From *Sangha* to United Nations: A Buddhist Model of Peace-Keeping

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Abstract

This paper examines the democratic and ethical decision-making practices of the early Buddhist *Sangha* and compares them with those of modern global institutions, such as the United Nations. The *Sangha* is the Buddhist monastic community guided by the Vinaya and consensus, while the United Nations promotes global peace, rights, and development through diplomatic efforts among its member nations. It explores key principles such as consensus-building, non-hierarchical leadership, and moral governance, showing how the *Sangha*'s collective decision-making and conflict resolution methods serve as a historical model for fostering peace and cooperation. By highlighting the *Sangha*'s emphasis on harmony, ethical conduct, and inclusivity, the study argues that ancient Buddhist organizational practices offer valuable insights for contemporary diplomacy and international governance.

Key words: *Sangha*, **United Nations, Consensus-building, Ethical governance, Non-hierarchical leadership, Peace and diplomacy.**

Introduction

The global quest for peace, cooperation, and democratic governance remains a central challenge in international relations. In an increasingly polarized world, institutions like the United Nations (UN) work tirelessly to foster dialogue, promote peace, and uphold principles of equality and human rights among their diverse member states (United Nations). Yet, the idea of cooperative governance and conflict resolution through non-violent, ethical means is not a modern invention. More than two thousand years ago, the early Buddhist *Sangha,* the monastic community founded by the Buddha, established a functioning model of peaceful governance grounded in non-hierarchical leadership,

moral discipline, and consensus-based decision-making (Gethin 87–89). While vastly different in form and scope, both the *Sangha* and the UN share core values centered on inclusivity, harmony, and collective deliberation.

This paper explores the intersection between these two institutions, focusing on how the democratic and ethical practices of the early *Sangha* offer valuable insights into modern global governance, particularly as exemplified in the actions and ideals of the UN. The *Sangha* functioned through regular assemblies where decisions were made collectively, without coercive authority, guided by the Vinaya rules that emphasized mutual respect, mindfulness, and communal harmony (Analayo 56). These practices resonate with the UN's principles of diplomacy, peaceful conflict resolution, and the protection of human dignity through cooperative effort (Boutros-Ghali 12–13).

By analyzing both the historical practices of the *Sangha* and the modern diplomatic mechanisms of the UN, this paper highlights how ancient Buddhist organizational models can inform and enrich contemporary approaches to peacekeeping and multilateral governance. The study seeks to demonstrate that the ethical foundations and decision-making structures of the *Sangha* are not relics of the past, but rather enduring principles that continue to offer regulation in the global quest for sustainable peace and cooperation. In this way, the *Sangha* becomes not just a religious institution, but a timeless model for global harmony.

Literature Review

Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
Gethin's work offers a comprehensive overview of the early Buddhist *Sangha*, particularly its ethical and organizational principles. He emphasizes how consensus and discipline shaped communal life, which this paper uses to explore parallels with the UN's governance structure.
Weiss, Thomas G., and Sam Daws, editors. *The Oxford Handbook on the United Nations*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

This authoritative volume details the functioning of key UN organs, offering a critical perspective on consensus, diplomacy, and institutional limitations—essential for comparing with the *Sangha*'s structure.

Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Harvey explores the moral underpinnings of Buddhist monastic life, including the Pātimokkha rules. His insights support the argument that ethical discipline was central to governance in the *Sangha*.

Bond, George D. *The Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka: Religious Tradition, Reinterpretation, and Response*. University of South Carolina Press, 1992.

Bond examines leadership in the *Sangha* from a socio-historical perspective, showing how non-hierarchical roles were preserved through merit and ethics, offering a critical frame for understanding shared leadership in the UN.

Thakur, Ramesh. *The United Nations, Peace and Security: From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Thakur discusses the ethical aspirations and political tensions within the UN's mission. His work highlights the structural flaws and potential for reform, supporting this paper's argument for alternative ethical models like the *Sangha*.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the existence of global institutions like the United Nations dedicated to peace and cooperation, the world continues to grapple with inequality, conflict, and governance failures. In this context, there is a pressing need to explore alternative, ethically grounded models of governance. The early Buddhist *Sangha*, with its emphasis on consensus, non-hierarchical leadership, and ethical accountability, presents a potentially valuable framework. However, there is limited scholarly engagement with how the principles of the *Sangha* could be applied to or inform modern global institutions like the UN.

