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## Buddhism in Sumatra

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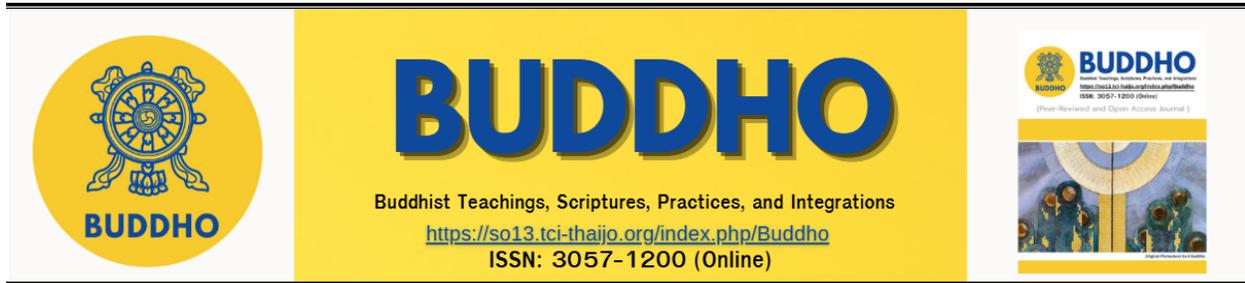
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## Buddhism in Sumatra

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### Abstract

Buddhism in Sumatra has played a significant role in shaping the island's cultural, religious, and historical landscape. This study explores the historical development, influence, and contemporary presence of Buddhism in Sumatra, focusing on key periods from the Srivijaya Empire to the present day. The research aims to analyze the factors that contributed to the spread and decline of Buddhism in the region, including political, economic, and social influences. A qualitative research methodology was employed, utilizing historical analysis, textual studies, and fieldwork. The study population consisted of Buddhist communities, religious leaders, and historians specializing in Sumatran Buddhism. The sample group included monks, scholars, and practitioners from various Buddhist temples and institutions across Sumatra. Research tools included in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participant observation.

Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify patterns and key themes regarding the transformation of Buddhist traditions in Sumatra. The findings indicate that while Buddhism thrived during the Srivijaya period as a major center of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, its decline was influenced by the rise of Islam and shifts in political power. However, contemporary Buddhist communities continue to preserve their heritage through monastic education, cultural festivals, and interfaith dialogue. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of Sumatra's religious diversity and provides insights into the resilience and adaptation of Buddhist traditions in a predominantly Muslim region.

**Keyword:** Buddhism, Sumatra

### Introduction

Buddhism has played a significant role in shaping the cultural, religious, and historical landscape of Sumatra. The island was once home to the powerful Srivijaya Empire (7th–13th century), a dominant maritime and trade center that facilitated the spread of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia (Hall, 1985). Srivijaya's influence extended beyond its borders, serving as a critical hub for Buddhist scholarship and fostering religious

exchange, particularly with India and China (Mabbett, 1991). Despite its historical prominence, Buddhism in Sumatra has undergone periods of decline and resurgence, influenced by political transitions, the spread of Islam, and socio-economic changes (Cederroth, 1997). In contemporary times, Buddhist communities in Sumatra continue to preserve their religious traditions, contributing to the island's diverse spiritual landscape.

While existing studies have extensively explored Buddhism in Sumatra from historical and archaeological perspectives, a significant gap remains in research concerning its modern-day presence and adaptation in a predominantly Muslim society (Ramstedt, 2018). Previous research has primarily focused on Srivijaya's role in the expansion of Buddhism, but fewer studies address the contemporary challenges faced by Buddhist communities in maintaining their religious and cultural identity (Soerjanto, 2015). Additionally, there is limited scholarly attention on the evolution of Buddhism in Sumatra post-Srivijaya, particularly in relation to local traditions, government policies, and interfaith interactions.

