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## **AIMS AND SCOPE OF JRS**

JRS publishes online articles that are related to the field of Religions, sociology, liberal arts, and other multidisciplinary aspects of the humanities and social sciences. All the published journals are peer-reviewed by three experts.

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## **Preface**

The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS), Vol. 5, No. 1, January–June 2025, is committed to enhancing the quality of English-language academic articles in accordance with the criteria of the Thai-Journal Citation Index Centre (TCI) and international academic journal standards. The journal emphasizes originality, clarity of content, appropriate academic English, credible references, and publication ethics. Every manuscript is screened for plagiarism and evaluated by three qualified peer reviewers to ensure academic credibility and connect the work of Thai scholars with the international academic community.

The editorial board invites academics, researchers, lecturers, and students from Thailand and abroad to submit English-language research or academic articles in religious studies, sociology, liberal arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and interdisciplinary studies. We particularly welcome works that present innovative ideas, comparative studies, or analyses of contemporary issues. No fees are charged for submission, peer review, or publication. We warmly invite you to share your knowledge through JRS and bring your scholarship to readers in both national and international academic communities.

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## **The Lotus-Bud Stupa, the Sri Lankan - Style Stupa, and the Prāṅg : Architectural Diversity and the Politics of Legitimacy in Sukhothai**

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### **Abstract**

Religious architecture in Sukhothai was neither stylistically uniform nor politically neutral. Lotus-bud stupas, Sri Lankan-style bell-shaped stupas, and Khmer-derived prāṅgs coexisted within the same cultural landscape and sometimes within a single monastery. This article examines these three architectural forms as different but overlapping languages of religious and political legitimacy. The lotus-bud stupa became a recognizable marker of Sukhothai artistic identity and the ritual centrality of cities such as Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai. The Sri Lankan-style stupa connected local rulers and monastic communities with relic worship, Laṅkā-associated ordination lineages, and the transregional authority of Theravāda Buddhism. The prāṅg, inherited from Khmer sanctuary architecture, allowed Sukhothai patrons to appropriate earlier sacred sites and transform them into Theravāda relic centers. None of these forms carried a single permanent meaning: their significance depended upon location, relic deposits, inscriptions, ritual use, and patronage. The article argues that Sukhothai's architectural diversity was not evidence of an incomplete stylistic transition. It was a political and religious resource through which rulers claimed regional identity, transregional Buddhist orthodoxy, and continuity with the sacred authority of earlier polities.

**Keywords:** Sukhothai, lotus-bud stupa, Sri Lankan stupa, Buddhist architecture

### **Introduction**

The architectural landscape of Sukhothai is often represented through one dominant image: the slender lotus-bud stupa rising at the center of Wat Mahathat. The form has become so closely associated with Sukhothai that it is frequently treated as an architectural expression of an essentially Thai artistic identity. Yet the historical landscape was considerably more diverse.

Within Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, Kamphaeng Phet, and associated settlements, one finds lotus-bud monuments, bell-shaped stupas associated with Sri Lankan traditions, Khmer-derived prāṅgs, Mon-related tiered structures, image shrines, and composite monuments that resist classification under a single style. Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo at Si Satchanalai is especially important because numerous stupas of different forms stand within the same complex.

Architectural diversity was not merely decorative. Each monument organized space, ritual movement, collective memory, and relationships of authority. A relic stupa could establish the sacred center of a city. A Sri Lankan-style monument could connect a local Saṅgha to the prestigious Theravāda world of Laṅkā. A Khmer sanctuary could be reused to claim continuity with an older sacred landscape while demonstrating the authority to reinterpret it.

The politics of architectural legitimacy should not be understood as cynical propaganda. Sukhothai rulers, monks, artisans, and lay donors may have sincerely believed in the power of relics, the merit of construction, and the authority of monastic lineages. Religious devotion and political legitimation were mutually reinforcing rather than necessarily opposed.

This article examines three major forms: 1) the lotus-bud stupa, conventionally identified as distinctly Sukhothai; 2) the bell-shaped stupa associated with Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture; 3) the *prāṅ*, developed from Khmer tower sanctuaries.

The central argument is that these monuments constituted complementary architectural languages. The lotus-bud form articulated regional identity; the Sri Lankan-style stupa articulated transregional Buddhist authenticity; and the *prāṅ* articulated continuity, appropriation, and transformation of earlier sacred power. Their coexistence enabled Sukhothai patrons to make several claims simultaneously.

## **Methodological Problems in Reading Architecture**

### **1. Architectural style is not political territory**

Art-historical terms such as “Sukhothai,” “Sri Lankan,” and “Khmer” can create the impression that architectural styles correspond directly to bounded states or ethnic populations. Historical reality was more complicated.

A Sri Lankan-style stupa in Sukhothai need not have been constructed by Sinhalese artisans. Its form could have reached the region through Nakhon Si Thammarat, Lower Myanmar, Mon monastic networks, or portable visual models. Similarly, a Khmer-style *prāṅ* does not prove that every individual who used the monument was Khmer or practiced the same religion as its original patrons.

Styles traveled independently of political borders. Monks, merchants, artisans, captives, royal envoys, and pilgrims transmitted technical and ritual knowledge. Miksic and Goh (2017) describe ancient Southeast Asia as a region of cultural fusion in which local societies actively selected and transformed external elements.

### **2. Architectural form does not have one fixed meaning**

A *prāṅ* might house a Brahmanical deity, a Mahāyāna Buddhist image, relics, or a Theravāda Buddha image at different times. A bell-shaped stupa might invoke Sri Lankan prestige, but it could also become a local funerary or commemorative monument. A lotus-bud stupa might mark a royal center in one location and a monastic or elite burial complex in another.

Meaning depended upon: what was deposited inside the monument; where it stood within the city or monastery; who commissioned or restored it; which rituals were performed around it; how inscriptions and narratives explained it; how later communities reused it.

Architectural analysis must therefore combine style with epigraphy, archaeology, spatial organization, and ritual history.

### **3. Problems of chronology and restoration**

Many Sukhothai monuments underwent repeated enlargement, repair, and transformation. A Khmer-period core might be surrounded by later Theravāda buildings. A stupa attributed to one ruler might contain several construction phases. Ayutthaya-period restorations may obscure Sukhothai forms.

Krairiksh (1993) demonstrates that much of the traditional chronology of Sukhothai art was developed through stylistic comparison and interpretations of inscriptions that remain open to debate. Labels such as “built by Ram Khamhaeng” or “constructed under Li Thai” should therefore be used only when supported by sufficiently strong evidence.

Architecture is cumulative. The present appearance of a monument may represent several historical moments rather than a single original design.

## **Buddhist Monuments and the Production of Legitimacy**

### **1. Merit and royal patronage**

Constructing or restoring a Buddhist monument was a major meritorious act. It required land, labor, bricks, stone, metal, artisans, and institutional organization. A ruler capable of mobilizing these resources demonstrated both worldly power and devotion to the Buddha's dispensation.

The king's legitimacy did not arise solely from building on a large scale. It came from directing power toward a morally authoritative purpose. By constructing stupas, enshrining relics, and supporting monasteries, a ruler presented himself as a protector of the *sāsana*. The monument converted temporary political resources into durable sacred presence. A reign ended, but the structure continued to generate merit and preserve the donor's name.

### **2. Relics and political centers**

Relics were especially important in transforming architecture into political theology. A stupa containing a bodily relic of the Buddha was not simply a symbolic monument. It was treated as a potent presence capable of sanctifying a monastery, city, or kingdom.

Blackburn (2010) shows that Buddha relics participated actively in the formation and renewal of South and Southeast Asian political communities. The acquisition, division, procession, and enshrinement of relics could establish centers of authority and connect local rulers with the sacred history of Buddhism.

The name Wat Mahathat—"Monastery of the Great Relic"—announces this relationship. A Mahathat monument at the urban center expressed the ideal ordering of political space around the Buddha's authority.

### **3. Architecture as a claim about time**

Monuments connected rulers not only with sacred places but with sacred time. A relic stupa linked the present to the Buddha's life and final nirvana. A Sri Lankan form linked a local institution to the historical transmission of Theravāda Buddhism. A reused Khmer sanctuary linked a new ruler with the accumulated sacredness and political memory of an earlier order.

Architectural legitimacy was therefore genealogical. A new polity became authoritative by claiming a place within several inherited histories.

## **The Lotus - Bud Stupa: Form and Identity**

### **1. Defining the form**

The monument commonly called the lotus-bud stupa is known in Thai as *chedi song phum khao bin*—a stupa shaped like a lotus bud or a folded offering. It usually rises from a square or stepped base through a tall central section and culminates in a pointed lotus-bud element.

The most prominent example stands at the center of Wat Mahathat, Sukhothai. Other significant examples appear at Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo in Si Satchanalai and at sites connected with the Sukhothai cultural and political sphere.

The form emphasizes verticality. Its multiple bases establish stability, while the narrow upper structure directs the eye upward. The lotus-bud finial appears poised between enclosure and opening, suggesting spiritual potential approaching realization.

### **2. The problem of origin**

Scholars have proposed different sources for the lotus-bud form, including Khmer tower architecture, Mon and Burmese stupas, Sri Lankan monuments, Pāla and peninsular forms, and Chinese pagodas. No single prototype fully explains the Sukhothai monument.

Gosling (1981) notes that the lotus-bud stupa at Wat Mahathat differs structurally from standard Sri Lankan stupas—for example, it lacks the clearly defined *harmikā*

characteristic of many Sinhalese monuments. This makes it inappropriate to classify the lotus-bud stupa as merely a modified Sri Lankan bell-shaped form.

Its composition is better understood as a synthesis: a stupa's relic and commemorative function; the vertical force of Khmer sanctuary towers; layered bases known from several regional traditions; the lotus as an established Buddhist symbol; local preferences for slender and ascending forms.

The monument's distinctiveness arose from recombination rather than isolation.

### **3. The lotus as religious symbolism**

The lotus is rooted in mud but rises above the water and opens without being stained. It is consequently an appropriate symbol for liberation from defilement.

A closed or emerging lotus bud can suggest potential, accumulated merit, or the movement toward awakening. Yet caution is necessary: the exact medieval interpretation of every architectural component is not documented. Modern viewers should not assume that the monument was designed as a literal diagram of one doctrinal concept.

Nevertheless, the lotus-bud form clearly participates in a Buddhist symbolic environment. It transforms the solid mass of a relic monument into a visual movement from earthly base toward spiritual culmination.

### **4. Wat Mahathat and the center of Sukhothai**

Wat Mahathat stood near the political and ceremonial center of Sukhothai. The principal lotus-bud monument, subsidiary stupas, image halls, and monumental Buddhas formed a complex sacred environment.

Its centrality mattered as much as its style. The monument organized religious space around a Great Relic and situated political authority beside—but doctrinally beneath—the Buddha's presence.

The Wat Mahathat complex also incorporated multiple architectural traditions. Subsidiary towers and stupas display Mon-related, Khmer-derived, and other regional features. Rather than undermining Sukhothai identity, this diversity presented the capital as a center capable of gathering and reorganizing several sacred traditions.

The central lotus-bud stupa therefore performed two related functions. It marked the Buddhist center of the capital, and it gave that center a recognizable Sukhothai visual identity.

#### **A seal of political affiliation?**

Lotus-bud stupas also appeared outside the principal capital. Their distribution has led some scholars to interpret them as markers of Sukhothai political authority. Pentz (1973), for example, associated a lotus-bud monument at Old Tak with Sukhothai suzerainty and described the form as a possible "seal" of Sukhothai sovereignty.

This interpretation is suggestive but should not become a universal rule. A monument may spread through religious admiration, workshop movement, elite emulation, or monastic networks without proving direct administrative control.

It is safer to conclude that the form could signal participation in a Sukhothai-centered cultural and political world. Its presence was evidence of affiliation, aspiration, or connection, but not necessarily of uniform territorial rule.

