachings are received and transformed within social and cultural contexts. This study uses a qualitative method with a critical and interdisciplinary approach in the field of religious and cultural studies. The focus is on the implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in the daily lives of the people in Sampali Village. The data sources are primary: observation, interviews, and field documentation involving members of the *Saṅgha*, temple administrators, and lay Buddhists and secondary: books, journals, and official documents. The data collection techniques include observations of religious practices, interviews with key informants, and document studies from temples and libraries. The instruments consist of the researcher as the main instrument, supported by interview guidelines and documentation tools. Data analysis refers to the Miles & Huberman model: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The research findings indicate that factors such as mental aspects, social and cultural environments, unstructured education, theological and economic factors all contribute to the incomplete implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in Sampali Village. The process of applying the teachings is carried out through three stages: *pariyatti* (theoretical understanding), *paṭipatti* (spiritual practice), and *paṭivedha* (empirical realization). These three stages demonstrate a systematic approach to internalizing the Buddha's teachings—from study to the attainment of enlightenment. The implications of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in Sampali Village include: Theological aspects, which emphasize individual effort to attain *Nibbāna* through morality, meditation, and personal wisdom; Psychological aspects, in which mindfulness practices and meditation such as *vipassanā* help reduce stress and improve emotional balance as well as social relationships; and Sociological aspects, which strengthen social norms based on harmony, tolerance, and peaceful conflict resolution. *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings have been proven not only to strengthen individual spirituality but also to provide significant positive impacts on the psychological and social aspects of the community.

Keywords: *Theravāda Buddhist teachings, mental health, vipassanā meditation, social harmony.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings, as one of the oldest branches within the Buddhist tradition, have developed since the time of the Buddha Gotama and spread to various countries, including Indonesia. This tradition teaches the path to *Nibbāna* through the practice of *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom). However, the implementation of these teachings in community life does not always align with their essence. In various places,

including Sampali Village in Percut Sei Tuan Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra, the application of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings still shows disparities between understanding, ritual practice, and spiritual experience.

Initial observations since the Covid-19 pandemic have revealed mental pressure, anxiety, and social disturbances that indicate a weak application of the core values of *Theravāda* Buddhism. The impact of social change and economic stress highlights the lack

of deep appreciation for the Dhamma as a spiritual foundation. Uneven Dhamma literacy, the dominance of ritualism, and limited access to authentic teachings remain major obstacles in implementing these teachings. On the other hand, *Theravāda* Buddhism offers reflective and contemplative principles that are highly relevant in addressing inner and social crises.

This research is important due to the lack of in-depth, contextual, and local studies on how *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings are practiced in daily life by its followers, especially in multicultural rural areas such as Sampali Village. Academic explorations regarding the imbalance between the exoteric (outer) and esoteric (inner) aspects of this teaching are still rare. Therefore, this study is unique as it offers an interdisciplinary approach, combining theological, sociological, and psychological perspectives to understand the internal dynamics of *Theravāda* Buddhists in the village. It also highlights a local and current case study of the lives of *Theravāda* Buddhists outside national Buddhist centers, while connecting *Theravāda* values with contemporary social dynamics. The research's focus on the imbalance between doctrine and practice makes it relevant for formulating more authentic implementation strategies.

The research problems addressed in this study are as follows: 1) Why have the *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings not been fully implemented in the daily lives of the people in Sampali Village, Percut Sei Tuan Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra? 2) How is the process of implementing the *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings carried out in the lives of the Sampali Village community? And 3) What are the theological, psychological, and sociological implications of implementing the *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings?

The general objective of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the dynamics involved in the implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in the daily lives of the Sampali Village community and to explore the factors that contribute to both the success and the challenges of this implementation. Specifically, this research aims to: (1) analyze the limitations in the implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in Sampali Village; (2) examine how these teachings are applied in daily life practices; and (3) explore

the implications of this implementation on the community's theological beliefs, psychological well-being, and social conditions.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach within the field of religious studies using a critical paradigm. The objective is to explore the philosophical values, influencing factors, and the implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in the lives of the people of Sampali Village, Deli Serdang Regency. The critical paradigm was chosen because it views social reality as a field of conflict and change, rather than a neutral condition (Eriyanto, 2011:6; Neuman, 2003:81).