To fill these gaps, this study aims to explore the historical development, influence, and present condition of Buddhism in Sumatra. Specifically, it seeks to analyze the factors contributing to both the spread and decline of Buddhism, considering political, economic, and social influences. Using a qualitative research methodology, the study employs historical analysis, textual studies, and fieldwork. The research focuses on Buddhist communities, religious leaders, and historians specializing in Sumatran Buddhism, with participants including monks, scholars, and practitioners from various temples and institutions across the island. Research tools such as in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participant observation are employed to provide a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism's historical trajectory and its contemporary significance in Sumatra.

By examining the historical transformations and the current state of Buddhism in Sumatra, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the region's religious diversity and the resilience of Buddhist traditions in a changing socio-political environment. The findings will provide valuable insights into the strategies employed by Buddhist communities to preserve their heritage and promote interfaith dialogue in a multicultural society.

## **Srivijaya**

Srivijaya, a powerful maritime empire that flourished between the 7th and 13th centuries, had a profound influence on the spread and development of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. As a major trading hub, Srivijaya facilitated cultural exchanges and played a pivotal role in the dissemination of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions across the region (Brown, 2025). Located on the island of Sumatra in present-day Indonesia, Srivijaya's strategic position along important sea trade routes allowed it to connect with key Buddhist centers in India, China, and other parts of Southeast Asia, contributing to the growth of Buddhist scholarship and religious practices (Hall, 1985; Mabbett, 1991). The empire's support for Buddhism was instrumental in establishing it as a dominant religious and philosophical tradition in the region. Srivijaya became a major center for Buddhist learning and pilgrimage, attracting scholars, monks, and pilgrims from across Asia. The city of Palembang, the capital of Srivijaya, became a well-known destination for Buddhist studies, particularly during the reign of King Samaratunga, who was a strong patron

of the faith. Buddhist scholars and monks from Srivijaya played a key role in the translation and dissemination of Buddhist texts, further solidifying the empire's influence in the global Buddhist community (Cederroth, 1997).

Srivijaya's prominence as a Buddhist center was not limited to religious scholarship; it also facilitated the establishment of Buddhist monastic institutions that became hubs for religious and philosophical discourse. These institutions were crucial for preserving and spreading Buddhist teachings, and they established strong connections with other major Buddhist centers, such as the Nalanda University in India. Additionally, Srivijaya's maritime trade routes helped introduce Buddhist art, architecture, and rituals throughout Southeast Asia, influencing the development of regional styles and practices (Mabbett, 1991).

However, Srivijaya's influence did not last indefinitely. The decline of the empire in the 13th century, largely due to the rise of new political powers and the spread of Islam, led to a gradual erosion of its Buddhist influence. Despite this, the legacy of Srivijaya's support for Buddhism remained embedded in the cultural and religious landscape of Southeast Asia, influencing subsequent Buddhist communities and practices in Sumatra and beyond (Cederroth, 1997). Srivijaya's prominence as a Buddhist center extended far beyond the realm of religious scholarship, playing a crucial role in the establishment of Buddhist monastic institutions that became significant hubs for religious and philosophical discourse in Southeast Asia. These institutions, often founded with royal patronage, were instrumental in the preservation and propagation of Buddhist teachings throughout the region. Srivijaya's monasteries attracted scholars, monks, and pilgrims from various parts of Asia, and their activities helped cultivate a thriving intellectual environment that was key to the development of Southeast Asian Buddhism (Cederroth, 1997).

The monastic institutions in Srivijaya were not only centers for religious practice but also key players in the dissemination of Buddhist knowledge. They were engaged in the translation of Buddhist texts, teaching of doctrinal principles, and the training of monks, all of which contributed to the continued flourishing of Buddhism in the region. These efforts also facilitated the establishment of strong intellectual and spiritual ties with other major Buddhist centers, particularly Nalanda University in India, which was one of the most important centers for Buddhist learning. Srivijaya's monks frequently traveled to India to study and exchange ideas, while also inviting Indian scholars to teach at Srivijaya's monasteries. This interaction helped solidify Srivijaya's role as a key node in the larger network of Buddhist intellectual and religious exchange across Asia (Mabbett, 1991). Furthermore, Srivijaya's maritime trade routes played a vital role in spreading Buddhist art, architecture, and rituals throughout Southeast Asia. The empire's control of crucial maritime routes allowed for the free movement of not only goods but also cultural and religious practices. Buddhist iconography, temple architecture, and ritual practices were introduced into neighboring regions, influencing the development of regional Buddhist traditions. The intricate carvings and stupas of Srivijaya's monasteries, for instance, served as a model for Buddhist architecture in other parts of Southeast Asia, particularly in the kingdoms of Java and Cambodia (Mohapatra, & Gupta, 2021).. These exchanges fostered the regional integration of Buddhist practices and aesthetics, enriching the diverse cultural landscapes of Southeast Asia (Hall, 1985; Mabbett, 1991).

