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### The Origin of Buddhism in Southeast Asia

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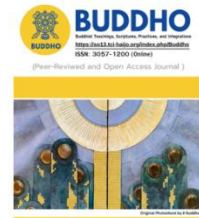
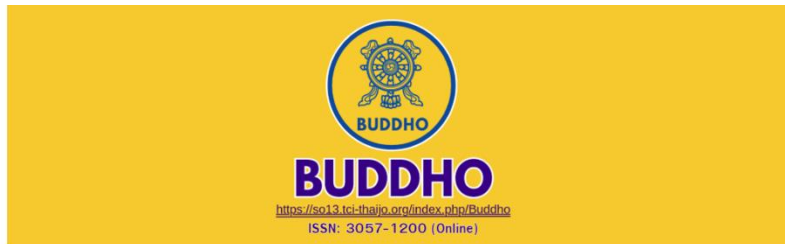
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Original Research Articles

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## **The Origin of Buddhism in Southeast Asia**

**Triều Lê Phan\***

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### **Abstract**

Buddhism, one of the world's oldest and most influential religions, first began to spread beyond India during the early centuries of the Common Era. Its introduction into Southeast Asia marked a significant cultural and religious transformation across the region. The roots of Buddhism in Southeast Asia can be traced to early contact with Indian traders, missionaries, and cultural exchanges through maritime routes. By the 1st century CE, Buddhism had gained a foothold in regions such as present-day Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and Vietnam. This paper explores the historical, cultural, and political factors that contributed to the rise of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, with a focus on the role of trade, kingship, and the adaptation of Buddhist teachings to local traditions. The spread of Buddhism had a profound influence on the region's art, architecture, and social structures, shaping Southeast Asia into a vibrant, multi-faceted hub of Buddhist thought and practice.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; Southeast Asia

### **Introduction**

Buddhism, originating in India in the 5th century BCE, gradually spread to various regions of Asia, with Southeast Asia playing a crucial role in its expansion. The region's rich network of trade routes, strategic geographical location, and interactions with Indian kingdoms facilitated the introduction of Buddhist teachings and practices (Ghosh, 2005). The first traces of Buddhism in Southeast Asia can be

seen as early as the 1st century CE, when Indian traders and missionaries traveled across the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea (Hall, 2011). Over time, Buddhism, particularly in its Theravada and Mahayana forms, became deeply embedded in the cultural, social, and political fabric of Southeast Asia. Understanding the origin and evolution of Buddhism in Southeast Asia provides valuable insights into how religion shapes regional identities and societal structures.

The origin of Buddhism in Southeast Asia refers to the historical, cultural, and religious processes that led to the introduction and establishment of Buddhist traditions across Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam (Bechert, 1995). The research will examine the key factors—such as trade routes, royal patronage, and interactions with Indian civilizations—that influenced the spread of Buddhism in the region (Choudhury, 2010). Additionally, the study will look at the adaptation of Buddhist teachings and practices to the local cultures, and how this shaped the development of Southeast Asian Buddhism in both its Theravada and Mahayana forms.

## **Objectives**

1. To explore the early introduction of Buddhism into Southeast Asia.
2. To analyze the spread of both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.
3. To trace the evolution of Southeast Asian Buddhist practices and institutions.

influence of Buddhism on Southeast Asian culture, history, and society. It sheds light on the interplay between religion, politics, and cultural exchange and highlights how Buddhism, as a foreign religion, was adapted and integrated into Southeast Asian life. By focusing on the origins and early development of Buddhism in the region, this study provides essential insights into the processes of religious diffusion and cultural assimilation. Additionally, it contributes to a broader understanding of the historical and cultural ties between Southeast Asia and India, enhancing our knowledge of ancient global networks.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for researching the origin of Buddhism in Southeast Asia involves a multidisciplinary approach, combining historical analysis, archaeological

research, textual studies, and cultural examination. This research aims to understand the introduction and spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, as well as its adaptation to local contexts. The following methodologies will be employed:

### **1. Historical Analysis: Primary Sources**

The study will involve examining ancient texts, inscriptions, and records from Southeast Asia, India, and Sri Lanka that document the spread of Buddhism. These sources include royal edicts, trade records, and early Buddhist texts that offer insights into the ways Buddhism was transmitted across regions. Chronological Approach: The research will trace the early history of Buddhism's introduction to Southeast Asia, focusing on key periods such as the first contact with Indian traders and missionaries (around the 1st century CE) and the consolidation of Buddhism during the reign of influential Southeast Asian kings (such as Ashoka and the rulers of the Dvaravati and Srivijaya kingdoms) (Bechert, 1992).