Primary data was collected through observations, direct interviews with informants who are competent in their fields, and document studies. Secondary data was gathered from books, journals, and internet sources. The researcher served as the main instrument for data collection, supported by recording devices and interview guides.

Data analysis is the process of systematically searching for and organizing interview, observation, and documentation data by organizing and selecting what is important and what needs to be studied, as well as drawing conclusions that are easy to understand. The data analysis technique used in this study follows the qualitative analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Sugiyono, 2019:204). Data reduction is a simplification process carried out through the selection, focusing, and validation of raw data into meaningful information, facilitating the conclusion drawing process. Data display in qualitative research is often in narrative form, presenting a set of information that is systematically arranged and easy to understand. Conclusion drawing is the final stage in data analysis, carried out by reviewing the results of data reduction while referring to the research problems and objectives. The data are compared across various sources to draw conclusions as answers to the identified problems.

This study aims to describe situations and events, with data consisting of written texts,

interviews, and behaviors obtained through observations of daily life in Medan City. In presenting the results of this research, the hidden meanings behind the values of the Buddha's teachings held by the Buddhist community in Medan can be revealed.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Factors Contributing to the Incomplete Implementation of Theravāda Buddhist Teachings in the Community of Sampali Village, Percut Sei Tuan Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra

The main reasons for the incomplete implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in society, particularly in Sampali Village, is the mental factor, which is closely related to the internal state of individuals. In Buddhist tradition, mental development is essential because it is directly linked to a person's ability to live consciously and meaningfully. *Theravāda* Buddhism emphasizes the importance of practicing *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom) as the foundation for mental cultivation.

Through these practices, individuals are trained to manage their minds in order to be free from emotional disturbances such as anxiety, anger, and greed. According to Rahula (1978), the ethical and meditative structure in Buddhism is designed not only to prevent unwholesome actions but also to develop lasting inner peace. Several residents of Sampali Village reported that meditation practices, particularly *vipassanā*, helped them overcome psychological pressures and mental health issues such as stress and anxiety.

This is consistent with the findings of Gunaratana (2002), who explained that mindfulness meditation has been shown to calm the mind and cultivate mental clarity. One informant, Mr. Rames Khumar, stated that regular meditation practice helped him grow in self-awareness and strengthen his right understanding of life. The government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs, has also encouraged the improvement of the community's mental well-being through religious education programs, although the

accessibility and effectiveness of such programs remain limited in practice. Social and cultural factors also influence the extent to which *Theravāda* teachings are applied. The social structure in Sampali Village is still heavily influenced by local customs and traditional norms, which are sometimes not aligned with the universal values of the Dhamma. People often engage with Buddhism in a symbolic or ritualistic manner, without fully understanding its substance.

In fact, *Theravāda* Buddhism emphasizes the values of the *brahmavihāras*, such as *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity), which are highly relevant to creating a harmonious and tolerant social life. As Nyanatiloka (1980) noted, these four sublime states form an essential foundation for human relationships. However, in practice, these values have not yet become guiding principles for most people, due to the prevailing influence of competitive culture and intense social pressure. The low quality of Buddhist religious education is another factor that contributes to the suboptimal implementation of *Theravāda* teachings. Educational curriculum, both formal in schools and informal in monasteries, have not widely integrated ethical learning, mindfulness development, and meditation practice in a complete and in-depth way. Ideally, Buddhist education should be holistic, addressing the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development of individuals in a balanced manner. Wijayaratna (1990) explained that traditional Buddhist education consistently emphasized a balance between study and practice, producing individuals who are both knowledgeable and virtuous.

Unfortunately, in many places including Sampali Village, religious education remains sporadic, often limited to major religious celebrations or routine activities, without deeply transforming the inner life of practitioners. The theological dimension of *Theravāda* Buddhism also presents its own set of challenges. This tradition is non-theistic, meaning it does not affirm the existence of an almighty creator God. In *Theravāda*, liberation is achieved through personal effort and understanding, particularly of concepts such as *anattā* (non-self), *kamma* (the law of moral causation), and *samsāra* (the cycle of rebirth). Harvey (2013) explained that this approach

requires critical reasoning and deep direct experience, which may not be easily accepted by laypeople who are accustomed to theistic or dogmatic worldviews.

