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Preface

The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS), Vol. 4, No. 1, January–June 2024, continues to serve as a platform for disseminating knowledge in religious studies, sociology, liberal arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and interdisciplinary studies. The journal operates in accordance with the criteria established by the Thai-Journal Citation Index Centre (TCI), including publication regularity, the quality and diversity of the editorial board, the accuracy of article information, publication ethics, reference formatting, and the management of information on the online journal system. These measures aim to enhance the academic standards, transparency, and credibility of the journal's published works.

All manuscripts are reviewed for completeness and conformity with the journal's aims and scope, screened for plagiarism, and evaluated by three qualified peer reviewers in accordance with the journal's established procedures before undergoing revision and final consideration for publication. The editorial board is also committed to improving English-language academic article information, clearly indicating the dates of submission, revision, and acceptance, and making the journal's publication ethics and peer-review procedures publicly accessible in accordance with TCI guidelines. The editorial board sincerely thanks the authors, reviewers, and all parties involved for their contributions to maintaining the journal's quality. It is hoped that the articles published in this issue will promote further learning, scholarly discussion, and constructive research development.

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Rethinking “Indian Influence” in the History of Thai Buddhist Art: From a Diffusionist Paradigm to Networks of Cultural Exchange

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Abstract

The concept of “Indian influence” has long occupied a central position in the study of Thai Buddhist art. Early scholarship commonly explained the emergence of Buddhist images, monuments, inscriptions, and ritual forms in Southeast Asia as the result of cultural diffusion from an advanced Indian center to a relatively passive regional periphery. Although this model correctly recognizes the importance of South Asian religious and artistic traditions, it often reduces complex historical processes to one-directional transmission. This article reassesses the concept of Indian influence by replacing the diffusionist paradigm with a network model of cultural exchange. It argues that Buddhist art in the territories of present-day Thailand emerged through the movement of monks, merchants, artisans, texts, relics, technologies, and political ideas across maritime and overland networks connecting South Asia, Sri Lanka, mainland Southeast Asia, island Southeast Asia, and China. Dvāravatī, Śrīvijaya, Khmer, Haripuñjaya, and Sukhothai artistic traditions were not merely provincial copies of Indian prototypes. Local communities selected, translated, combined, and transformed transregional forms according to their own ritual needs, materials, political structures, and aesthetic preferences. The network approach does not deny India’s importance; rather, it explains more precisely how forms conventionally labeled “Indian” were circulated through multiple intermediaries and continually recreated. Thai Buddhist art should therefore be interpreted as the product of cultural translation, local agency, and multidirectional exchange rather than as the delayed reproduction of a singular Indian original.

Keywords: Indian influence, Thai Buddhist art, cultural exchange

Introduction

The history of Thai Buddhist art is frequently narrated through a sequence of external influences. Dvāravatī sculpture is compared with Gupta and post-Gupta Indian art; peninsular Buddhist images are connected with Pāla, Pallava, and Śrīvijayan traditions; Lopburi architecture is classified through Khmer models; and Sukhothai art is interpreted in relation to Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism. Within this narrative, India often appears as the original source from which religious ideas and artistic forms travelled outward.

The term “Indian influence” is not entirely incorrect. Buddhism originated in South Asia, and many fundamental elements of Southeast Asian Buddhist art—including images of the Buddha, stupas, Bodhisattva iconography, Sanskrit and Pāli inscriptions, cosmological concepts, and monastic institutions—possess clear South Asian genealogies. The problem arises when “influence” becomes a complete explanation rather than the beginning of an investigation.

To say that a Buddha image displays Indian influence does not explain who transmitted its model, which route was used, whether an actual object or only an iconographic description travelled, how the model was understood locally, or why certain features were adopted while others were rejected. The language of influence may also imply that Southeast Asian artists lacked creativity and merely copied culturally superior Indian prototypes.

Such assumptions were partly inherited from colonial-period historiography. Southeast Asia was frequently represented as a region situated between the great civilizations of India and China and therefore understood primarily through external cultural forces. Coedès's influential concept of the "Indianized states" provided an important framework for recognizing the widespread presence of Indian religions, languages, political concepts, and artistic forms in early Southeast Asia (Coedès, 1968). Nevertheless, the term "Indianization" could suggest a unilateral process in which an active India transformed a passive Southeast Asian world.

More recent research presents a different picture. Archaeological discoveries, inscriptions, material analysis, and maritime studies demonstrate that Southeast Asian societies participated actively in long-distance networks. Local rulers, monks, artisans, and merchant communities did not simply receive complete cultural systems. They selected and reorganized religious ideas and artistic conventions to address local needs. Cultural transmission was consequently a process of negotiation and translation.

This article reconsiders Indian influence in the history of Thai Buddhist art by shifting from a diffusionist model to a network paradigm. The network approach recognizes India as an important historical source while emphasizing multiple routes, intermediaries, local agencies, and reciprocal relationships. It also permits Thai Buddhist art to be studied within the wider connected histories of the Bay of Bengal, the South China Sea, mainland Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean.

The Formation of the Diffusionist Paradigm

The diffusionist paradigm assumes that cultural innovation begins at a center and moves outward toward peripheral regions. In the study of Buddhist art, the Indian subcontinent was normally identified as the center because Buddhism originated there and the earliest surviving Buddhist monuments are found in South Asia. Southeast Asian artistic traditions were then classified according to their degrees of similarity to Indian styles.

This method produced valuable chronological and iconographic knowledge. Comparisons with Amarāvātī, Gupta, post-Gupta, Pallava, and Pāla art enabled scholars to identify the religious subjects of Southeast Asian objects and propose approximate dates. Indian visual traditions unquestionably supplied important models for representing Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, deities, stupas, wheels of the Dhamma, and scenes from the Buddha's life.

Nevertheless, comparative stylistic analysis sometimes developed into a hierarchy of originals and copies. An object resembling a recognized Indian prototype could be regarded as early and aesthetically refined, whereas an object diverging from that prototype might be described as provincial, degenerate, or incorrectly executed. Difference was treated as evidence of technical decline rather than possible local innovation.

The paradigm also tended to treat "India" as a unified cultural source. Historical India, however, contained numerous political states, languages, monastic communities, artistic workshops, and Buddhist schools. Artistic traditions in Gandhāra, Mathurā, Andhra, Sarnath, Nālandā, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, and Kashmir were not identical. Forms reaching Southeast Asia could therefore derive from different regions and periods.

Moreover, transmission did not always occur directly between India and the area of present-day Thailand. Models could pass through Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, or Java. A form described as Indian might already have been modified several times before arriving in a Thai-speaking political community.

The use of modern national categories presents another problem. The ancient artistic cultures called *Dvāravatī*, *Śrīvijaya*, *Khmer*, *Haripuñjaya*, or *Sukhothai* did not operate within the present boundaries of Thailand. To describe all artifacts found within modern Thailand as stages in the development of a single national art risks projecting the modern nation-state into periods when cultural and political geography was organized differently.

From Indianization to Localization

Coedès (1968) used “Indianization” to describe the adoption of Indian religions, royal concepts, scripts, literary languages, law, and cosmology by Southeast Asian societies. His work remains fundamental because it demonstrated the historical importance of Sanskrit inscriptions, Hindu-Buddhist institutions, and transregional political ideas. Yet the model placed strong emphasis on the movement of a civilizational system from India into Southeast Asia.

Later scholars shifted attention toward local agency. Wolters (1999) argued that cultural materials entering Southeast Asia were localized through existing regional structures. Foreign ideas acquired meaning only when local communities selected and reformulated them. Cultural reception was thus an active process rather than the mechanical reproduction of an imported model.

Localization is especially important for art history because artistic forms cannot function independently of local contexts. A Buddha image produced in central Thailand may share iconographic features with an Indian image, but its scale, material, ritual placement, inscription, patronage, and relationship to surrounding monuments may differ substantially. These differences are not peripheral additions to a fundamentally Indian object. They constitute the conditions through which the image became meaningful.

The concept of localization also challenges the assumption that an object must belong exclusively to either an Indian or indigenous category. Cultural forms can be simultaneously transregional and local. The Buddha image is a transregional Buddhist form, but each community may establish a distinctive way of representing and venerating it.

Pollock’s (1996) concept of the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” provides another alternative to simple diffusion. Sanskrit circulated across South and Southeast Asia as a prestigious language of political and literary expression without requiring direct political control from India. Rulers and intellectuals in Southeast Asia appropriated Sanskrit to participate in a transregional cultural world. Their use of the language did not make them merely Indian; it enabled them to construct new forms of local authority.

A similar process can be observed in visual culture. Adopting Buddhist iconography allowed patrons to join a wider sacred community while modifying that iconography to express local identities. Transregional participation and local differentiation were therefore complementary rather than contradictory.

The Network Model of Cultural Exchange

The network model replaces the image of a single line connecting India with Thailand with a system of intersecting routes. These routes linked religious centers, ports, river valleys, political courts, monasteries, production sites, and pilgrimage destinations.

The principal actors in these networks included: Monks carrying texts, ritual knowledge, ordination traditions, and memories of sacred sites. Merchants transporting objects, metals, pigments, manuscripts, and information. Artisans moving between courts and

religious centers. Pilgrims visiting relic shrines and monasteries. Rulers exchanging gifts, relics, texts, and diplomatic missions. Local patrons commissioning images and monuments for specific ritual purposes.

Objects did not travel alone. A portable bronze image could circulate with stories about its sacred origin. A manuscript might require teachers capable of explaining its language and ritual application. A relic might bring architectural knowledge concerning how it should be enshrined. Artistic exchange therefore involved material objects, technical skills, narratives, and institutions.

Maritime routes were particularly important. Monsoon winds made regular travel possible across the Bay of Bengal and through the Straits of Malacca. The Malay Peninsula functioned not simply as a passage between India and the South China Sea but as a region containing active ports, religious communities, and production centers. UNESCO’s Silk Roads research similarly emphasizes that trade routes transmitted beliefs, knowledge, technologies, and artistic practices alongside commercial goods (UNESCO, n.d.).

Networks were multidirectional. A monk travelling from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia might return with donations, texts, or information. Artisans could carry models from one Southeast Asian court to another without returning to India. Buddhist institutions in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, or Java could become centers of authority in their own right.

The model can be summarized as follows:

Diffusionist paradigm	Network paradigm
One primary center	Multiple interconnected centers
One-directional transmission	Multidirectional circulation
Stable cultural package	Selection and recombination
Passive recipient	Active local participant
Original and copy	Translation and transformation
National or civilizational units	Ports, courts, monasteries, routes, and workshops
Stylistic similarity as influence	Material, ritual, political, and social relationships

The network model does not claim that all communities possessed equal power. Certain monasteries, courts, languages, and artistic centers enjoyed greater prestige. Networks can reproduce hierarchies. However, cultural prestige does not eliminate the agency of those who receive and adapt a form.

Dvāravatī Art and the Problem of the Indian Prototype

Dvāravatī art, flourishing broadly between the sixth and eleventh centuries in central and northeastern parts of present-day Thailand, provides an important case for reassessing Indian influence. Buddha images, wheels of the Dhamma, stupas, narrative reliefs, inscriptions, and sacred boundary stones show strong connections with South Asian Buddhist traditions. Yet the combination and ritual use of these elements became distinctively regional.

Dvāravatī Buddha images have often been compared with Gupta and post-Gupta sculpture. Certain facial types, robes, bodily proportions, gestures, and halo forms support these comparisons. However, Dvāravatī images cannot be reduced to defective Gupta copies. They frequently display local physiognomic conventions, frontal monumentality, distinctive facial expressions, and clothing patterns that developed through regional workshops.

The large stone wheels of the Dhamma are particularly revealing. The wheel is a well-established Indian Buddhist symbol associated with the Buddha’s first sermon. In Dvāravatī contexts, however, monumental wheels were placed on pillars and combined with deer, inscriptions, and other components in arrangements that were not simply reproduced from one surviving Indian prototype. Brown (1996) argues that the Dvāravatī wheel tradition requires attention to local innovation as well as Indian religious symbolism.

Semā stones in northeastern Thailand offer another example. Sacred boundary markers have a basis in Buddhist monastic practice, but the elaborately carved stone traditions of the Khorat Plateau developed distinctive forms and narrative programs. Their scale and iconography were shaped by local ritual landscapes, materials, and communities.

Early Southeast Asian sculpture more generally reveals simultaneous connections with several South Asian regions. Guy (2014) shows that early artistic traditions in present-day Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia, and Indonesia developed through complex relationships with India and with one another. Stylistic diversity therefore reflects regional participation in overlapping networks rather than the progressive weakening of a single source.

Peninsular Thailand and the Maritime Buddhist World

The art of peninsular Thailand cannot be adequately understood through a direct India-to-Thailand model. The peninsula was integrated into maritime networks connecting the Bay of Bengal, Sri Lanka, Tamil-speaking South India, the Malay world, Sumatra, Java, and the South China Sea.

Archaeological materials from southern Thailand include Buddhist and Hindu images, inscriptions, architectural remains, beads, ceramics, seals, and imported objects. These materials suggest that ports were meeting places for diverse communities rather than simple terminals receiving Indian civilization.

Bodhisattva images found in the peninsula are often classified as “Śrīvijayan,” “Pāla,” or “South Indian” in style. Such labels can be useful, but they may obscure the mobility of forms. Śrīvijaya itself participated in networks linking Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, Java, India, and China. A sculpture with Pāla-related iconography might have been transmitted through manuscripts, portable bronzes, travelling monks, or a Southeast Asian workshop familiar with northeastern Indian models.

The distinction between imported and locally produced objects is therefore crucial. An imported Indian image demonstrates trade or religious exchange, but a locally manufactured image based on a transregional model demonstrates technical translation. Scientific analysis of stone, metal composition, casting methods, and production debris can help distinguish these processes.

The maritime perspective also reveals that Southeast Asian communities sometimes transmitted Buddhist culture onward. Ports in the peninsula and Sumatra provided support for monks travelling between India and China. They were nodes at which texts could be copied, languages learned, and religious affiliations negotiated. Southeast Asia was consequently part of the infrastructure of Buddhist globalization rather than merely its destination.

Khmer, Mon, and Tai Interactions

The territories of present-day Thailand were also shaped by extensive interaction with Khmer and Mon cultural centers. These relationships complicate attempts to identify Indian influence as a direct and separate force.

Religious and artistic forms associated with Angkor had Indian genealogies, but Khmer artists and patrons had already transformed them through centuries of local development. When Khmer architectural and sculptural forms circulated into the Chao Phraya basin or northeastern Thailand, communities were not simply receiving “Indian” art. They were engaging with a Khmer interpretation of Sanskritic and Buddhist traditions.

The same applies to Mon Buddhist cultures. Dvāravatī and Haripuñjaya communities contributed to the transmission of Buddhist iconography, ritual forms, and artistic knowledge to later Tai-speaking societies. Tai political centers therefore encountered Buddhism through culturally layered intermediaries.

A single monument could combine elements from several networks. Its architectural plan might have Khmer precedents, its Buddha image could recall Mon forms, its inscription might use Pāli, its relic tradition might appeal to Sri Lankan authority, and its patrons might belong to a Tai-speaking court. Classifying the monument under only one source of influence would conceal its composite history.

