Rejuvenating Connections between Tibet and Indonesia through Artivism

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent, or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences, and courses, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia. The style of our essays is subjective and informal. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and our region. In the current edition, we focus on the theme of "Rejuvenating Connections between Tibet and Indonesia through Artivism."

Articles are edited by Edwin Jurriëns (edwin.jurriens@unimelb.edu.au) from the Asia Institute at The University of Melbourne, https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/asia-institute

Politics of the Unseen: Visual Practice, Spirituality, and Resistance in Contemporary Indonesia

Edwin Jurriëns

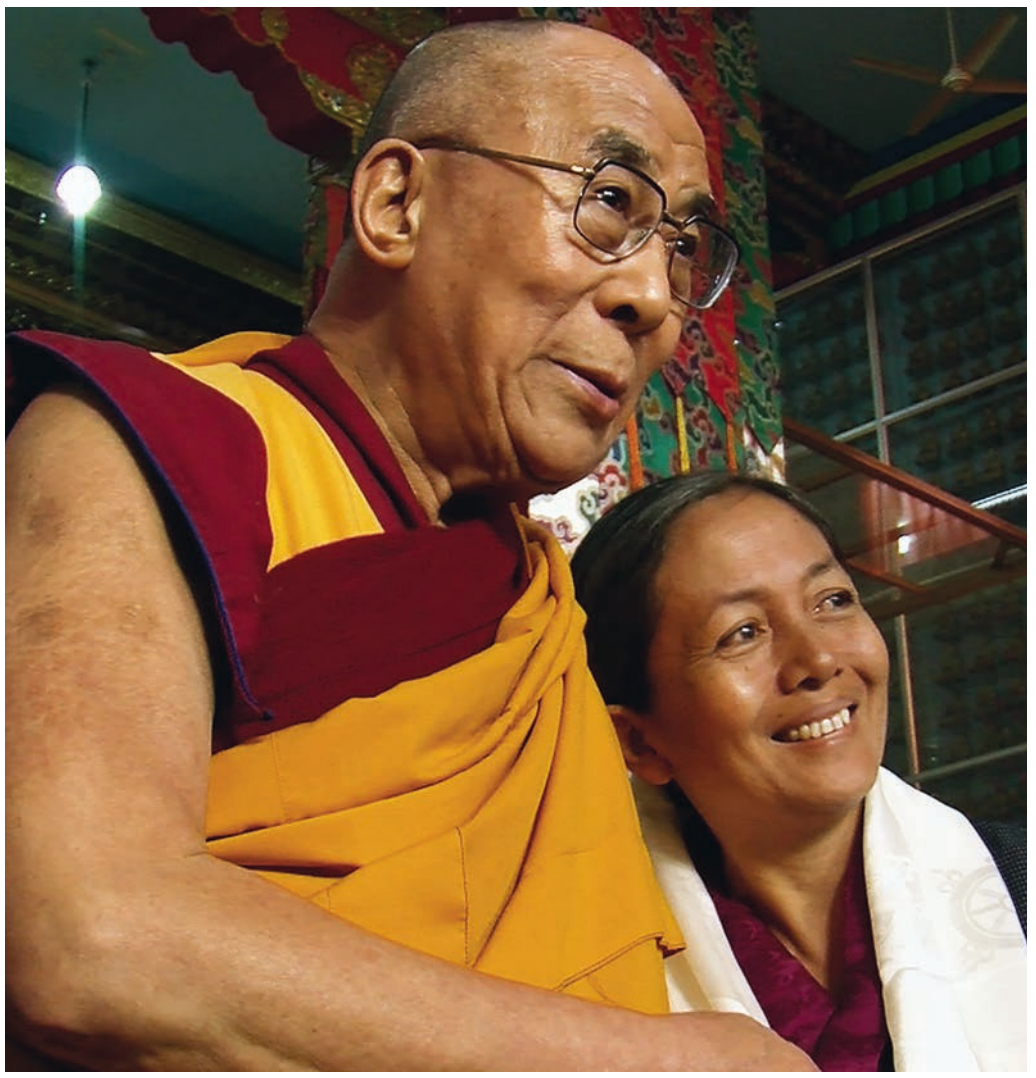
The biennial Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) conference, the largest gathering of experts working on Asia in the southern hemisphere, was hosted by The University of Melbourne in 2020. Due to the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic, the event could not take place on campus on the planned dates in July 2020. Using a flexible approach in response, the organisers reshaped the conference into a series of online panels and roundtable discussions throughout the remainder of the year. One of the events was the roundtable webinar "Politics of the Unseen: Visual Practice, Spirituality and Resistance in Contemporary Indonesia."