### **5. Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo and Architectural Plurality**

Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo at Si Satchanalai contains numerous stupas of different sizes and forms. Lotus-bud, bell-shaped, and tower-like structures coexist within the same enclosure.

This diversity is important because it challenges the assumption that one polity required one architectural style. The complex may have served royal or elite commemorative functions, although the identities of all those associated with its monuments remain uncertain.

Its architectural plurality could express genealogical accumulation. Different monuments may correspond to different patrons, periods, lineages, or commemorative needs. New buildings did not necessarily replace old ones. They expanded the sacred and political memory of the site.

The complex also demonstrates that architectural choice was socially meaningful. A patron selecting a lotus-bud form placed a monument within one visual genealogy; another choosing a bell-shaped stupa invoked a different set of associations. Both could remain within the same Theravāda sacred landscape.

## **The Sri Lankan-Style Stupa and Transregional Authority**

### **1. Formal characteristics**

The Sri Lankan-style stupa in the Sukhothai cultural sphere is commonly characterized by a square or stepped base, a rounded or bell-shaped dome, a square upper element, diminishing circular moldings, and a spire.

These features vary considerably. The label “Sri Lankan style” identifies a broad relationship rather than exact replication. Sukhothai builders adjusted proportions, bases, decoration, and surrounding structures to local materials and ritual requirements.

Important examples occur at Wat Sa Si, Wat Sorasak, Wat Chang Lom, and other sites in Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai. Some include elephant figures around the base, producing one of the most recognizable regional adaptations of the form.

### **2. Laṅkā and the authority of ordination**

Sri Lankan architectural forms became especially prestigious because they were associated with a wider religious relationship. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, monks from mainland Southeast Asia sought ordination, texts, relics, and instruction from Sri Lanka or from Southeast Asian communities claiming Sri Lankan monastic descent.

Laṅkā functioned as an authoritative center of Theravāda Buddhist memory. Association with its Saṅgha offered a genealogy of ordination and disciplinary purity.

A Sri Lankan-style stupa could therefore communicate more than aesthetic preference. It could indicate that patrons and monastic communities participated in a transregional Theravāda order. Architecture made lineage visible.

The connection was not always direct. Monks, relics, and architectural ideas could reach Sukhothai through Nakhon Si Thammarat, Lower Myanmar, Mon centers, or other intermediary networks. “Sri Lankan” should thus be understood as both a geographical and genealogical designation.

### **3. Relics and the reproduction of Laṅkā**

A relic believed to originate from Sri Lanka carried a sacred history. Its enshrinement in a monument reproduced part of Laṅkā’s religious authority within Sukhothai.

Sukhothai Inscription II, associated with the monk Śrī Śraddhā, describes relic-related activities and connections with Sri Lanka. Interpretations of its locations and architectural references remain disputed, but it demonstrates the prestige attached to pilgrimage, restoration, and relic transmission (Gosling, 1981).

The construction of a Sri Lankan-style stupa around such a relic could coordinate form, object, and narrative: the relic supplied sacred presence; the architectural style supplied recognizable genealogy; the inscription supplied historical explanation; royal patronage supplied political protection.

Together they transformed a local monastery into part of the imagined geography of Theravāda Buddhism.

## **Elephants and the Architecture of Support**

### **1. Wat Chang Lom**

The name Wat Chang Lom means “monastery surrounded by elephants.” At major examples in Si Satchanalai and Sukhothai, elephant figures emerge from or stand around the base of a stupa.

The elephant-supported stupa has significant Sri Lankan parallels, but the form also circulated through other parts of South and Southeast Asia. It should not be treated as proof of direct copying from a single monument.

Elephants possess several possible meanings. They signify strength, stability, royalty, and the support of the sacred order. In Buddhist narratives, the white elephant is connected with the Buddha’s conception. Elephants also appear in descriptions of royal power and cosmological space.

At the base of a stupa, elephants visually support the relic monument and the Buddhist world it represents. Their massive bodies contrast with the upward movement of the dome and spire.

### **2. Royal strength subordinated to the Dhamma**

The elephant was a major symbol of royal and military power. Placing elephants beneath a relic stupa transforms that power. Royal force becomes the support of Buddhism rather than its superior.

This arrangement offers an architectural model of righteous kingship: political power is legitimate when it carries, protects, and serves the *sāsana*.

Again, this does not prove that every patron consciously articulated the same theory. Yet the structural relationship between royal animal symbolism and the Buddhist monument made such an interpretation available.

### **3. Problems of attribution**

The famous inscriptional account of a stupa constructed or restored under Ram Khamhaeng has generated debate about which monument it describes. Gosling (1988) demonstrates that scholars have identified several possible sites and that the association with a particular surviving stupa is not secure.

This uncertainty illustrates a broader methodological point. Architectural similarity and later tradition should not be used to assign monuments automatically to famous kings. The politics of legitimacy operated in medieval patronage, but it also operates in modern attribution, when monuments are connected retrospectively with celebrated rulers.

## **The Prāṅg and the Khmer Inheritance**

### **1. From prāsāda to prāṅg**

The Thai prāṅg developed from the Khmer tower sanctuary or prāsāda. The Khmer structure normally contained a sacred central chamber and rose vertically as an architectural representation of divine presence and cosmic centrality.

In Brahmanical contexts, the chamber might house a *liṅga* or image of a deity. In Mahāyāna Buddhist settings, it might contain a Buddha, bodhisattva, or ritual deposit. The tower’s meaning therefore varied even before its adoption within Theravāda landscapes.

Sukhothai’s political emergence occurred in a region containing Khmer-built monuments. Wat Phra Phai Luang and Wat Si Sawai preserve especially important evidence of this earlier architectural environment.

### **2. Wat Phra Phai Luang and changing ritual centers**

Wat Phra Phai Luang was an important religious complex before Wat Mahathat became the principal center of Sukhothai. Its surviving tower and archaeological remains reflect Khmer-related architectural traditions.

Later additions, including Theravāda monastic buildings, images, and ritual boundaries, transformed the site. The earlier sanctuary was not necessarily destroyed when political and religious patronage changed. It was incorporated into a new sacred order.

The movement of ritual centrality from a Khmer-associated complex toward Wat Mahathat was politically meaningful. It expressed the creation of a new center. Yet the continued use of Wat Phra Phai Luang also acknowledged the sacred authority of the older landscape.

Sukhothai legitimacy therefore involved both displacement and continuity.

### **3. Wat Si Sawai and religious reinterpretation**

Wat Si Sawai, with its three tower sanctuaries, is frequently interpreted as having originated within a Brahmanical or Khmer ritual context before later association with Buddhism.

Its history demonstrates that architectural form does not determine permanent religious identity. A monument created for one ritual system could be reinterpreted through new images, ceremonies, names, and institutional relationships.

Reusing an older sanctuary allowed later patrons to claim its accumulated sacredness. The new regime did not begin in an empty landscape; it demonstrated authority by mastering and transforming inherited places.

### **4. The prāṅ as relic monument**

Within later Thai Theravāda culture, the prāṅ increasingly functioned as a relic tower. Terwiel (2013) notes the close relationship between prāṅs and monasteries called Wat Mahathat in several older urban centers. A structure derived from Khmer sanctuary architecture could thus become a monumental reliquary.

This transformation did not erase the tower's earlier associations with cosmic centrality. Instead, those associations were redirected toward the Buddha and his relics. The Buddha's presence replaced or absorbed the divine presence once associated with the sanctuary chamber.

The prāṅ consequently became an architectural translation: a Khmer-derived form serving a Theravāda relic cult.

## **Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat at Chaliang–Si Satchanalai**

Wat Phra Si Rattana Mahathat at Chaliang is an important example of architectural continuity and transformation. Its central prāṅ, monumental enclosure, Buddha images, and later additions represent several phases.

The site stood within an older urban and sacred environment later connected with Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai. Its prāṅ demonstrates the continued prestige of Khmer-derived vertical architecture even when Theravāda Buddhism became dominant.

The monument's name identifies it with the Great Relic. This association transformed the tower into a Theravāda center without requiring rejection of its architectural ancestry.

Vickery (1990) cautions against overly simple identifications of Chaliang, Si Satchanalai, and Sawankhalok. Changes in place names and political geography complicate attempts to assign monuments to fixed historical capitals. The site's importance lies partly in this continuity across changing political labels.

Its architecture enabled successive communities to claim connection with the same sacred center while altering its institutional and political significance.

### Three Architectural Languages of Legitimacy

The three principal forms may be compared as follows:

| Architectural form     | Primary historical associations             | Major legitimating claim                                          | Important qualification                             |
|------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Lotus-bud stupa        | Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai centers        | Regional identity and participation in a Sukhothai-centered order | Not every example proves direct political control   |
| Sri Lankan-style stupa | Laṅkā-oriented Theravāda and relic networks | Monastic authenticity and transregional Buddhist legitimacy       | Forms were often transmitted through intermediaries |
| Prāṅg                  | Khmer sacred and political architecture     | Continuity with and appropriation of earlier sacred authority     | Religious use could change over time                |

These claims were not mutually exclusive. A ruler might sponsor all three forms. A single monastery might contain monuments from several traditions.

Architectural plurality allowed legitimacy to operate on multiple scales: locally, through connection with a particular city and community; regionally, through affiliation with Sukhothai political culture; transregionally, through Laṅkā-oriented Theravāda Buddhism; historically, through continuity with Khmer and Mon sacred landscapes; cosmologically, through relics and the mapping of the Buddhist universe.

Diversity was therefore an advantage. It enabled Sukhothai patrons to speak several architectural languages simultaneously.

### Architecture, Urban Space, and the Mandala of Power

Sukhothai should not be imagined as a uniformly administered territorial state equivalent to a modern nation. Political authority radiated through relationships among centers, subordinate towns, local rulers, monastic institutions, and trade routes.

Architecture helped make these relationships visible. A principal Mahathat established an urban sacred center. Related monument forms in other towns indicated cultural and political affiliation. Monasteries outside the walls extended sacred space into forests, agricultural areas, and routes connecting settlements.

The distribution of monuments operated according to a mandala-like political geography. Power was strongest at ritual centers and became more negotiable toward the periphery. A shared architectural form could express allegiance without requiring uniform administration.

The building of stupas in Si Satchanalai, Kamphaeng Phet, Tak, and related centers thus participated in a wider political culture. Yet the presence of different forms within those cities also indicates that local patrons retained choices and connections beyond Sukhothai.

### Architectural Synthesis at Wat Mahathat

Wat Mahathat is the clearest demonstration that diversity and identity were not opposites. Its central lotus-bud stupa is surrounded by subsidiary monuments reflecting different formal traditions. Large Buddha images and halls organize the space around the relic center.

The complex may be interpreted as an architectural hierarchy: 1) the central Great Relic establishes sacred authority; 2) the lotus-bud form gives that authority a distinctive Sukhothai expression; surrounding Mon- and Khmer-related structures acknowledge inherited regional traditions; 3) image halls make the Buddha visually accessible; 4) processional space enables monks and laypeople to activate the monument through ritual.

The central form does not erase surrounding differences. It organizes them. Sukhothai identity is produced by placing diverse inherited elements into a new relationship.

This is the architectural equivalent of political integration. Different communities and traditions remain visible, but they are arranged around a shared sacred center.

### **From Medieval Monument to National Symbol**

The political meanings of Sukhothai architecture did not end with the decline of the historical kingdom. In the modern period, the lotus-bud stupa became a symbol of Thai national origins and artistic genius.

Modern museums, restoration programs, textbooks, and heritage tourism classified the monuments and integrated them into a national history. UNESCO's recognition of Sukhothai, Si Satchanalai, and Kamphaeng Phet emphasizes both the assimilation of diverse traditions and the emergence of a distinctive architectural culture (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, n.d.).

Modern recognition has supported conservation, but it can also simplify the past. The lotus-bud stupa may be presented as purely Thai, Sri Lankan-style monuments as direct imports, and *prāṅs* as foreign Khmer survivals. Such categories obscure centuries of interaction.