The concept of hybridity is sometimes used to describe such combinations. However, hybridity should not imply the accidental mixture of previously pure cultures. Indian, Mon, Khmer, Sri Lankan, and Tai traditions were themselves historically changing formations. Cultural combination was not an exceptional condition; it was the normal operation of connected religious worlds.

Sukhothai Art and the Reproduction of Origins

Sukhothai art is frequently celebrated as the first fully developed expression of a distinctively Thai Buddhist aesthetic. At the same time, its development is explained through influences from India, Sri Lanka, Dvāravatī, Khmer art, and other Southeast Asian traditions. This apparent contradiction illustrates the limitations of both pure diffusionism and pure nationalism.

The Sukhothai Buddha image demonstrates processes of selection and synthesis. Features such as the cranial protuberance, flame finial, elongated limbs, oval face, curved eyebrows, and refined bodily contours were combined into a recognizable local visual system. Some elements possessed earlier South Asian or Southeast Asian precedents, but their integration was innovative.

The walking Buddha is especially significant. Walking Buddha images existed outside Sukhothai, and the concept of the Buddha walking is rooted in Buddhist narrative and ritual. Nevertheless, Sukhothai sculptors transformed the theme into an influential aesthetic form characterized by rhythmic movement, bodily flexibility, and controlled serenity. It is therefore more accurate to speak of the creative reformulation of a transregional iconographic possibility than of the copying of an Indian model.

Sri Lankan connections are also central to Sukhothai history. Pāli learning, monastic ordination lineages, stupa forms, relic traditions, and concepts of Buddhist kingship enhanced the prestige of Sri Lankan Theravāda Buddhism. Yet “Sri Lankan influence” did not operate independently of local political objectives. Sukhothai rulers and monks selected Sri Lankan affiliations to reform institutions, establish legitimacy, and position their communities within a wider Theravāda world.

Sri Lanka itself was not simply a transmitter preserving unchanged Indian Buddhism. It was a major center of Buddhist interpretation with its own historical traditions and artistic forms. The movement of Theravāda institutions from Sri Lanka to Southeast Asia was therefore an exchange between Buddhist centers, not merely a secondary stage of Indian diffusion.

Objects, Texts, Artisans, and Technologies

A network approach encourages scholars to identify the actual mechanisms through which artistic knowledge travelled. Stylistic resemblance alone cannot determine the nature of historical contact.

Several transmission mechanisms should be distinguished. First, finished objects could be imported and installed in local religious settings. Second, small portable images could function as models for larger sculptures. Third, illustrated manuscripts could transmit iconographic compositions. Fourth, texts could describe bodily marks, gestures, cosmological arrangements, and ritual requirements. Fifth, artisans could move between workshops, carrying technical knowledge that left no direct textual record.

The technologies of artistic production were equally important. Stone carving required access to appropriate materials, tools, and trained labor. Bronze casting depended on metallurgical knowledge and supply networks. Brick construction, stucco decoration, mural painting, and ceramic ornamentation involved different communities of specialists.

Local materials inevitably changed received forms. An architectural type developed for stone construction might be reinterpreted in brick and stucco. A portable bronze composition might be transformed into a monumental stone image. Differences between Indian and Southeast Asian works could therefore result from technological adaptation rather than misunderstanding.

Material analysis can help reconstruct such networks. Metal composition may indicate whether objects were produced in the same workshop tradition. Stone sourcing can distinguish imported sculpture from local production. Archaeological evidence of furnaces, molds, tools, and unfinished objects can identify local manufacturing centers.

This approach shifts attention from the visual question “What does this object resemble?” to a broader set of historical questions: How was it made? Where did its materials originate? Who possessed the required knowledge? For whom was it produced? How was it used? What other objects surrounded it?

Religious Agency and Selective Adoption

The movement of Buddhist art was not governed only by aesthetic preference. Communities adopted forms because those forms served ritual, doctrinal, political, and social purposes.

Relics encouraged the construction of stupas and generated pilgrimage. Monastic ordination networks shaped the design of ritual boundaries and assembly spaces. Narratives of the Buddha’s previous lives supported mural and relief programs. Ideas of merit motivated rulers and lay donors to commission images. Eschatological concerns encouraged the preservation of texts and sacred objects.

Selection was therefore purposeful. A community might adopt one image type while ignoring others available within the same network. Theravāda institutions could preserve certain Bodhisattva images while rejecting or redefining particular Mahāyāna rituals. Political rulers might favor forms associated with a prestigious foreign center without adopting its entire religious system.

Selective adoption also explains why no complete “Indian package” was transferred to Southeast Asia. Sanskrit, Pāli, Buddhist ritual, Brahmanical court ceremony, and local spirit traditions could coexist in different combinations. Their relationships varied across time and region.

Local agency should not be romanticized as unrestricted freedom. Political power, economic resources, religious authority, and access to literacy shaped who could participate in cultural selection. Yet even under unequal conditions, reception required interpretation. No image or concept could acquire local meaning without being incorporated into an existing social world.

Rethinking Artistic Identity

The network model has significant implications for the concept of Thai artistic identity. If Thai Buddhist art emerged through exchange, its identity cannot be based on cultural isolation or formal purity. Its distinctiveness lies precisely in the ability of local communities to transform diverse materials into meaningful configurations.

This does not make the category “Thai Buddhist art” useless. The category can identify artistic traditions produced within particular historical communities that contributed to the formation of Thailand. However, it should not imply that all such traditions developed toward a predetermined national style.

National art history often arranges Dvāravatī, Lopburi, Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Rattanakosin into a continuous sequence. A network perspective instead recognizes overlapping regional systems. Dvāravatī was connected to Mon communities beyond present-day Thailand. Lopburi art participated in the Khmer world. Peninsular art belonged to maritime networks. Sukhothai and Ayutthaya engaged with Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, China, and the Malay world.

Modern museums may unintentionally reinforce diffusionism by arranging galleries according to stylistic influences or national boundaries. An alternative exhibition strategy could organize objects around routes, materials, religious practices, or networks of patronage. Visitors could then see how one iconographic form changed as it moved among different communities.

Methodological Principles for a Network History of Thai Buddhist Art

A network-based art history requires several methodological changes.

First, stylistic comparison should be combined with archaeology, epigraphy, material science, religious studies, and maritime history. Visual similarity is evidence, but it cannot independently prove the route or mechanism of transmission.

Second, scholars should distinguish origin from agency. A symbol may have originated in India, but its later meanings were created by all the communities that used it.

Third, intermediary centers must be taken seriously. Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and Java were not passive stations between India and Thailand. They were productive cultural centers that transformed Buddhist forms.

Fourth, chronology should avoid assuming that similarity necessarily indicates direct contemporaneous contact. Communities can preserve, revive, or deliberately imitate older styles. A Sukhothai object resembling an earlier Indian form may reflect mediation through manuscripts or Southeast Asian traditions rather than direct contact with India.

Fifth, absence and asymmetry must be recognized. Networks do not preserve all evidence equally. Portable objects and inscriptions may survive while textiles, wooden buildings, oral instruction, and human movement disappear. Historical reconstruction must therefore distinguish demonstrable connections from plausible hypotheses.

Finally, the language of scholarship should avoid terms such as “pure,” “degenerate,” or “incorrect” when describing local transformations. Formal difference should first be investigated as a possible cultural choice.

Does the Network Model Eliminate Indian Influence?

Replacing diffusionism with a network model does not require denying India’s historical importance. Buddhism, Sanskrit, Pāli, numerous narratives, ritual concepts, and major iconographic systems emerged from South Asian contexts. Indian religious centers remained important destinations for pilgrimage, especially places associated with the Buddha’s life.

The network approach instead makes influence historically specific. Rather than stating simply that an object was influenced by India, scholars should ask: Which Indian region or tradition is relevant? Was transmission direct or mediated? What evidence identifies the route? Did objects, people, texts, or techniques move? Which elements were selected locally? How were they transformed? What new functions did they acquire?

These questions produce a more precise account of cultural contact. They also prevent two opposing distortions: the colonial image of a passive Southeast Asia and the nationalist image of an entirely autonomous Thai artistic genius.

Thai Buddhist art was neither a copy of India nor a creation independent of the wider Buddhist world. It emerged from the productive tension between transregional affiliation and local differentiation.

Conclusion

The concept of Indian influence has made an important contribution to the study of Thai Buddhist art by identifying the South Asian genealogies of Buddhist iconography, architecture, religious language, and ritual. However, when influence is understood as one-directional diffusion from a creative center to a passive periphery, it obscures the historical complexity of cultural transmission.

A network perspective provides a more adequate framework. Buddhist art travelled through interconnected maritime and overland routes involving India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Java, China, and multiple communities in the territories of present-day Thailand. Monks, merchants, pilgrims, rulers, artisans, texts, relics, and technologies participated in these networks.

Dvāravatī artists transformed South Asian Buddhist symbols into distinctive local ritual forms. Peninsular communities operated within a maritime world that cannot be reduced to direct Indian transmission. Khmer and Mon traditions served as creative intermediaries. Sukhothai patrons and artists synthesized transregional elements into new visual expressions rather than reproducing a single prototype.

The replacement of diffusionism by network analysis also changes the meaning of artistic identity. Thai Buddhist art becomes distinctive not because it remained culturally pure but because its communities repeatedly selected, translated, and recombined diverse traditions. Local agency and transregional exchange were not opposing forces. Local identities were constructed through participation in larger Buddhist worlds.

The phrase “Indian influence” may still be used if it identifies a specific and demonstrable historical relationship. It should not serve as a substitute for explaining that relationship. The central question is no longer whether Thai Buddhist art was influenced by India, but how people, objects, knowledge, and religious authority moved—and how each act of movement generated new meanings.

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Emptiness Is Not Nothingness: Dependent Origination and the Middle Way in Madhyamaka Philosophy

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Abstract

The Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is frequently misunderstood as a nihilistic assertion that nothing exists. Such an interpretation overlooks Nāgārjuna's explicit identification of emptiness with dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and the Middle Way (*madhyamā pratipad*). This article argues that emptiness does not negate the conventional existence of phenomena; rather, it denies that anything exists through an independent and immutable intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). Because phenomena arise dependently upon causes, conditions, conceptual designation, parts, and relations, they are empty of self-established existence. Their emptiness is precisely what makes causation, change, language, ethical action, and liberation possible. Nāgārjuna's analysis avoids the extremes of eternalism, which treats things as intrinsically real and permanent, and annihilationism, which concludes that nothing exists or that an independently existing entity is later destroyed. Through an examination of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, particularly Chapters 1, 15, 18, 24, and 25, this article clarifies the relationship among dependent origination, emptiness, conventional designation, the two truths, and *nirvāṇa*. It concludes that Madhyamaka is neither a metaphysical theory of absolute nothingness nor an assertion of a hidden absolute reality. It is a critical and soteriological philosophy that dismantles attachment to fixed views while preserving the functional reality of the conventional world.

Keywords: Middle Way, Madhyamaka, Nāgārjuna

Introduction

The concept of emptiness, or *śūnyatā*, occupies a central position in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, particularly in the Madhyamaka tradition associated with Nāgārjuna. It is also one of the most frequently misunderstood Buddhist concepts. Emptiness is often interpreted as the claim that the world does not exist, that all experiences are meaningless illusions, or that Buddhist liberation requires withdrawal from an entirely unreal world. Under this interpretation, Madhyamaka appears to be a form of metaphysical nihilism.

This interpretation is misleading because it isolates emptiness from dependent origination. Nāgārjuna does not present emptiness as a substance, cosmic void, or absolute reality existing behind ordinary phenomena. Nor does he use it to deny that things function in everyday life. His central claim is that whatever arises dependently is empty of intrinsic nature. Emptiness therefore describes how phenomena exist—not as independent substances but through causes, conditions, parts, relations, concepts, and linguistic conventions.

The relationship is expressed most clearly in Chapter 24 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*: Whatever is dependently arisen, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the Middle Way. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.18)

This verse connects four fundamental concepts: dependent origination, emptiness, dependent designation, and the Middle Way. None can be adequately understood in isolation. Dependent origination explains that phenomena arise through conditions; emptiness denies that dependently arisen phenomena possess independent intrinsic nature; dependent designation explains how they are identified and discussed conventionally; and the Middle Way avoids the extremes of absolute existence and complete nonexistence.

The purpose of this article is to clarify these relationships and demonstrate why emptiness must not be equated with nothingness. It first examines the philosophical meaning of *svabhāva*, the primary object of Nāgārjuna's critique. It then analyzes dependent origination as the basis of emptiness, explains the Middle Way between eternalism and annihilationism, and considers the importance of the two truths. Finally, it examines the soteriological significance of emptiness and the relationship between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.

Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka Project

Nāgārjuna is generally placed around the second or third century CE and is regarded as the foundational philosopher of the Madhyamaka tradition. Although reliable biographical information is limited, works attributed to him exercised a decisive influence upon Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese Buddhist thought.

His most important philosophical work is the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way. The text contains 27 chapters examining causation, motion, perception, the aggregates, personal identity, time, suffering, action, the self, the Four Noble Truths, and *nirvāṇa*. Rather than constructing a comprehensive metaphysical system, Nāgārjuna investigates whether the fundamental categories through which reality is explained can exist through their own intrinsic nature.

The method is primarily dialectical. Nāgārjuna examines the consequences of a philosophical position and demonstrates contradictions that follow when phenomena are assumed to possess *svabhāva*. His arguments are therefore often negative in form. He denies that things arise from themselves, from something entirely different, from both, or without a cause (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 1.1). He also rejects the intrinsic existence of motion, time, causation, personal identity, and *nirvāṇa*.

These negations do not mean that Madhyamaka seeks to replace the world with nothingness. Their purpose is to show that phenomena cannot exist in the independent and self-grounded way imagined by reifying thought. Conventional processes remain operative, but they cannot withstand analysis when examined as self-existent entities (Garfield, 1995; Westerhoff, 2009).

The name Madhyamaka derives from the “middle” position that avoids opposing metaphysical extremes. This continues the Buddha's teaching of the Middle Way, especially the rejection of eternalism and annihilationism. Nāgārjuna extends this insight by showing that both extremes depend upon the mistaken assumption that something possesses a fixed nature.

What Is Emptiness Empty Of?

The statement “all phenomena are empty” is incomplete unless one asks: empty of what? In Madhyamaka, phenomena are empty of *svabhāva*. This term is translated variously as intrinsic nature, inherent existence, self-being, own-being, or essence. No single English expression communicates all its philosophical implications (Westerhoff, 2023).

For Nāgārjuna, something possessing *svabhāva* would have to exist independently. It would be what it is through its own power rather than through causes, conditions, parts, relations, or conceptual designation. Its essential nature would not depend upon anything else and could not be fundamentally changed by external circumstances.

Nāgārjuna argues that no experienced phenomenon satisfies these conditions. A tree depends upon a seed, soil, water, sunlight, temperature, and numerous biological processes. It also depends upon roots, trunk, branches, leaves, and the conceptual practices by which a particular configuration is identified as a “tree.” If all these conditions and components were removed, no independently existing tree would remain.

This does not mean that the tree is nonexistent. It grows, provides shade, absorbs water, and can be cut down. Its causal efficacy is not denied. What is denied is that the tree exists as a self-established substance independent of its conditions.