Consequently, many practitioners feel more comfortable with the Mahāyāna tradition, which highlights universal compassion through figures such as the Bodhisattva, who is seen as a savior of beings. Mahāyāna is perceived as more flexible because it offers external hope for liberation, in contrast to *Theravāda*'s introspective and individualistic approach. From an economic perspective, financial limitations significantly hinder the comprehensive practice of *Theravāda* Buddhism. Access to Dhamma education, spiritual teachers, and adequate meditation facilities often depends on the community's economic capacity. A lack of funding has led to the shortage of translated Buddhist texts in accessible languages and weak spiritual infrastructure in the village. This situation is illustrated by the testimony of Mrs. Darma, a resident of Sampali Village, who experienced emotional distress after her husband lost his job. She said:

"I experienced excessive anxiety after my husband lost his job. I had trouble sleeping, cried often, avoided talking to neighbors, and didn't know what to do, even though our family could still afford to eat."
(Interview, August 25, 2024)

The phenomenological approach used in this research allows for an understanding of Mrs. Darma's suffering not from a clinical or moral standpoint, but as an authentic human experience. When she was introduced to basic meditation practice, she began to realize that negative thoughts were merely transient mental phenomena. This shows that, despite economic constraints, spiritual practice can serve as a powerful resource for building psychological resilience (Goleman, 2003).

3.2 The Process of Implementing Theravāda Buddhist Teachings in the Community of Sampali Village, Percut Sei Tuan Subdistrict, Deli Serdang Regency, North Sumatra

This research model illustrates the gradual process by which the community of Sampali Village implements the teachings of

Theravāda Buddhism, which is divided into three main stages:

Pariyatti serves as the initial foundation, involving an intellectual understanding of the Buddha's teachings. The community gains knowledge through studying the Tipiṭaka, attending Dhamma talks, reading texts such as the *Visuddhimagga*, and participating in Dhamma discussions. This stage includes a deep comprehension of *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom). The goal is to establish a correct understanding before engaging in spiritual practice.

Paṭipatti refers to the direct practice of the teachings, such as observing the *pañca-sīla* (Five Precepts), practicing *ānāpānasati* (breath meditation), *mettā bhāvanā* (loving-kindness), and *vipassanā* (insight meditation). The community also engages in ethical training, mindfulness (*sati*), and mental discipline to integrate the Dhamma into daily life. This practice acts as a bridge between theoretical understanding and inner realization.

Paṭivedha represents the ultimate stage, where intellectual understanding and practice lead to direct experience of the Dhamma. This is marked by the arising of profound wisdom and inner transformation, such as the eradication of *kilesa* (mental defilements) and the attainment of levels of enlightenment: *Sotāpanna*, *Sakadāgāmi*, *Anāgāmi*, and finally *Arahant*. This realization brings peace, wisdom, and liberation from suffering (*dukkha*).

This model is rooted in the core teachings of *Theravāda*—*sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*—which mutually support each other in spiritual practice. It is also based on the Noble Eightfold Path as a practical framework and *Paṭicca Samuppāda* (Dependent Origination) as a philosophical foundation explaining the interdependence of all phenomena. Thus, the implementation of the Buddha's teachings is not merely conceptual comprehension but a progressive journey toward spiritual enlightenment and sustainable social well-being. As Bhikkhu Bodhi affirms, "The practice of the *Dhamma* is a process of transformation which unfolds in stages: from right view through right conduct to right liberation" (Bodhi, 2005: 23). This quote emphasizes that the *Dhamma* is not merely to

be known, but to be lived gradually until one reaches true liberation.

3.3 Implications of the Implementation of Theravāda Buddhist Teachings in the Community of Sampali Village

The implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings, which encompasses *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom), has brought transformative impacts to various aspects of life in the community of Sampali Village. These impacts can be seen through three main dimensions: theological, psychological, and sociological.