Peleggi (2013) demonstrates that the transformation of Buddhist icons and monuments into national antiquities was connected with modern cultural nationalism. The politics of legitimacy therefore has two historical levels: medieval rulers used architecture to establish religious and political authority; modern institutions use the same architecture to narrate national identity. A critical history must analyze both.

### **Limits of the Political Interpretation**

Not every stupa was a royal declaration, and not every architectural choice was designed primarily to legitimate a ruler. Monks, local elites, families, artisans, and lay communities also commissioned religious structures.

Some stupas may have commemorated deceased persons. Others may have housed texts, relics of monks, votive deposits, or objects associated with local cults. Workshop availability and structural practicality could affect architectural choices as much as political ideology.

The political interpretation becomes strongest when several kinds of evidence converge: central urban location; association with a royal monastery; inscription naming a ruler; relic installation sponsored by the court; large-scale mobilization of resources; repetition of the form across politically connected centers.

Where such evidence is absent, conclusions should remain provisional. Architecture can participate in political legitimacy without having been created exclusively for politics. Its meaning develops through use, memory, and later reinterpretation.

### **Conclusion**

The lotus-bud stupa, the Sri Lankan-style stupa, and the *prāṅ* reveal the architectural plurality of Sukhothai Buddhist culture. They should not be arranged in a simple evolutionary sequence in which an indigenous Thai style replaced foreign Mon, Khmer, or Sri Lankan forms.

The lotus-bud stupa gave Sukhothai religious centers a recognizable visual identity. At Wat Mahathat, it marked the Great Relic and organized a diverse architectural complex around a new sacred center. Its appearance in related towns could express participation in a Sukhothai cultural and political sphere, although it does not automatically prove direct territorial rule.

The Sri Lankan-style stupa connected Sukhothai patrons with the prestige of Laṅkā-oriented Theravāda Buddhism. Its bell-shaped form, relic function, and occasional elephant-supported base communicated monastic genealogy, sacred transmission, and righteous kingship. Yet Sri Lankan forms were localized and frequently transmitted through Mon, Burmese, and peninsular intermediaries.

The prāṅ embodied a different form of legitimacy. Derived from Khmer sanctuary architecture, it allowed Sukhothai communities to inherit and reinterpret older sacred sites. Through conversion into a Theravāda image shrine or relic monument, the tower's cosmic and political centrality was redirected toward the Buddha's dispensation.

These forms did not compete in a zero-sum struggle. Their coexistence provided Sukhothai with several kinds of authority: regional identity, transregional orthodoxy, historical continuity, relic power, and cosmological centrality.

Architectural diversity was therefore not evidence of cultural confusion. It was a deliberate or cumulative strategy of synthesis. Sukhothai became distinctive not by eliminating foreign and earlier traditions but by placing them within a new sacred and political order.

The politics of legitimacy was built in brick, laterite, stucco, relic chambers, processional paths, and rising silhouettes. Through architecture, Sukhothai rulers and communities made claims about who they were, which Buddhist world they belonged to, and how their present authority was connected with the sacred past.

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## **Emptiness as the Middle Way: Dependent Origination, the Two Truths, and the Critique of Intrinsic Existence in Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the central philosophical structure of the Madhyamaka school through Nāgārjuna's analysis of emptiness (*sūnyatā*), dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), the Middle Way, and the two truths. Drawing upon the themes contained in the source document while correcting several interpretive ambiguities, the article argues that emptiness should not be understood as absolute nonexistence or nihilism. It signifies the absence of intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*) in all phenomena. Because things arise through causes, conditions, conceptual designations, and relations, they cannot exist independently or through an immutable essence of their own. Nāgārjuna's dialectical method, including the four-cornered analysis and the eight negations, dismantles substantialist interpretations without replacing them with another metaphysical foundation. The doctrine of the two truths explains how phenomena may function conventionally while being empty ultimately. Conventional truth is therefore not simply illusion or falsehood; it is the indispensable domain of language, ethical action, causality, and Buddhist practice. Ultimate truth is the realization that conventional phenomena lack intrinsic existence. This realization supports rather than destroys the Buddhist teachings of karma, suffering, moral responsibility, and liberation. Madhyamaka is consequently best understood as a philosophical and soteriological Middle Way between reified existence and nihilistic nonexistence.

**Keywords:** Madhyamaka, Nāgārjuna, emptiness, two truths, Middle Way

### **Introduction**

Madhyamaka is one of the most influential philosophical traditions within Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is traditionally associated with Nāgārjuna, an Indian Buddhist philosopher who probably lived between approximately 150 and 250 CE. Nāgārjuna's principal philosophical work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*—commonly translated as the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*—consists of twenty-seven chapters devoted to the critical examination of causation, motion, the sense faculties, the aggregates, action, time, the self, suffering, *nirvāṇa*, and other fundamental categories of Buddhist thought (Siderits & Katsura, 2013; Westerhoff, 2024).

The name Madhyamaka derives from the Sanskrit term *madhyama*, meaning “middle.” However, the Madhyamaka Middle Way should not be interpreted merely as a moderate compromise between two opposing doctrines. It is a philosophical method that reveals how extreme positions arise from the mistaken attribution of intrinsic existence to things. Nāgārjuna's Middle Way avoids both eternalism—the belief that entities possess permanent and independent essences—and annihilationism—the belief that persons and actions simply become nothing and have no causal or moral significance.

The central concept of Madhyamaka is emptiness (*śūnyatā*). This term has often been misunderstood as meaning that nothing exists. Such an interpretation turns Madhyamaka into nihilism, a position Nāgārjuna explicitly rejects. Emptiness instead means the absence of *svabhāva*: an intrinsic, independent, and self-establishing nature. Things exist conventionally, enter into causal relationships, and perform practical functions, but they do not exist independently of causes, conditions, parts, relations, language, and conceptual designation (Garfield, 1994; Westerhoff, 2009).

The central argument of this article is that emptiness, dependent origination, and the Middle Way are not three unrelated doctrines. They describe the same reality from interconnected perspectives. Dependent origination explains the conditioned existence of phenomena; emptiness denies that dependently originated phenomena possess independent essences; and the Middle Way prevents this denial from becoming either substantialism or nihilism.

### **The Philosophical Context of Madhyamaka**

Nāgārjuna inherited the early Buddhist teaching of dependent origination and developed its philosophical implications through dialogue with Buddhist and non-Buddhist Indian traditions. Some philosophical systems attempted to explain change and causality by proposing substances, fundamental entities, or enduring natures. Within Buddhist scholasticism, certain Abhidharma traditions analyzed persons and objects into momentary factors or dharmas. Although the person was regarded as conceptually constructed, some interpretations treated the component dharmas as possessing their own definitional nature.

Madhyamaka extends the analysis of non-self beyond the person to all phenomena. Just as a person cannot be found as an independent essence separate from the aggregates, the aggregates and other phenomena cannot be found as self-established realities. Each depends upon causes, conditions, constituent parts, relations, and conceptual practices. Consequently, the analysis does not end by replacing the substantial self with substantially existing psychological or physical elements (Garfield, 1995).

Nāgārjuna's position is therefore more radical than simply asserting that composite objects depend upon smaller components. The components themselves are dependently identified. A whole depends upon its parts, but something becomes a "part" only in relation to a conventionally designated whole. Causes are identified through their relation to effects, while effects are understood through their dependence upon causes. Neither side possesses an entirely independent identity.

This relational analysis does not deny the practical existence of tables, persons, causes, intentions, or suffering. Instead, it challenges the assumption that their ordinary functioning requires an underlying metaphysical essence.

### **Dependent Origination and Emptiness**

The most important connection in Madhyamaka is the equivalence between dependent origination and emptiness. In chapter 24 of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna states that whatever is dependently arisen is explained as emptiness, is dependently designated, and constitutes the Middle Way (Siderits & Katsura, 2013).

This relationship can be understood through a simple argument: A phenomenon possessing intrinsic nature would exist independently. What exists independently would not depend upon causes, conditions, parts, or conceptual designation. All conditioned phenomena depend upon such factors. Therefore, conditioned phenomena do not possess intrinsic nature. Their absence of intrinsic nature is called emptiness.

Emptiness is thus not a separate substance hidden behind appearances. It describes how phenomena exist: relationally, conditionally, and without self-sufficient foundations. A

seed, for example, does not produce a plant solely through an independently existing power contained inside it. Growth depends upon soil, water, temperature, time, and numerous biological conditions. Moreover, the designation “seed” depends upon its position within a particular biological and conceptual system.

Garfield (1994) argues that Nāgārjuna begins his major work with causation because dependent origination provides the foundation for understanding emptiness. If causes and effects possessed fixed intrinsic natures, genuine causal interaction would become impossible. A thing whose identity was completely independent and immutable could not be transformed by conditions. Causal efficacy is possible precisely because phenomena are empty of fixed essence.

Emptiness therefore does not undermine causation. It explains how causal change is possible. If things possessed immutable intrinsic natures, no seed could become a plant, no ignorant person could acquire wisdom, and no suffering individual could attain liberation.

### **Emptiness Is Not Absolute Nonexistence**

A frequent misunderstanding identifies emptiness with absolute nothingness. This interpretation confuses the denial of intrinsic existence with the denial of every kind of existence. Madhyamaka rejects the independent existence of phenomena, not their conventional occurrence or effectiveness.

Nāgārjuna distinguishes between saying that something lacks intrinsic nature and saying that it is entirely nonexistent. A chariot provides a traditional example. No chariot can be found independently of its wheels, axle, frame, arrangement, function, and designation. Nevertheless, the chariot can transport people. Its emptiness does not prevent it from functioning. Rather, the chariot functions as a dependently constituted phenomenon.

The same analysis applies to persons. A person cannot be identified as an independent self existing separately from bodily and mental processes. Yet conventional persons experience suffering, form intentions, make decisions, perform actions, and receive consequences. The absence of an intrinsic self does not eliminate agency at the conventional level.

Madhyamaka consequently avoids two extremes: **Substantialism or eternalism:** Things possess permanent, independent essences. **Nihilism or annihilationism:** Nothing exists, functions, or has consequences.

The Middle Way recognizes conventional existence without turning it into intrinsic existence. As Westerhoff (2024) explains, Madhyamaka is directed against *svabhāva*, not against the practical world as such.

### **The Dialectical Method and the Four Alternatives**

Nāgārjuna’s philosophical method frequently examines a claim through four alternatives known as the *catuskoṭi* or tetralemma: A phenomenon exists. It does not exist. It both exists and does not exist. It neither exists nor does not exist.

These alternatives should not be understood as a claim that meaningful reasoning is impossible. Nāgārjuna uses them to demonstrate that concepts become contradictory when treated as descriptions of intrinsically existing realities. His analysis of causation, for example, examines whether an effect arises from itself, from something entirely different, from both, or from no cause. Each possibility encounters difficulties when cause and effect are assumed to possess independent essences (Siderits & Katsura, 2013).

If an effect arose from itself, production would be unnecessary because the effect would already exist. If it arose from something entirely different, anything might arise from anything else because no meaningful causal relationship could be established. The combination of self-production and production from another inherits the problems of both positions, while causeless production eliminates causal intelligibility.

The purpose of this analysis is not to deny ordinary causal relations. It demonstrates that causation cannot be coherently explained as an interaction between self-existing substances. Causality functions conventionally as an interdependent process.

Nāgārjuna generally does not replace the positions he criticizes with another metaphysical thesis. His dialectic operates therapeutically: it loosens attachment to views that convert useful concepts into fixed realities. Madhyamaka reasoning is therefore connected with liberation, since attachment to metaphysical views reflects and reinforces the more fundamental habit of grasping at an independently existing self and world.

### **The Eight Negations and the Meaning of the Middle Way**

The dedicatory verses of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* praise dependent origination as free from eight conceptual extremes: neither cessation nor arising, neither annihilation nor permanence, neither identity nor difference, neither coming nor going.