The same reasoning applies to persons. A person depends upon bodily processes, sensations, perceptions, dispositions, consciousness, language, social relations, and continuous causal development. Buddhism does not deny that persons experience suffering or bear moral responsibility. It denies the existence of an unchanging self that owns these processes while remaining independent of them.

Emptiness should therefore be understood as the absence of independent existence, not the absence of conventional existence. As Westerhoff (2023) explains, emptiness is always the emptiness of *svabhāva*. It does not refer to an empty space left after phenomena have been eliminated.

Dependent Origination as the Basis of Emptiness

Dependent origination is one of the foundational teachings of Buddhism. In its general form, it states that when particular causes and conditions are present, corresponding phenomena arise; when those conditions cease, the phenomena conditioned by them also cease.

In early Buddhist teaching, dependent origination is frequently used to explain the arising and cessation of suffering. Ignorance conditions formations; formations condition consciousness; and the process continues through craving, attachment, becoming, birth, aging, and death. The teaching avoids attributing suffering either to an eternal creator or to random occurrence. Suffering arises conditionally and can cease when its supporting conditions are transformed.

Nāgārjuna expands the philosophical implications of dependent origination. If something arises through causes and conditions, it cannot possess an independent nature. Conversely, if it possessed a self-established nature, it could not be produced or transformed by conditions.

This relationship may be presented as a three-step argument: 1. Whatever possesses intrinsic nature must exist independently of causes and conditions. 2. All conditioned phenomena arise through causes and conditions. 3. Therefore, conditioned phenomena do not possess intrinsic nature.

Nāgārjuna states: Something that is not dependently arisen, such a thing does not exist. Therefore, a nonempty thing does not exist. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.19)

The verse does not say that nothing exists. It says that nothing exists in a nonempty or intrinsically established manner. Everything that exists within experience is dependently originated and is therefore empty.

The relationship between dependent origination and emptiness can be viewed from two complementary directions. Dependent origination shows how phenomena exist conventionally: they arise through relations and conditions. Emptiness shows how they do not exist ultimately: they lack independent self-nature. These are not two separate conditions imposed on phenomena. They describe the same reality from interconnected perspectives.

Dependent origination thus supports emptiness, while emptiness makes dependent origination possible. If fire possessed an immutable intrinsic nature, it could not depend upon fuel, oxygen, heat, and other conditions. If a seed possessed the fixed intrinsic nature of a

seed, it could never become a plant. Change is possible precisely because things are not imprisoned within immutable essences.

Why Intrinsic Nature Would Make Causation Impossible

Nāgārjuna's critique reverses a common assumption. Ordinary metaphysical thinking often supposes that a thing must possess a stable essence in order to exist and perform causal functions. Nāgārjuna argues that intrinsic nature would make causation and change impossible.

If an effect already existed intrinsically within its cause, production would be unnecessary. The cause would produce something already fully present. Conversely, if the effect were entirely and intrinsically different from the cause, no intelligible relation would connect them. Anything might then arise from anything else.

The opening verse of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* rejects four possible accounts of intrinsic production: Neither from itself nor from another, nor from both, nor without a cause, does anything whatever, anywhere arise. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 1.1)

This verse should not be read as denying conventional causation. It denies that causation can be explained through intrinsically existing causes and effects. Conventional causation functions through dependence, not through metaphysically independent entities.

Consider a flame produced by a lamp. The flame depends upon fuel, oxygen, temperature, a wick, and preceding physical events. It is neither wholly identical to nor completely separate from these conditions. The flame cannot be found as an independent entity within any one condition, but it functions when the necessary conditions converge.

If the flame possessed an intrinsic nature, it would either exist permanently or never exist. A self-established flame would not need fuel, and extinguishing the fuel could not affect it. The actual responsiveness of the flame to changing conditions demonstrates its emptiness.

Emptiness is thus not an obstacle to causal efficacy. It is the condition under which causal efficacy becomes intelligible. Siderits and Katsura (2013) emphasize that Nāgārjuna's critique targets the metaphysical interpretation of dependent phenomena, not their conventional functionality.

The Middle Way Between Eternalism and Annihilationism

The Middle Way is frequently understood as moderation between extremes of behavior, such as sensual indulgence and severe self-mortification. In *Madhyamaka*, however, it also has an ontological and epistemological meaning. It avoids the opposing views that things exist absolutely or do not exist at all.

Eternalism assumes the existence of enduring substances or selves that retain their identity independently of changing conditions. Annihilationism assumes that a genuinely existing entity is completely destroyed or that moral and causal continuity is meaningless. Nāgārjuna explains: "It exists" is a grasping at permanence; "It does not exist" is the view of annihilation. Therefore the wise should not dwell in either existence or nonexistence. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 2013, 15.10)

The Middle Way does not simply select a compromise halfway between existence and nonexistence. It exposes the mistaken assumption shared by both positions—the belief that existence must be intrinsic.

From the conventional perspective, phenomena exist and function. Persons act, suffer, remember, make decisions, and experience consequences. From the ultimate perspective, no phenomenon can be established as possessing independent self-nature. The Middle Way therefore permits conventional affirmation without ultimate reification.

Annihilation ordinarily presupposes that an independently existing thing first exists and is subsequently destroyed. Madhyamaka rejects the initial assumption of independent existence. A person is a continuously changing causal process rather than an eternal self that is later annihilated. Death is consequently neither the destruction of a permanent soul nor proof that actions have no consequences.

The Middle Way may be expressed as follows:

Extreme	Central claim	Madhyamaka response
Eternalism	Things possess permanent intrinsic nature	Whatever arises dependently lacks intrinsic nature
Annihilationism	Nothing exists, or a real substance is destroyed	Phenomena function conventionally through causal continuity
Middle Way	Phenomena exist dependently but not intrinsically	Conventional existence and emptiness are compatible

The Madhyamaka position is therefore neither realism in the sense of intrinsic substances nor nihilism in the sense of universal nonexistence.

Emptiness and Dependent Designation

Nāgārjuna’s identification of emptiness with dependent origination includes the phrase *upādāya prajñapti*, commonly translated as dependent designation. This introduces a linguistic and conceptual dimension to the analysis.

Things depend not only upon causal conditions and constituent parts but also upon conventions through which they are identified. A “chariot,” to use a classical Buddhist example, depends upon wheels, an axle, a frame, and other components. None of the components is individually the chariot, but the chariot cannot be found independently of them. The term designates the organized collection for particular practical purposes.

Dependent designation does not mean that human thought creates the world arbitrarily. Calling fire “water” does not make it extinguish another fire. Conventions must remain responsive to causal relations, shared practices, and experienced effects. However, the boundaries through which objects are identified are not established by an intrinsic essence existing independently of conceptual activity.

A person is similarly designated in dependence upon bodily and mental aggregates. The designation is conventionally valid because it supports communication, ethical responsibility, and social relationships. The fact that the person cannot be found as an independently existing self does not make personal language entirely false.

Garfield (2002) describes this position as recognizing that conventional reality is the only kind of reality phenomena possess. Conventional does not mean completely unreal or useless. It means dependent upon causes, relations, and practices rather than grounded in an ultimate essence.

Language is therefore both necessary and limited. It enables the Buddha to teach, communities to distinguish wholesome from unwholesome conduct, and practitioners to understand the path. Yet conceptual categories become sources of attachment when treated as representations of self-existing realities.

The Two Truths

The distinction between conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) is essential for preventing the nihilistic interpretation of emptiness. Nāgārjuna states: The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma is based on two truths: a truth of worldly convention and an ultimate truth. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.8)

Conventional truth includes the ordinary world of persons, objects, causes, actions, language, and ethical distinctions. Ultimate truth is the emptiness of all these phenomena—the fact that none possesses intrinsic nature.

The two truths do not refer to two separate worlds. Ultimate truth is not a hidden reality existing behind the conventional world. It is the ultimate manner in which conventional phenomena exist: empty of self-nature.

A table clarifies their relationship:

Aspect	Conventional truth	Ultimate truth
Object of analysis	Persons, objects, causes, and actions	Their lack of intrinsic nature
Mode of existence	Dependently and relationally	Empty of independent self-existence
Function	Communication and practical activity	Release from reification
Error to avoid	Treating convention as absolutely real	Treating emptiness as an absolute substance
Relationship	Necessary basis for teaching	Understood through conventional teaching

Nāgārjuna emphasizes that ultimate truth cannot be taught without relying upon convention and that nirvāṇa cannot be realized without understanding the ultimate (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.10). Conventional language is therefore not discarded. It is used without mistaking its categories for self-established entities.

This distinction also prevents the conclusion that moral teachings become meaningless under emptiness. Actions and consequences operate conventionally. A harmful action need not possess intrinsic nature in order to produce suffering. Medicine does not need an eternal essence to affect illness. Likewise, generosity, hatred, compassion, and violence produce consequences through dependent relations.

The ultimate truth does not cancel conventional truth. It frees conventional life from metaphysical absolutization.

The Emptiness of Emptiness

A further protection against nihilism and metaphysical reification is the doctrine that emptiness itself is empty. If emptiness possessed intrinsic nature, it would become the ultimate substance that Madhyamaka denies to all other phenomena.

Emptiness is a description of the lack of svabhāva. It does not exist as an independent entity behind appearances. Just as the absence of an elephant in a room is not another object occupying the room, the absence of intrinsic nature is not a metaphysical substance contained within phenomena.

Nāgārjuna warns that emptiness misunderstood is dangerous: Emptiness wrongly grasped is like picking up a poisonous snake incorrectly or using a magical formula improperly. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.11)

The warning addresses at least two errors. The first is nihilism: concluding that because things lack intrinsic nature, nothing exists and no action matters. The second is absolutism about emptiness: treating emptiness as the ultimate foundation or true essence of reality.

Correctly understood, emptiness relinquishes rather than establishes metaphysical views. Nāgārjuna states that the Buddhas taught emptiness as the relinquishing of all views, but those who turn emptiness itself into a view are difficult to cure (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 13.8).

The emptiness of emptiness thus prevents Madhyamaka from becoming another theory of ultimate substance. It also preserves the practical function of the teaching.

Emptiness is comparable to medicine: it is used to overcome attachment to intrinsic existence, not to provide a new object of attachment.

Does Emptiness Destroy the Four Noble Truths?

Chapter 24 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* responds to an objection that continues to shape modern misunderstandings. An opponent claims that if everything is empty, then the Four Noble Truths, the Buddhist path, moral action, and liberation become impossible.

Nāgārjuna reverses the objection. These teachings would become impossible if phenomena were not empty. If suffering possessed intrinsic nature, it could never arise through conditions and could never cease. If ignorance were an immutable essence, it could not be replaced by wisdom. If a person possessed a fixed nature as an unenlightened being, spiritual cultivation could not produce liberation.

Emptiness makes transformation possible. Because suffering is conditioned, its causes can be identified. Because its causes are impermanent and empty, they can be weakened and brought to cessation. Because mental habits lack fixed essence, ethical and contemplative training can transform them.

The Four Noble Truths consequently depend upon emptiness: 1. Suffering arises through conditions rather than through a permanent essence. 2. Craving and ignorance can function as causes because they are relational processes. 3. Cessation is possible because the causes of suffering are not immutable. 4. The path can transform the practitioner because persons and mental states are empty of fixed nature.

Nāgārjuna therefore states that for one who accepts emptiness, everything is possible, whereas for one who rejects emptiness, nothing is possible (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.14). The verse should not be interpreted as magical idealism. It means that change, causation, and liberation require the absence of immutable intrinsic nature.

Ethical Responsibility in an Empty World

A common concern is that emptiness undermines moral responsibility. If there is no intrinsically existing person, who acts and who experiences the result? Madhyamaka responds by distinguishing causal continuity from permanent identity.

Moral responsibility does not require an unchanging soul. It requires an appropriate causal relationship between intention, action, and consequence. The person who experiences the result of an earlier action is neither absolutely identical to nor completely different from the earlier agent. There is continuity without immutable identity.

This resembles the continuity of a flame passed from one lamp to another. The later flame is not numerically identical to the earlier flame, but it is not causally unrelated. The analogy should not be treated as a complete metaphysical explanation, yet it illustrates how continuity can exist without a permanent substance.

Emptiness may strengthen ethical awareness by revealing relational dependence. Actions do not occur within isolated selves. Speech affects trust, violence affects bodies and communities, and compassion changes both the recipient and the agent. Because persons arise relationally, personal well-being cannot be separated completely from the well-being of others.

At the same time, Madhyamaka does not imply that emptiness automatically produces a particular modern social ethic. Ethical conclusions must be developed through Buddhist teachings on compassion, non-harming, intention, and wisdom. Emptiness supplies an ontological critique of separateness, while ethical practice directs that insight toward the reduction of suffering.

Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa

Nāgārjuna's analysis of nirvāṇa further demonstrates why emptiness is not a metaphysical void. If nirvāṇa were an intrinsically existing realm entirely separate from conditioned reality, it would stand outside dependent origination and could have no meaningful relationship to the liberation of conditioned beings.

The Mūlamadhyamakakārikā states: There is not the slightest difference between cyclic existence and nirvāṇa. There is not the slightest difference between nirvāṇa and cyclic existence. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 25.19)

This statement does not mean that suffering and liberation are experientially identical. Saṃsāra is marked by ignorance, attachment, and suffering, whereas nirvāṇa is freedom from those conditions. The verse denies that they possess separate intrinsic natures.

Saṃsāra is dependently originated experience grasped through ignorance and reification. Nirvāṇa involves the cessation of that grasping. Liberation does not require escape from one intrinsically existing world into another. It requires transformation in how phenomena are understood and experienced.

The distinction between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa remains conventionally and soteriologically indispensable. Ultimately, however, neither can be established through independent essence. Even nirvāṇa is empty.

This prevents nirvāṇa from becoming a Buddhist version of an eternal substance. It is not nothingness, but neither is it a permanent entity possessed by an enlightened self. It is freedom from the cognitive and affective processes through which intrinsic existence is imagined and appropriated.

Emptiness as a Soteriological Practice

Madhyamaka is not concerned solely with abstract metaphysics. Its philosophical arguments serve a soteriological purpose: the cessation of suffering. Reification is not merely an intellectual error; it supports attachment, fear, pride, hostility, and craving.

When the self is imagined as intrinsically existing, experiences are divided rigidly into what protects or threatens “me” and “mine.” Pleasant objects become objects of attachment, unpleasant objects become targets of aversion, and changing conditions are resisted as though they violated a permanent identity.

Insight into emptiness weakens these patterns. If the self is a dependently arisen process, there is no immutable possession that must be defended at all costs. If objects of craving depend upon changing conditions and conceptual projections, they cannot provide permanent satisfaction. If enemies and conflicts arise through complex conditions, hatred need not treat other persons as possessing an unchangeably evil essence.

This does not mean that the practitioner becomes passive. Emptiness reveals that conditions matter. Because suffering is dependently arisen, changing its conditions is meaningful. Compassionate action becomes possible precisely because persons and situations can be transformed.

Wisdom (prajñā) and compassion (karuṇā) therefore support one another. Wisdom recognizes the emptiness of persons and phenomena; compassion responds to the suffering that occurs conventionally. Wisdom without compassion may become detached intellectualism, while compassion without wisdom may reproduce attachment and poor judgment.