Research Questions

1. How do the governance principles of the early Buddhist *Sangha* compare with the institutional structures and decision-making practices of the United Nations?
2. In what ways can the ethical, consensus-based, and participatory practices of the *Sangha* inform or enhance the governance effectiveness of modern global institutions such as the United Nations?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the decision-making processes, leadership models, and ethical foundations of the early Buddhist *Sangha* in the context of democratic governance.
2. To assess the relevance and applicability of *Sangha* principles in addressing key governance challenges faced by contemporary international organizations, particularly the United Nations.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and proportional research design. It relies on historical and textual analysis of primary Buddhist sources such as the Vinaya Pitaka, alongside secondary scholarly commentaries. It also analyzes official UN documents, charters, and academic literature on global diplomacy. Comparative thematic analysis is used to explore overlaps in governance principles such as consensus-building, non-hierarchical leadership, and ethical accountability.

Significance of the Study

This research contributes to the fields of comparative politics, peace studies, and religious ethics by bridging ancient Buddhist models with contemporary global governance. It highlights how timeless ethical principles can inform present-day diplomacy and peace-building, potentially fostering more compassionate and cooperative global institutions.

Limitations of the Study

This study is a theoretical and interpretive analysis based on textual sources and philosophical reflection, rather than empirical methods like surveys or interviews. It examines selected aspects of governance such as decision-making, ethical leadership, and participatory practices, without attempting a full evaluation of the UN's structure or performance. A key limitation lies in the contextual differences between the early Buddhist *Sangha* and the modern United Nations. The *Sangha* was a religious, monastic institution guided by spiritual and ethical principles, while the UN functions within a political and legal framework influenced by national interests and diplomacy. These fundamental differences restrict direct comparisons and highlight the study's focus on conceptual insights rather than empirical applicability or institutional equivalence.

The *Sangha*: An Ancient Model of Democratic Harmony

The early Buddhist *Sangha*, established shortly after Siddhartha Gautama's enlightenment in the 6th century BCE, is among the earliest known models of non-hierarchical, ethically driven communal governance. Originating after the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, the *Sangha* evolved into a monastic community emphasizing ethical conduct (*sīla*), meditative focus (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) under the moral framework of the *Dhamma* (Gethin 70).

Governance within the *Sangha* was based not on divine or royal authority but on the *Vinaya Pitaka*, a dynamic code of monastic discipline that developed in response to real-life situations (Harvey 84). Each rule (*sikkhāpada*) emerged from specific events, reflecting a participatory and adaptive legal framework. Central to its governance was the principle of *sammukhi vinaya* decision-making in the presence of all, which ensured inclusive deliberation and prevented power centralization (Gombrich 54).

A key institution was the *uposatha* ceremony, held fortnightly, where monks recited the *Pātimokkha* (the rule code) and voluntarily confessed transgressions. This process fostered transparency, trust, and self-regulation (Harvey 91). Major decisions, including ordinations and conflict resolutions, were reached through consensus or

majority vote, highlighting a proto-democratic process rooted in dialogue rather than hierarchy (Prebish 27).

The *Sangha*'s structure reflected moral responsibility, communal participation, and a commitment to peace and harmony. Its legal-ethical code was shaped by real experiences and grounded in spiritual ethics rather than secular law. Authority was collective and moral, not authoritarian or personal. As Gombrich notes, the *Sangha* avoided autocracy by rooting governance in shared ethical conduct (Gombrich 54). In doing so, the early Buddhist *Sangha* presents a historically significant model of participatory governance founded on spiritual values and collective moral reasoning.