These eight negations summarize Nāgārjuna's rejection of attempts to describe reality through fixed ontological categories. They do not mean that conventional events never begin, end, change, or move. At the ordinary level, a person travels from one city to another, a plant arises from a seed, and a flame ceases when fuel is exhausted. The negations address the ultimate analysis of intrinsically existing arising, ceasing, identity, difference, coming, and going.

Consider the relation between identity and difference. If cause and effect were intrinsically identical, causal production would be redundant because nothing new would arise. If they were intrinsically different, it would be difficult to explain why one specific cause produces one effect rather than any possible effect. Nāgārjuna's Middle Way understands the distinction between cause and effect conventionally while denying that either possesses a self-defined identity.

The eight negations thus prevent dependent origination from being interpreted as a metaphysical process involving independently existing entities. They also prevent emptiness from becoming another absolute doctrine. The Madhyamaka Middle Way is not a new object situated between existence and nonexistence; it is freedom from reifying either extreme.

### **Conventional and Ultimate Truth**

Nāgārjuna's doctrine of the two truths is essential for avoiding nihilistic interpretations. He distinguishes conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*) from ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). The Buddha's teaching depends upon these two dimensions, and failure to understand their distinction leads to misunderstanding the Dharma (Garfield, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013).

Conventional truth includes the world of persons, language, objects, institutions, causes, ethical distinctions, and Buddhist practices. It is the domain within which statements can be relatively true or false. "Fire produces heat" is conventionally true, whereas "fire produces cold" is ordinarily false. The fact that both statements employ conventions does not make them equally valid.

The source document describes conventional truth primarily as ignorance or a veil that conceals reality. Although the Sanskrit term *saṃvṛti* can suggest covering or concealment, reducing conventional truth to falsehood is misleading. Conventional truth is also the indispensable communicative and practical framework through which people learn, reason, act ethically, and follow the Buddhist path.

Ultimate truth is the emptiness of all phenomena—the fact that nothing possesses independent intrinsic nature. However, ultimate truth is not a second realm existing behind or above the conventional world. It is the ultimate mode of understanding conventional things.

To see a table ultimately is not to discover a mysterious reality behind the table; it is to understand that the table exists only through parts, conditions, functions, and designation.

Nāgārjuna famously states that ultimate truth cannot be taught without relying upon convention and that nirvāṇa cannot be attained without understanding ultimate truth (Siderits & Katsura, 2013). Language is therefore both limited and necessary. It cannot capture an intrinsically existing ultimate reality because no such reality exists, yet it can correct mistaken views and guide the practitioner toward non-reifying understanding.

The two truths are consequently inseparable. Conventional truth without ultimate analysis encourages reification. Ultimate truth separated from convention becomes an imagined absolute and contradicts emptiness.

### **The Emptiness of Emptiness**

One of the most philosophically important implications of Madhyamaka is that emptiness itself is empty. If emptiness possessed intrinsic existence, it would become precisely the kind of metaphysical foundation that Madhyamaka rejects.

Emptiness depends upon empty phenomena. The emptiness of a chariot is not an additional object existing beside the chariot; it is the chariot's absence of intrinsic nature. If there were no conventionally designated chariot, there would be no emptiness of the chariot to identify. Emptiness is therefore relational and dependently designated (Garfield, 1994).

Nāgārjuna warns that emptiness misunderstood is dangerous, like a snake grasped incorrectly or a magical formula improperly applied (Siderits & Katsura, 2013). When emptiness is reified, it may produce the belief that all moral distinctions, knowledge claims, and religious practices are meaningless. This is not Madhyamaka but another extreme view.

The emptiness of emptiness prevents the doctrine from becoming dogmatic. Emptiness is a corrective concept used to remove attachment to intrinsic nature. Once it performs this function, the practitioner should not attach to emptiness as a final metaphysical object.

### **Karma, Ethics, and Liberation in an Empty World**

Nāgārjuna's critics might argue that if persons and actions are empty, karma and moral responsibility become impossible. His response is that causal and moral processes are possible because they are empty rather than despite their emptiness.

If a person possessed an immutable essence, genuine moral transformation would be impossible. A permanently greedy person could never become generous, and an intrinsically ignorant being could never attain awakening. Because persons are dependently constituted processes, habits can change when their supporting conditions change.

Karma also does not require a permanent self that travels unchanged through time. An intentional action and its later consequence belong to a causal continuum without being absolutely identical or completely unrelated. The later person is neither an immutable entity identical with the earlier person nor an entirely disconnected being. This middle position supports continuity without positing a permanent substance.

The realization of emptiness has ethical implications. Reification encourages rigid divisions between self and others, identity and difference, possession and loss. When persons understand that their identities and well-being depend upon innumerable relationships, compassion becomes philosophically intelligible. Emptiness need not result in ethical indifference; it can weaken the self-centered attachment that sustains exploitation, hostility, and fear.

### **Saṃsāra and Nirvāṇa**

The relationship between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa presents another application of the Middle Way. Nāgārjuna denies that nirvāṇa is an independently existing realm or substance. If nirvāṇa possessed intrinsic nature, it would be disconnected from conditioned existence and could not be attained through a path.

The non-difference between saṃsāra and nirvāṇa does not mean that suffering and liberation are experientially identical. It means that they are not two independently existing ontological worlds. Saṃsāra is dependently arisen experience grasped through ignorance and intrinsic-existence thinking. Nirvāṇa is the cessation of that ignorance and grasping. The same empty phenomena may be experienced through attachment or understood without reification.

Liberation is therefore not the destruction of a truly existing world. Nor is it the movement of a permanent self into another metaphysical reality. It is a transformation in understanding and attachment grounded in the realization that neither self nor phenomena possess an independent essence.

### **Critical Assessment**

The source document correctly identifies emptiness, dependent origination, the Middle Way, the eight negations, and the two truths as central to Madhyamaka. Nevertheless, three clarifications are necessary.

First, emptiness should not be described as the “unreality of all elements of existence” without qualification. Such language can suggest nihilism. A more accurate formulation is that all phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence while remaining conventionally existent and causally effective.

Second, conventional truth is not simply ignorance or false appearance. It includes valid ordinary knowledge and is indispensable to communication, morality, and religious practice. A conventional statement may be reliable without describing an intrinsically existing reality.

Third, ultimate truth should not be reified as a transcendent substance. Ultimate truth is the emptiness of conventional phenomena, and emptiness itself is dependently designated. Madhyamaka therefore offers no permanent metaphysical foundation behind the conditioned world (Garfield, 1994; Westerhoff, 2009).

These corrections strengthen rather than reject the central insight of the original document: Nāgārjuna uses philosophical analysis to establish a Middle Way between existence and nonexistence. His method shows how dependent origination makes both ordinary functioning and liberation possible.

### **Conclusion**

Madhyamaka philosophy is founded upon the inseparable relationship among dependent origination, emptiness, and the Middle Way. All phenomena arise through causes, conditions, constituent parts, relations, and conceptual designation. For this reason, they are empty of intrinsic nature. Yet emptiness does not mean that they are absolutely nonexistent. They function conventionally precisely because they are conditional and capable of change. Nāgārjuna’s dialectical analysis exposes contradictions that arise when conventional categories are transformed into self-existing realities. The four alternatives and eight negations do not destroy rational thought; they free thought from the assumption that language must correspond to fixed metaphysical essences.

The doctrine of the two truths preserves the practical world while revealing its emptiness. Conventional truth makes language, causation, karma, morality, and Buddhist practice possible. Ultimate truth reveals that none of these possesses an independent

foundation. Each truth depends upon the other: without convention, emptiness cannot be taught; without understanding emptiness, convention becomes reified.

Madhyamaka is therefore neither a doctrine of absolute reality nor a philosophy of nothingness. It is a soteriological critique of intrinsic-existence thinking. By loosening attachment to permanent identities, substances, and views, the realization of emptiness supports wisdom, ethical transformation, compassion, and liberation.

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## **From Pariyatti to Paṭivedha: Integrating Textual Learning, Practice, and Direct Experience in Buddhist Education**

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### **Abstract**

Theravāda Buddhist education is commonly organized through the threefold framework of pariyatti, paṭipatti, and paṭivedha: learning the Buddha's teaching, putting it into practice, and directly realizing its truth. Although this precise tripartite formulation was systematized in post-canonical Theravāda tradition, each dimension has clear foundations in the Pāli discourses. Textual and oral learning provides concepts, ethical orientation, and instructions for practice. Practice transforms received knowledge through ethical discipline, meditation, and wisdom. Direct realization penetrates impermanence, suffering, non-self, dependent origination, and ultimately nibbāna. This article argues that the three dimensions are distinguishable but interdependent. Pariyatti without practice can produce intellectual pride, dogmatism, or merely verbal knowledge. Practice without adequate learning risks misinterpretation, ineffective methods, and the mistaking of temporary mental states for awakening. Claims of direct realization without doctrinal, ethical, and communal criteria may become forms of unaccountable subjectivism. An integrated Buddhist educational model therefore combines textual study, critical reflection, ethical conduct, contemplative exercise, dialogue with qualified teachers, and experiential verification. The purpose of this integration is not simply to produce knowledgeable students but to transform how learners perceive, act, and respond to suffering.

**Keywords:** pariyatti, Buddhist education, textual learning, threefold training

### **Introduction**

Buddhist education contains an apparent tension between textual learning and direct experience. On the one hand, Buddhist traditions preserve extensive bodies of scripture, commentary, monastic discipline, philosophy, narrative, and meditation instruction. Accurate learning has been essential to the transmission of Buddhism across generations. On the other hand, Buddhist texts repeatedly warn that memorization and intellectual mastery alone cannot eliminate greed, hatred, delusion, or suffering.

This tension is commonly addressed through the framework of pariyatti, paṭipatti, and paṭivedha. The terms may provisionally be translated as learning, practice, and realization. Pariyatti refers to the acquisition and understanding of the teaching. Paṭipatti denotes living and practicing according to it. Paṭivedha refers to penetrating or directly realizing the truths taught by the Buddha.

The tripartite framework is sometimes presented as though it were a single formula repeatedly stated in the earliest discourses. More precisely, its systematic use is characteristic of later Theravāda interpretive and educational traditions, although the Pāli canon clearly supports the distinction among learning, practice, and realization (Sugunasiri, 2005).

Recognizing this historical qualification prevents a later organizational scheme from being anachronistically attributed to every layer of early Buddhist literature.

The framework should not be reduced to a simple linear sequence in which study is completed before practice begins and practice is completed before realization occurs. Study influences practice; practice changes the learner's understanding of texts; partial insight motivates further learning; and dialogue helps practitioners interpret experience. The relationship is recursive and developmental.

This article examines the functions, limitations, and integration of these three dimensions. It argues that Buddhist education is complete only when received knowledge is ethically embodied, contemplatively tested, and transformed into wisdom that weakens the causes of suffering.

## **Historical and Conceptual Background**

### **1. A post-canonical synthesis with canonical foundations**

The words *pariyatti*, *paṭipatti*, and *paṭivedha* occur in Pāli literature, but the familiar three-part educational model was systematized in Theravāda commentarial and later scholastic traditions. It became an influential way of explaining the preservation and realization of the “true Dhamma” (*saddhamma*).

This historical development does not make the model inauthentic. Buddhist traditions frequently organize earlier teachings into frameworks that facilitate learning. The question is whether the framework accurately represents important canonical relationships.

The Pāli discourses distinguish people who memorize teachings from those who practice them, describe a gradual training in conduct and meditation, and repeatedly contrast second-hand knowledge with direct knowing and seeing. The tripartite framework brings these themes together into a coherent educational structure.

### **2. Meanings of the three terms**

*Pariyatti* derives from a verb associated with learning, mastering, or comprehending. In educational usage, it includes hearing, memorizing, reciting, reading, interpreting, and discussing the Dhamma and Vinaya.

*Paṭipatti* means conduct, practice, procedure, or the act of proceeding along a path. It includes ethical discipline, restraint of the senses, mindfulness, concentration, insight, and the broader application of the teaching in everyday life.