Common Misinterpretations of Emptiness

Several recurring interpretations should be distinguished from Nāgārjuna's position.

1. Emptiness as Absolute Nonbeing

This interpretation claims that nothing exists in any sense. It is inconsistent with Nāgārjuna's defense of conventional truth and causal functioning. Madhyamaka denies intrinsic existence, not conventional existence.

2. Emptiness as a Hidden Absolute

Under this interpretation, ordinary things are unreal, while emptiness is the true reality behind them. This reifies emptiness and contradicts the emptiness of emptiness.

3. Emptiness as Mere Interconnectedness

Interdependence is essential, but emptiness should not be reduced to the popular idea that "everything is connected to everything else." Nāgārjuna's claim is more precise: whatever depends upon causes, parts, relations, or designation cannot possess independent intrinsic nature. Not every phenomenon needs to depend immediately upon every other phenomenon.

4. Emptiness as Subjective Construction

Dependent designation does not mean that reality is created entirely by individual thought. Conventional truths are constrained by causal efficacy, communal practices, and experience. Poison remains harmful regardless of whether one personally labels it medicine.

5. Emptiness as Moral Relativism

The absence of intrinsic moral essences does not imply that all actions are equally valuable. Actions produce different consequences within dependent causal systems. Buddhist ethics evaluates them in relation to intention, suffering, well-being, wisdom, and liberation.

Correcting these misunderstandings is necessary because an incorrect view of emptiness can either destroy confidence in Buddhist practice or turn emptiness into another object of metaphysical attachment.

Discussion

The relationship among dependent origination, emptiness, and the Middle Way can now be stated more precisely.

First, dependent origination explains the conditional existence of phenomena. Things arise and function because supporting causes, parts, relations, and conceptual practices are present.

Second, emptiness expresses the absence of independent intrinsic nature in those dependently arisen phenomena. It does not add a second reality to them.

Third, dependent designation explains how phenomena can be identified and discussed without possessing self-established essences. Conventional categories are functional but not metaphysically absolute.

Fourth, the Middle Way avoids both the reification of phenomena and their nihilistic elimination. Things neither exist intrinsically nor fail to exist conventionally.

Finally, the two truths explain how Buddhist teaching can use ordinary language and causal explanation while demonstrating the ultimate emptiness of all categories. Ultimate truth is approached through conventional truth, not through the abandonment of meaningful communication.

The relationships may be summarized as follows: The diagram is sequential only for analytical clarity. In Nāgārjuna's philosophy, dependent origination, emptiness, and the Middle Way describe mutually implicating dimensions of the same insight.

Conclusion

Emptiness in Madhyamaka philosophy does not mean that nothing exists. It means that nothing exists independently, permanently, or through an intrinsic nature of its own. Phenomena exist conventionally through causes, conditions, components, relations, and conceptual designation.

Nāgārjuna's identification of dependent origination with emptiness is therefore not a rejection of the Buddha's causal teaching. It is an analysis of its deepest philosophical implications. Whatever arises dependently cannot be self-established; whatever lacks self-established existence can arise, change, function, and cease through conditions.

The Middle Way avoids two related errors. Eternalism reifies persons and phenomena as independently real, while annihilationism concludes that reality is meaningless or that an intrinsically real entity is completely destroyed. Madhyamaka rejects the assumption of intrinsic nature shared by both positions. It affirms conventional causal continuity without accepting permanent substances.

The doctrine of the two truths preserves the functioning of language, knowledge, ethics, and religious practice. Conventional truth makes teaching and action possible, while ultimate truth reveals the emptiness of the phenomena conventionally designated. Neither truth can be understood adequately in isolation.

Emptiness itself must also remain empty. It is not a hidden absolute, ultimate substance, or cosmic void. It is a therapeutic insight directed against reification. Once transformed into a rigid metaphysical position, it ceases to perform its liberating function.

The importance of emptiness is ultimately practical. Because suffering and its causes are empty, they can change. Because the person lacks a fixed essence, ethical cultivation is possible. Because ignorance is conditioned, wisdom can bring it to cessation. Emptiness therefore does not deprive the world of meaning. It provides the philosophical basis for transformation, responsibility, compassion, and liberation.

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From Paṭirūpadesavāsa to Digital Spiritual Friendship : Social Ecology and Moral Development in the Online World

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Abstract

The Buddhist principle of paṭirūpadesavāsa, living in a suitable locality, traditionally emphasizes the importance of an environment conducive to material welfare, ethical conduct, learning, and spiritual development. Closely related is sappurisūpassaya, reliance upon good persons, and the wider Buddhist ideal of kalyāṇamittatā, admirable or spiritual friendship. In contemporary society, however, human environments are no longer exclusively physical. Social media platforms, online communities, recommender systems, content creators, and artificial-intelligence-mediated communication increasingly shape attention, belief, emotion, identity, and moral behavior. This article reinterprets paṭirūpadesavāsa through the concept of digital social ecology and develops a normative account of the “digital spiritual friend.” It argues that a suitable digital environment cannot be created through individual mindfulness alone because online conduct is conditioned by platform design, algorithmic amplification, community norms, economic incentives, and networks of influence. Likewise, digital popularity, religious identity, or follower count does not establish someone as a kalyāṇamitta. A digital spiritual friend must be evaluated through ethical integrity, truthfulness, compassionate communication, epistemic responsibility, non-exploitation, and the capacity to guide others toward reduced greed, hatred, and delusion. The article proposes a four-level model of digital moral ecology encompassing user self-regulation, relational friendship, community governance, and platform responsibility. Buddhist ethics can thereby contribute to digital citizenship without rejecting technology or reducing online problems to individual moral failure.

Keywords: social ecology, Buddhist friendship, moral development

Introduction

Human character does not develop in isolation. Places, relationships, institutions, habits, and forms of communication influence what individuals notice, believe, value, and do. Buddhist teachings recognize this dependence through principles such as living in a suitable locality, associating with wise persons, directing oneself rightly, and accumulating wholesome action.

The Cakka Sutta identifies living in a suitable locality (paṭirūpadesavāsa) and relying upon good persons (sappurisūpassaya) as two of the four “wheels” that support prosperity and progress (Bodhi, 2012, AN 4.31). The Maṅgala Sutta similarly identifies avoiding foolish persons, associating with the wise, living in a suitable place, having performed merit previously, and directing oneself rightly as important blessings (Ñāṇamoli, 1994).

These teachings emerged in a world where locality was primarily physical. A suitable place could offer safety, food, teachers, communities, and access to the Dhamma. A harmful place might expose inhabitants to violence, conflict, exploitation, or influences discouraging ethical conduct.

Contemporary life expands the meaning of locality. Individuals now spend substantial portions of their lives within digitally mediated environments. Social media feeds provide information, establish norms, trigger emotions, shape political identities, and connect users with friends, teachers, strangers, and institutions. Online interactions may continue long after individuals leave a physical location.

The digital environment is not immaterial simply because it is mediated by screens. Online activity affects sleep, emotion, relationships, reputation, employment, political participation, and sometimes physical safety. Digital communication is therefore part of the actual social ecology in which moral development takes place.

The principle of *paṭirūpadesavāsa* can consequently be reinterpreted as a demand to create and inhabit digital environments conducive to knowledge, non-harming, mindfulness, truthfulness, and wisdom. At the same time, *kalyāṇamittatā* can be extended to relationships through which people guide, support, correct, and encourage one another online.

Such an extension requires caution. A social media influencer is not necessarily a spiritual friend. A platform recommendation is not morally neutral guidance. A highly engaged community may be supportive, but it may also become an echo chamber that strengthens hostility or false beliefs.

This article develops a Buddhist analysis of digital social ecology and proposes criteria for digital spiritual friendship. Its central argument is that online moral development requires coordination among individual practice, ethical relationships, community governance, and platform design.

Buddhist Foundations of a Suitable Environment

1. *Paṭirūpadesavāsa* in the Four Wheels

The Cakka Sutta identifies four favorable conditions: 1. Living in a suitable locality; 2. Relying upon good persons; 3. Directing oneself rightly; and 4. Having previously performed meritorious action (Bodhi, 2012, AN 4.31).

The first two factors concern environment and relationship. They recognize that moral and spiritual development cannot be explained solely through individual willpower. People need access to knowledge, safety, trustworthy companions, and institutions supporting wholesome conduct.

A suitable place should not be defined only by comfort or wealth. A luxurious environment may encourage greed and heedlessness, whereas a materially simple community may support generosity, discipline, and wisdom. Suitability must be evaluated in relation to human flourishing and the reduction of suffering.

2.2 Environment as Conditional Structure

Buddhist dependent origination provides the philosophical basis for environmental analysis. Conduct arises through interacting conditions: perception, feeling, intention, habit, companionship, social expectation, and material opportunity.

An environment does not remove personal responsibility, but it changes the probability, difficulty, and consequences of different actions. A place in which violence is rewarded creates different conditions from one in which conflict is mediated peacefully. A community where deception produces prestige creates different habits from one where accuracy and correction are valued.

The suitable environment is therefore not merely a passive background. It is an active configuration of opportunities, constraints, meanings, and relationships.

3. Physical and Digital Locality

A digital space can perform many functions once associated with physical locality. It may provide: Access to teachers and religious texts; Educational opportunity; Emotional and social support; Participation in communities; Moral examples; Information about health and public affairs; Platforms for generosity and social action; and Spaces for meditation or Dhamma discussion.

The same environment can also expose users to harassment, misinformation, addictive design, social comparison, hate speech, fraud, and ideological extremism. Digital suitability is therefore neither inherent in technology nor guaranteed by access alone.

The Concept of Social Ecology

Social ecology understands development as occurring within interacting environmental systems. Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasizes that human development is influenced by immediate relationships, institutions, cultural systems, and historical change.

A digital social ecology includes at least five components: 1. Users, who attend, interpret, create, and share; 2. Relationships, including friends, teachers, followers, and adversaries; 3. Communities, which establish norms and identities; 4. Platforms, which design interfaces, rules, and recommendation systems; and 5. Institutions, including governments, schools, religious organizations, media, and commercial actors.

No component operates independently. Users influence algorithms through engagement, while algorithms influence what users encounter. Community norms shape expression, while repeated expressions reinforce norms. Commercial incentives affect platform design, while platform design changes attention and behavior.

Digital ethics must therefore move beyond telling individuals simply to “use social media mindfully.” Mindfulness is important, but users act within systems deliberately designed to capture attention and maximize engagement.

Platforms as Moral Environments

1. Architecture Is Not Neutral

Digital platforms are sometimes described as neutral tools used either well or badly. This description is incomplete because design influences behavior.

Notification systems create cues for repeated checking. Public metrics such as likes, views, and shares influence status and self-evaluation. Recommendation systems determine which content becomes visible. Interface design can encourage rapid reaction before reflection.

The architecture of a platform does not determine action completely, but it modifies what actions are easy, rewarding, visible, or socially reinforced.

2. Engagement and Emotional Amplification

Research suggests that emotional and moralized content often spreads effectively through social networks. Brady et al. (2017) found that moral-emotional language was associated with greater diffusion of political content within ideological groups.

Rathje et al. (2021) reported that social media posts expressing hostility toward political out-groups were especially likely to be shared. These findings do not mean that every expression of moral concern is harmful. Moral outrage may draw attention to injustice. However, systems rewarding engagement can amplify anger without distinguishing compassionate accountability from dehumanizing hostility.

From a Buddhist perspective, communication rooted in hatred remains ethically problematic even when directed toward a real wrongdoing. Right Speech requires attention not only to factual content but also to intention, timing, tone, and probable consequences.

3. Echo Chambers

Echo chambers emerge when users are repeatedly exposed to information and people reinforcing existing beliefs. Cinelli et al. (2021) found evidence of echo-chamber dynamics across major social media platforms, although their form and intensity differed by platform. Selective exposure may create confidence without understanding. Repetition can make a claim feel familiar and therefore credible, while exclusion of contrary evidence weakens opportunities for correction.

The Buddhist problem is not merely that people hold strong beliefs. It is attachment to views, unwillingness to examine conditions, and hostility toward those outside the group.

4. Exposure Is Not Automatically Dialogue

Simply presenting users with opposing opinions may not reduce polarization. Bail et al. (2018) found that exposure to opposing political views on social media could increase polarization among some participants.

This result cautions against an overly simple idea that more information always produces wisdom. The effect of exposure depends upon trust, identity, framing, emotional context, and opportunities for respectful deliberation.

A suitable digital environment must therefore cultivate not only diversity of content but also capacities for listening, verification, perspective-taking, and non-hostile disagreement.

From Sappurisūpassaya to Kalyāṇamittatā

1. Relying upon Good Persons

The second wheel, sappurisūpassaya, means relying upon or associating with morally good and wise persons. Such association influences conduct through example, instruction, encouragement, and correction.

The broader concept of kalyāṇamittatā emphasizes admirable friendship. In the Upaḍḍha Sutta, the Buddha declares admirable friendship to be the whole of the holy life because it supports development of the Noble Eightfold Path (Bodhi, 2000, SN 45.2).

A spiritual friend does more than provide emotional affirmation. Such a person helps another recognize unwholesome states, understand the Dhamma, cultivate virtue, and progress toward liberation.

2. Friendship and Asymmetry

Spiritual friendship can occur among peers, but it may also involve asymmetry between teacher and student. Asymmetry is not inherently exploitative; expertise and experience are real. Nevertheless, it creates responsibility.

A teacher who possesses influence over followers must avoid manipulation, financial exploitation, sexual misconduct, false claims of attainment, and suppression of legitimate questions. Digital platforms can intensify these risks because authority may be constructed through visibility and parasocial attachment.

3. Friendship Is Not Mere Agreement

A good friend does not always confirm another person's existing beliefs. Compassion may require correction, disagreement, or warning. The correction should be truthful, appropriately timed, and motivated by concern rather than humiliation.

Online communities often confuse loyalty with agreement. Members who question leaders may be treated as enemies, while repeated confirmation becomes evidence of belonging. Such a relationship strengthens group identity but may fail the Buddhist standard of spiritual friendship.

Defining the Digital Spiritual Friend

A digital spiritual friend may be defined as a person who uses digitally mediated relationships to support ethical conduct, critical understanding, mental cultivation, and reduced attachment without exploiting the dependence or vulnerability of others.

The definition includes teachers, peers, content creators, moderators, and community members. Physical distance does not make the relationship unreal. Guidance delivered through a video, message, online class, or discussion forum can have genuine effects.

However, digital mediation changes the conditions of trust. Users may not know the teacher's conduct outside curated content. Credentials can be fabricated, testimonials manipulated, and images edited. Digital spiritual friendship therefore requires explicit criteria.

Criteria for Digital Spiritual Friendship

1. Ethical Integrity

The person's conduct should be consistent with non-harming, honesty, restraint, and respect. Moral teaching unsupported by conduct is insufficient.

Online evaluation cannot reveal everything, but patterns matter. Does the person exploit conflict for engagement? Do they humiliate opponents? Do they manipulate followers financially or emotionally?

2. Truthfulness and Verification

Digital spiritual friends should distinguish evidence, interpretation, tradition, and personal opinion. They should verify information before sharing and correct mistakes transparently.

Truthfulness is particularly important when discussing health, politics, history, or vulnerable persons. Religious status does not substitute for relevant expertise.

