The Transmission of Buddhism in the Era of Globalization

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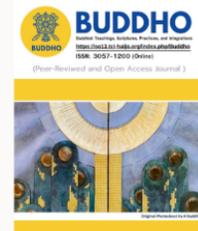
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Abstract

In the context of intensifying globalization, Buddhism has emerged as a significant transnational religious and ethical force, shaping global discourses on mindfulness, morality, and human well-being. This article examines Buddhism's global transmission through the conceptual framework of religious soft power, with particular attention to Thai Theravāda Buddhism. Drawing on theories of globalization and soft power, the study analyzes how Buddhist teachings, meditation practices, and monastic traditions function as non-coercive sources of cultural and moral influence. Rather than expanding through institutional conversion or political authority, Buddhism exerts global influence through attraction, ethical credibility, and experiential relevance. Thai Buddhism, rooted in canonical discipline (vinaya), meditation, and moral cultivation, plays a pivotal role in shaping global perceptions of Buddhism as a practical path for personal transformation and social harmony. The article further explores challenges arising from globalization, including tensions between traditional monastic norms and contemporary social contexts, critiques of institutional authority, and ethical accountability in the digital age. It argues that Buddhism's continued global relevance depends not on institutional power, but on the authenticity of its ethical vision and its capacity to respond constructively to global challenges. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Buddhism functions as a form of religious soft power that reshapes values and worldviews rather than political structures.

Keywords: Buddhism, Globalization, Soft Power, Religious Transmission, Mindfulness

Introduction

Globalization has profoundly transformed the ways in which religions are transmitted, interpreted, and practiced across national and cultural boundaries. Advances in communication technology, increased migration, transnational education, and global tourism have facilitated the rapid circulation of religious ideas, symbols, and practices (Appadurai, 1996; Beyer, 2006). Within this dynamic context, Buddhism has emerged as one of the most globally influential religious traditions, often perceived as compatible with modern values such as rational inquiry, ethical autonomy, and psychological well-being (McMahan, 2008; Gethin, 1998).

Unlike missionary religions that historically expanded through institutional conversion or political patronage, Buddhism's global transmission has largely occurred through cultural exchange, intellectual engagement, and experiential practices (Lopez, 2009). Meditation, mindfulness, ethical reflection, and philosophical inquiry have become central vehicles through which Buddhism reaches global audiences (Wilson, 2014). This phenomenon invites scholarly inquiry into how Buddhism functions not merely as a spiritual system, but also as a form of cultural and moral influence in international society (Queen & King, 1996).

This article examines the transmission of Buddhism in the era of globalization through the conceptual framework of religious soft power. It focuses particularly on Thai Theravāda Buddhism, which has played a significant role in shaping global perceptions of Buddhist practice through meditation traditions, monastic discipline, and ethical teachings (Swearer, 2010; Jackson, 2016). By analyzing Thai Buddhism's global engagement, this study seeks to demonstrate how religion can exercise influence through attraction, credibility, and ethical authority rather than coercion or institutional dominance (Nye, 2004).

Buddhism and Globalization: Conceptual Framework

Globalization refers to the intensification of interconnectedness across societies, cultures, and institutions (Giddens, 1990). In the religious sphere, globalization does not necessarily lead to secularization or the decline of faith traditions. Instead, it often results in the transformation, reinterpretation, and recontextualization of religious practices (Beyer, 2006).

Buddhism's adaptability has enabled it to flourish in diverse cultural environments. Core Buddhist principles—such as impermanence (anicca), non-self (anattā), dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), and compassion (karuṇā)—are not bound to a single cultural worldview (Harvey, 2013). As a result, Buddhist teachings can be translated into ethical, psychological, and philosophical frameworks that resonate with global audiences (McMahan, 2008). Thai Buddhism occupies a unique position within this global landscape. Rooted in Theravāda canonical traditions and sustained by a strong monastic institution, Thai Buddhism has historically emphasized discipline (vinaya), meditation, and moral cultivation (Tambiah, 1976; Swearer, 2010). In the global era, these features have become sources of international appeal rather than cultural limitation.