*Paṭivedha* means penetration, breakthrough, or direct realization. In its strongest Buddhist sense, it refers to supramundane insight—the direct realization of the Four Noble Truths and *nibbāna*. It should not be equated with every personal experience produced during meditation.

These three concepts may be summarized as knowing the teaching, living the teaching, and realizing what the teaching discloses.

## **Pariyatti: Learning and Preserving the Dhamma**

### **1. Oral and textual learning**

Early Buddhist education initially operated within an oral culture. Monastics learned discourses, disciplinary rules, verses, classifications, and teaching formulas through listening, repetition, communal recitation, and dialogue. Memorization was not necessarily mechanical. In an oral tradition, accurate memory was the primary means of preserving knowledge.

The later development of manuscripts and print culture changed the technology of preservation but not the importance of study. Texts enabled the transmission of doctrines across time and distance, while commentaries supplied grammatical, doctrinal, and practical interpretation.

Pariyatti includes more than memorizing words. It involves understanding: The Four Noble Truths, Dependent origination, Kamma and its results, The five aggregates, The sense bases, The three characteristics, The Noble Eightfold Path, The principles of ethical discipline, Methods of meditation.

This doctrinal map helps learners recognize what is to be understood, abandoned, cultivated, and realized.

## **2. Educational functions of textual knowledge**

Textual learning performs several indispensable functions.

First, it preserves the content of the teaching. Without shared texts or oral collections, Buddhist practice could become detached from the Dhamma and shaped solely by personal preference.

Second, it provides conceptual orientation. Meditation experiences are often ambiguous. Knowledge of Buddhist categories helps practitioners distinguish concentration, mindfulness, emotional tranquillity, insight, and liberation.

Third, it supplies ethical standards. A practice that produces unusual experiences but encourages deception, exploitation, or cruelty cannot be justified merely by its psychological intensity.

Fourth, it enables communal dialogue and correction. Shared terminology allows teachers and practitioners to compare interpretations and identify errors.

Fifth, study makes the teaching available to future generations. A practitioner may gain personal benefit from meditation, but a tradition requires trained persons who can preserve, interpret, and communicate its teachings.

## **3. Learning as a form of active inquiry**

Buddhist study should not be reduced to passive reception. The Mahāvedalla Sutta presents advanced learning as dialogue in which monks ask detailed questions concerning wisdom, consciousness, feeling, right view, meditation, and liberation (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013). Questioning is part of the educational process.

The discourse identifies the “voice of another” and appropriate attention as two conditions for the arising of right view. Textual instruction must therefore be accompanied by reflection. Learners should examine meaning, context, causal structure, and practical consequences rather than merely reproduce inherited formulations.

## **The Limitations and Dangers of Textual Learning**

### **1. Recitation without practice**

The Dhammapada contrasts a person who recites many teachings but does not act accordingly with one who knows fewer teachings but practices the Dhamma. The former is compared to a cowherd who counts the cattle of others without sharing in the fruits of ownership. The latter participates genuinely in the contemplative life (Buddharakkhita, 1985).

The criticism is not directed against recitation itself. The problem is the separation of speech from transformation. A student may explain loving-kindness while habitually speaking with hostility, or analyze non-self while becoming strongly attached to academic status.

Buddhist education evaluates knowledge through its effects upon conduct and mental qualities. An increase in information that leaves greed, hatred, and delusion untouched is educationally incomplete.

### **2. The snake and the incorrect grasp of doctrine**

The Alagaddūpama Sutta compares wrongly grasped teachings to a snake seized incorrectly. A person who catches a snake by its body or tail may be bitten; one who restrains it correctly can handle it safely. Similarly, some people learn the Dhamma for debate,

criticism, status, or victory over others rather than for understanding its meaning. Their learning causes harm because it is wrongly grasped (Bodhi, 2009).

This simile identifies an ethical dimension of interpretation. The same text can function differently according to the learner's intention. Study motivated by humility and liberation may support wisdom; study motivated by conceit can strengthen self-attachment. The discourse also compares the Dhamma to a raft for crossing a dangerous body of water. The teaching is necessary, but attachment to the teaching as a possession must eventually be relinquished. Pariyatti is an instrument of liberation, not an end in itself.

### **3. Intellectualism and doctrinal identity**

Textual expertise can become a basis for identity: "I am learned," "my interpretation alone is correct," or "my school possesses the complete truth." Such attachment converts Buddhist knowledge into a means of reinforcing the self it is intended to deconstruct.

Doctrinal precision remains valuable, but the learner must examine whether debate is directed toward clarification or domination. The criterion is not the absence of disagreement; Buddhist traditions have always debated interpretation. The criterion is whether disagreement contributes to wisdom and freedom from hostility.

## **Paṭipatti: Embodying the Teaching**

### **1. Practice as the threefold training**

Paṭipatti is the application of the Dhamma through conduct and mental cultivation. It is most comprehensively represented by the threefold training: Ethical discipline (sīla), Concentration (samādhi), Wisdom (paññā).

Ethical discipline includes refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants, together with the positive cultivation of generosity, honesty, responsibility, and non-harming. Monastic discipline extends this training through the Vinaya.

Concentration includes right effort, mindfulness, and mental unification. It develops the stability required to observe experience without immediate reaction.

Wisdom examines phenomena as impermanent, conditioned, unsatisfactory when appropriated, and devoid of a permanent self. It also understands the Four Noble Truths and dependent origination.

The three trainings prevent Buddhist practice from being reduced to meditation technique. Ethical conduct establishes the foundation for mental stability, while concentration supports insight. Wisdom gives ethical and contemplative practice their liberating direction (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013).

### **2. The gradual training**

The Pāli discourses frequently describe a gradual training. A practitioner begins with confidence, ethical conduct, and restraint; develops moderation, vigilance, mindfulness, and contentment; cultivates concentration; and then realizes liberating knowledge.

The Kīṭāgiri Sutta explicitly states that final knowledge is not achieved immediately. It describes a developmental process involving confidence, approaching a teacher, listening, remembering, examining meaning, reflective acceptance, desire to practice, effort, careful evaluation, and direct realization (Sujato, 2018a).

This sequence integrates education and practice. Hearing precedes but does not replace examination. Examination generates motivation. Motivation produces effort. Sustained practice culminates in bodily and mental realization of truth.

### **3. Practice beyond formal meditation**

Paṭipatti includes formal meditation but is not limited to it. Everyday relationships provide contexts for observing craving, anger, fear, comparison, and self-defence. Right

speech, livelihood, generosity, patience, and care for others are part of the educational process.

A practitioner who experiences tranquillity during meditation but acts dishonestly outside meditation has not integrated practice. Buddhist education evaluates how insight functions under ordinary conditions - during disagreement, loss, praise, blame, success, and failure.

Practice is thus embodied knowledge. It transforms doctrine from a description of an ideal into patterns of perception and action.

## **The Risks of Practice without Adequate Learning**

### **1. Technique without direction**

Meditation techniques can be detached from their ethical and philosophical context. Mindfulness, for example, may be used to increase concentration or productivity without examining whether the goals being pursued are wholesome.

Buddhist practice requires right view. Concentration serving greed or violence is not right concentration merely because it is powerful. Textual and doctrinal learning provide criteria for evaluating the intention, object, method, and consequences of practice.

### **2. Misinterpretation of experience**

Meditation may produce calm, joy, unusual perceptions, altered bodily sensations, or states of reduced conceptual activity. These experiences can be beneficial, but they do not automatically constitute awakening.

Without knowledge of Buddhist psychology and meditation, practitioners may mistake temporary concentration for nibbāna, emotional catharsis for insight, or dissociation for non-self. Qualified teachers and textual frameworks help interpret such experiences cautiously.

### **3. Anti-intellectualism**

The claim that “Buddhism is only practice” can become another form of dogmatism. It may shield teachers from criticism, discourage historical inquiry, or allow private interpretation to replace accountable knowledge.

Direct experience always requires interpretation. The language used to identify an experience as mindfulness, emptiness, jhāna, or awakening already depends upon conceptual frameworks. The relevant question is not whether interpretation can be eliminated but whether it is careful, informed, ethically responsible, and open to correction.

## **Paṭivedha: Penetration and Direct Realization**

### **1. From knowing about to knowing directly**

Paṭivedha marks the transition from knowledge about the Dhamma to direct penetration of its truth. A learner may understand impermanence as a proposition, but experiential realization changes how conditioned phenomena are perceived and appropriated. Knowledge about impermanence recognizes that things change. Penetrative knowledge sees arising and cessation so directly that attachment begins to lose its basis. Knowledge about non-self denies an eternal soul; penetrative knowledge weakens the immediate habit of treating the aggregates as “I,” “me,” and “mine.”

The difference is not simply between conceptual and sensory knowledge. Paṭivedha is cultivated wisdom that transforms the structure of attachment.

### **2. The Four Noble Truths as realized tasks**

The Four Noble Truths are not merely four propositions to be accepted. Each includes a practical task: Suffering is to be fully understood. Its origin is to be abandoned. Its cessation is to be realized. The path is to be developed.

Direct realization integrates knowledge with these tasks. One does not fully know the origin of suffering while continuing to cultivate craving without recognition. Nor is cessation known merely through a verbal definition.

The arising of the noble path constitutes a breakthrough because the truths are understood in their functional relationship. In Theravāda, the strongest sense of paṭivedha therefore concerns the stages of noble awakening and the realization of nibbāna.

### 3. Direct experience is not private infallibility

The expression “direct experience” can misleadingly suggest that personal experience is self-validating. Buddhist traditions do not normally accept every internal event as authoritative.

Claims of realization are evaluated through several criteria: Consistency with the Dhamma and Vinaya. Reduction of greed, hatred, and delusion. Ethical transformation. Freedom from attachment and conceit. Stability rather than momentary intensity. Examination by qualified teachers. The specific defilements said to have been abandoned

The need for such criteria does not deny the personal character of realization. No teacher can eliminate another person’s craving. It recognizes that experience can be misidentified and that interpretation remains necessary.

### Ganthadhura and Vipassanādhura

Later Theravāda literature distinguishes two broad monastic responsibilities: Ganthadhura: the responsibility of texts, learning, or scriptural study. Vipassanādhura: the responsibility of insight meditation.

This distinction reflects institutional specialization. Some monastics preserve, teach, and interpret texts; others devote greater attention to contemplative practice. Both responsibilities contribute to the continuation of Buddhism.

The distinction should not be treated as an absolute separation. A textual specialist still practices ethical discipline and may meditate, while an insight practitioner requires some knowledge of the Dhamma and discipline. The ideal relationship is complementary.

When the two become institutionally disconnected, several problems may appear. Scriptural education may become examination-oriented and remote from transformation. Meditation instruction may become technically effective but doctrinally narrow or historically uninformed. Integration requires dialogue between scholars and practitioners rather than competition over which responsibility is “real Buddhism.”

### An Integrated Model of Buddhist Learning

The relationship among the three dimensions can be presented as a cycle:

| Dimension                 | Principal activities                                              | Educational contribution                | Risk when isolated                                        |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Pariyatti</b>          | Listening, reading, memorizing, interpreting, and discussing      | Doctrinal orientation and preservation  | Verbalism, pride, and dogmatism                           |
| <b>Paṭipatti</b>          | Ethical conduct, mindfulness, concentration, and insight practice | Embodiment and testing of knowledge     | Technique without right view or misinterpreted experience |
| <b>Paṭivedha</b>          | Direct penetration of the Four Noble Truths and nibbāna           | Transformative and liberating knowledge | Unverifiable subjective claims                            |
| <b>Return to teaching</b> | Communicating insight through responsible instruction             | Renewal of the educational tradition    | Personal authority detached from texts and community      |

The final row indicates that realization may return to and enrich pariyatti. Practitioners who have deeply understood the teaching can explain it more effectively, adapt examples to different audiences, and preserve a living rather than purely textual tradition.

The cycle does not imply that realization gives an individual unlimited interpretive authority. Teaching remains accountable to ethical conduct, communal standards, and the inherited Dhamma and Vinaya.