3. Compassionate Communication

Compassion does not require avoiding difficult subjects. It requires addressing them without dehumanization. A digital spiritual friend communicates in ways intended to reduce suffering and increase understanding.

4. Epistemic Humility

Wise persons recognize the limits of their knowledge. They do not present every interpretation as unquestionable truth or claim expertise outside their competence.

Epistemic humility also includes willingness to cite sources, acknowledge uncertainty, and revise claims.

5. Non-Exploitation

Spiritual guidance should not manipulate fear, guilt, loneliness, or devotion for personal gain. Financial relationships should be transparent, and boundaries should be clear.

7.6 Encouragement of Agency

A genuine spiritual friend does not create permanent dependency. Guidance should strengthen the learner's ethical discernment and capacity for practice.

7. Openness to Accountability

Digital teachers and communities should permit respectful questions and establish procedures for addressing misconduct. Charisma without accountability creates conditions for abuse.

8. Orientation toward Reduced Defilement

The decisive Buddhist criterion is direction. Does the relationship reduce or increase greed, hatred, and delusion? Does it encourage generosity, compassion, mindfulness, wisdom, and responsibility?

Popularity Is Not Spiritual Authority

Digital platforms often equate visibility with value. Follower counts, views, shares, and verification badges function as symbols of authority. Yet popularity may result from entertainment, controversy, advertising, or algorithmic amplification rather than wisdom.

A digital teacher may possess millions of followers while lacking scriptural knowledge or ethical accountability. Conversely, a careful and qualified teacher may reach a small audience.

Buddhist evaluation should therefore resist metric-based authority. The relevant questions concern conduct, understanding, motivation, effects, and accountability—not numerical popularity.

This does not mean that successful digital communication is unwholesome. Skillful presentation can make the Dhamma accessible. The problem arises when engagement metrics become the primary measure of truth or spiritual value.

Right Speech in Digital Communication

Right Speech provides a central ethical framework for online interaction. It traditionally involves abstention from false, divisive, harsh, and irresponsible speech.

1. False Speech

False speech includes deliberate deception, fabricated evidence, manipulated images, impersonation, and knowingly spreading false information. Forwarding a claim without verification may also be irresponsible even when the user did not create it.

2. Divisive Speech

Divisive speech aims to separate individuals or groups by intensifying suspicion and hostility. Online systems can amplify such speech because group conflict generates attention.

3. Harsh Speech

Harsh speech includes insults, dehumanization, threats, and communication intended to wound. The absence of physical proximity can weaken empathy and make cruelty easier.

4. Idle or Irresponsible Speech

The category should not be interpreted as prohibiting all casual conversation. In digital contexts, it raises questions about careless amplification, rumor, compulsive posting, and content produced without awareness of consequences.

9.5 Positive Right Speech

Right Speech is not limited to abstention. It includes communication that is: Truthful; Constructive; Reconciliatory; Respectful; Timely; Supported by evidence; Appropriate to the audience; and Motivated by compassion.

A digital spiritual friend models these qualities, especially during disagreement.

Mindfulness and Digital Attention

Digital environments compete for attention. Repeated notifications, short-form media, infinite scrolling, and algorithmic recommendations can fragment awareness and encourage automatic consumption.

Mindfulness can help users recognize the sequence: 1. A cue appears; 2. Attention is captured; 3. Feeling arises; 4. Craving or aversion develops; 5. The user clicks, reacts, or shares; and 6. The behavior is reinforced.

Mindfulness creates a pause within this sequence. Before sharing, a person can ask: Is this true? Why do I want to share it? What emotion is present? Who may be harmed? Does sharing contribute to understanding? Am I reacting to the content or to the desire for recognition?

Mindful digital use should not become another form of individual blame. Platforms also bear responsibility for systems intentionally designed to maximize engagement. Personal mindfulness and structural reform are complementary.

Digital Environments and Young People

Children and adolescents are especially important because identity, attention, emotional regulation, and social relationships are still developing. Social media can provide creativity, community, identity exploration, and access to support. It can also expose young people to bullying, harmful comparison, sleep disruption, inappropriate content, and compulsive use.

The American Psychological Association (2023) emphasizes that the effects of social media vary according to individual characteristics, content, developmental stage, and patterns of use. Social media is not uniformly beneficial or harmful.

A Buddhist digital ecology for young people should therefore include: Age-appropriate digital literacy; Protection from exploitation; Education in truthful and compassionate communication; Limits preserving sleep and physical activity; Trusted adults and mentors; Supportive peer communities; Critical understanding of algorithmic influence; and Opportunities to practice mindful disengagement.

Prohibition alone is insufficient. Young people require guidance in how to become responsible participants rather than passive consumers.

Digital Dhamma and Online Religious Communities

Digital platforms have expanded access to Buddhist texts, teachings, meditation instruction, chanting, and communities. People living far from monasteries can study with teachers and communicate with practitioners internationally.

These developments can democratize knowledge, but they also produce risks. Teachings may be shortened to fit platform formats, removing context. Algorithms may favor certainty, novelty, emotional intensity, and controversy over careful explanation. Religious quotations may circulate without accurate sources. Meditation advice may be offered to people with psychological vulnerabilities without adequate screening.

Online religious communities should therefore provide: Accurate references; Qualified teachers; Clear boundaries between general teaching and clinical care; Moderation policies; Procedures for reporting misconduct; Protection of personal data; Transparency about donations; and Encouragement of offline support where appropriate.

Digital Dhamma should supplement rather than automatically replace embodied community and direct ethical relationships.

Parasocial Relationships and Spiritual Authority

A parasocial relationship occurs when an audience member experiences familiarity or attachment toward a public figure who does not know them personally. Such relationships are common in digital media and are not necessarily harmful.

A Dhamma teacher's videos may provide comfort and instruction. Problems arise when followers mistake mediated familiarity for mutual relationship or assume that curated content reveals the teacher's complete character.

Digital spiritual education should make this asymmetry explicit. Content consumption is not equivalent to personal guidance, and emotional attachment is not evidence of spiritual attainment.

Teachers should avoid encouraging possessive loyalty or presenting themselves as the sole source of truth. Followers should compare teachings with reliable texts, qualified communities, and ethical standards.

Misinformation and Buddhist Epistemic Responsibility

Digital misinformation spreads through emotional appeal, repetition, group identity, and selective exposure. Del Vicario et al. (2016) found that selective exposure contributed to the formation of homogeneous clusters around online narratives.

Buddhist ethics adds an epistemic responsibility to speech. Before sharing information, users should investigate sources, context, evidence, and potential harm.

This does not mean that every user must become an expert fact-checker. It means recognizing the moral difference between knowing, believing, suspecting, and repeating.

UNESCO (2024) emphasizes that digital citizenship education should integrate critical thinking, information literacy, ethical participation, human rights, and responsibility. These goals overlap with Buddhist concerns for wisdom, truthfulness, and non-harming.

A digital spiritual friend should model verification and teach followers how to evaluate claims rather than merely telling them what to believe.

A Four-Level Model of Digital Moral Ecology

A suitable digital environment requires coordinated responsibility at four levels.

Level	Principal agent	Core responsibility
Personal	Individual user	Mindful attention, verification, and Right Speech
Relational	Friends, teachers, and influencers	Guidance, compassion, correction, and non-exploitation
Communal	Groups, schools, monasteries, and moderators	Norms, safety, accountability, and inclusion
Structural	Platforms, regulators, and technology companies	Ethical design, transparency, privacy, and harm reduction

1. Personal Level

Users cultivate awareness of intention, emotional reactivity, time spent online, and the consequences of sharing.

2. Relational Level

Digital spiritual friends support moral and intellectual development. They model humility, truthfulness, and compassionate disagreement.

3. Communal Level

Communities establish norms regarding evidence, civility, confidentiality, conflict, and misconduct. Moderation is a form of moral architecture rather than mere censorship when applied transparently and proportionately.

4. Structural Level

Platforms determine visibility, collect data, design incentives, and govern access. They bear responsibilities that cannot be transferred entirely to users.

The four levels interact. Mindful users cannot fully overcome manipulative systems, while ethical platforms cannot guarantee wise behavior. Digital well-being requires both personal cultivation and structural responsibility.

Indicators of a Suitable Digital Environment

A digital environment informed by paṭirūpadesavāsa may be assessed through the following indicators: 1. **Safety:** Protection from harassment, exploitation, fraud, and violence. 2. **Truthfulness:** Support for verification, correction, and credible sources. 3. **Ethical norms:** Clear opposition to dehumanization and deliberate deception.

4. **Diversity:** Access to multiple perspectives without forced hostility. 5. **Accountability:** Transparent rules and fair reporting procedures. 6. **Privacy:** Responsible treatment of personal data. 7. **Attention protection:** Tools reducing compulsive use and manipulation. 8. **Accessibility:** Inclusion of users with different abilities and resources. 9. **Developmental suitability:** Protection appropriate to age and vulnerability. 10. **Constructive purpose:** Support for knowledge, cooperation, compassion, and well-being.

No platform will meet these conditions perfectly. The indicators provide a direction for evaluation and reform.

From Digital Consumers to Moral Participants

Users are often treated as consumers whose task is to select content from a market. Buddhist ethics presents them as intentional agents participating in the production of a shared environment.

Every post, reaction, comment, and share contributes to platform signals and community norms. A person who rewards humiliating content strengthens its visibility. A user who corrects misinformation respectfully contributes to epistemic integrity.

This does not imply that individual users possess equal power to platform companies. It means that participation has moral consequences even within unequal systems.

The digital spiritual friend helps users understand this participatory responsibility. The aim is not simply to consume wholesome content but to help create wholesome digital conditions for others.

Challenges in Applying Buddhist Ethics Online

1. Cultural Diversity

Buddhist categories cannot simply be imposed upon religiously diverse digital populations. Their application should be translated into broadly accessible values such as non-harming, truthfulness, compassion, responsibility, and critical reflection.

2. Freedom of Expression

Efforts to reduce harmful speech may be misused to suppress criticism or minority voices. Buddhist harmony should not be interpreted as compulsory agreement. Truthful criticism of injustice may be ethically necessary.

3. Defining Harm

People disagree about what constitutes harmful content. Transparent procedures, evidence, proportionality, and opportunities for appeal are necessary.

4. Commercial Incentives

Platforms profit from attention, and emotionally intense content may produce engagement. Ethical reform must confront business models rather than rely only upon voluntary user restraint.

5. Artificial Intelligence

Generative AI can support education and translation but can also produce misinformation, impersonation, fabricated religious quotations, and automated persuasion. Digital spiritual friendship requires clear disclosure when content is generated or substantially modified by AI.

Implications for Buddhist Education

Buddhist educational institutions can integrate digital ethics into religious instruction. Students should learn not only how to access texts but also how to verify translations, identify manipulated content, protect privacy, and communicate through Right Speech.

A curriculum could include: Buddhist ethics of speech; Mindfulness of digital intention; Source verification; Algorithmic literacy; Online conflict resolution; Privacy and consent; Ethical content creation; AI-generated misinformation; Teacher accountability; and Digital community service.

The objective is not withdrawal from technology but responsible participation guided by wisdom and compassion.

Discussion

Extending paṭirūpadesavāsa into the digital world reveals that moral development depends upon both personal and technological conditions. Digital locality consists not only of websites or devices but also of algorithms, commercial incentives, relationships, norms, and institutions.

The Buddhist principle of spiritual friendship likewise becomes more complex online. Digital mediation expands access to teachers and communities, but it weakens some traditional mechanisms of accountability. Popularity, charisma, and visual presentation can substitute for demonstrated integrity.

A digital kalyāṇamitta should therefore be identified through ethical function rather than title or status. The person supports truth, reduces harm, encourages discernment, corrects with compassion, acknowledges limitations, and avoids exploitation.

The framework also challenges a purely individual approach to digital well-being. Users should cultivate mindfulness and Right Speech, but platforms and institutions must address the structures that amplify hostility, misinformation, and compulsive behavior.

The suitable digital environment is thus a collective moral achievement. It emerges when users, teachers, communities, designers, and public institutions accept interconnected responsibility.

Conclusion

The Buddhist principle of paṭirūpadesavāsa remains deeply relevant in the digital age. A suitable locality is no longer only a physical place with safety, resources, and access to wise teachers. It also includes online environments that shape attention, belief, emotion, identity, and conduct.

Digital spaces can support education, spiritual practice, social connection, compassion, and collective action. They can also amplify misinformation, hatred, addiction, exploitation, and rigid attachment to views. Their moral quality depends upon the interaction of user intention, relational influence, community norms, platform design, and institutional governance.

The principle of sappurisūpassaya and the ideal of kalyāṇamittatā provide a relational response. Human beings require companions who model ethical integrity, communicate truthfully, correct compassionately, and guide others toward wisdom.

A digital spiritual friend cannot be identified by follower count, algorithmic visibility, religious clothing, or rhetorical certainty. The decisive criteria are moral conduct, epistemic responsibility, compassion, non-exploitation, accountability, and the reduction of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Digital moral development consequently requires four coordinated levels: personal self-regulation, ethical friendship, responsible community governance, and accountable platform design. Neglecting any level produces an incomplete solution.

Mindful users cannot create a healthy digital world alone if platforms systematically reward harmful engagement. Ethical platforms cannot guarantee wisdom if users deliberately deceive or attack others. Teachers cannot serve as spiritual friends without accountability, and communities cannot remain safe without responsible participation.

The movement from paṭirūpadesavāsa to digital spiritual friendship therefore does not abandon the traditional teaching. It reveals its continuing logic: human development depends upon inhabiting supportive environments and relating to persons who direct one another toward the good. In the digital age, everyone who designs, teaches, moderates, creates, shares, or responds participates in constructing the locality in which others must live and develop.

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Path, Arahantship, and Buddhahood: A Comparative Study of the Paths and Ideals of Liberation in Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism

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Abstract

Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism share the fundamental objective of liberation from ignorance, craving, suffering, and saṃsāra, yet they organize their paths and formulate their highest religious ideals differently. Theravāda gives normative priority to the Noble Eightfold Path and presents arahantship as complete liberation through the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion. It nevertheless recognizes the bodhisatta path culminating in perfect Buddhahood as an exceptionally demanding vocation. Mahāyāna makes the bodhisattva aspiration universally normative in many of its traditions, integrating wisdom, compassion, skillful means, the perfections, and progressive stages of realization into the path toward buddhahood. Certain Mahāyāna texts criticize the arahant's nirvāṇa as incomplete or provisional, while others reinterpret the three vehicles as skillful means leading ultimately to the single Buddha Vehicle. This article argues that the contrast should not be reduced to a simple opposition between individual and universal liberation. Theravāda arahants are not defined by selfishness, and Mahāyāna bodhisattvas do not abandon wisdom or personal transformation. The central difference concerns the scope and ideal culmination of the path: Theravāda distinguishes the complete liberation shared by Buddhas and arahants from the unique capacities of a perfectly awakened Buddha, whereas influential Mahāyāna traditions regard full buddhahood—often defined as the removal of both affective and cognitive obscurations—as the most comprehensive realization of wisdom and compassion.