In sum, the conceptual framework of Buddhism and globalization highlights a dynamic, reciprocal relationship. Globalization transforms Buddhist practices and institutions, while Buddhist ethical and philosophical resources offer critical perspectives on globalization itself—particularly its implications for suffering, desire, identity, and interdependence. Understanding Thai Buddhism within this framework allows for a nuanced analysis of how a historically rooted religious tradition negotiates global modernity without relinquishing its doctrinal and disciplinary foundations.

Understanding Religious Soft Power

Soft power, a concept widely used in international relations, refers to the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or force. Coined by political scientist Joseph S. Nye, soft power operates through culture, values, and moral legitimacy rather than military or economic pressure (Nye, 2004). In contrast to hard power, which relies on compulsion, soft power shapes preferences and behaviors by inspiring admiration, trust, and voluntary alignment. In a religious context, soft power emerges when spiritual traditions shape global perceptions, ethical norms, and patterns of behavior in subtle but enduring ways (Haynes, 2013). Religion becomes influential not because it demands obedience, but because it offers meaning, moral orientation, and practical guidance for living. Within this framework, Buddhism functions as a form of religious soft power by projecting ethical authority, spiritual credibility, and cultural appeal (Wilson, 2014).

Rather than seeking conversion through institutional expansion or doctrinal enforcement, Buddhism influences global audiences through its teachings on non-violence (ahiṃsā), mindfulness (sati), compassion (karuṇā), and wisdom (paññā) (Harvey, 2013). These values resonate strongly in a globalized world facing psychological stress, social conflict, and ethical uncertainty. Buddhism's emphasis on reducing suffering through self-awareness and ethical conduct allows it to function as a universal ethical framework rather than an exclusive belief system (Gethin, 1998).

Thai Buddhism contributes significantly to religious soft power through its association with peaceful practice, meditation traditions, and moral discipline rooted in Theravāda teachings (Swearer, 2010). Thai monastic culture emphasizes restraint (sīla), mental cultivation (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā), presenting Buddhism as a practical path for personal and social transformation rather than a dogmatic belief system (Jackson, 2016).

The international popularity of meditation traditions—particularly Vipassanā and mindfulness-based practices—has further amplified Thai Buddhism's soft-power influence (Wilson, 2014). Although mindfulness has often been adapted into secular and therapeutic settings, its historical roots in Thai forest traditions and monastic discipline continue to shape its global credibility (McMahan, 2008). Meditation retreats led by Thai monks and lay teachers attract participants from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, reinforcing Buddhism's image as inclusive, experiential, and non-dogmatic.

This chapter explains religious soft power as the ability of faith traditions to influence others through moral authority, cultural appeal, and ethical guidance rather than force. Buddhism exemplifies religious soft power by promoting universally resonant values such as compassion, non-violence, mindfulness, and wisdom. Thai Buddhism, rooted in Theravāda practice, strengthens this influence through its emphasis on ethical discipline, meditation, and peaceful monastic culture. The global spread of mindfulness and Vipassanā meditation—adapted across religious and secular contexts—has further enhanced Thai Buddhism's soft-power impact, presenting it as an inclusive, practical, and non-dogmatic path for personal and social transformation.

Globalization and the Transmission of Buddhist Values

Globalization has accelerated the transnational flow of Buddhist ideas, practices, and symbols (Appadurai, 1996). Through migration, digital media, academic exchange, and international tourism, Thai Buddhist culture circulates far beyond national borders (Beyer, 2006). Overseas Thai temples serve not only as religious centers for diaspora communities but also as spaces of intercultural dialogue and spiritual exploration for non-Thai practitioners (Swearer, 2010). Online dhamma teachings, livestreamed meditation sessions, translated scriptures, and digital learning platforms allow Buddhist soft power to operate independently of direct state control while still reflecting Thailand's cultural heritage (Campbell, 2013). This decentralized transmission enables Buddhism to reach global audiences in flexible and context-sensitive ways.