Theologically, *Theravāda* Buddhism emphasizes a non-theistic approach, in which the attainment of *nibbāna* does not depend on supernatural intervention but is achieved through individual effort, consistency, and discipline. This teaching shapes the worldview of the community to be based on the law of *kamma* (cause and effect) and *saṃsāra* (rebirth), focusing on personal responsibility for liberation from suffering. Ethics in this tradition are not grounded in obedience to a divine being, but in rational efforts to reduce personal and social suffering. As a result, a spiritual community that is autonomous, self-reliant, and rational in its everyday conduct has taken shape.

Psychologically, the practice of *samādhi*, such as *vipassanā* meditation and the cultivation of *sati* (mindfulness), provides significant therapeutic benefits.

Those who regularly engage in meditation experience reduced stress and anxiety, along with enhanced emotional stability and self-awareness. Furthermore, the cultivation of the *brahmavihāras*—*mettā* (loving-kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity)—fosters the development of positive emotions and mental resilience. Additionally, the understanding of *anattā* (non-self) helps reduce egoic identification and excessive attachment to identity or possession, thereby strengthening inner balance and increasing psychological maturity. As Bodhi (2005: 34) states, “The Dhamma is not a gift from a divine source but a path to be walked through one’s own mindful efforts.”

Sociologically, the values within *Theravāda* Buddhism foster harmonious and

cohesive social interactions. The application of *pañca-sīla* (five basic moral precepts) and the strengthening of *dāna* (generosity) create a culture of mutual care and respect. The relationship between the *Saṅgha* and laypeople develops through a healthy reciprocal pattern: the community supports the material needs of the *Saṅgha*, while the *Saṅgha* provides spiritual guidance to the community. Dhamma education, which is regularly provided at the *vihāra*, enhances social awareness, environmental concern, and collective responsibility for communal well-being. The principles of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) and peaceful conflict resolution serve as the foundation for maintaining social order and nurturing interpersonal relationships. These values also influence family structure, promote gender equity, and encourage a lifestyle that is inclusive, simple, and sustainable.

In summary, the implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in Sampali Village not only strengthens the spiritual quality of individuals but also enhances the psychological and social well-being of the community, shaping a harmonious, inclusive, and highly conscious way of life.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that the implementation of *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings in Sampali Village unfolds through a complex and gradual process. Although *Theravāda* teachings have long been present in the community, their application has not yet reached the depth ideally envisioned by the Buddha. This condition is influenced by a variety of interrelated factors, both internal to the practitioners and external, stemming from the social and cultural environment that surrounds them.

One of the key findings of this study is that, despite being widely known, *Theravāda* Buddhist teachings have not been fully internalized by the majority of grassroots followers. Teachings that are contemplative in nature and emphasize inner transformation—such as *sīla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (wisdom)—are often perceived merely as religious obligations or rituals, rather than as a holistic way of life

that touches upon the psychological and social dimensions of practitioners.

The obstacles to proper implementation of the teachings are found in five major aspects: mental, socio-cultural, educational, theological, and economic. Mentally, many individuals experience psychological pressures without possessing sufficient spiritual resilience to overcome them. Culturally, the dominance of ritualism and pragmatic local values often marginalizes deeper contemplative practices. Educationally, the scarcity of accessible learning materials and the limited number of competent Dhamma teachers hinder understanding. Theologically, some practitioners struggle to grasp the non-theistic nature of *Theravāda*, which places liberation not in the hands of a divine power, but in personal effort. Economically, limited facilities and inadequate access to spiritual training contribute to an uneven distribution of practice and understanding across the community.

Nonetheless, this research also highlights the transformative potential of *Theravāda* Buddhism. Theologically, those who understand *kamma* (the law of cause and effect) and *anattā* (non-self) become more responsible for their own lives. Psychologically, meditation practices such as *vipassanā* have helped practitioners manage stress and emotional disturbances. Sociologically, the application of *sīla* and values such as *dāna* (generosity) and *mettā* (loving-kindness) has strengthened social solidarity and harmony within families and the broader community.