Keywords: Noble Eightfold Path, Theravāda, nirvāṇa liberation

Introduction

The distinction between the arahant and bodhisattva ideals is frequently used to summarize the difference between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism. According to a familiar representation, Theravāda practitioners seek individual liberation by becoming arahants, whereas Mahāyāna practitioners postpone liberation to save all beings by becoming Buddhas. This contrast is memorable but historically and philosophically inadequate.

Theravāda does accord a central place to the arahant, a disciple who realizes nibbāna and brings rebirth to an end. Yet Theravāda literature also preserves the bodhisatta career of the Buddha Gotama, accounts of previous Buddhas, practices called perfections, and historical cases of practitioners aspiring to future buddhahood. Conversely, Mahāyāna does not teach that bodhisattvas simply remain in saṃsāra as ordinary beings or reject liberation. The bodhisattva path requires the transformation of one's own conduct, mind, and understanding precisely so that effective assistance can be offered to others.

Nor is Mahāyāna a single doctrinal system. Prajñāpāramitā, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, tathāgatagarbha, Pure Land, Huayan, Tiantai, Chan, and Tibetan scholastic traditions do not

explain buddhahood in identical ways. Some emphasize emptiness, others nondual cognition, Buddha nature, the three bodies, or the One Vehicle. General comparison must therefore acknowledge internal diversity.

This article compares Theravāda and Mahāyāna at three levels: the structure of the path, their principal ideals of liberation, and their understanding of buddhahood. It argues that both traditions integrate wisdom, ethical transformation, and concern for others, but they rank and systematize their ideals differently. The most important disagreement is not whether liberation should benefit others. It concerns whether arahantship constitutes the unsurpassable completion of the path or whether only perfect buddhahood realizes the fullest removal of obscurations and the complete capacity to liberate beings.

The Shared Buddhist Framework of Liberation

Despite their differences, Theravāda and Mahāyāna share a broad doctrinal foundation. Both understand ordinary existence as conditioned by ignorance and craving. Both accept kamma and rebirth, regard attachment to self as a central source of suffering, and teach that ethical discipline, meditative cultivation, and wisdom are necessary for liberation.

Both traditions also understand the Buddhist path as transformative rather than merely doctrinal. Liberation cannot be achieved solely through ritual affiliation, intellectual knowledge, or belief in Buddhist propositions. It requires the purification of conduct, mind, and understanding.

The Four Noble Truths provide a common structure: 1. Suffering or unsatisfactoriness must be understood. 2. Its origin in craving and ignorance must be abandoned. 3. Its cessation must be realized. 4. The path leading to cessation must be cultivated.

Mahāyāna texts reinterpret and expand this framework but do not simply discard it. The bodhisattva must understand suffering and its causes, cultivate ethical discipline and meditation, and realize non-self and emptiness. The distinctively Mahāyāna element is the aspiration to perfect awakening for the benefit of all beings and the systematic integration of this aspiration into every stage of the path (Williams, 2009).

The Noble Eightfold Path in Theravāda Buddhism

1. Structure of the path

The Noble Eightfold Path consists of: 1. Right view 2. Right intention 3. Right speech 4. Right action 5. Right livelihood 6. Right effort 7. Right mindfulness 8. Right concentration

The Magga-vibhaṅga Sutta defines these factors in relation to the Four Noble Truths, renunciation, harmlessness, ethical restraint, wholesome effort, foundations of mindfulness, and meditative absorption (Sujato, 2018a).

The eight factors are traditionally grouped under the three trainings: Ethical discipline (sīla): right speech, action, and livelihood, Concentration (samādhi): right effort, mindfulness, and concentration, Wisdom (paññā): right view and right intention

These trainings are mutually supportive. Ethical restraint reduces remorse and social conflict. Concentration stabilizes the mind. Wisdom directly understands impermanence, suffering, non-self, dependent origination, and the Four Noble Truths. The path is therefore not merely a sequence of commandments but an integrated transformation of conduct, attention, motivation, and understanding (Gethin, 1998).

2. Mundane and supramundane dimensions

Theravāda distinguishes mundane cultivation of the path from the supramundane path consciousness that directly realizes nibbāna. Before awakening, practitioners gradually develop generosity, morality, concentration, mindfulness, and insight. At the decisive moment, the path becomes supramundane because nibbāna is its object and the relevant defilements are irreversibly eliminated.

The four stages of awakening are: 1. Stream-entry (sotāpatti): the destruction of identity view, doubt, and attachment to rules and observances as sufficient for liberation. 2. Once-returning (sakadāgāmitā): a further weakening of sensual desire and ill will. 3. Non-returning (anāgāmitā): the elimination of sensual desire and ill will. 4. Arahantship (arahatta): the destruction of all ten fetters and the end of rebirth.

This graded model demonstrates that liberation is both developmental and punctuated by irreversible breakthroughs. Arahantship represents the completion of the disciple's path.

Arahantship as Complete Liberation

1. The meaning of arahantship

An arahant has destroyed greed, hatred, and delusion and eliminated the conditions for renewed birth. Canonical declarations of arahantship state that birth is ended, the spiritual life has been fulfilled, what had to be done has been done, and there is no further coming to any state of existence.

Arahantship is not merely moral excellence or temporary meditative peace. It is irreversible liberation. During life, an arahant still experiences bodily pain and the results of previous conditions, but these experiences no longer generate craving, clinging, or future becoming. At death, the process of rebirth ceases.

Theravāda does not regard the arahant's attainment as partial in the sense of leaving some liberating task unfinished. The arahant and the Buddha both realize the same nibbāna and both completely eliminate the defilements responsible for saṃsāra (Bodhi, 2010).

2. The arahant is not defined by selfishness

The description of the arahant ideal as "selfish liberation" is misleading. Arahants cultivate generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, ethical restraint, and non-harming. Many canonical arahants teach others, care for communities, preserve the Dhamma, and assist practitioners.

The distinction lies not in whether arahants possess compassion but in the scope of their religious vocation. An arahant follows a path discovered and taught by a Buddha. A perfectly awakened Buddha discovers the path in an age when it has been forgotten and establishes a dispensation through which others can attain liberation.

An arahant's removal of greed and self-attachment makes a fundamentally selfish arahant conceptually inconsistent. Nevertheless, Theravāda does not require every practitioner to undertake the immeasurably long career necessary to become a teaching Buddha.

Buddhahood in Theravāda

1. Three forms of awakening

Theravāda literature distinguishes three principal forms of awakened person: A disciple arahant (sāvaka-arahant). A solitary Buddha (paccekabuddha). A perfectly awakened Buddha (sammāsambuddha).

All three attain release from saṃsāra. The difference concerns how awakening is attained and the capacities associated with it.

A disciple arahant realizes the path through the teaching of a Buddha. A paccekabuddha independently realizes liberation but does not establish a comprehensive dispensation. A sammāsambuddha independently rediscovers the path and possesses exceptional abilities to formulate, adapt, and transmit the Dhamma to diverse beings.

The Buddha's superiority therefore need not imply that the arahant's liberation is defective. It concerns the Buddha's unique knowledge, accumulated perfections, pedagogical capacities, and historical role as the founder of a Buddhist dispensation.

2. The Theravāda bodhisatta

In Theravāda, bodhisatta primarily refers to a being committed to becoming a sammāsambuddha, especially Gotama Buddha in his former lives. The bodhisatta develops perfections such as generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity.

The bodhisatta ideal is therefore present in Theravāda, although it is not normally prescribed as the universal vocation of all practitioners. Historical Theravāda societies have included rulers, monks, and laypersons who expressed aspirations for future buddhahood. Consequently, Theravāda cannot simply be equated with rejection of the bodhisattva path (Ratnayaka, 1985; Samuels, 1997).

Theravāda nevertheless distinguishes this exceptional aspiration from the normative path to arahantship. Becoming a Buddha requires an extraordinarily long accumulation of perfections and a commitment to rediscover and teach the Dhamma in a future world.

The Mahāyāna Bodhisattva Ideal

1. Bodhicitta

The defining orientation of the Mahāyāna path is bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain complete buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. It unites two dimensions: Compassion directed toward beings who suffer, Wisdom directed toward perfect awakening and the realization of emptiness.

Bodhicitta transforms the intention behind Buddhist practice. Generosity, morality, meditation, and wisdom are cultivated not solely for personal release but as components of a universal aspiration.

Śāntideva's Bodhicaryāvatāra presents bodhicitta as the foundation of the bodhisattva life. The text integrates confession, carefulness, mindfulness, patience, diligence, meditation, wisdom, and dedication of merit. Compassion is not treated as a substitute for wisdom; effective altruism requires understanding the emptiness of self and phenomena (Śāntideva, 1996).

2. Does the bodhisattva postpone nirvāṇa?

The popular statement that a bodhisattva postpones enlightenment until every other being has been saved is only partly accurate. Bodhisattvas may vow to remain engaged with saṃsāra and refuse a liberation conceived as withdrawal from others. Yet full buddhahood is itself regarded as the state most capable of benefiting beings.

The bodhisattva does not normally postpone the removal of greed, hatred, or ignorance. These are obstacles to effective compassion. Rather, the bodhisattva rejects the exclusive appropriation of peace and seeks an awakening that unites freedom from defilement with the knowledge and capacities needed to assist others.

Advanced Mahāyāna philosophy also challenges the rigid opposition between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. In Madhyamaka, both are empty of intrinsic existence. The bodhisattva can therefore engage with conventional suffering without grasping either saṃsāra or nirvāṇa as an independently existing realm (Garfield, 1995).

The Perfections and Stages of the Bodhisattva Path

1. The six perfections

The Mahāyāna bodhisattva path is commonly organized around six perfections (pāramitās): 1. Generosity (dāna) 2. Ethical discipline (śīla) 3. Patience (kṣānti) 4. Energy or diligence (vīrya) 5. Meditative concentration (dhyāna) 6. Wisdom (prajñā)

Some systems expand the list to ten by adding skillful means, vow or aspiration, power, and knowledge.

The perfections are not simply individual virtues placed beside one another. Wisdom prevents generosity and morality from being grounded in attachment to an independently existing giver, recipient, or gift. Compassion prevents wisdom from becoming detached from suffering. The bodhisattva path therefore seeks to integrate insight into emptiness with practical responsibility.

2. The ten grounds

Mahāyāna scholastic systems also describe ten bodhisattva grounds or bhūmis. These represent progressively deeper realization and greater capacity to benefit beings. Although lists and interpretations differ, the stages generally connect the perfection of wisdom with the gradual removal of obscurations and the cultivation of qualities leading to buddhahood.

The path is often preceded by stages of accumulation and preparation and followed by the paths of seeing, meditation, and no-more-learning. These structures show that Mahāyāna does not imagine altruistic intention alone to be sufficient. Bodhicitta inaugurates a demanding process of ethical, contemplative, and cognitive transformation (Williams, 2009).

3. Skillful means

Skillful means (upāya-kauālya) is especially important to the bodhisattva vocation. Because beings possess different capacities, dispositions, and forms of attachment, a single formulation may not benefit everyone equally. A Buddha or advanced bodhisattva adapts teachings to the audience without losing the liberating purpose of the Dhamma.

Skillful means helps explain the diversity of Buddhist teachings. Mahāyāna texts may interpret earlier doctrines as genuine but provisional instructions designed for particular practitioners. This hermeneutical strategy becomes especially important in the doctrine of the One Vehicle.

The Mahāyāna Critique of Arahantship

1. The three vehicles

Mahāyāna sources frequently distinguish three vehicles: 1. The disciple vehicle (śrāvakayāna). 2. The solitary Buddha vehicle (pratyekabuddhayāna). 3. The bodhisattva vehicle (bodhisattvayāna).

The first two culminate in forms of individual nirvāṇa, while the third culminates in perfect buddhahood. Some texts accept these as genuinely distinct paths. Others regard them as provisional divisions within a single ultimate path.

The Mahāyāna critique does not appear uniformly in all texts. It ranges from acknowledgment of the arahant's liberation as valid but limited to the claim that apparent final nirvāṇa is a temporary resting place before the practitioner eventually enters the bodhisattva path.

2. The One Vehicle of the Lotus Sūtra

The Lotus Sūtra teaches that the three vehicles are skillful means and that there is ultimately one Buddha Vehicle. Its famous parable of the burning house describes a father promising different carts to persuade his children to leave danger, after which he gives them a superior vehicle. Similarly, the Buddha teaches different paths according to the capacities of beings while intending ultimately to lead them to buddhahood.

The Lotus Sūtra therefore predicts future buddhahood for major disciples traditionally identified as arahants. This does not simply deny the value of their earlier attainment. It reinterprets that attainment as a stage within a more comprehensive journey (Kubo & Yuyama, 2007).

The One Vehicle doctrine became especially influential in East Asian Buddhism. However, it should not be attributed uniformly to every Mahāyāna system. Certain Yogācāra traditions, for example, gave more substantial doctrinal status to differences in spiritual capacity and lineage.

3. Two kinds of obscuration

Later Mahāyāna scholastic traditions frequently distinguish two broad forms of obscuration: Affective obscurations (kleśāvaraṇa): greed, hatred, delusion, and related defilements that bind beings to saṃsāra, Cognitive obscurations (jñeyāvaraṇa): subtle habits of dualistic cognition and limitations that obstruct complete knowledge.

Within this framework, an arahant has eliminated the affective obscurations and attained genuine freedom from compulsory rebirth. Full buddhahood additionally requires eliminating the cognitive obscurations that prevent complete and spontaneous knowledge of what benefits beings.

This model explains why Mahāyāna can recognize the arahant's liberation while regarding buddhahood as a more comprehensive attainment. Theravāda does not generally accept this precise classification as evidence that an arahant's liberation is incomplete.

Buddhahood in Mahāyāna Philosophy

1. Perfect wisdom and universal compassion

Mahāyāna buddhahood represents the culmination of both wisdom and compassion. Wisdom directly realizes the emptiness and nonduality of phenomena. Compassion responds spontaneously to the suffering of beings. These are not merely two qualities placed together: wisdom removes self-centred reification, while compassion expresses the relational consequences of that realization.

Buddhahood also includes extraordinary pedagogical capacities. A Buddha knows the dispositions of beings, teaches through appropriate means, and manifests in forms suited to different worlds and communities.

2. The three bodies

Mahāyāna developed the doctrine of the three bodies (trikāya) to explain different dimensions of buddhahood: Dharmakāya: the dimension of ultimate reality, awakened knowledge, or the true nature realized by a Buddha, Saṃbhogakāya: an exalted or enjoyment body appearing to advanced bodhisattvas, Nirmāṇakāya: an emanated body appearing in the world, such as the historical Buddha Śākyamuni.

Interpretations vary significantly among Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, tathāgatagarbha, Tibetan, and East Asian traditions. The doctrine generally expands buddhahood beyond the biography of one historical teacher while preserving the idea that awakened activity can become conventionally manifest (Buswell & Lopez, 2014).

3. Buddha nature and universal potential

Many Mahāyāna traditions teach that beings possess Buddha nature (tathāgatagarbha) or the capacity for awakening. Some texts employ affirmative language that presents this nature as pure, luminous, or enduring. Such descriptions have generated debate over whether Buddha nature is an ontological principle, a potential for awakening, an expression of emptiness, or a skillful means intended to encourage practice.