The webinar was organised by Wulan Dirgantoro (School of Culture and Communication) and Edwin Jurriëns (Asia Institute) and sponsored by the Faculty of Arts' Indonesia Strategy Engagement Group (ISEG) from The University of Melbourne. In the roundtable discussion, four leading Indonesian creative practitioners examined the intimate connections between art, spirituality, and social empowerment in contemporary Indonesia. The panellists explored the possibilities and challenges of personal and communal agency through a renewal of traditional knowledge in the present as well as in the context of "future Asias" (the key theme of the 2020 ASAA conference). Rather than making a priori distinctions between the modern and the non-modern, the speakers provided on-the-ground observations from various locations and multiple historical, social, political, and cultural perspectives.

Gustaff Hariman Iskandar from the independent art collective Common Room Networks Foundation (est. 2006) in Bandung, the capital of West Java, discussed the ongoing creative collaborations between his urban collective and the indigenous Kasepuhan Ciptagelar community in the rural Mount Halimun Salak National Park area in West Java. Since 2013, their projects have focused on the participatory mapping of customary land and cultural space, indigenous land rights advocacy, forest and water management, food sovereignty, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and the utilisation of internet technology and digital media for rural development.

The presentation by literary author and Macquarie University lecturer Intan Paramaditha was about the Cipta Media Ekspresi (CME) arts and culture initiative (est. 2018). This initiative provides grants to women artists and researchers from various parts of Indonesia, particularly from relatively isolated or marginalised communities. Paramaditha asked, "What is gained and at risk when cosmopolitan feminist subjects interact and collaborate with women who articulate their agency through different means and paths detached from the global discourses of feminism?"

The third presenter was Naomi Srikandi, theatre director and co-founder of the women art worker organisation Peretas. The word *peretas* translates as "hacker," but the name is also short for *perempuan lintas batas* ("women crossing boundaries"). Peretas seeks to facilitate creative opportunities for women by organising research projects, book publications, public discussions, and the annual event *Peretas Berkumpul* ("Peretas Get-Together"). Srikandi explained how one of Peretas' collaboration partners, the women's grassroots organisation Institut Mosintuwu, has been using culture, local knowledge, and spirituality as means to promote peace and justice in Poso, Central Sulawesi, an area hit by prolonged religious conflict after the collapse of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998.



Above: The Dalai Lama with Arahmaiani (Photo courtesy of Arahmaiani).

In this edition of *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we give space to the artistic statement by our fourth panellist, Arahmaiani. The statement has been translated from Indonesian into English by Wulan Dirgantoro. With her activist art projects, Arahmaiani attempts to promote a deeper historical understanding about Buddhist cultural heritage and living traditions in Indonesia that counters the narrow religious-nationalist causes and discourses of increasingly militant Islamic groups. This includes collaborations with monks from the Buddhist Lab monastery in the Kham region of the Tibetan Plateau. Arahmaiani's "artivism" not only unearths the cultural connections between Tibet and Indonesia, but also the interrelations between art, religion, gender, and nature.[1] We believe her ongoing visits to and collaborations with Australian universities confirm not only her self-proclaimed status of "nomadic artist" but also the highly productive and inspiring cross-fertilisations between art, academia, and activism.

Edwin Jurriëns, Asia Institute,
The University of Melbourne,
Email: edwin.jurriens@unimelb.edu.au

Notes

1 See also *Wulan Dirgantoro, Feminisms and Contemporary Art in Indonesia: Defining Experiences* (2017, Amsterdam University Press) and Edwin Jurriëns, "Gendering the Environmental Artivism: Ekofeminisme and Unjuk Rasa of Arahmaiani's Art," *Southeast of Now: Directions in Contemporary and Modern Art in Asia* 4(2), October 2020.