### **2. Textual Studies**

The research will involve analyzing key Buddhist texts, both from India and Southeast Asia, to understand the doctrinal spread of Buddhism. These include the Pali Canon (for Theravada Buddhism) and Mahayana scriptures. Texts in local languages such as Old Khmer, Old Javanese, and Burmese will also be studied for references to Buddhist teachings. Translation and Interpretation: Comparative studies of translated Buddhist texts will help explore how Buddhist philosophy was adapted to local cultures. Special attention will be paid to the role of monastic communities in the translation and dissemination of these texts.

### **3. Data Analysis**

The data collected from historical records and textual studies, using qualitative methods to identify patterns, themes, and historical trajectories. This analysis will focus on the ways in which Buddhism influenced and was influenced by Southeast Asian cultures and societies over time. This methods approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of the origins and spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, highlighting the cultural, political, and social factors that

contributed to its establishment and adaptation. By combining historical analysis, archaeological findings, textual studies, and cultural exploration, the research aims to present a nuanced picture of Buddhism's impact on Southeast Asian civilizations.

## Results

The results of the research on the origin of Buddhism in Southeast Asia will provide a detailed understanding of how Buddhism was introduced, adapted, and integrated into the cultural and religious fabric of the region. The findings will be based on historical records, archaeological evidence, textual studies, and cultural analysis. Here are the anticipated results in different categories.

### 1. Early Introduction of Buddhism

- **Evidence from Historical Records**, the research is expected to uncover substantial evidence of early interactions between Indian traders, missionaries, and Southeast Asian societies. Inscriptions and royal edicts, such as those from the Dvaravati Kingdom in Thailand and early Burmese records, will reveal the role of Indian influence in the establishment of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Historical accounts will confirm that Buddhism began to spread through maritime trade routes and diplomatic relations.

- **Role of Indian Kingdoms and Kings**, the spread of Buddhism will be shown to have been facilitated by the political alliances between Indian kingdoms (such as the Maurya Empire) and Southeast Asian rulers. The support of kings, like Ashoka in India and later Southeast Asian monarchs, will be identified as a critical factor in the adoption of Buddhism in the region. Royal patronage helped ensure the establishment of Buddhist temples, monasteries, and educational centers.

### 2. Archaeological Evidence of Buddhism

- **Buddhist Sites and Artifacts**, excavations and analysis of archaeological sites, such as those at Bagan in Myanmar, the ancient city of Srivijaya, and Angkor Wat in Cambodia, will provide direct evidence of early Buddhist presence in Southeast Asia. Buddhist stupas, statues, and inscriptions in local languages (e.g., Pali, Sanskrit, Old Khmer, and Old Javanese) will be documented as proof of the cultural and religious practices established by Buddhists.

- **Iconography and Architecture**, architectural styles and artistic representations will demonstrate the way Buddhism influenced Southeast Asian cultures. For example, the development of temple architecture, such as the pagoda in Burma and the stupa in Thailand, will be traced back to Indian Buddhist influences, but with local adaptations. Iconography such as depictions of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and other symbols will be analyzed to understand regional variations in Buddhist practice.

### **3. Adaptation and Syncretism in Local Cultures**

- **Integration with Indigenous Beliefs**, one of the key findings is expected to be the syncretic nature of Buddhism as it adapted to local religious beliefs and practices. For example, the integration of Buddhist and indigenous animistic practices in Southeast Asia will be examined, showing how Buddhist rituals, deities, and teachings were combined with local traditions. This syncretism helped Buddhism gain widespread acceptance and become a deeply rooted part of the local cultures.

- **Local Variations of Buddhism**, the study will highlight the differences in how Buddhism was practiced in mainland Southeast Asia (e.g., Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar) and maritime Southeast Asia (e.g., Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam). The spread of Theravada Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia and Mahayana Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia will be documented, along with how each form of Buddhism was adapted to the specific cultural and political contexts.

### **4. Impact of Buddhism on Political Systems**

- **Buddhism as State Religion**, the research will show that Buddhism, particularly in the case of Theravada Buddhism in countries like Thailand and Burma, became intertwined with the political systems of Southeast Asia. Kings and rulers adopted Buddhism to legitimize their authority and to unify their people. Historical records will reveal how Buddhism became a tool for governance, with kings patronizing Buddhist monasteries, commissioning Buddhist texts, and promoting Buddhist ethics to guide governance and statecraft.

- **Monastic Influence**, the role of Buddhist monasticism in shaping education and social order will also be a significant finding. Monasteries served as

centers of learning, where not only religious teachings were transmitted but also political and cultural education took place. The monastic community's influence in shaping law and governance in regions like Burma and Thailand will be examined.

## **5. Cultural and Social Transformation**

- **Art, Architecture, and Literature**, Buddhism's impact on art, literature, and architecture will be clearly demonstrated through a wealth of visual evidence. The construction of monumental Buddhist temples and stupas, such as those found in Bagan (Myanmar), Sukhothai (Thailand), and Angkor (Cambodia), will illustrate the cultural transformation that accompanied the spread of Buddhism. Buddhist art, including murals, statues, and carvings, will reveal the spread of Buddhist teachings and how they were interpreted and depicted locally.