Importantly, this influence is non-coercive and dialogical. Buddhist teachings are often framed in universal ethical language—such as emotional balance, compassion, and ethical awareness—making them accessible regardless of religious identity (Queen & King, 1996). As a result, Thai Buddhism participates in global ethical discourse without asserting dominance or political authority, distinguishing religious soft power from ideological or nationalist influence (Nye, 2004).

The highlights how globalization has enabled Thai Buddhist ideas and practices to spread transnationally through migration, digital media, overseas temples, and online platforms. This decentralized and flexible transmission allows Buddhism to function as cultural soft power beyond direct state control while remaining rooted in Thai heritage. Importantly, Thai Buddhism engages global audiences through non-coercive, universal ethical values—such as compassion and mindfulness—positioning it as a dialogical and inclusive presence in global ethical discourse rather than a political or nationalist force.

Moral Authority in a Global Context

In an era marked by skepticism toward institutions and authority figures, Buddhism's emphasis on personal verification and experiential understanding strengthens its moral credibility (McMahan, 2008). Teachings such as the Kālāma Sutta, which encourage critical inquiry rather than blind faith, align closely with contemporary values of autonomy and rational reflection (Gethin, 1998). This philosophical openness enhances Buddhism's legitimacy in global ethical conversations related to mental health, education, environmental responsibility (Suebkrapan, et al, 2025), and peacebuilding (Harvey, 2013). Buddhist mindfulness practices are increasingly incorporated into schools, healthcare systems, and conflict-resolution programs, demonstrating the tradition's practical relevance beyond religious boundaries (Wilson, 2014).

Thai Buddhism's global influence, therefore, does not arise from political ambition but from moral attraction and practical relevance. By offering tools for inner transformation and social harmony, Buddhism functions as a form of soft power that reshapes values rather than policies, perceptions rather than power structures (Haynes, 2013).

Buddhism's moral authority in the global context stems from its emphasis on personal inquiry, experiential understanding, and practical application rather than institutional power. Teachings that encourage critical reflection align with modern values of autonomy and rationality, enhancing Buddhism's credibility in areas such as mental health, education, environmental ethics, and peacebuilding. The global influence of Thai Buddhism emerges through moral appeal and practical relevance, functioning as a form of soft power that shapes values and perceptions by fostering inner transformation and social harmony rather than political control.

Challenges and Future Directions

As Thai Buddhism continues to engage with global audiences, it encounters a range of structural, ethical, and cultural challenges that require careful reflection and adaptive responses (Jackson, 2016). Globalization expands the reach of Buddhist teachings but also exposes tensions between traditional monastic norms and rapidly changing social contexts.

One major challenge concerns the maintenance of monastic discipline (vinaya) in culturally diverse environments. Thai monks serving abroad as dhammadūta missionaries often face social expectations that differ significantly from those in Thailand (Swearer, 2010). Issues such as interaction with laywomen, use of digital technology, financial transparency, and engagement with secular institutions complicate strict adherence to traditional codes.

Moreover, the visibility of monks in global media magnifies the consequences of ethical misconduct. In a globalized information environment, institutional credibility depends increasingly on transparency, ethical consistency, and accountability rather than symbolic status alone (Beyer, 2006). Ethical lapses can quickly undermine Buddhism's moral authority and weaken its soft-power influence. Another challenge lies in critiques of institutional authority. Younger generations tend to respect Buddhist teachings while questioning hierarchical structures and centralized governance, reflecting a global trend in which religious legitimacy is evaluated more by ethical performance than by tradition alone (McMahan, 2008). At the same time, global challenges such as environmental degradation, social inequality, and interreligious conflict present opportunities for Buddhist engagement. Teachings on interdependence, non-harming, and moderation offer powerful ethical frameworks for addressing contemporary crises (Harvey, 2013). Thai Buddhism's involvement in environmental activism and engaged Buddhism illustrates its capacity to translate spiritual principles into social responsibility (Queen & King, 1996).