Second Life at the Roof of the World

Arahmaiani

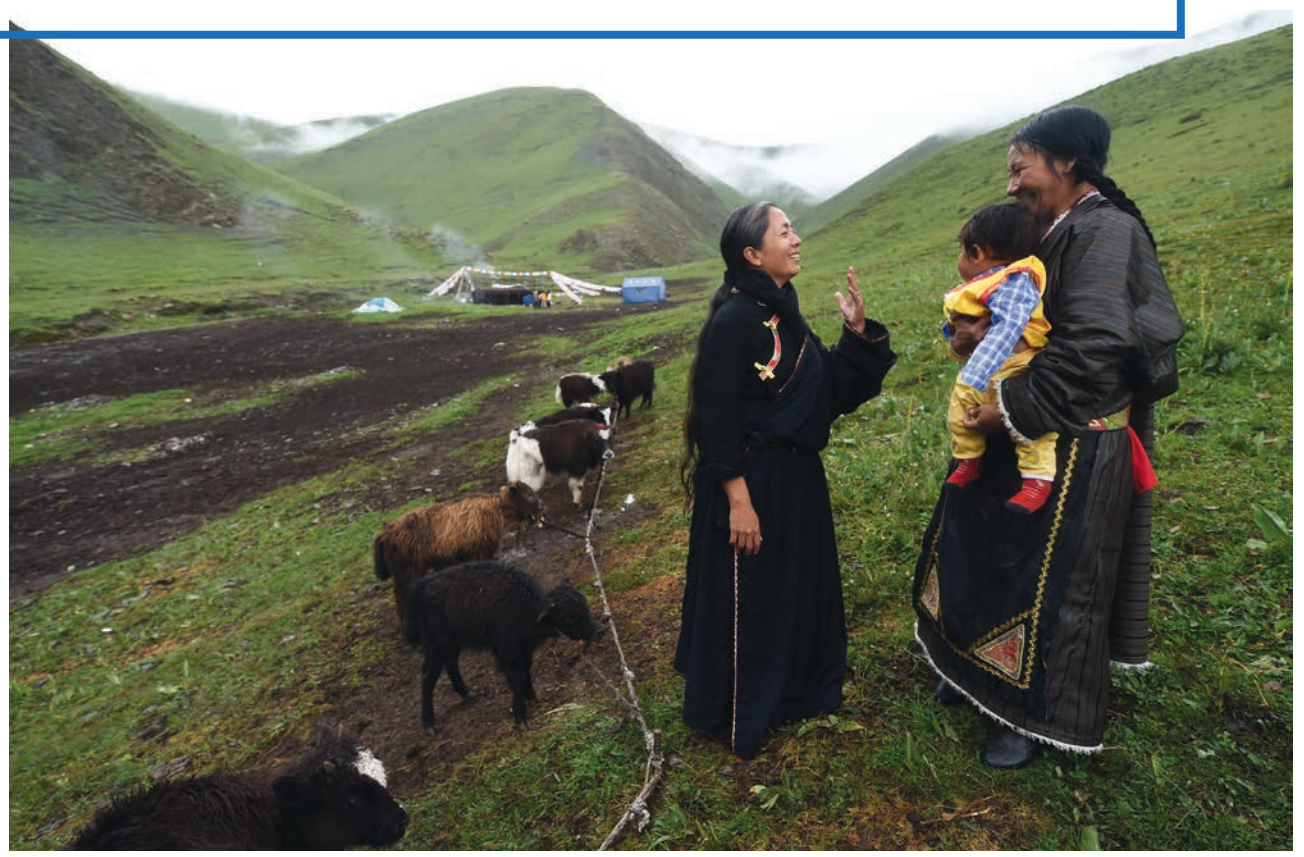


Fig. 1: Arahmaiani with nomad in Tibet, 2014. (Photo courtesy of Arahmaiani).

In 2010, I was invited to participate in an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in Shanghai, China. The exhibition of contemporary Indonesian artists was curated by Jim Supangkat (Indonesia) and Biljana Ciric (China), who selected my work *Flag Project* for the group exhibition. The work is a long-term, community-based artwork that I started in 2006. It started with a collaboration with Pondok Pesantren Amumarta in Yogyakarta, and I continued this work with other communities. For the group exhibition, I proposed to continue this project with other communities in China so that the public could understand the intention and concept behind a "community-based art project." At the time, such an artmaking method was not yet much practised in China.

The curators agreed with my proposal and assisted with looking for more information, as I wished to work with marginalised or disaster-affected communities. Biljana mentioned the recent earthquake in the Qinghai Plateau in Tibet; the earthquake occurred about two months before I arrived in China. The community still struggled in the aftermath of the earthquake. Although I had never been to the area, the situation reminded me of a similar experience working with earthquake-hit communities in Yogyakarta. After checking the affected area's condition, my assistant Li Mu agreed to accompany me there, so we eventually left Shanghai for Yushu Prefecture in the Kham area.