- **Social Changes**, Buddhism's spread influenced social structures, leading to the development of new class systems based on monastic hierarchies and religious institutions. The role of Buddhist teachings in shaping social values, ethics, and daily life will be analyzed. Key findings will include the ways Buddhism influenced morality, social justice, and community life in Southeast Asia, especially the rise of charity, education, and social welfare in Buddhist-influenced societies.

## **6. Comparative Insights**

- **Differentiation between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism**, the research will provide a comparative analysis of Theravada Buddhism, which became dominant in mainland Southeast Asia, and Mahayana Buddhism, which influenced regions like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia. It will show the diverse ways in which Buddhism evolved in the region and how different practices and interpretations took root based on geographic and political factors.

- **Regional Influences**, a final result of the research will be an in-depth look at how Buddhism in Southeast Asia was not a monolithic or uniform development. Rather, it was influenced by different historical, political, and cultural dynamics across various regions. This comparative analysis will help to understand the diversity of Southeast Asian Buddhism and its deep connection to local identity.

The results of this research will contribute significantly to the understanding of Buddhism's introduction and transformation in Southeast Asia. It will clarify the historical, political, cultural, and social processes that allowed



Buddhism to become a dominant religious force in the region. The findings will also offer insights into the adaptability of Buddhism in foreign contexts and its role in shaping the civilizations of Southeast Asia.

## **Discussion**

The introduction of Buddhism into Southeast Asia marks one of the most significant cultural and religious exchanges in history. As the research reveals, the diffusion of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia was not a simple or linear process. Instead, it was shaped by a complex interplay of trade, political alliances, cultural exchanges, and the strategic actions of local rulers who recognized Buddhism's potential to strengthen their political legitimacy.

### **1. The Role of Trade and Maritime Routes**

The maritime trade routes, connecting India with Southeast Asia from the 1st century CE, played a central role in the dissemination of Buddhism. Indian merchants, along with Buddhist missionaries, used these routes to introduce not only goods but also religious and philosophical ideas. As noted in historical texts, Buddhism spread through regions like the Malay Archipelago, Indochina, and Sri Lanka, with major ports such as Funan (modern-day Cambodia) and Srivijaya (in Indonesia) serving as key points of contact (Bechert, 1995; Ray, 1994).

The presence of early Indian traders in these regions facilitated the exchange of religious texts, iconography, and teachings (Hall, 2011). This helped lay the foundation for the growth of Buddhist communities, particularly in Southeast Asia's coastal regions, where trade was crucial to local economies and societies (Glover, 1996).

### **2. The Influence of Kingship**

The adoption of Buddhism by Southeast Asian rulers was another major factor influencing its spread. In countries like Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia, kings adopted Buddhism as a state religion to consolidate their power and unify their subjects (Skilling, 2009). Kings such as King Ashoka of India played a key role in the propagation of Buddhism across the Indian subcontinent and furthered the



expansion into Southeast Asia (Strong, 1983). Through royal patronage, the religion found institutional support and was integrated into political life.

This royal patronage of Buddhism can be seen in the construction of temples, monasteries, and Buddhist educational institutions. For example, the establishment of the first Buddhist monastic institutions in Southeast Asia, such as in the Dvaravati Kingdom of Thailand and the Khmer Empire, was supported by the local elite and rulers who used Buddhism to legitimize their reigns and maintain social order (Swearer, 2010).

### **3. Syncretism and Cultural Adaptation**

One of the most remarkable aspects of Buddhism in Southeast Asia is its ability to adapt to and integrate with local religious practices. The syncretism between Buddhism and indigenous animistic beliefs allowed for a smoother acceptance of Buddhism (Keyes, 1977). Local deities, spirits, and rituals were often incorporated into Buddhist practices, creating a unique form of Southeast Asian Buddhism that was distinct from its Indian origins (Crosby, 2014).

Research shows that in places like Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, indigenous animism and Buddhism coexisted and influenced each other (Tambiah, 1970). In these regions, local customs and deities were often absorbed into the Buddhist pantheon, resulting in a blended religious practice that catered to the spiritual needs of the people while maintaining core Buddhist principles (Harris, 2005).

### **4. Differences in Buddhist Traditions**

The spread of Theravada Buddhism to mainland Southeast Asia and Mahayana Buddhism to maritime Southeast Asia also led to distinct regional differences in practice. Theravada Buddhism, which emphasizes the monastic tradition and the Pali Canon, became predominant in countries like Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia (Gombrich, 1988). Meanwhile, Mahayana Buddhism, which emphasizes the role of Bodhisattvas and the use of the Sanskrit scriptures,

was more influential in maritime Southeast Asia, particularly in Vietnam and Indonesia (Seneviratne, 1999).