Thai Buddhism's global expansion brings both opportunities and challenges. Monks operating in diverse cultural contexts face difficulties maintaining traditional monastic discipline amid differing social norms, digital media use, and institutional expectations. Increased global visibility also heightens the impact of ethical misconduct, making transparency and accountability crucial for maintaining moral credibility. Additionally, younger generations increasingly question hierarchical authority while valuing ethical integrity over tradition. At the same time, global issues such as environmental and social crises create opportunities for Thai Buddhism to apply core teachings—such as interdependence and non-harming—through engaged and socially responsible forms of practice.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Buddhism, particularly Thai Theravāda Buddhism, plays a significant role in the global religious landscape through its function as a form of religious soft power. In the context of globalization, Buddhism's influence extends beyond doctrinal boundaries, shaping ethical discourse, cultural exchange, and practices of self-cultivation worldwide. Thai Buddhism's emphasis on monastic discipline, meditation, and moral integrity contributes to its global credibility and appeal. Rather than relying on institutional dominance or political authority, Buddhism exercises influence through ethical attraction, experiential relevance, and moral legitimacy. While globalization presents challenges including tensions between tradition and adaptation, institutional accountability, and generational critique it also offers opportunities for renewal and constructive engagement. Thai Buddhism's continued global relevance will depend on its ability to uphold monastic integrity, respond ethically to criticism, and engage meaningfully with global issues. In doing so, Buddhism affirms its role as a moral and spiritual resource in an interconnected world.

Recommendations

Body of Knowledge

1. Buddhism, Globalization, and Cultural Adaptability

Globalization, understood as the intensification of interconnectedness across societies and institutions, has profoundly reshaped religious transmission and interpretation (Giddens, 1990). In contrast to predictions of religious decline, globalization has facilitated the transformation and recontextualization of religious traditions rather than their disappearance (Beyer, 2006). Buddhism exemplifies this process through its remarkable adaptability across cultural and historical contexts.

2. Religious Soft Power and Buddhist Influence

Soft power refers to the capacity to influence others through attraction, values, and moral legitimacy rather than coercion or force (Nye, 2004). When applied to religion, soft power emerges through ethical credibility, symbolic authority, and the ability to inspire voluntary engagement (Haynes, 2013). Buddhism functions as a form of religious soft power by offering meaning, moral orientation, and practical tools for addressing suffering without demanding exclusive allegiance. Rather than pursuing expansion through institutional enforcement or doctrinal dominance, Buddhism influences global audiences through non-violence (ahiṃsā), mindfulness (sati), compassion (karuṇā), and wisdom (paññā) (Harvey, 2013). These values resonate strongly in a globalized world marked by psychological stress, social conflict, and ethical uncertainty. By emphasizing experiential understanding and ethical conduct, Buddhism operates as a universal ethical framework rather than a dogmatic belief system (Gethin, 1998).

Suggestions for Future Study

Future research would benefit from comparative analyses of Buddhist soft power across diverse cultural and national contexts, including Japanese Zen, Tibetan Buddhism, and the global diffusion of secular mindfulness movements. Such comparative frameworks could illuminate how historical traditions adapt to modern political, cultural, and institutional environments.

Empirical investigations into the long-term social, psychological, and ethical effects of Buddhist meditation programs are also recommended. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies could strengthen interdisciplinary engagement between Buddhist studies, psychology, sociology, and public policy by moving beyond short-term outcomes to assess sustained individual and societal impacts.

Additionally, scholars should examine the growing influence of digital technologies on global Buddhism, particularly in relation to monastic authority, constructions of religious authenticity, and mechanisms of ethical accountability. Online teaching platforms, social media, and virtual communities raise important questions about lineage, legitimacy, and power in transnational religious networks.

Finally, integrating Buddhist ethical frameworks with contemporary global challenges—such as climate change, social inequality, and peacebuilding—offers a promising avenue for both theoretical scholarship and applied practice. Future studies in this area could contribute to broader debates on ethical leadership, sustainability, and nonviolent social transformation in an increasingly interconnected world.

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