Foreigners and Tibetans from other areas were not allowed to enter without a permit because this area was considered politically and economically sensitive. Kham was the birthplace of five Dalai Lamas, and there was a long history of resistance. Moreover, scientists called this area "the future of China" due to its wealth of natural resources. Before leaving for Yushu, I was asked by the museum to sign some waiver statements in case I would get into trouble in the area!

To cut a long story short, I met with a group of monks from the Jiegu monastery in Yushu to gather information about the difficult post-earthquake recovery. I could see how people were still living in tents, and many buildings were in ruins. Chinese police and military were also still doing their recovery works. However, the Jiegu monastery head told me that I could get into serious trouble if the authorities discovered that I was a foreigner, so he advised me to go to another monastery in a remote area. That was the beginning of my introduction to and collaboration with the Lab *gompa* ("monastery") and its community.

The logistics of this project were not easy, and I always needed a translator for communication. Moreover, scientific terms around environmental issues were not easy to explain, as there were no references from a local perspective. This was why I learned about Buddhism and the teaching of Tibetan Buddhism at the Sera Jey Monastery in India. This also allowed me to study the almost forgotten cultural heritage in Nusantara, the Indonesian archipelago. Many Indonesians have forgotten the close connections between Tibet and Indonesia during the Sriwijaya Kingdom (7th-12th century). During the 10th century, a Buddhist monastery in Muara Jambi (Sumatra) had a strong reputation among the Buddhist monastic community. The temple was considered a continuation of the Nalanda monastery tradition, the first Buddhist temple in India, so many monks from China and India would come to study there. One of them was Atisha Dipankara Srijnana (982-1054) from India, who came to study with the local master Dharmakirti. After he finished his studies, he went back to India to become a teacher. Atisha eventually made his way to Tibet and, to introduce the new teachings, founded the Kadampa school – the predecessor of the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) school. Atisha's name is now famous as a leader for Mahayana Buddhism's reform in Tibet, where his teachings are still practised today.

I was fortunate to have the support of the head of the Lab monastery, Lama Kadheng Rinpoche. Eventually, I received permission from the local government to work there on the condition that I would not receive external funding, which meant that I had to pay for my trip and all the associated costs. Nonetheless, I felt that it was my calling, and I could not refuse it. Even though friends reminded me about the dangers that I would face, I stood firm in my wish to work and help there, even without any pay and facing serious risks. I realised that the situation would require innovative and creative approaches and problem-solving strategies that would not add to the existing problems.

This calling was also steered by another reason: the Tibet Plateau's importance for regional and global environmental sustainability. The Tibet Plateau is known as the "Asian water tower." This water source for more than 1.3 billion people who live on the Asian continent is threatened by droughts caused by global warming. This place is also known as "The Third Pole," or one of the most extensive ice surface areas on the planet, together with the North Pole and the South Pole. The ice and glaciers in this area are melting fast, causing regular floods and landslides that have claimed many victims in various Asian countries.

The environmental project began when I returned in the summer of 2011. For the first step, we implemented waste management because so much rubbish polluted the whole village. Even the rivers were full of waste, especially plastic! When I proposed managing the waste during my first visit in 2010, the suggestion was not taken up. Monks are at the top of the hierarchical system in the Tibetan community, so my suggestion was

Introduction to Arahmaiani's Second Life

Wulan Dirgantoro

Arahmaiani Feisal's (b. 1961) art practice has represented Indonesian contemporary art on the global stage. Across nearly four decades of artmaking, art and activism are consistent themes in her body of work. The artist's works have evolved from her time as an art student pushing the boundaries of creative media in the 1980s to global recognition from the 1990s with a select group of other Indonesian contemporary artists, including Nindityo Adipurnomo (b. 1961), Heri Dono (b. 1960), Mella Jaarsma (b. 1960), and Agung Kurniawan (b. 1968).

Arahmaiani's works could be seen as a connecting point of gender activism in and beyond the Indonesian art world. Indonesian visual artists have worked alongside cultural and political activists during and after the authoritarian New Order era (1966-1998), yet this partnership often just scratched the surface to enact change. Indeed, notable Indonesian activist artists such as the Taring Padi collective, the late Semsar Siahaan (1952-2005), Moelyono (b. 1957), and Alit Ambara (b. 1971) have attempted to raise social consciousness through artmaking and direct actions. Yet, Arahmaiani's recent projects seek an alternative way of making change through a more inclusive and empathic approach.