In non-substantialist interpretations, Buddha nature does not constitute an eternal self. It means that defilements are adventitious and removable and that the absence of fixed identity makes transformation possible. The universality of Buddha nature supports the Mahāyāna conviction that buddhahood is not restricted to an exceptional class of beings.

A Comparative Analysis

The principal similarities and differences may be summarized as follows:

Dimension	Theravāda	Mahāyāna
Normative path	Noble Eightfold Path and three trainings	Bodhisattva path integrating perfections, grounds, wisdom, and skillful means

Primary ideal	Arahantship, while recognizing the exceptional bodhisatta vocation	Buddhahood through the bodhisattva path
Understanding of arahantship	Complete and irreversible liberation	Genuine liberation but often interpreted as less comprehensive or provisional
Understanding of buddhahood	Rediscovery of the path, complete liberation, and unsurpassed teaching ability	Complete removal of affective and cognitive obscurations and perfect capacity to benefit beings
Role of compassion	Essential virtue and expression of non-harming, but not necessarily a universal vow to buddhahood	Constitutive of bodhicitta and the bodhisattva vocation
Path practices	Sīla, samādhi, paññā; thirty-seven factors of awakening	Six or ten perfections, ten grounds, bodhicitta, emptiness, and skillful means
Final religious horizon	Nibbāna attained by Buddha and arahant, with differences in capacities	Perfect buddhahood, interpreted in some traditions through the One Vehicle

The comparison demonstrates that neither tradition separates personal transformation from ethical responsibility. An arahant must eliminate self-centred craving, while a bodhisattva must cultivate personal discipline and wisdom. Their difference concerns how the goal is framed and which capacities are considered essential to its fullest completion.

Beyond the Opposition between Self-Liberation and Altruism

The stereotype that Theravāda represents selfish individualism while Mahāyāna represents universal compassion is historically and philosophically problematic.

First, Theravāda morality includes generosity, loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, and service to the Buddhist community. Arahants frequently teach others. Liberation from self-grasping cannot coherently be reduced to egoistic self-interest.

Second, Mahāyāna altruism depends upon personal cultivation. A bodhisattva dominated by anger, delusion, and attachment cannot reliably liberate others. The apparent contrast between helping oneself and helping others overlooks their causal interdependence.

Third, the Mahāyāna critique of arahantship often belongs to a particular polemical and hermeneutical context. It should not be repeated as a neutral historical description of living Theravāda traditions.

A more accurate comparison concerns the scope of aspiration. Theravāda permits different legitimate aspirations but generally treats arahantship as complete liberation. Mahāyāna elevates the aspiration to perfect buddhahood for all beings as its normative ideal and often interprets lesser goals within that wider framework.

Conclusion

Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism share the aim of overcoming ignorance, craving, suffering, and rebirth. Both require ethical discipline, meditative cultivation, and wisdom. Both recognize the transformative significance of non-self and the necessity of abandoning the defilements.

Their paths nevertheless differ in organization and ideal culmination. Theravāda gives normative priority to the Noble Eightfold Path and regards arahantship as complete liberation. A Buddha differs from an arahant not because the arahant remains bound to

samsāra, but because a Buddha independently rediscovers the path, perfects extraordinary qualities, and establishes a dispensation for the liberation of others.

Mahāyāna makes bodhicitta and the bodhisattva path central. The perfections, grounds, emptiness, compassion, and skillful means culminate in buddhahood. Influential Mahāyāna traditions regard the removal of affective obscurations as insufficient for the most comprehensive awakening and maintain that full buddhahood also removes subtle cognitive obscurations. The Lotus Sūtra goes further by interpreting the three vehicles as provisional means within the single Buddha Vehicle.

The contrast is therefore not adequately expressed as personal liberation versus altruistic liberation. It is a difference between two ways of ordering valid Buddhist attainments. Theravāda emphasizes the completeness of liberation attained by the arahant while reserving perfect buddhahood for an exceptional vocation. Mahāyāna universalizes the bodhisattva aspiration and presents buddhahood as the integration of complete wisdom, unrestricted compassion, and unsurpassed liberating capacity.

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When Morality Is Tested: Mental Cultivation and the Development of Ethical Resilience in Buddhist Philosophy

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Abstract

Moral conduct is relatively easy to maintain when social conditions are stable, personal needs are secure, and ethical action carries little cost. Its strength is more clearly tested during unemployment, conflict, illness, institutional pressure, scarcity, fear, and social disorder. Buddhist philosophy does not regard morality as obedience to external rules alone. Ethical conduct must be supported by the cultivation of mind through right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, and wisdom. This article develops the analytical concept of “ethical resilience” to describe the capacity to preserve or restore responsible conduct under adverse conditions. The term is not a traditional Pāli category but draws upon canonical teachings concerning *sīla*, *citta-bhāvanā*, heedfulness, the four right efforts, mindfulness, concentration, and wise reflection. Buddhist mental training strengthens ethical resilience by preventing unwholesome states, recognizing them when they arise, creating a pause between feeling and action, stabilizing attention, and examining conduct before, during, and after it occurs. Nevertheless, mental cultivation should not be reduced to emotional suppression, passive endurance, or adaptation to unjust institutions. Wisdom and compassion require attention to structural causes of suffering as well as personal responsibility. Ethical resilience in Buddhist philosophy is therefore neither rigid rule-following nor individual toughness. It is the flexible, reflective, and compassionate capacity to act without being dominated by greed, hatred, fear, and delusion.

Keywords: Buddhist ethics, mental cultivation, mindfulness

Introduction

An individual’s moral commitments are not tested equally under all circumstances. Refraining from theft is easier when one has secure access to food and income. Truthful speech is easier when honesty does not threaten employment, status, or physical safety. Nonviolence is easier in a peaceful environment than during war, persecution, or civil disorder.

This does not imply that adverse conditions eliminate responsibility. It means that responsible evaluation must recognize how fear, scarcity, authority, group identity, and psychological exhaustion influence action. Moral development requires more than knowing rules. It requires the capacity to remain aware, deliberate, and responsible when the emotional and social costs of ethical conduct increase.

Buddhist philosophy locates the immediate roots of action in the mind. Intentions and actions may arise from greed, hatred, and delusion or from non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. Consequently, a person cannot reliably safeguard conduct merely through external conformity. The underlying mental conditions must also be trained.

The present article develops “ethical resilience” as a contemporary analytical concept grounded in Buddhist principles. It refers to the capacity to maintain, recover, or deepen wholesome conduct under conditions that threaten it. Ethical resilience includes the ability to: Recognize moral danger, Regulate destructive impulses, Tolerate discomfort without automatically causing harm, Recall ethical commitments under pressure, Reflect upon probable consequences, Correct misconduct when it occurs, Learn from failure without falling into denial or despair.

Ethical resilience is not a canonical Pāli term. It is an interpretive model for bringing Buddhist moral psychology into dialogue with contemporary discussions of crisis, self-regulation, and resilience. Its Buddhist foundation lies in the integration of ethical discipline, mental cultivation, and wisdom.

Moral Vulnerability under Crisis Conditions

1. Crisis as a test of habitual character

A crisis disrupts the conditions supporting ordinary behaviour. It may involve sudden danger, prolonged insecurity, social conflict, illness, displacement, or moral pressure within an institution. Such conditions narrow attention and intensify survival concerns.

A person who values honesty may conceal information to protect a career. A compassionate person may become hostile toward a group portrayed as dangerous. A professional may obey an unethical command because resistance threatens income or status.

Buddhist ethics explains these vulnerabilities through conditionality. Conduct arises from interacting factors that include intention, perception, feeling, habit, social influence, and available alternatives. Adverse conditions can activate latent tendencies that remain less visible during stability.

This conditional analysis avoids two extremes. The first is moral essentialism, which treats a harmful action as proof of an unchangeably evil person. The second is determinism, which treats crisis conditions as removing responsibility entirely. Buddhism recognizes conditioning while maintaining that present awareness and intention remain morally significant.

2. Stress, cognitive narrowing, and reactivity

Under threat, attention tends to focus upon immediate danger. The capacity to consider long-term effects, the welfare of strangers, or alternative responses may weaken. Strong unpleasant feeling can rapidly develop into aversion, blame, and aggressive action.

In Buddhist analysis, feeling (*vedanā*) does not automatically determine conduct. Yet when feeling is combined with ignorance, it can condition craving and clinging. A painful experience may generate the demand that the pain stop immediately, followed by hostility toward anyone identified as its cause.

Mental cultivation intervenes in this process. It does not necessarily remove pain or danger, but it can change how they are interpreted and acted upon. The central educational question becomes: can a person experience fear, anger, or deprivation without allowing those states to control bodily and verbal action?

Buddhist Ethics as Training

1. The precepts are training principles

The five precepts provide a basic structure for Buddhist lay ethics: 1. Refraining from killing. 2. Refraining from taking what has not been given. 3. Refraining from sexual misconduct. 4. Refraining from false speech. 5. Refraining from intoxicants that cause heedlessness.

The usual Pāli formulation describes each precept as a *sikkhāpada*, a training principle. This language is significant. A precept is not merely a command backed by punishment. It is a discipline through which habits, intentions, and awareness are developed. The precepts establish moral boundaries before crisis occurs. When a person has repeatedly reflected upon non-harming and honesty, these principles are more likely to remain cognitively available under pressure.

Precepts do not eliminate the need for judgment. Circumstances may be complex, information incomplete, and possible actions harmful in different ways. Their function is to orient judgment around non-harming, responsibility, and the weakening of defilements (Harvey, 2000).

2. Intention and psychological roots

The Buddha's statement that intention is *kamma* places motivation at the centre of moral analysis. Bodily and verbal conduct acquire ethical significance through the mental qualities directing them (Bodhi, 2012).

This emphasis does not make consequences irrelevant. A well-intentioned action may cause foreseeable harm through negligence or delusion. Mature ethical judgment requires attention to intention, means, context, and likely effects.

Buddhist analysis identifies three unwholesome roots: Greed (*lobha*), Hatred (*dosa*), Delusion (*moha*).

Their wholesome counterparts are: Non-greed (*alobha*), Non-hatred (*adosa*), Non-delusion (*amoha*).

During crisis, ethical resilience depends partly upon recognizing which roots are active. A decision presented as necessary self-protection may actually be shaped by hatred. Apparent compassion may be mixed with attachment, fear, or the desire for social approval.

3. Character as cultivated tendency

Repeated intentions form habits. Habits make certain responses more available under pressure. A person who repeatedly practices truthful speech has developed a different disposition from someone who avoids lying only when detection is likely.

Buddhist training therefore prepares for crisis before it occurs. The decisive moral response may take place in seconds, but the capacity behind it has often been formed through years of smaller choices.

Ethical resilience is thus not spontaneous heroism detached from ordinary life. It is the crisis expression of previously cultivated qualities.

Defining Ethical Resilience in Buddhist Terms

Psychological resilience commonly refers to the capacity to adapt successfully to adversity. Masten (2014) describes resilience not as an extraordinary trait possessed by a few exceptional individuals but as a process emerging from ordinary adaptive systems.

Buddhist ethical resilience is more normatively specific. Adaptation alone is insufficient. A person may adapt efficiently to a corrupt organization by becoming more skilled at deception. Such adaptation is psychologically functional but ethically problematic. Ethical resilience may therefore be defined as:

The cultivated capacity to maintain or restore conduct grounded in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion when adverse internal or external conditions increase pressure toward harmful action.

This definition includes both stability and recovery. A morally resilient person may still fail. The relevant issue is whether misconduct is recognized, acknowledged, repaired where possible, and used as a basis for renewed training.

Buddhist ethical resilience has four dimensions:

Dimension	Principal function
Ethical orientation	Establishes non-harming and responsibility as guiding commitments
Emotional regulation	Prevents fear, anger, and craving from automatically becoming action
Attentional stability	Maintains awareness of intention and consequence
Wisdom	Interprets conditions and selects responses that reduce suffering

Right Effort as the Energy of Ethical Resilience

1. The four right efforts

Right effort (sammāvāyāma) is conventionally explained through four tasks: 1. Preventing unarisen unwholesome states. 2. Abandoning unwholesome states that have arisen. 3. Arousing wholesome states not yet arisen. 4. Maintaining and developing wholesome states that have arisen

This structure offers a complete model of preventive and restorative moral development. Ethical resilience does not begin only after anger or greed has overwhelmed the mind. It includes arranging conditions so that harmful states are less likely to arise.

2. Prevention

Preventive effort includes avoiding unnecessary exposure to conditions that predictably weaken ethical judgment. Examples may include intoxicants, inflammatory media, corrupt peer groups, or situations in which exhaustion repeatedly produces harmful conduct.

Prevention should not be confused with avoidance of all discomfort. Moral development sometimes requires approaching difficult situations. The point is to distinguish necessary engagement from careless exposure.

At an institutional level, prevention includes codes of conduct, transparent procedures, shared accountability, and protection for persons who report wrongdoing. Individual mental strength cannot compensate for every structural failure.

3. Abandonment without suppression

When an unwholesome state has arisen, right effort seeks its abandonment. Buddhist texts describe multiple strategies: redirecting attention, examining disadvantages, relaxing the processes that sustain the thought, calming mental formation, and applying determined restraint when necessary.

Abandonment does not require denying that anger or fear exists. Suppressed emotion may continue to influence conduct without awareness. Effective abandonment begins with recognition.

Nor does abandoning hatred mean ignoring injustice. Hatred is the desire to harm or destroy; moral opposition can remain firm without being rooted in dehumanization. Buddhist resilience distinguishes strength from hostility.

4. Cultivation and maintenance

Preventing harm is only one side of morality. Ethical resilience also requires cultivating positive qualities such as patience, courage, compassion, generosity, and equanimity.

Maintaining wholesome states is particularly important. A brief intention to act compassionately may disappear when pressure continues. Recollection, community support, and repeated practice help stabilize the quality until it becomes more habitual.

5. Balanced effort

Excessive effort can produce tension, frustration, and harsh self-judgment. Insufficient effort permits negligence. The Buddhist image of tuning a stringed instrument illustrates the need for balance: strings that are too tight break; strings that are too loose do not produce the proper sound (Bodhi, 2012).

Ethical resilience is not created by relentless self-coercion. It requires sustainable energy, realistic assessment, and the capacity to rest without abandoning responsibility.

Right Mindfulness as Moral Recollection and Monitoring

1. Mindfulness is not ethically neutral attention

Right mindfulness (*sammāsati*) is sometimes reduced to nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment. This captures part of its contemporary therapeutic use but not its complete role in the Noble Eightfold Path.

Buddhist mindfulness includes remembering the relevant framework of practice, recognizing mental qualities, and observing whether they contribute to suffering or liberation. It works together with right view and right effort.

Bare attentiveness can serve ethically harmful purposes. A thief, interrogator, or combatant may be highly attentive. Mindfulness becomes “right” through its place within an ethically directed path (Monteiro et al., 2015).

2. Recognition before reaction

Mindfulness creates awareness of the stages through which action develops. A person may notice: Unpleasant bodily sensation, Fear or anger, A perception of another person as threatening, An impulse to retaliate, A story that justifies retaliation, Bodily preparation for speech or action.

Recognizing these stages creates a possible pause. The pause is not moral indecision; it is the space in which intention can be examined before becoming action.