Through its monastic institutions, intellectual exchanges, and strategic position along key trade routes, Srivijaya helped shape the religious, philosophical, and cultural development of Southeast Asia. Its legacy as a Buddhist center continued to influence the region long after its political decline, as the monastic traditions and art forms it nurtured became embedded in the cultural fabric of Southeast Asia (Cederroth, 1997).

### **The Cultural, Religious, and Social of The Srivijaya Empire**

Buddhism in Sumatra has a rich and complex history that has deeply influenced the cultural, religious, and social fabric of the region. The island of Sumatra, located in present-day Indonesia, became a significant center for Buddhist practices, particularly during the height of the Srivijaya Empire (7th–13th century). The empire's maritime trade routes and its strategic geographical position played a crucial role in facilitating the spread of Buddhism across Southeast Asia, including the island of Sumatra (Mabbett, 1991).

The Srivijaya Empire was instrumental in establishing Sumatra as a key hub for Buddhist scholarship and religious exchange. The empire's royal patronage of Buddhism led to the establishment of numerous monastic institutions, which became centers of intellectual and spiritual activity. These institutions attracted scholars, monks, and pilgrims from India, China, and other Southeast Asian regions, further strengthening the island's connection to the broader Buddhist world (Cederroth, 1997). Srivijaya's influence in Buddhism was not only seen in religious practices but also in the development of art, architecture, and cultural traditions that incorporated Buddhist elements. The artistic legacy of Srivijaya, including the intricate carvings and statues found in temples and monuments, served as a testament to the empire's role in shaping Buddhist visual culture across Southeast Asia (Hall, 1985).

Despite the decline of Srivijaya in the 13th century, Buddhism continued to persist in Sumatra. The arrival and spread of Islam in the region marked a period of significant transformation for Buddhist communities, as Islamic influence gradually became more dominant. However, pockets of Buddhist communities have remained in Sumatra, particularly in areas like the coastal regions and the highlands, where Buddhism continues to be practiced by both local and immigrant populations (Cederroth, 1997).

In modern times, Buddhism in Sumatra faces new challenges, including the preservation of religious traditions in a predominantly Muslim society. While the number of Buddhists in Sumatra is relatively small, these communities continue to play a vital role in the island's diverse spiritual landscape. Buddhist temples and institutions in Sumatra have become sites of cultural preservation and interfaith dialogue, promoting understanding and cooperation between different religious groups in the region (Soerjanto, 2015).

Buddhism's historical and ongoing presence in Sumatra highlights the island's rich cultural and religious heritage, reflecting both the endurance and adaptation of Buddhist traditions in the face of political, social, and religious changes over the centuries. The 13th century marked a period of profound transformation for the Srivijaya Empire and its Buddhist communities in Sumatra (Weerasinghe, et al, 2015). The decline of Srivijaya in this period was largely due to a combination of internal political instability, external invasions, and shifts in regional trade patterns, particularly the rise of the Majapahit Empire in Java and the increasing dominance of

Islam in Southeast Asia (Mabbett, 1991). Despite the empire's eventual fall, the impact of Srivijaya on Buddhism in Sumatra and Southeast Asia remained significant. However, the arrival and spread of Islam during this time reshaped the religious and cultural landscape of the region, forcing Buddhism to adapt to the growing Islamic influence.