## **The Teacher and Community in Integrated Learning**

### **1. The teacher as kalyāṇamitta**

A spiritual friend connects study, practice, and realization. The teacher introduces texts, explains difficult concepts, demonstrates conduct, provides meditation instructions, and assists in the interpretation of experience.

In the Upaḍḍha Sutta, the Buddha describes good friendship as the whole of the spiritual life because a person with good friends can be expected to develop the Noble Eightfold Path (Sujato, 2018b).

The teacher's role is indispensable but limited. A teacher points out the path and creates conditions for learning; the learner must undertake the training. Effective teaching therefore gradually develops the learner's capacity for wise attention and responsible practice.

### **2. Communal recitation and dialogue**

Buddhist education is not exclusively an individual relationship between teacher and student. Communal recitation preserves texts, while discussion allows interpretations to be questioned. The Saṅgha provides ethical standards, institutional continuity, and shared practices.

Community also protects against purely private accounts of realization. At its best, it provides multiple perspectives and mechanisms of accountability. At its worst, however, institutional conformity may suppress legitimate questions. An integrated model must combine continuity with critical reflection.

## **Comparison with Contemporary Educational Theory**

The movement from study through practice to realization has similarities with experiential and transformative education.

Experiential learning emphasizes a cycle involving concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Buddhist learning likewise moves between teaching, practice, observation, and revised understanding.

Transformative learning concerns changes in the frameworks through which individuals interpret experience. Buddhist education also seeks a profound transformation of perspective, especially the abandonment of permanent-self assumptions and habitual attachment.

Nevertheless, Buddhist paṭivedha should not be reduced to experiential learning in a general educational sense. Its final purpose is not simply improved professional performance or a revised personal worldview. It is the destruction of ignorance and the realization of liberation.

The comparison is therefore useful at the level of educational process but limited at the level of ultimate purpose.

## **Applications to Contemporary Buddhist Education**

### **1. Integrating curricula and contemplative practice**

Buddhist educational institutions can design curricula in which textual study is connected with ethical and contemplative exercises. A course on right speech, for example, might include: Study of relevant discourses. Analysis of contemporary communication problems. Observation of one's speech and intentions. Practice in truthful and non-harmful communication. Reflection on the results. Revision of understanding through discussion. Such integration prevents doctrine from remaining abstract.

### **2. Reflective journals and practice reports**

Learners may document how teachings function in daily life. Reflection can identify discrepancies between conceptual knowledge and actual behaviour. Practice reports should not encourage public claims of attainment but can develop careful self-observation.

### **3. Dialogue between scholars and meditation teachers**

Textual scholars can clarify historical contexts, translations, and doctrinal variations. Meditation teachers can contribute knowledge of pedagogical difficulties and lived practice. Collaborative teaching can reduce the separation between *ganthadhura* and *vipassanādhura*.

### **4. Digital learning**

Digital archives and online courses have expanded access to Buddhist texts. They also increase the risk of fragmented quotations, unreliable translations, and instruction without personal guidance.

Digital Buddhist education should therefore combine accessible sources with contextual explanation, opportunities for dialogue, ethical safeguards, and clear distinctions between general mindfulness exercises and advanced meditation practices.

### **5. Assessment beyond examinations**

Written examinations can measure textual knowledge but not complete Buddhist development. An integrated assessment model may also consider reflective understanding, ethical responsibility, consistency of practice, and the ability to apply principles to concrete situations.

Claims of spiritual attainment should not be converted into conventional grades. The purpose is to recognize that memorization alone does not measure the full educational process.

## **Critical Limitations**

Several cautions are necessary when applying this framework.

First, textual learning is internally diverse. "The text" does not always provide a single uncontested interpretation. Students need awareness of genre, chronology, translation, and commentarial differences.

Second, practice is shaped by culture and institutions. What is presented as timeless meditation may reflect modern reforms or regional traditions. Historical knowledge improves rather than undermines practice.

Third, direct experience is communicated retrospectively through concepts. The distinction between conceptual and experiential knowledge should not become an absolute dualism.

Fourth, ethical conduct cannot be treated merely as preparation for meditation. It is an essential expression of Buddhist understanding and a criterion for evaluating purported realization.

Finally, the framework should not be imposed uncritically on all Buddhist traditions. Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna systems possess their own models of study, contemplation, and realization, even though comparable relationships are present.

## Conclusion

Pariyatti, paṭipatti, and paṭivedha provide a powerful framework for understanding Buddhist education as the integration of learning, practice, and realization. Textual study preserves the Dhamma, supplies ethical and philosophical orientation, and gives practitioners the concepts needed to interpret experience. Yet learning becomes incomplete when it remains at the level of recitation, debate, or identity.

Practice embodies knowledge through ethical discipline, mental cultivation, and wisdom. It tests whether teachings actually transform conduct and perception. Yet practice without adequate study may lose its direction, become detached from Buddhist ethics, or generate mistaken interpretations of meditation experiences.

Direct realization fulfils the educational process by transforming knowledge into liberating insight. It does not mean that every personal feeling is infallible. Buddhist realization is assessed through doctrinal coherence, ethical change, the weakening of defilements, and freedom from attachment.

The three dimensions are therefore neither interchangeable nor separable. Pariyatti guides paṭipatti; paṭipatti creates the conditions for paṭivedha; and realization gives living depth to the continued interpretation and teaching of the Dhamma. Buddhist education becomes complete when words inform practice, practice verifies words, and both contribute to a wisdom that changes the learner's relationship to suffering.

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## **The Four Wheels of Prosperity and Holistic Human Development : Integrating External Conditions and Internal Virtues in Buddhist Philosophy**

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### **Abstract**

The Buddhist teaching known as the Four Wheels of Prosperity (cakka) provides a concise but comprehensive framework for understanding human development. Presented in the Cakka Sutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the four factors are living in a suitable locality (paṭirūpadesavāsa), relying upon good persons (sappurisūpassaya), directing oneself rightly (attasammāpaṇidhi), and having performed meritorious deeds in the past (pubbe ca katapuññatā). This article interprets the four wheels as an integrated model of holistic human development that connects structural opportunity, relational support, moral agency, and accumulated ethical capacity. The first two factors emphasize the external and social conditions that make development possible, while the latter two highlight purposeful self-direction and the continuing influence of previous action. Nevertheless, the factors should not be divided rigidly because environments shape character, companions influence aspirations, present self-direction modifies future conditions, and accumulated merit becomes effective through present choices. The framework challenges both radical individualism, which attributes success solely to personal effort, and fatalism, which explains present conditions as the unavoidable result of past kamma. It defines prosperity broadly to include material sufficiency, moral integrity, intellectual development, social well-being, and spiritual freedom. The article concludes by proposing a Four-Wheel Holistic Development Model applicable to education, community development, organizational leadership, and public policy.

**Keywords:** Four Wheels, cakka, holistic development, Buddhist philosophy, kamma

### **Introduction**

Human development is often measured through economic income, educational attainment, physical health, occupational achievement, and access to resources. These indicators are important, but they do not fully capture the moral, relational, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions of a flourishing life. A society may achieve economic growth while experiencing corruption, social isolation, environmental destruction, or psychological distress. Similarly, an individual may possess wealth and status without wisdom, ethical integrity, or freedom from suffering.

Buddhist philosophy provides a broader understanding of development. It recognizes material welfare and social stability while placing them within an ethical and soteriological framework. Human development involves not only acquiring external resources but also cultivating conduct, mental qualities, wisdom, and relationships that reduce suffering.

A concise expression of this approach appears in the Cakka Sutta of the Aṅguttara Nikāya. The discourse identifies four “wheels” that lead human and divine beings toward prosperity and greatness: 1. Living in a suitable locality (paṭirūpadesavāsa); 2. Relying upon good persons (sappurisūpassaya); 3. Directing oneself rightly (attasammāpaṇidhi); and 4. Having performed meritorious deeds in the past (pubbe ca katapuññatā) (Bodhi, 2012, AN 4.31).

The image of a wheel suggests movement. A vehicle cannot travel effectively if one wheel is absent, damaged, or turned in a different direction. Likewise, sustainable human development cannot depend exclusively upon personal effort, favorable surroundings, social relationships, or inherited advantages. Progress requires coordination among all four.

The first factor emphasizes environmental conditions. The second highlights relational and moral influence. The third identifies personal direction and responsibility. The fourth recognizes historical continuity: present opportunities and capacities are partly shaped by previous intentional action.

This article analyzes the Four Wheels as a Buddhist model of holistic human development. It argues that the teaching integrates external opportunity and internal virtue without reducing one to the other. It also offers a middle position between individualism and structural determinism, as well as between moral agency and karmic fatalism.

### **Textual Foundation and Terminological Clarification**

The Pāli text of Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.31 lists the four wheels as paṭirūpadesavāsa, sappurisūpassaya, attasammāpaṇidhi, and pubbe ca katapuññatā. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates them as dwelling in a suitable locality, relying on good persons, right resolution, and merit done in the past (Bodhi, 2012).

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2005) translates the same factors as dwelling in a civilized land, associating with people of integrity, directing oneself rightly, and having made merit in the past. The concluding verse states that when these conditions are present, prosperity, wealth, status, honor, and happiness may come to the individual.

Two terminological points are important. First, the second factor should be rendered sappurisūpassaya, not sappurisapassaya. It refers to relying upon, associating with, or receiving support from morally good and wise persons.

Second, the fourth factor is pubbe ca katapuññatā, “having performed meritorious action previously.” It should not be replaced by pubbekatapubbakāra, which is not the canonical expression used in this discourse.

The phrase “merit done in the past” can include actions performed earlier in the present life as well as deeds associated with previous lives within traditional Buddhist cosmology. Its practical significance is temporal: present development does not begin from zero. Individuals inherit consequences, habits, knowledge, relationships, reputations, and opportunities shaped partly by earlier conduct.

The discourse is brief and initially connects the four wheels with prosperity. However, when interpreted alongside broader Buddhist teachings on spiritual friendship, ethical conduct, household welfare, the Noble Eightfold Path, and liberation, it can support a multidimensional account of human development.

### **The Meaning of Holistic Human Development**

Holistic development concerns the coordinated cultivation of several dimensions of life: Material sufficiency; Physical and psychological well-being; Ethical conduct; Intellectual capability; Supportive social relationships; Responsible participation in community; Mental cultivation; and Wisdom directed toward freedom from suffering.

Buddhism does not necessarily condemn material prosperity. Household discourses discuss diligent work, protection of wealth, balanced livelihood, friendship, generosity, and preparation for future welfare. In the *Dīghajāṇu Sutta*, the Buddha identifies qualities supporting welfare in the present life and future life, including initiative, vigilance, good friendship, balanced living, faith, ethical conduct, generosity, and wisdom (Bodhi, 2012, AN 8.54).

The Buddhist critique concerns attachment, exploitation, and the mistaken belief that material accumulation alone can produce lasting happiness. Wealth becomes beneficial when acquired ethically, used responsibly, shared appropriately, and understood as impermanent.

The Four Wheels consequently should not be reduced to a technique for achieving wealth or status. They form a framework for directing prosperity toward individual well-being, social harmony, moral development, and spiritual progress.

## **First Wheel: Living in a Suitable Locality**

### **1. Meaning of Paṭirūpadesavāsa**

Paṭirūpadesavāsa means living in an appropriate, suitable, or conducive place. The term refers to more than geographical location. A place becomes suitable through the opportunities, institutions, relationships, norms, resources, and degree of safety it provides.

A conducive environment may include: Physical safety; Access to food, housing, health care, and education; Ethical and trustworthy institutions; Opportunities for meaningful work; Availability of religious and intellectual instruction; Social cooperation; Freedom from severe violence and exploitation; and Conditions supporting reflection and mental cultivation.

A quiet monastery may be suitable for intensive meditation, while an educational center may be suitable for intellectual training. Suitability is therefore partly relative to legitimate developmental goals.

### **2. Environment as a Condition, Not a Deterministic Cause**

Buddhist dependent origination rejects both absolute self-creation and strict environmental determinism. Environments influence conduct, but they do not mechanically determine every response. Individuals interpret, resist, modify, and sometimes leave their environments.