3. The acrobat simile

The *Sedaka Sutta* describes two acrobats balancing upon a bamboo pole. One suggests that each should watch the other, but the other argues that each should protect themselves. The Buddha explains that by protecting oneself through mindfulness, one protects others; by protecting others, one protects oneself (Bodhi, 2000).

The simile counters the view that guarding one’s mind is selfish. Unregulated anger, craving, and fear affect others. Mental self-care becomes socially significant when it prevents harmful conduct.

The relationship is reciprocal. Patience and non-harming protect others, while supportive relationships create conditions that help individuals maintain mindfulness and ethical conduct.

4. Mindfulness during crisis

In a crisis, mindfulness has at least four ethical functions: 1. It notices emotional escalation. 2. It recalls moral commitments. 3. It distinguishes facts from fear-driven interpretation. 4. It maintains awareness of how actions affect others.

Mindfulness does not guarantee the correct decision. It makes responsible deliberation more possible by reducing automaticity.

Right Concentration and Stability of Mind

1. Concentration as support for moral agency

Right concentration (*sammāsamādhi*) stabilizes attention and reduces domination by distraction and agitation. A stable mind is better able to remain with discomfort without immediately seeking relief through harmful action.

Concentration supports ethical resilience by increasing the capacity to: Tolerate strong affect, Sustain attention to long-term consequences, Resist impulsive action, Observe complex situations without rapid fragmentation, Maintain commitment when social pressure persists.

The *Vijjā-bhāgiya Sutta* describes tranquillity and insight as complementary contributors to clear knowledge. Tranquillity develops the mind and assists the abandonment

of passion, while insight develops discernment and assists the abandonment of ignorance (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 1998).

2. Concentration without ethics

Concentration is not inherently moral. A person can concentrate effectively while pursuing exploitation or violence. Buddhist right concentration is embedded within a path that includes right view, intention, speech, action, and livelihood.

This point prevents mental cultivation from being used merely to improve performance within unethical systems. Training employees to remain calm while subjecting them to abusive conditions is not a complete Buddhist application. Mental stability must support ethical discernment and responsible change.

3. Calm is not passivity

Calmness should not be confused with emotional numbness or submission. A concentrated person can act urgently and firmly. The difference lies in whether action is guided by clear understanding or uncontrolled reactivity.

Buddhist equanimity similarly does not mean indifference. It is balanced awareness that enables compassionate action without being overwhelmed by attachment or hostility.

Wisdom and Ethical Judgment

1. From rule-following to understanding

Precepts provide moral orientation, but crises often involve competing responsibilities and incomplete information. Wisdom (*paññā*) is necessary to understand causes, likely consequences, relevant motivations, and available alternatives.

Wisdom asks: What suffering is present? What conditions are producing it? Which response will remove or intensify those conditions? Is the action motivated by greed, hatred, fear, or delusion? Who bears the risks and costs? What longer-term habits will this action reinforce?

Such questions transform morality from mechanical obedience into responsible discernment.

2. Reflection before, during, and after action

The Ambalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta instructs Rāhula to use reflection as one uses a mirror. Before acting bodily, verbally, or mentally, he should examine whether the intended action is likely to harm himself, others, or both. During the action, he should continue examining it. Afterward, he should review its effects (Horner, 1954).

This three-stage model is especially valuable for ethical resilience.

Before action

The person anticipates consequences and identifies motivation. This stage supports prevention.

During action

The person remains responsive to new information. If harm is becoming apparent, the action can be modified or stopped.

After action

The person reviews what occurred. Harmful conduct should be acknowledged and corrected; wholesome conduct should be reinforced.

This model rejects the idea that moral judgment ends once a decision has been made. Ethical agency remains active throughout the process.

3. Learning from failure

Crisis decisions may be made under uncertainty, and even careful actions can cause unintended harm. Buddhist reflection encourages accountability without turning guilt into permanent identity.

Confession and acknowledgment prevent denial. Wise remorse motivates correction, while excessive self-condemnation can become another form of self-absorption. Ethical resilience includes the ability to recover from moral failure without trivializing it.

A Process Model of Buddhist Ethical Resilience

The interaction of ethical discipline, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom can be organized into the following process:

Phase	Buddhist resource	Ethical function
Preparation	Precepts, generosity, repeated wholesome conduct	Establishes habits and boundaries before crisis
Prevention	First right effort	Reduces exposure to avoidable moral danger
Recognition	Mindfulness	Detects feelings, motives, and impulses
Regulation	Second right effort and concentration	Prevents unwholesome states from controlling action
Deliberation	Wisdom and right view	Examines causes, consequences, and alternatives
Action	Right speech, action, and livelihood	Expresses ethical commitment concretely
Review	Reflection before, during, and after action	Corrects errors and strengthens learning
Renewal	Third and fourth right efforts	Cultivates and maintains wholesome qualities

The model is cyclic rather than linear. Reflection after one event becomes preparation for the next.

Crisis Applications

1. Economic insecurity

Unemployment and debt may increase pressure toward deception, theft, exploitation, or participation in harmful work. Buddhist analysis should not moralize poverty or ignore structural injustice.

Ethical resilience here includes maintaining responsibility while seeking legitimate forms of support, collective assistance, and institutional reform. Generosity and social welfare reduce conditions that make ethical conduct more difficult.

2. Professional pressure

Healthcare workers, soldiers, civil servants, corporate employees, and educators may face conflicts between institutional demands and personal conscience. Fear of losing employment can weaken resistance to harmful instructions.

Mindfulness helps recognize rationalization, while wisdom examines whether obedience transfers or eliminates responsibility. Spiritual friendship and ethical communities provide external support when individual resistance is costly.

3. Violence and social polarization

During political or ethnic conflict, group narratives may portray outsiders as less than human. Repetition, fear, and social conformity can make cruelty appear morally necessary.

Loving-kindness does not prevent legitimate protection of threatened persons. It prevents protective action from becoming indiscriminate hatred. Wisdom distinguishes individuals from collective stereotypes and immediate defence from revenge.

4. Illness and caregiving

Chronic illness and caregiving can produce exhaustion, resentment, and moral distress. Ethical resilience does not demand unlimited self-sacrifice. Compassion must include realistic attention to capacity and support.

Mindfulness may help caregivers recognize resentment before it becomes abuse, while wisdom supports boundaries, shared responsibility, and requests for assistance.

5. Digital crisis communication

During emergencies, unverified information spreads rapidly. Fear and moral outrage encourage users to share material without checking its accuracy.

Right speech and mindfulness require verification, awareness of emotional motivation, and consideration of possible consequences. Refraining from harmful forwarding can be a significant form of ethical action.

Personal Cultivation and Structural Responsibility

A major limitation of individual resilience discourse is its tendency to place responsibility on persons while leaving harmful systems unchanged. Employees may be told to become more resilient instead of being protected from exploitation. Communities may be encouraged to meditate instead of receiving material assistance.

Buddhist dependent origination offers a broader analysis. Individual conduct arises within social, economic, political, and environmental conditions. Mental cultivation is important, but external conditions must also be transformed.

A Buddhist model of ethical resilience should therefore operate at three levels: **1. Personal:** cultivation of intention, mindfulness, and wisdom. **2. Relational:** spiritual friendship, mutual care, and accountable communities. **3. Structural:** institutions that reduce exploitation and support ethical action.

The acrobat simile illustrates this reciprocity. Protecting oneself and protecting others are interdependent. Ethical resilience is strongest when personal cultivation is supported by just social arrangements.

Ethical Resilience and Moral Injury

Contemporary psychology uses “moral injury” to describe distress that can follow participation in, failure to prevent, or witnessing of actions that violate deeply held moral beliefs. It may involve guilt, shame, betrayal, anger, and loss of meaning (Litz et al., 2009).

Buddhist resources can contribute to understanding moral recovery, but they should not be treated as substitutes for professional care. Relevant practices may include: Honest acknowledgment of the act, Wise remorse rather than denial, Restitution where possible, Compassion for all affected persons, Renewed ethical commitment, Recognition that a harmful act is conditioned but not an eternal identity.

The doctrine of non-self can support recovery when correctly understood. It does not erase responsibility. It means that a person is not permanently identical with the worst action they have performed and can cultivate different conditions.

Critical Qualifications

Several cautions must accompany this model.

First, ethical resilience should not mean tolerating abuse. Patience is not passive submission, and equanimity is not indifference to injustice.

Second, mental cultivation should not become emotional repression. Anger may contain information about violation even when hatred is ethically dangerous.

Third, calmness does not prove moral correctness. A person may commit harm without emotional disturbance. Wisdom and compassion remain necessary.

Fourth, precepts must not be interpreted without attention to context. Their ethical orientation is stable, but responsible application may require careful judgment in complex situations.

Fifth, resilience is influenced by material conditions. Lack of housing, healthcare, food, safety, and social support cannot be solved through meditation alone.

Finally, the purpose of Buddhist mental cultivation is not simply to preserve social conformity. Right view may require resisting institutions whose norms are rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion.

Conclusion

Buddhist philosophy explains moral conduct through the interaction of external conditions, mental states, intention, and cultivated habit. Ethical rules alone may be insufficient when fear, scarcity, anger, group pressure, or institutional power intensify. Conduct becomes more stable when supported by systematic mental development.

Right effort directs energy toward preventing and abandoning unwholesome states and cultivating and maintaining wholesome ones. Right mindfulness recognizes feeling, intention, and impulse before they become harmful conduct. Right concentration provides the stability required to tolerate distress and consider long-term consequences. Wisdom examines causes, motivations, alternatives, and effects.

Together, these qualities support what this article has called ethical resilience: the capacity to maintain or restore conduct grounded in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion under adverse conditions.

This resilience is neither moral rigidity nor psychological toughness. It is flexible because it responds to changing conditions, reflective because it examines action before, during, and after it occurs, and compassionate because it considers the welfare of oneself and others.

Its highest Buddhist purpose is liberation from the roots of harmful conduct. Its contemporary significance lies in forming persons and communities capable of responding to crisis without allowing fear, hatred, or desperation to determine what they become.

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Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS)

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Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) is a trilingual (English) and an interdisciplinary journal seeking an engagement between scholars working across a range of disciplinary fields, including world philosophical studies, religious studies, cultural studies, critical theory, and interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences. Lying at the interface between the study of philosophy, religion and other academic studies of culture. In particular, the journal will consider why philosophical, religious and cultural studies have hitherto neglected the significance of religious manifestations in cross-cultural perspectives, and define ways in which religious studies needs to engage with contemporary areas of cultural critique.

The principal aim of the Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) is to promote critical investigation into all aspects of the study of philosophy, religions, cultures, and interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences, particularly with an innovative and global interactive focus.

Frequency of Issue

Twice per year (June and December) (1st issue January-June, 2nd issue July-December).

Peer Review Policy

All submitted manuscripts must be reviewed by at least three experts via the double-blinded review system.

The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) is an interdisciplinary journal encouraging multidisciplinary working scholars in humanities, social sciences, philosophical studies, religious studies and cultural inquiry to explore cross-cultural and religious perspectives with an innovative and global interactive focus. The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) is an open-access journal, hosted by the Research Center for Dhammsuksa Phrapariyattidhamma of Watawutwikasitaram School, biannually publishing research papers (January-June, July-December) and special issues, both via a double-blind peer review process.

All submitted papers must be original and not submitted or published elsewhere. Submitted papers will undergo originality assessment. Manuscripts will pass through an initial editorial screening and are sent for double-blind review to anonymous independent referees. Apart from research articles, we also accept quality book reviews. All accepted articles, after appropriate revisions, will be published online on our Journal's website, and are downloadable free of charge. We recommend that potential authors review our publishing policies, manuscript requirements, and formats, before submitting their manuscripts to the Journal.

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1. The author has to assure that her/his paper has not been previously published in nor simultaneously submitted to other journals.
2. The author shall not commit any degree of plagiarism in her/his paper.
3. The author shall produce her/his manuscript format in accordance with the 'guideline for authors' of the journal.

4. The author whose name is listed in the paper needs to have contributed to the paper production or the research-related procedure.

5. All pictures, figures, or tables appearing in the paper must be cited properly with their source(s) accurately identified. The author (s) shall be solely liable to any legal suit, if any.

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7. The author is required to correct or rework their paper in due time as assessed and advised by reviewers and the editorial board.

8. The author must identify the source (s) of research fund (if any) as well as any applicable conflict of interest.

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1. The editor will assess the paper quality for publication and select only those passing through the reviewing process, in which the clarity of and congruence with the journal policy must be prioritized. The selected paper must contain a body of knowledge that reflects valuable perception, and a theoretical framework derived from experiences or textual/research synthesis. A grounded theory or a conceptual model contributing to further research must be preferably included.

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Regulations for submission of academic articles, research articles, and book reviews for submission to the Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS) hosted by the Research Center for Dhammsuksa Phrapariyattidhamma of Watawutwikasitaram School.

1. The journal will not charge a fee for publishing articles. The journal encourages contributions that present innovative findings and creative approaches including novel methodologies and research designs.

2. Editorial Board reviews articles according to follows guidelines, namely:

- Formal requirements stated in the guidelines
- Usage of appropriate methodology, presentation of evidences and synthesizing of findings
- Societal relevance

3. The article is neither under review nor published elsewhere. The article must be in the form of an academic essay, presenting the discussion of the research in an objective way.

4. Elements of the article:

- Title in English
- name of the author(s)
- 300 words abstract in English
- Author(s) affiliation(s)
- Keywords (maximum 7)
- Content of the article:

Research article:

- ☐ Abstract
- Introduction
- Research methodology
- Results
- Discussion
- References

Academic Article, Review Article:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Content
- Conclusion
- Suggestions
- References

5. An original article should range between 3000 and 7000 words excluding abstract, references, diagrams and data sets.

File format: Microsoft Word (*.doc or *.docx), Times New Roman 12, in (English) journal.

The submitted file which includes graphs, charts and images should be located at appropriate locations in the text, between paragraphs, not within them. All figures should have figure numbers and titles (title case) and should be referred to by figure number in the text. A figure's number and the title should be placed above and outside the figure, for example, table 1 or image 1 and Figure. Figures need to be clear and the author must have the original copyright.

6. Book Review should have the name of the author, the title of the book, name and place of publisher, and the year of publication. Book Review should be between 3000-5000 words.

7. To submit an article online.

Example of writing reference

Notes-Bibliography Style

- Author's name needs to be placed in front of a sentence that is being quoted, for example, Kamnuansilpa (2006)
- Citations need to be placed after the sentence (author's name, year of publication).
- Single author: (Yota Chaiworamankul, 2023), (Keown, 2023)
- Two authors: (Hersey & Blanchard, 2022)
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The referencing **style**: APA (latest edition). The following are requirements and examples for common reference types.

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Author's name, (publish year). Title. (Edition). Place of publication: name of press. etc.

- Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. (1996). Thai Tipitakas. Bangkok: MCU Press.
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The logo is centered within a dark blue circle. The background features soft, watercolor-style clouds in shades of pink and orange at the top and bottom, and faint, golden-yellow line drawings of rice stalks on the sides. The text 'Journal' is written in a blue script font, and 'JRS' is in a large, bold, blue serif font. Below 'JRS', the words 'editor in chief' are written in a smaller, green script font.

Journal JRS editor in chief

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