Srivijaya had been a powerful Buddhist kingdom, with a robust network of trade, scholarship, and monastic institutions that helped spread Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism throughout Southeast Asia (Hall, 1985). By the 13th century, however, Srivijaya's political influence began to wane, primarily due to the encroaching power of the Majapahit Empire and the growing dominance of Islamic sultanates in the region (Andaya, 2008). The expansion of Islam, particularly in coastal regions where trade and cultural exchanges were central, increasingly marginalized Buddhism as the dominant religious tradition.

The spread of Islam significantly altered the socio-religious fabric of Sumatra. As Muslim traders, scholars, and rulers expanded their influence, Islam gradually became the dominant religion on the island, particularly in the coastal areas where it gained political and social traction (Cederroth, 1997). The spread of Islam was facilitated by both peaceful means, such as trade and intermarriage, and through political conquest. This marked a major shift from the religious diversity that had characterized Sumatra under Srivijaya's Buddhist influence.

Despite the political and religious changes that occurred, pockets of Buddhist communities continued to survive in Sumatra, particularly in the highlands and in the more remote areas, where Buddhism persisted among both local populations and immigrant communities (Cederroth, 1997). These communities, though smaller in number, played an essential role in maintaining Buddhist traditions and practices. The ability of these communities to survive and adapt to Islamic dominance highlights the resilience of Buddhist heritage in Sumatra, even in the face of significant cultural and political pressures. The persistence of Buddhism in Sumatra can be attributed to several factors. First, the deeply rooted historical presence of Buddhism in the region allowed for its continued practice, despite shifts in political power (Mabbett, 1991). Buddhist communities in the highlands, less affected by the political and religious shifts in the coastal regions, could maintain their religious practices, rituals, and educational institutions. Second, the role of Buddhist institutions in Sumatra, which had been integral to religious and philosophical discourse during Srivijaya's peak, remained influential. These institutions helped preserve Buddhist teachings and provided a sense of continuity in the face of external pressures (Soerjanto, 2015).

Furthermore, the adaptation of Buddhist practices in response to the growing Islamic influence also played a crucial role in the survival of Buddhism in Sumatra. Buddhist communities in the region began to incorporate local traditions and Islamic influences, particularly in art, architecture, and rituals. This adaptive approach allowed Buddhism to maintain its relevance in a predominantly Muslim society, fostering interfaith dialogue and cultural exchange (Soerjanto, 2015).

In conclusion, while Srivijaya's decline in the 13th century marked the end of an era for Buddhism in Sumatra, the resilience of Buddhist communities, particularly in remote and highland areas, allowed Buddhism to persist. Despite the growing dominance of Islam, these communities continued to preserve their religious traditions and cultural heritage, adapting to

the socio-political realities of the region. The legacy of Srivijaya's Buddhist influence can still be seen today in the persistence of these communities and in the ongoing interfaith exchanges that continue to shape Sumatra's religious landscape.

### **The Arts, Architecture, and Traditions of Buddhism in Sumatra**

The arts, architecture, and traditions of Buddhism in Sumatra have left an indelible mark on the island's cultural landscape. Rooted in the legacy of the Srivijaya Empire (7th–13th century), Buddhism flourished in Sumatra, giving rise to unique artistic expressions and architectural styles that combined Buddhist ideals with local Sumatran traditions. The development of Buddhist art and architecture in Sumatra was closely tied to the empire's role as a center for religious scholarship, trade, and cultural exchange across Southeast Asia. Buddhist traditions in Sumatra, particularly those associated with the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools, continue to influence the island's art and cultural heritage, even as Islam became the dominant religion after the 13th century (Cederroth, 1997).

1. **Buddhist Architecture in Sumatra** Buddhist architecture in Sumatra during the Srivijaya period was notable for its distinct styles, which combined local Southeast Asian building techniques with influences from India and Central Asia. The Srivijaya Empire's influence extended far beyond Sumatra, with its architectural achievements visible in the region's temples, stupas, and monastic complexes. One of the most significant examples of Srivijaya's Buddhist architecture is the Muara Jambi temple complex in present-day Jambi Province, which is considered one of the largest and most important archaeological sites in Sumatra (Hall, 1985). This complex features a range of stone structures, including stupas and Buddha statues, that reflect the blend of Indian architectural traditions with local Southeast Asian styles (Nayak, 2018).