The divergence of these two Buddhist traditions shaped the cultural and religious landscapes of Southeast Asia, influencing everything from the architecture of temples to the style of Buddhist rituals and festivals (Woodward, 2004). These differences also had social and political implications, as local rulers and elites chose the form of Buddhism that best suited their political goals and cultural identity (Berkwitz, 2006).

### **5. Buddhism's Long-Lasting Impact**

Over time, Buddhism became deeply ingrained in Southeast Asian societies, not just as a religion but as a central part of cultural identity and national consciousness (McDaniel, 2011). Its influence can be seen in the region's art, architecture, and literature, with monumental temples and sculptures continuing to shape the cultural heritage of countries like Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia (Chandler, 2008).

Buddhism also played a central role in shaping social and ethical values in Southeast Asia. The principles of compassion, non-violence, and mindfulness became embedded in local customs and laws (Harvey, 2013). In many ways, Buddhism became a framework through which Southeast Asian societies navigated issues related to governance, morality, and social welfare (Collins, 1998).

The spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia is a complex story of cultural adaptation, political strategy, and religious transformation. Its success in the region was not just due to the appeal of its teachings, but also due to the proactive role played by kings, trade routes, and local cultural practices. As this research has shown, Southeast Asian Buddhism is a unique synthesis of indigenous traditions and Buddhist teachings, and it has had a profound and lasting impact on the region's religious, cultural, and political landscape.

## **Conclusion**

The study of Buddhism's origin and spread in Southeast Asia highlights the profound cultural, religious, and political transformations that took place in the region over centuries. The introduction of Buddhism to Southeast Asia, which began around the 1st century CE, was not a simple diffusion of religious beliefs but a complex process influenced by trade, political strategies, royal patronage, and the adaptation of indigenous traditions. Through the maritime trade routes, Indian merchants and missionaries brought Buddhist teachings, scriptures, and art to Southeast Asia. The support of local kings, who saw the value in adopting Buddhism as a tool for political legitimacy, was crucial to its establishment as the region's dominant religion. Royal patronage not only provided the necessary resources for the construction of temples and monasteries but also helped to institutionalize Buddhism within Southeast Asian societies. A key feature of Buddhism's spread in Southeast Asia was its ability to adapt to local customs and traditions, resulting in the syncretic blending of Buddhist teachings with indigenous animistic practices. This adaptability helped Buddhism gain widespread acceptance and ensured its deep integration into the cultural fabric of Southeast Asian societies. The influence of Buddhism can be seen in various aspects of life in the region, including art, architecture, literature, and social ethics. Moreover, the differences in the forms of Buddhism practiced—Theravada in mainland Southeast Asia and Mahayana in maritime Southeast Asia—have contributed to the diverse cultural and religious landscapes of the region. Despite these differences, Buddhism has remained a unifying force, shaping the identities of nations such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

In conclusion the origins and spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia illustrate how religion can evolve and adapt across cultures and geographies. The legacy of Buddhism in Southeast Asia is not only seen in the magnificent temples and sculptures that still stand today but also in the continued influence of Buddhist philosophy on the region's moral, social, and political systems. The research demonstrates the importance of Buddhism as a transformative force in Southeast Asia's history, with its influence continuing to resonate in the present day.

## Suggestion

Suggest areas for future research or implications of your findings. You could propose studying specific aspects of Buddhist cultural adaptation or exploring the influence of Buddhism on modern Southeast Asian societies. The study not only sheds light on the historical journey of Buddhism into Southeast Asia but also opens avenues for further research into the evolving relationship between religion, culture, and politics in the region. Future studies could explore how modern Southeast Asian societies continue to draw on Buddhist traditions to navigate contemporary challenges.

## Body of Knowledge

Tie the conclusion back to your original research objectives. Clearly state how the findings addressed the goals set out in the introduction. For example: *"This research aimed to explore the historical, cultural, and political factors that influenced the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. The findings demonstrate that trade networks, royal patronage, and cultural adaptability were pivotal in this process, fulfilling the study's objectives."*

Reinforce the most significant discoveries of Body of Knowledge. Summarize the major points, such as:

- The role of maritime trade routes in the early spread of Buddhism.
- The influence of local rulers and royal patronage.
- The syncretism between Buddhism and indigenous practices.
- The regional differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism.

Restate the broader impact of your research. Explain why understanding the origin of Buddhism in Southeast Asia matters, both historically and in contemporary contexts.

If applicable, mention how your research fills existing gaps in the literature. For example: *"While previous studies have focused on individual countries, this research offers a comparative perspective across the region, contributing a broader understanding of Buddhism's transformative role in Southeast Asia."*

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