The following translation charts the recent trajectory of Arahmaiani's artistic practice from Indonesia to Tibet. The artist's ongoing projects in Lab village in the Yushu region of Tibet are impactful for their focus on the environment and local communities. Yet, the seed for this idea came from a closer place. Following the devastating earthquake that shook the city of Yogyakarta in 2006, the artist worked together with an Islamic boarding school, Pondok Pesantren Amumarta, as a way to rebuild the traumatised community. The artist worked with the students at the boarding school. They held discussions to raise awareness of the importance of environmental issues, from replanting the earthquake-destroyed land around the school to the benefits of organic farming. As a result, according to the artist, the school can now sustain their environmental curriculum by producing eco-friendly products that supplement the school's income.[1]

Arahmaiani's engagement with various local communities speaks of connectivity within and beyond the boundaries of the nation. Her projects in Tibet deal with processes of belonging outside normative citizenship. Her nomadic trajectory of continuously making herself at home through different collectivities has shaped her worldview and art practices as mobile and mutable.

The artist's initiative in Tibet triggered a series of community projects. Together with the monks from Lab monastery and community members from 16 villages, they have initiated waste management, mass tree planting, clean water projects, and yak coops over the last ten years. In addition, the artist has focused on participation and transversal dialogue to rebuild ecological awareness within the communities.[2] The artworks that have emerged during her time in Tibet, such as *The Memory of Nature* (2013-present) and *Shadow of the Past* (2015-present), have attested to the potential of art and creativity to affect social and environmental change.

Wulan Dirgantoro,
School of Culture and Communication,
The University of Melbourne.
Email: wdirgantoro@unimelb.edu.au

Notes

1 Conversation with the artist, 11 April 2019, Melbourne. For a more critical discussion on environmentalism and the Islamic boarding school in Indonesia, see also Kristina Grossmann, "Green Islam: Islamic Environmentalism in Indonesia," *New Mandala*, 28 August 2019.

2 See interview with Arahmaiani and 15th Lab Kyab Gon Rinpoche about the project in Peter Hylands, "Arahmaiani in Tibet," *Creative-i magazine*, Creative Cowboy, April 2013, pp. 18–28.

not easy for them to accept. Of course, I could understand their perspective, but I also had a strong reason to ask the monks to help because there was no support from the government for solving environmental issues. After the Lama had framed my arguments in line with their belief system, the monks finally agreed to be involved.

One of my assistants, a monk called Sonamrinchen, told me that, initially, the community was startled to see that the monks were collecting rubbish; they thought that the monks had gone crazy! However, after an arduous start, the first project ran smoothly, and the villages also joined in. Our following project was planting trees for preserving water. This time I did not face much opposition because a tree-planting project had already been initiated by the 13th Lab Kyabgon Rinpoche, in 1914. He predicted that tree planting was an action that would be needed in the future. He even built a mother tree temple for the first tree that he planted. Even before the project was approved and supported by the Chinese government in 2015, we had managed to plant more than 230,000 trees. In 2017, we received an award from an environmental organisation for our success in planting trees on "the roof of the world."

For the next project, I proposed the reintroduction of a nomadic lifestyle, a natural and traditional way of life, and a return to organic farming and barley planting. These changes were needed for ecological balance, safeguarding food security, and healthy living. I had seen that everyday food and drinking water were all processed items from China. The local community did not produce their food; even the water they consumed was bottled water, despite the area's reputation as a place of water sources. I asked the monks to look for water springs around the Lab village, and I was astonished because they discovered more than 250 water springs!

Situated over 4000 metres above sea level, only a limited number of tree and plant species can grow in the area. Pine and poplar trees, planted in 1914, used to grow quite well. Nonetheless, when I started to work there, those trees were beginning to show signs of decay. So, we experimented with alternative planting techniques, and we managed to grow apple and walnut trees. We also developed winter protection techniques to have a greater variety of vegetables. Eventually, the activities in the Lab village attracted the attention of neighbouring villages who also wanted to be involved.

In 2015, when the government started to support the environmental project, 16 villages had joined. We also tried to revive elements of the nomadic lifestyle by starting a "Yak Bank." At the start of the project, the nomadic lifestyle was almost extinct because most young people did not want to live as nomads. They wanted to move to urban areas to get a "successful" life; the nomad lifestyle was considered out of date and non-profitable. This project was not easy to conduct because it required much money to supply the expensive yaks. Therefore, we started with a loan of 37 yaks for one nomad family, so they could start reviving the nomadic tradition and reconnect with the land.