In addition to the Muara Jambi site, Srivijaya's architectural legacy can be seen in the numerous smaller Buddhist shrines and stupas scattered across Sumatra. These structures often feature intricate carvings and sculptures, which were designed to aid in meditation and spiritual practice. The architectural layout of these temples was typically designed to create a sense of spiritual progression, with pathways leading from the mundane to the sacred, reflecting the Buddhist view of life and enlightenment (Mabbett, 1991).

2. **Buddhist Art in Sumatra** Buddhist art in Sumatra was deeply influenced by the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism, with an emphasis on symbolic representations of Buddhist cosmology, deities, and the Buddha himself. The artistic traditions of Srivijaya are characterized by stone reliefs, sculptures, and murals that were created to educate the faithful and convey Buddhist teachings. Iconography such as the bodhisattvas, the Wheel of Dharma, and the Buddha's footprint are prominent in Sumatran Buddhist art, demonstrating the intertwining of local artistic traditions with imported religious motifs (Andaya, 2008).

The sculptures and carvings found at the Muara Jambi complex, for instance, depict various scenes from the Jataka tales stories about the Buddha's past lives—offering a glimpse into the moral and ethical lessons central to Buddhist teachings (Cederroth, 1997). Furthermore, the use of local materials like stone, brick, and wood in the creation of these works suggests that Sumatra's Buddhist artisans successfully adapted their religious artistic practices to suit the resources available in the region.

3. **Buddhist Traditions and Rituals** Buddhism in Sumatra was not just a religious system but a vibrant cultural tradition that influenced local practices and customs. Buddhist monastic communities played a crucial role in the transmission of religious knowledge and in the development of Sumatran Buddhist rituals. The Srivijaya Empire established a strong network of monasteries that became centers for meditation, study, and the dissemination of Buddhist philosophy (Hall, 1985). Rituals, such as the puja (offerings), chanting of mantras, and meditation, were integral to the daily lives of Buddhist practitioners in Sumatra.

Buddhism also influenced local Sumatran traditions, especially in the areas of sculpture, painting, and ritual performances. The spiritual practices of the region were infused with Buddhist ideas of compassion, karma, and enlightenment, which became reflected in traditional Sumatran arts and folk beliefs. Buddhist themes were integrated into local storytelling traditions, as seen in the influence of Buddhist teachings on the performance of traditional wayang (shadow puppetry) and other forms of theatrical storytelling (Mabbett, 1991).

Buddhism's influence on the arts, architecture, and traditions of Sumatra during the Srivijaya period played a critical role in shaping the island's cultural identity. Buddhist monastic institutions fostered the creation of temples and art that reflected the region's spiritual aspirations. These structures and artistic expressions not only served religious purposes but also acted as symbols of cultural exchange between Sumatra and the broader Buddhist world. Even with the spread of Islam in the later centuries, the legacy of Buddhism in Sumatra remains evident in the art and cultural practices of the island, continuing to inspire interfaith dialogue and cultural preservation.