United Nations: Diplomatic Consensus in a Modern Framework

The United Nations (UN), established in 1945 after World War II by 51 nations, aims to promote peace, prevent conflict, protect human rights, and foster global cooperation. With 193 member states today, it stands as the world's most inclusive international organization (Weiss and Daws 23). The UN functions through six main organs: the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, the Trusteeship Council, and the Secretariat, along with specialized agencies like WHO, UNESCO, and UNICEF (Thakur 61).

The General Assembly, where each country has one vote, reflects a democratic ideal similar to the early Buddhist *Sangha*'s emphasis on shared responsibility and inclusive decision-making. Although its resolutions are not legally binding, they carry significant political and moral weight (Weiss and Daws 142). In contrast, the Security Council, tasked with global peace and security, grants veto power to five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the UK, the USA), allowing them to block actions despite majority consensus. This structure often leads to delays and power imbalance (Thakur 78).

Despite such limitations, the UN plays a critical role in peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, conflict resolution, and sustainable development. It achieves its goals through diplomacy, international law, dialogue, and partnerships with regional bodies.

The International Court of Justice offers legal rulings on disputes among nations (Weiss 45). While structurally different, both the UN and the Buddhist *Sangha* share core principles of peaceful conflict resolution, ethical deliberation, and consensus-based governance, demonstrating alternative institutional models for achieving global harmony.

Consensus-Building: A Foundation for Ethical Governance

A significant parallel between the early Buddhist *Sangha* and the United Nations lies in their shared reliance on consensus-based decision-making as a foundation of ethical and inclusive governance. Within the *Sangha*, this process was not merely procedural but spiritual, rooted in the principles of *sīla* (moral discipline) and guided by the *Dhamma*. The *Vinaya Pitaka* outlines the process of *Saṅghakamma*, which required the presence of a quorum and the resolution of disagreements before any decision could be finalized, thereby fostering dialogue free from coercion (Thanissaro 114). This approach, based on *sammukha vinaya*—face-to-face deliberation—ensured that decisions emerged from mutual understanding and collective moral responsibility (Thanissaro, *The Buddhist Monastic Code*). The *Sangha*'s model emphasized moral clarity and communal harmony, ensuring that authority was exercised through ethical consensus rather than individual dominance.

Similarly, the United Nations General Assembly operates on a one-nation-one-vote principle, emphasizing equality among states and striving for resolutions achieved through majority or consensus (Weiss 112). While the UN's processes, especially within the Security Council, often reflect geopolitical power dynamics, many of its major achievements, such as climate accords and humanitarian interventions, are outcomes of extended negotiations aimed at building broad agreement (Weiss and Daws 148). Unlike the UN's often strategic or political motivations, the *Sangha* emphasized decisions rooted in ethical impartiality and the *Dhamma*, free from personal bias (Bodhi 231). This contrast highlights the potential for modern institutions to learn from the *Sangha*'s morally grounded consensus model. Both systems demonstrate that sustainable peace and governance arise more effectively through mutual respect, dialogue, and ethical alignment than through top-down authority or domination.

Peace and Conflict Resolution in the *Sangha* and the UN

The United Nations (UN) and the early Buddhist *Sangha* both prioritize non-violent conflict resolution, although their methods and underlying philosophies differ significantly. The UN employs a combination of peacekeeping missions, diplomacy, mediation, and sanctions to prevent and resolve global conflicts ("Peace and Security"). While these tools are rooted in international law and geopolitical considerations, they often rely on the deterrent power of military presence. In contrast, the early Buddhist *Sangha* governed its internal disputes through the *Adhikaraṇa-samatha*, a set of seven procedural rules emphasizing reconciliation, dialogue, and moral correction rather than punishment (Harvey 72). The *Vinaya Piṭaka* of the Theravāda tradition outlines six formal methods (*Chaddhamma*) to resolve disputes within the monastic *Saṅgha*, aimed at maintaining harmony and preventing schism (*saṅghabheda*). These include Sammukhā Vinaya, where disputes are resolved face-to-face to ensure transparency; Sati Vinaya, which relies on truthful recollection; Amūḷha Vinaya, applied only when the accused is mentally sound; Paṭiññāta Kāraka Vinaya, where voluntary confession leads to resolution; Yebhuyyasikā, which uses majority vote in deadlock situations; and Tassapāpiyyasikā, which favors the more credible party when both sides accuse each other. Together, these methods reflect the *Saṅgha's* emphasis on ethical conduct, fairness, mental clarity, and communal consensus (Prebish 87).