Our last project was the most critical, namely water management. The water was to be used for daily activities and as an alternative energy source in the village. The Kham area is crossed by three large rivers: the Yangtze, the Mekong, and the Yellow River. With assistance from Chinese alternative energy and water management experts, this project is now running smoothly. As a result, villagers can consume healthy and clean local water for various needs. They also enjoy alternative energy that they produce independently, a method they were previously not aware of.

The focus points of this long-term project are education about nature, targeting the younger generation in the monastery and the outside villages, and women's empowerment. In addition, an alternative communal market is planned as a place where organic products or crafts can be sold among community members. One of the most important educational premises is a collaboration between the monastic community and the common people for handling everyday problems. This used to be outside the monastery tradition, in which worldly life was to be avoided by the monks.

The experiences and knowledge I gained while working with the Tibetan communities have given me insights into the connections between life and creativity. This connection is closely related to my learning about the culture and beliefs that developed in Indonesia a long time ago. While we can still see the biggest Buddhist temple in the world – namely the Borobudur temple in Central Java – as an example of the interrelation between Sriwijaya and Medang (Mataram) Kingdoms (8th-11th century), and the remains of the Buddhist temple in Muara Jambi, Sumatra, the majority of Indonesians are not aware of their history. I also recently became aware of the history of the Eloprogo area, an area of confluence between two rivers (Elo and Progo) near Borobodur, where Buddhist monks practised their meditation. It is believed Atisha also spent some time at this site. However, the culture and teachings related to these temples have mostly been forgotten.

This knowledge pushed me to research and explore what is left from the past culture and what is still practised in Indonesia, especially in Java and Bali. Even though the monastery traditions that I witnessed and experienced in Tibet are no longer practised, I could still find related localised culture and philosophy in Java and Bali. For example, I met with a small Tibetan Buddhism community, which started in Java about 30 years ago. It began with the arrival of a Tibetan Lama named Dagpo Rinpoche, who initiated Tibetan Buddhist teaching in Indonesia. In 2020, they opened a Gelugpa branch of Tibetan Buddhism in Batu, Malang (East Java). There are many interesting aspects of these past cultural practices, and they are connected to what is happening in Indonesia and the world today.

The first aspect is the syncretic principle, as, in the past, Buddhism was deeply connected with Hinduism and Animism. Pluralism was supported by shared values from different beliefs in different cultures. Furthermore, there was an awareness and ability to appreciate differences as positive and enriching, as reflected in Indonesia's national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity"). Given the current global condition where various cultures and belief systems are often enmeshed, I believe that such pluralist values are still highly relevant to be learnt and practised.

The second important point is the teaching of the Bodhisattva that stated, "may all beings be free from suffering." This teaching is based on compassion, the basic principle of Buddhism. Bodhisattva's teaching uses reason and logic to formulate the specific link between good intention, wisdom, and action as a basis for humility and considerate actions. It is also strengthened by another important principle, namely, a tradition of non-violence. In Indonesia today, many people are no longer interested in pursuing the principles above; they prefer materialist and individualist lifestyles. They perceive violence as a normal part of everyday life. This problem can be traced to many issues throughout Indonesian political history, especially to violent acts by those in power or those who want to control or gain profit from power. Violence and greed are rarely questioned, except by the people negatively affected, such as certain minority groups, women activists, or traditional communities.

Finally, another important historical reference relates to the position of women. A historical symbol of the highest knowledge and wisdom was *prajnaparamita* ("transcendental wisdom"), which was depicted through the figure of a meditating woman. It represents a balance between feminine and masculine energy or the interconnected balance of opposite fields in the universe. The principle of equality requires deep understanding, not a simplified black-and-white approach. Such understanding can become a positive force, urging people to understand the interconnections between nature, the elements, and the inhabitants. It can give people a greater understanding of the connections between the heart and the mind and about the principles of life.[1]

Arahmaiani, Independent artist.
Email: arahmaianif@gmail.com

Notes

1 This essay was translated from Indonesian into English by Wulan Dirgantoro at The University of Melbourne.

Fig. 2 (left): Monks collecting garbage in Tibet.
Fig. 3 (above top): Solar panel project, Kham Tibet.
Fig. 4 (above): Community member working in vegetable garden in Tibet.
(All photos courtesy of Arahmaiani).