## **Conclusion**

The Srivijaya Empire played a fundamental role in shaping the religious, cultural, and intellectual landscape of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. As a dominant maritime power from the 7th to the 13th century, Srivijaya served as a major hub for the transmission of Buddhist teachings, art, and traditions. The empire's strategic location along vital trade routes facilitated interactions with Buddhist centers in India, China, and other parts of Southeast Asia, leading to the growth of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism in the region. Srivijaya's rulers and monastic institutions actively promoted Buddhist scholarship, translating texts, training monks, and fostering intellectual exchanges with renowned institutions such as Nalanda University. Beyond religious scholarship, Srivijaya's influence extended into the artistic and architectural traditions of Sumatra. The empire's Buddhist heritage is reflected in temple structures, intricate carvings, and artistic motifs that merged Indian, Chinese, and indigenous Sumatran styles. These artistic expressions not only enriched the cultural identity of Sumatra but also influenced neighboring regions such as Java and Cambodia, leaving a lasting imprint on Southeast Asian Buddhist art. Despite the eventual decline of Srivijaya in the 13th century and the spread of Islam in Sumatra, Buddhist traditions persisted in certain communities, adapting to new cultural and religious realities while maintaining elements of their artistic and ritual heritage. The enduring legacy of Srivijaya's Buddhist influence is evident in the continued presence of Buddhist art, practices, and interfaith exchanges in contemporary Sumatra. The historical contributions of Srivijaya underscore the dynamic role of Buddhism in shaping the cultural and religious evolution of the

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region. Understanding this legacy not only highlights the historical significance of Srivijaya but also provides valuable insights into the broader patterns of religious and cultural exchange in Southeast Asia.

## **Recommendations**

### **Body of Knowledge**

#### **Preservation of Historical Sites and Artifacts**

1. The rich archaeological heritage of Buddhism in Sumatra, including sites such as the Muara Jambi temple complex, needs sustained preservation efforts.
2. Collaborative projects involving local authorities, international organizations, and academic institutions should be initiated to conserve these invaluable historical sites.
3. Digital documentation and virtual tours can help promote global awareness and interest in Sumatran Buddhist heritage.

#### **Encouragement of Interfaith Dialogue**

1. Buddhist communities in Sumatra have demonstrated resilience and adaptability in a predominantly Muslim society. Promoting interfaith dialogue and cultural exchanges can foster mutual understanding and harmony.
2. Events such as cultural festivals, workshops, and interfaith seminars should be organized to create platforms for dialogue between different religious groups.

#### **Educational and Scholarly Engagement**

1. Academic institutions should include Sumatran Buddhist history and culture as part of their curriculum to promote awareness and understanding of the island's religious diversity.
2. Scholarships and research grants should be offered to encourage studies on Buddhism's historical and contemporary role in Sumatra.
3. Partnerships with international universities can facilitate research collaborations and exchange programs focusing on religious and cultural studies.

#### **Support for Monastic Education and Community Initiatives**

1. Monastic education continues to play a critical role in preserving Buddhist teachings and cultural traditions. Supporting these educational initiatives through funding and resource provision is essential.
2. Community programs that integrate Buddhist teachings with practical life skills can help sustain religious traditions while contributing to community development.

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### **Promotion of Cultural Heritage Tourism**

1. The government and tourism authorities should promote Buddhist heritage tourism in Sumatra, highlighting key historical and cultural sites.
2. Creating well-structured tourist routes and informative materials can attract both domestic and international visitors.
3. Training local guides with expertise in the history and significance of Buddhist sites will enhance the tourism experience.

### **Documentation and Dissemination of Oral Histories**

1. The oral histories of monks, scholars, and practitioners are valuable resources for understanding the evolution and adaptation of Buddhism in Sumatra.
2. Efforts should be made to document these narratives through audio, video, and written formats to preserve them for future generations.

### **Adaptation to Contemporary Challenges**

1. In the face of globalization and socio-economic changes, Buddhist communities in Sumatra must continue to adapt their practices while staying true to core teachings.
2. Innovative approaches, such as online platforms for religious education and virtual community gatherings, can help sustain engagement with younger generations.

### **Promotion of Artistic and Cultural Expressions**

1. Buddhist art, architecture, and traditions have significantly contributed to Sumatra's cultural landscape. Initiatives to revive and promote these artistic expressions should be prioritized.
2. Workshops and exhibitions showcasing traditional Buddhist art forms can help preserve these cultural practices and inspire new generations of artists.

The study of Buddhism in Sumatra underscores the importance of understanding the dynamic interplay between religion, culture, and history. By preserving its rich heritage, fostering interfaith harmony, and supporting community initiatives, Sumatra can continue to celebrate its religious diversity and contribute valuable insights to global discourses on cultural resilience and adaptation.

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