In terms of the implementation process, the research finds that success in integrating *Theravāda* teachings into community life relies heavily on deep understanding, ongoing spiritual guidance, and structural support from the *Saṅgha*, lay community, and government. The implementation of the teachings should not be reduced to mere ritual observance, but must be viewed as a comprehensive educational process of the mind aimed at liberating beings from suffering. This process follows three main stages: *pariyatti* (theoretical understanding), *paṭipatti* (spiritual practice), and *paṭivedha* (realization).

At the *pariyatti* stage, people begin to access the teachings through scriptures and Dhamma talks, although their understanding tends to remain superficial and normative. In the

paṭipatti stage, individuals begin to engage in practical application, such as maintaining moral conduct and practicing meditation, although not all practitioners do so consistently. The *paṭivedha* stage, which reflects deep inner realization, has only begun to emerge among a small number of practitioners who have committed themselves seriously to the spiritual path.

The implications of implementing *Theravāda* Buddhism are far-reaching. Theologically, the teachings foster self-reliant and responsible individuals through awareness of *kamma* and *anattā*, encouraging practitioners to seek liberation through disciplined personal effort rather than relying on external forces. Psychologically, Dhamma practices especially meditation and the cultivation of the *brahmavihāra* (sublime attitudes) serve as effective tools for mental strengthening and emotional healing. Practitioners become more aware, composed, and resilient in facing life's challenges. Sociologically, the application of *pañca-sīla* (the Five Precepts) and values like *dāna* contribute to the development of an ethical, peaceful, and mutually supportive society. Continuous Dhamma education also fosters social awareness and sustainable values rooted in simplicity and mindfulness.

Therefore, the success of *Theravāda* Buddhist implementation in community life cannot depend solely on the formal presence of the teachings. It must be accompanied by deep internalization, consistent spiritual cultivation, and strong institutional support. *Theravāda* Buddhism is not merely a set of rituals, but a comprehensive path of mental education and liberation. To ensure its full realization, the stages of *pariyatti*, *paṭipatti*, and *paṭivedha* must be pursued in an integrated, systematic, and contextually appropriate manner. When carried out in this way, *Theravāda* teachings can truly serve as a path of liberation not only spiritually, but also in the psychological and social dimensions of life in Sampali Village.

REFERENCES

- Bhagavant.com. (2006). Jalan Arya Berunsur Delapan – Ariyo Atṭhaṅgiko Maggo. Diakses pada 23 Juni 2024, dari <https://bhagavant.com/jalan-arya-berunsur-delapan-ariyo>

- Bodhi, B. (2005). *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- K. Sri. (2002). *What do Buddhists Believe?* Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia.
- Bhikkhu, P. (2022). *Buddha: India's message for global Buddha-consciousness and human well-being*.
- Bechert, H., & Gombrich, R. (1984). *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture*. Thames and Hudson.
- Buddhaghosa. *Visuddhimagga*. (Rujukan utama dalam tahap pemahaman ajaran).
- Dhammananda, K. Sri. (2002). *What do Buddhists Believe?* Kuala Lumpur: Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia.
- Geertz, C. (1976). *The Religion of Java*. University of Chicago Press.
- Goleman, D. (2003). *Destructive Emotions: How Can We Overcome Them?*. Bantam Books.
- Gunaratana, H. (2002). *Mindfulness in Plain English*. Wisdom Publications.
- Harvey, P. (2013). *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (2nd Ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Husserl, E. (1900–1901). *Logische Untersuchungen* [Logical Investigations]. Berlin: M. Niemeyer.
- Jauss, H. R. (1982). *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (T. Bahti, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1977)
- Nyanatiloka Thera. (1980). *Buddhist Dictionary: Manual of Buddhist Terms and Doctrines*. Buddhist Publication Society
- Patañjali. (1971). *Yoga-sūtra of Patañjali* (J. R. Ballantyne & G. D. Sastri, Eds., 2 ed.). Delhi: Indological Book House.
- Rahula, W. (1978). *What the Buddha Taught*. Grove Press.
- Tipiṭaka (*Kanon Pāli*). *Tipiṭaka*. (Digunakan dalam tahap *pariyatti*).
- Wijayaratna, M. (1990). *Buddhist Monastic Life: According to the Texts of the Theravāda Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.