Nevertheless, ignoring environmental conditions places an unfair burden upon individuals. A person living amid violence, hunger, discrimination, or institutional corruption cannot be expected to develop under the same conditions as someone with security, education, and social support.

The first wheel therefore carries a structural implication: communities and governments share responsibility for creating conditions in which people can develop. Education, health services, social justice, environmental protection, and public safety are not external to moral development. They are among its enabling conditions.

### **3. Suitability and the Buddhist Path**

In Buddhist practice, an appropriate environment reduces distraction and supports wholesome qualities. Monastic discipline organizes residence, food, relationships, and daily activity partly to provide conditions for ethical and contemplative development.

The broader principle applies to lay life. Homes, schools, workplaces, and digital environments shape attention and habit. A workplace normalizing dishonesty can weaken moral restraint, while an institution rewarding integrity can support it.

A suitable environment should not be confused with a perfectly comfortable environment. Some challenges promote patience, resilience, and wisdom. The decisive question is whether the environment supports constructive development rather than chronic harm or degradation.

#### **4. Contemporary Application**

In education, *paṭirūpadesa* implies that learning depends upon more than curriculum. Students require physical safety, inclusive relationships, access to materials, competent teachers, and freedom from humiliation.

In public policy, the principle supports investment in social determinants of well-being. A society cannot demand moral responsibility while systematically depriving people of the conditions needed to exercise it.

In digital life, suitable locality includes virtual environments. Online spaces influence attention, identity, emotion, and social behavior. Designing ethically responsible digital environments is therefore a contemporary extension of the first wheel.

### **Second Wheel: Relying upon Good Persons**

#### **1. Meaning of Sappurisūpassaya**

Sappurisūpassaya refers to association with, reliance upon, or support from a *sappurisa*—a morally good, wise, and trustworthy person. Such persons influence development through instruction, example, encouragement, correction, and companionship.

This factor resembles the broader Buddhist concept of *kalyāṇamittatā*, admirable or spiritual friendship. In the *Upaddha Sutta*, Ānanda suggests that admirable friendship constitutes half of the holy life. The Buddha responds that it is the whole of the holy life because good friendship supports development of the Noble Eightfold Path (Bodhi, 2000, SN 45.2).

The statement does not mean that friendship alone automatically produces awakening. It emphasizes that the path is relationally supported. Teachers, companions, communities, and examples help practitioners discover, understand, and sustain the path.

#### **2. Characteristics of a Good Person**

A good person is not simply someone agreeable or socially influential. Buddhist criteria include: Ethical integrity; Wisdom; Compassion; Truthfulness; Patience; Freedom from exploitative motivation; Willingness to offer correction; Ability to communicate appropriately; and Conduct consistent with teaching.

The quality of guidance matters more than status. A famous or powerful individual may be a poor moral companion, while a socially ordinary person may embody wisdom and compassion.

#### **3. Mechanisms of Relational Development**

Good companions support growth in several ways.

First, they provide moral examples. Ethical conduct becomes more credible when observed in real behavior rather than only described abstractly.

Second, they provide interpretive guidance. Complex experiences may be misunderstood without instruction. A teacher can help distinguish genuine patience from passive submission, nonattachment from indifference, and mindfulness from emotional suppression.

Third, companions provide accountability. Individuals often fail to recognize their own biases and rationalizations. Honest feedback interrupts self-deception.

Fourth, relationships provide emotional support. Development involves setbacks, uncertainty, and frustration. Encouragement helps sustain effort.

Finally, spiritual friendship is reciprocal. One should not only search for good companions but also cultivate the qualities required to become a good companion to others.

#### **4. Risks of Misplaced Reliance**

Relying upon good persons does not require blind obedience. Buddhist history, like other religious histories, includes risks of authoritarian leadership, exploitation, and misuse of trust.

Discernment remains necessary. Teachers should be evaluated through conduct, consistency, transparency, and whether their guidance reduces greed, hatred, delusion, and harm.

In contemporary online environments, apparent mentors may gain authority through visibility rather than wisdom. The second wheel therefore requires media literacy and critical assessment alongside openness to guidance.

### **Third Wheel: Directing Oneself Rightly**

#### **1. Meaning of Attasammāpaṇidhi**

Attasammāpaṇidhi means rightly directing, establishing, or orienting oneself. It involves setting one's life in a wholesome direction rather than merely pursuing any desired objective.

The term does not support unrestricted individual ambition. The qualifier sammā, “rightly,” places self-direction within an ethical framework. A goal cannot be regarded as right merely because it is specific, measurable, or personally satisfying. It must be evaluated according to intention, means, consequences, and its relationship to suffering.

#### **2. From Opportunity to Agency**

A favorable environment and good companions provide opportunities, but they cannot substitute for personal commitment. A student may attend an excellent school and receive wise guidance yet fail to learn without effort. Similarly, access to the Dhamma does not produce transformation unless one practices it.

The third wheel introduces agency into the framework. Individuals must reflect upon their aims, make choices, establish priorities, and persevere.

Buddhist agency is conditional rather than absolute. Choices arise from character, knowledge, emotion, social context, and previous action. Yet conditional agency remains meaningful because present intentions can modify future conditions.

#### **3. Right Direction and the Noble Eightfold Path**

The Noble Eightfold Path provides criteria for right self-direction. Goals should be informed by Right View and motivated by intentions of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. Their pursuit should employ ethical speech, action, and livelihood while cultivating effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

This prevents a separation between ends and means. An apparently beneficial goal pursued through deception, violence, or exploitation is not rightly directed.

Self-direction also requires flexibility. Commitment should not become attachment to a single plan. Conditions change, new information appears, and the ethical consequences of action may become clearer. Right direction includes the wisdom to revise methods without abandoning wholesome purpose.

#### **4. Contemporary Goal-Setting**

Modern goal-setting frequently uses SMART criteria: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound. These criteria improve practical clarity but do not determine whether a goal is morally wholesome.

A Buddhist expansion might add four questions: 1. Is the goal rooted in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion? 2. Are the methods non-harmful? 3. Does the goal benefit only the individual or also consider others? 4. Will its achievement reduce or strengthen attachment?

Thus, career advancement, educational success, health improvement, and financial security may be legitimate goals when ethically pursued and wisely understood.

## **Fourth Wheel: Having Performed Merit in the Past**

### **1. Meaning of Pubbe ca Katapuññatā**

The fourth wheel refers to merit or wholesome action performed previously. Traditional Buddhist interpretation allows this to include earlier lives, but it also includes earlier actions in the present life.

Previous action shapes present development in multiple ways. Earlier study creates knowledge; previous generosity establishes supportive relationships; ethical consistency creates trust; disciplined practice develops skill; and past care for health affects present capacity.

The fourth wheel can therefore be interpreted as accumulated ethical and developmental capital.

### **2. Merit as More than Ritual Credit**

Merit (puñña) should not be understood as a metaphysical currency mechanically exchanged for success. It refers to the wholesome potential of actions grounded in generosity, ethical conduct, mental cultivation, and other beneficial intentions.

Meritorious action transforms the agent as well as the surrounding conditions. Generosity weakens possessiveness, ethical conduct supports trust, and meditation develops mental capacities. Communities also remember and respond to earlier conduct.

Merit thus has psychological, relational, social, and karmic dimensions.

### **3. Avoiding Karmic Fatalism**

The fourth wheel is vulnerable to fatalistic interpretation. One might conclude that wealth, illness, poverty, disability, or social status is entirely determined by past kamma. Such a view is inconsistent with the Buddhist emphasis on multiple conditions and present effort.

Not every event is explained exclusively by past moral action. Physical processes, social structures, environmental conditions, other people's choices, and present behavior also contribute to experience (Harvey, 2000).

Kamma should therefore not be used to blame disadvantaged people or justify inequality. The existence of inherited conditions does not eliminate social responsibility. On the contrary, present generosity and institutional reform become ways of creating better conditions for the future.

### **4. Temporal Continuity and Preparation**

The practical lesson of the fourth wheel is that good foundations must be created before a crisis or opportunity arrives. Education completed earlier supports later employment. Trust built over years supports cooperation during difficulty. Habits of mindfulness developed under ordinary conditions become resources during illness or loss.

Present action is simultaneously the result of past conditions and the creation of future conditions. In this sense, every individual continually transforms "past merit" into future potential.

## **External Conditions and Internal Virtues**

The Four Wheels can be organized analytically into external and internal dimensions:

| <b>Wheel</b>         | <b>Primary dimension</b>     | <b>Developmental function</b>                             |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Suitable locality    | Environmental and structural | Provides safety, resources, institutions, and opportunity |
| Good persons         | Social and relational        | Provides models, guidance, feedback, and support          |
| Right self-direction | Agentive and ethical         | Establishes purpose, discipline, and responsible choice   |
| Previous merit       | Temporal and karmic          | Supplies accumulated capacities, trust, habits,           |

|  |  |                 |
|--|--|-----------------|
|  |  | and opportunity |
|--|--|-----------------|

This distinction is useful but not absolute. Environments become supportive through the actions of persons. Companions influence internal motivation. Right self-direction changes one's environment and relationships. Previous merit may be embodied in external resources as well as internal qualities.

The four factors therefore form a mutually conditioning system rather than a linear sequence.

### **Beyond Individualism and Structural Determinism**

Modern discussions of development often divide between individualist and structural explanations.

Individualism attributes success to effort, discipline, talent, and choice. It may encourage responsibility but ignore unequal starting points and institutional barriers.

Structural determinism emphasizes economic conditions, social class, political systems, culture, and institutional power. It reveals injustice but may understate personal agency.

The Four Wheels provide a middle position. Suitable locality and good companions recognize structural and relational conditions. Right self-direction recognizes agency. Previous merit recognizes temporal continuity and unequal starting conditions.

No single wheel is sufficient. Personal effort cannot fully overcome every structural barrier, but structural advantage cannot guarantee wisdom or ethical development. Past foundations influence the present, but present choices remain capable of creating new trajectories.

### **Relationship to Dependent Origination**

The philosophical foundation of the Four Wheels is consistent with dependent origination. Human development arises through multiple conditions rather than from an isolated self.

A person's achievements depend upon: Bodily capacities; Families and caregivers; Teachers and institutions; Cultural knowledge; Economic resources; Personal effort; Previous habits; Social cooperation; and Opportunities created by others.

Recognizing dependence does not diminish achievement. It replaces possessive pride with gratitude and responsibility. If one's development depended upon others, one acquires a moral reason to create favorable conditions for future persons.

Dependent origination also explains why intervention is possible. Changing environments, relationships, habits, or goals can change developmental outcomes. Human beings are neither permanently fixed nor infinitely self-creating.

### **Material Prosperity and Moral Development**

The Cakka Sutta associates the four wheels with greatness, abundance, wealth, status, honor, and happiness. This raises the question of whether the teaching is merely a method for worldly success.

Buddhist household teachings recognize legitimate material welfare. Food, shelter, health, security, and livelihood are necessary conditions for most forms of development. Poverty can restrict education, health care, mobility, and contemplative opportunity.

However, material resources remain instrumental rather than ultimate. Wealth acquired through exploitation contradicts Buddhist ethics. Wealth used solely to strengthen identity and craving cannot provide lasting satisfaction.

Holistic prosperity must therefore satisfy at least four criteria: 1. It is acquired through ethical means. 2. It supports genuine needs and responsible well-being. 3 It contributes to

others through generosity and social responsibility. 4. It is understood as impermanent and not-self.

The Four Wheels can generate worldly prosperity, but Buddhist wisdom determines how that prosperity is understood and used.

### **Personal and Social Development**

The framework connects individual development with social harmony. A suitable locality cannot be created by isolated individuals alone. It requires collective action, institutions, ethical leadership, and public resources.

Good persons also create networks of influence. A teacher's integrity affects students; students influence families and workplaces; and communities normalize particular forms of behavior.