The Buddha's teachings on *mettā* (loving-kindness), *ahiṃsā* (non-violence), and *paṭiccasamuppāda* (interdependence) offer an ethically grounded model for peace-building that transcends mere political compromise. These values emphasize not only the cessation of conflict but the cultivation of inner and social harmony through ethical living and mindful awareness (Harvey 56). Buddhist approaches to conflict resolution emphasize qualities such as patience (*khanti*), compassion, and a focus on healing rather than punishment, principles that are firmly rooted in the monastic disciplinary system and the collective decision-making practices of the *Saṅgha* (Prebish 87). While the United Nations often turns to military intervention in the name of peacekeeping, Buddhist traditions illustrate the potential of morally guided dialogue and community-based reconciliation to achieve sustainable and inclusive outcomes (Loy 311).

The *Saṅgha's* emphasis on consensus, confession, and mutual respect demonstrates how non-coercive methods can resolve disputes without resorting to force. The integration of Buddhist ethical principles into modern peace-building could help reorient international efforts away from domination and toward mutual understanding, spiritual reconciliation, and nonviolent coexistence (Queen and King 17). Ultimately, both institutions—though situated in vastly different historical and cultural contexts—demonstrate that peace is not merely the absence of violence but the presence of justice, respect, and ethical cooperation (Harvey 58).

Human Rights in the *Sangha* and the UN

Both the early Buddhist *Sangha* and the United Nations (UN) exhibit profound commitments to human dignity, justice, and ethical governance within different frameworks. Although the *Sangha* began as a male monastic community, the establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Sangha* under the Buddha's guidance marked a revolutionary shift toward gender inclusivity. By recognizing women's equal potential for enlightenment, the Buddha upheld a core Buddhist principle that all sentient beings possess the innate capacity for awakening and moral development (Analayo 33). Moreover, early Buddhism challenged social hierarchies, especially the rigid caste system prevalent in society. The Buddha openly rejected caste distinctions by allowing individuals from all social backgrounds, including so-called "untouchables" like Saccaka and Upāli, to enter the monastic community and attain high spiritual status. In a powerful symbolic gesture, the Buddha accepted Upāli, a barber from the *śūdra* caste, into the *Saṅgha* before the princes who had previously been his patrons, thereby affirming spiritual equality over birth-based hierarchy (Narada 67).

This affirmation of spiritual equality resonates with the modern ideals enshrined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), adopted by the UN in 1948, which asserts the inherent dignity and equal rights of all individuals regardless of gender, race, or religion (United Nations, "UDHR"). In addition to the UDHR, the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR, 1966) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR, 1966) further elaborate on the rights to

freedom of thought, belief, and equal participation in society (United Nations, "ICCPR"; "ICESCR"). The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW, 1979) emphasizes gender equality and women's empowerment, echoing the inclusive spiritual principles found in early Buddhist texts (United Nations, "CEDAW"). Moreover, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC, 1989) upholds the dignity, protection, and participation of children in society—principles that align with the Buddhist emphasis on compassion and nurturing for the vulnerable (United Nations, "CRC"). These instruments collectively affirm a global commitment to justice, non-discrimination, and human dignity, reflecting values that are deeply consonant with the ethical vision of the Buddha.

Furthermore, the *Sangha*'s internal governance is rooted in the *Vinaya Pitaka,* which reflects a model of ethical leadership that prioritizes the moral well-being and communal harmony of its members. The disciplinary rules outlined in the *Vinaya* are not merely legalistic codes but tools for cultivating *sīla* (ethical conduct), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *paṭicca-samuppāda* (interdependence), emphasizing both individual responsibility and communal welfare (Bodhi 198). In contrast, the UN upholds ethical governance primarily through legal frameworks and international declarations, promoting peace and justice through secular mechanisms. Ultimately, both institutions aspire to create a just and peaceful world by affirming the dignity and potential of every human being.

Ethical Governance: Morality as the Bedrock of Peace

The governance model of the early Buddhist *Sangha* was rooted in a profound ethical framework. The *Pātimokkha,* a set of disciplinary rules that outlined appropriate behavior for monastics, was central to this structure. In the *Theravāda* tradition, these 227 precepts guided not only physical conduct but also speech and thought, reinforcing a life of moral discipline and self-restraint. Breaches of these rules necessitated processes such as confession, communal correction, and, in more serious cases, expulsion, emphasizing the *Sangha*'s collective commitment to moral integrity. From a Buddhist perspective,

governance lacking ethical grounding inevitably results in societal decline and disorder (Gombrich 145).

A parallel emphasis on morality can be found in the foundational principles of the *United Nations Charter*, which advocates for human dignity, the rule of law, and the protection of fundamental freedoms (United Nations, *Charter*). Through institutions like the Human Rights Council and the International Court of Justice, the UN has attempted to institutionalize ethical norms in global governance. The effort to combat injustices such as genocide, extreme poverty, and ecological destruction demands more than legal frameworks; it requires moral determination and courage on the part of international actors (Alston 25).

The Buddhist virtue of *Sīla*, often translated as moral discipline, aligns deeply with the UN's objectives toward just and humane governance. *Sīla* emphasizes right speech, right action, and right livelihood as foundational components of the Eightfold Path, guiding individuals and institutions toward non-exploitative and compassionate behavior (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 85). Both systems recognize that true leadership is not exercised through powerful control but through service to the welfare of all beings. Moreover, the Buddhist precept of *ahiṃsā*, or non-harming, strongly aligns with the UN's peacekeeping operations and humanitarian initiatives, reflecting the shared value of safeguarding human life and reducing suffering (Harvey 52). In both worldviews, ethical governance is not merely a tool for stability—it is a sacred responsibility to uphold the dignity and well-being of all people.

Findings

1. **The Early Buddhist *Sangha* Demonstrates a Viable Model of Ethical and Participatory Governance**

The early *Sangha* operated through consensus-based decision-making, focusing on ethical conduct, mutual respect, and accountability. Ceremonies like *uposatha* and rules from the *Vinaya Pitaka* encouraged transparency and harmony. This governance model, though religious, highlights collective moral responsibility over coercive control.

2. The United Nations Reflects Similar Aspirations, but Faces Structural Challenges

The UN shares the *Sangha*'s goals of inclusive governance and peace-building. However, power imbalances—especially the Security Council's veto system—often hinder equal participation and ethical consensus, indicating a gap between ideals and practice and pointing to the need for reform.

3. Both Systems Employ Consensus as a Core Mechanism for Conflict Resolution

Consensus is key in both systems. The *Sangha* relied on direct dialogue (*sammukha vinaya*) and ethical reconciliation (*Adhikaraṇa-samatha*), while the UN uses diplomacy and law. Both stress that true peace emerges from dialogue, trust, and ethical engagement.

4. Buddhist Ethical Principles Can Enrich Modern Global Governance and Peace Process

Values like *sīla*, *ahiṃsā*, and *karuṇā* offer ethical depth for global governance. Though secular, the UN can benefit from such principles to enhance its efforts in peacekeeping and human rights, with the *Sangha* serving as a model of inclusive moral leadership.

Conclusion

The early Buddhist *Sangha* and the United Nations (UN), though created in different times and for different purposes, both aim to promote peace, ethical leadership, and cooperation. The *Sangha* made decisions through group discussions, focusing on moral values and shared understanding. Its system was based on nonviolence (ahiṃsā), compassion (karuṇā), and mutual respect. Unlike today's political systems, the *Sangha* worked without strict hierarchies and avoided power struggles.

This ancient method offers useful lessons for today's world. The UN, while often influenced by politics and inequality, can learn from the *Sangha*'s focus on fairness and inclusion. By applying Buddhist ideas of ethical behavior and equal participation, global institutions could build a more peaceful, respectful, and sustainable system of international cooperation.

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