Right self-direction has social consequences because individual goals shape institutions and relationships. A business leader pursuing profit without ethical restraint creates different conditions from one committed to fairness and non-harming.

Past merit also has a collective dimension. Communities inherit educational systems, public infrastructure, trust, cultural knowledge, and environmental conditions produced by earlier generations. They may likewise inherit conflict, inequality, debt, and ecological damage.

Human development is therefore intergenerational. Present communities receive conditions from the past and bear responsibility for what they transmit to the future.

### **Comparison with Contemporary Human Development**

Contemporary human-development theories have moved beyond measuring progress solely through economic output. Sen (1999) defines development in relation to expanding substantive freedoms and capabilities—what people are actually able to be and do.

The Four Wheels share several concerns with capability-oriented development: Suitable locality affects access to real opportunities. Good persons provide social support and knowledge. Right self-direction concerns agency and meaningful choice. Previous merit represents accumulated capacities and conditions.

The frameworks are not identical. Buddhist development includes kamma, merit, mental purification, and liberation, while the capability approach primarily addresses freedom, justice, and social evaluation.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach likewise emphasizes that human development occurs within interacting systems involving family, school, community, institutions, culture, and historical change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This resonates with paṭirūpadesavāsa but lacks the explicit Buddhist emphasis on merit and liberation.

These comparisons demonstrate that the Four Wheels can engage contemporary developmental thought without being reduced to it.

### **The Four-Wheel Holistic Development Model**

The teaching can be reconstructed as an integrated model:

The final arrow represents generativity. Developed persons create better environments, become good companions, assist others in directing themselves wisely, and perform actions that become future merit.

Holistic development is therefore not a private possession. It reproduces conditions of development for others.

### **Application to Education**

The Four Wheels can guide educational development.

#### **1. Suitable Educational Environment**

Schools and universities should provide safety, learning resources, fair assessment, inclusive participation, and conditions supporting intellectual and ethical growth.

#### **2. Teachers and Mentors**

Teachers should function not merely as transmitters of information but as models of integrity, critical inquiry, compassion, and responsibility.

#### **3. Rightly Directed Learners**

Students require meaningful goals that connect personal achievement with ethical and social contribution. Education should develop autonomy without promoting unrestricted self-interest.

#### **4. Accumulated Foundations**

Prior knowledge, family support, health, language, and economic conditions affect learning. Fair education must recognize unequal starting points and provide appropriate support rather than interpreting every outcome as evidence of personal merit or failure.

### **Application to Organizations and Leadership**

An organization can be evaluated through the same four factors.

A suitable workplace provides safety, fairness, adequate resources, transparent rules, and opportunities for development. Good persons include ethical leaders, mentors, and colleagues who support responsible conduct.

Right self-direction appears in the organization's mission and the goals of its members. An organization oriented solely toward profit may develop efficiently while remaining ethically deficient.

Previous merit includes institutional trust, reputation, professional knowledge, culture, and relationships accumulated over time. These assets can be strengthened or destroyed by present leadership.

The framework therefore encourages leaders to consider both performance and moral ecology.

### **Application to Community and Public Policy**

Public policy often focuses either on providing resources or changing individual behavior. The Four Wheels suggest that both are necessary.

Governments and communities should develop: Safe and healthy environments; Accessible education and health care; Ethical public institutions; Networks of mentors and community leaders; Opportunities for meaningful participation; Support for responsible personal goals; and Long-term investment benefiting future generations.

The fourth wheel is especially relevant to sustainability. Present actions become the inherited conditions of future communities. Environmental destruction, public debt, educational neglect, and social conflict represent negative legacies, whereas conservation, knowledge, trust, and compassionate institutions function as collective merit.

### **Risks of Misapplication**

The model may be misused in several ways.

First, a "suitable locality" could be interpreted narrowly as living only among people who share one's beliefs. This may create isolation and prejudice. Suitability should include ethical and intellectual openness, not ideological uniformity.

Second, association with good persons could become uncritical submission to authority. Genuine spiritual friendship supports discernment rather than dependency.

Third, right self-direction could be reduced to competitive achievement. The Buddhist qualifier “right” requires non-harming, wisdom, and concern for others.

Fourth, previous merit could become victim-blaming. Poverty, illness, disability, or oppression should not be attributed simplistically to past kamma.

Finally, material prosperity could be mistaken for proof of moral superiority. Buddhist teaching does not establish wealth as an infallible measure of virtue.

### Indicators of Holistic Development

A practical application requires multidimensional indicators.

| Dimension            | Possible indicators                                        |
|----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Environmental        | Safety, education, health services, ethical institutions   |
| Relational           | Mentoring, trust, cooperation, supportive networks         |
| Agentive             | Goal clarity, perseverance, ethical decision-making        |
| Accumulated capacity | Knowledge, virtue, reputation, resilience, prior service   |
| Material             | Sufficiency, livelihood security, responsible resource use |
| Moral                | Non-harming, honesty, generosity, responsibility           |
| Mental               | Mindfulness, emotional regulation, reduced reactivity      |
| Social               | Participation, compassion, equity, community contribution  |
| Spiritual            | Wisdom, nonattachment, understanding of suffering          |

No single indicator should dominate. Economic growth without ethical development is incomplete, while spiritual language without material responsibility may ignore preventable suffering.

### Discussion

The Four Wheels constitute a sophisticated model because they distribute responsibility across environment, relationship, agency, and history.

Paṭirūpadesavāsa shows that persons require conducive structures. Sappurisūpassaya demonstrates that moral and intellectual development is relational. Attasammāpaṇidhi preserves responsibility and intentional direction. Pubbe ca katapuññatā situates the present within temporal and karmic continuity.

Together, the wheels avoid several false oppositions: Individual versus society; Freedom versus conditioning; Material versus spiritual development; Present effort versus past causes; and Personal welfare versus collective well-being.

The model also contains a theory of developmental justice. If favorable environments and good companions are essential conditions of growth, societies should not reserve them for privileged groups. Creating such conditions for others becomes a meritorious and ethical responsibility.

The teaching’s karmic dimension strengthens rather than weakens this responsibility when correctly understood. Present conditions have histories, but present actions create future histories. Kamma is not an excuse for passivity; it is a principle of consequential agency.

### Conclusion

The Four Wheels of Prosperity provide a compact Buddhist framework for holistic human development. They identify four indispensable dimensions: suitable environment, good companionship, right self-direction, and accumulated merit.

The first wheel demonstrates that development requires structural opportunity. Individuals need safety, resources, education, ethical institutions, and environments conducive to wholesome growth. The second wheel shows that development is relational. Teachers, mentors, friends, and communities shape values, knowledge, resilience, and aspiration.

The third wheel introduces moral agency. Favorable conditions become fruitful only when individuals establish themselves in a right direction and pursue meaningful goals through ethical means. The fourth wheel recognizes temporal continuity. Present capacities and opportunities are influenced by previous actions, while present conduct creates the foundations of future development.

These factors are not independent variables operating separately. Environments shape relationships; relationships influence goals; goals direct action; and action becomes future accumulated merit. Development is therefore recursive and generative.

The framework also broadens the meaning of prosperity. Material resources remain important, but authentic prosperity includes ethical integrity, wisdom, supportive relationships, mental well-being, social responsibility, and progress toward liberation. Correctly understood, the fourth wheel does not support fatalism. Past kamma conditions but does not completely determine the present. Current intentions, social reform, education, and compassionate action can create new conditions.

The Four Wheels therefore offer a middle path between radical individualism and structural determinism. People are neither isolated creators of their destiny nor powerless products of circumstance. They are conditioned agents capable of modifying conditions through ethically directed action.

A developed person is not merely someone who has succeeded within favorable circumstances. Such a person also helps create suitable environments, becomes a good companion, guides others toward wholesome goals, and performs actions that provide beneficial foundations for future generations. Holistic human development is thus complete only when personal progress becomes a condition for collective flourishing.

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## **From Citta-Bhāvanā to Neuroplasticity: A Comparative Study of Mental Transformation in Buddhism and Contemporary Psychology**

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### **Abstract**

Buddhist mental cultivation and contemporary psychology share the premise that patterns of thought, attention, emotion, and behavior are capable of systematic transformation. In early Buddhist thought, citta-bhāvanā refers to the cultivation of the mind within an integrated path of ethical discipline, concentration, mindfulness, and wisdom. Contemporary psychology and neuroscience explain psychological change through mechanisms such as learning, cognitive restructuring, metacognitive awareness, emotional regulation, and neuroplasticity. Despite significant points of convergence, these traditions differ in terminology, method, ontology, and ultimate purpose. Psychology generally aims to reduce symptoms and improve adaptive functioning, whereas Buddhist cultivation is directed toward the eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion and ultimately toward liberation from suffering. This article comparatively analyzes the concepts of citta, bhāvanā, mindfulness, neuroplasticity, and mental transformation. It argues that neuroscientific evidence can clarify some mechanisms associated with meditation, particularly attention and emotional regulation, but cannot by itself establish Buddhist doctrines such as non-self or nirvāṇa. To organize the comparison, the article proposes a four-dimensional model comprising ethical-behavioral regulation, attentional stabilization, metacognitive awareness, and liberating insight. This framework supports interdisciplinary dialogue while avoiding both the reduction of Buddhism to brain science and the uncritical use of neuroscience to validate religious claims.

**Keywords:** citta-bhāvanā, neuroplasticity, Buddhist psychology, mindfulness, meditation

### **Introduction**

The possibility of transforming the mind is fundamental to both Buddhism and contemporary psychology. Buddhist traditions maintain that suffering arises through conditioned patterns of ignorance, craving, attachment, and aversion. Since these patterns arise dependently rather than from an immutable essence, they can be weakened and ultimately abandoned through systematic cultivation. Contemporary psychology similarly recognizes that behavior, cognition, attention, and emotional responses can change through learning, therapy, environmental modification, and repeated practice.

Neuroscience provides an additional vocabulary for describing this capacity for change. Neuroplasticity refers broadly to the nervous system's capacity to alter its organization, connectivity, and functioning in response to experience, learning, environmental demands, injury, and training. The adult brain is neither completely fixed nor infinitely malleable. Its plasticity is constrained by biological development, health, prior learning, environmental conditions, and the type and duration of experience.

Meditation research has brought Buddhist mental practices into dialogue with neuroplasticity. Studies have examined whether mindfulness and concentration practices are associated with differences in attention, emotional regulation, stress responses, self-referential processing, functional connectivity, and brain structure. Some findings suggest that meditation is associated with measurable neural and psychological changes (Brewer et al., 2011; Fox et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2015). Nevertheless, methodological limitations prevent strong conclusions that every observed difference is caused by meditation or that neural changes directly correspond to Buddhist awakening.

The relationship between Buddhist mental cultivation and neuroplasticity therefore requires careful analysis. The two concepts are not interchangeable. *Citta-bhāvanā* is situated within an ethical and soteriological path, while neuroplasticity is a descriptive scientific concept concerning the nervous system. Neuroplasticity can occur through beneficial or harmful experiences; repeated anxiety, addiction, violence, and prejudice can shape neural pathways as surely as disciplined attention can. Buddhist cultivation, by contrast, is normatively directed toward wholesome qualities and liberation from suffering.

This article examines the similarities and differences between these frameworks. Its central argument is that Buddhist mental cultivation and contemporary psychology converge in recognizing the mind as conditioned and trainable but differ in what counts as transformation and in the purpose toward which transformation is directed.

## Conceptual Clarifications

### 1. The Meaning of Citta

The Pāli term *citta* may be translated as mind, heart, mentality, or state of consciousness, depending upon context. It should not automatically be equated with the modern scientific concept of the brain or with a single technical definition of consciousness.

In early Buddhist teaching, *citta* refers to the affective and cognitive dimension of experience that may be defiled, concentrated, liberated, distracted, contracted, expanded, or purified. It is closely related to, but not always identical with, *viññāṇa*, which is often translated as consciousness, and *mano*, which may refer to the mind as a cognitive faculty.

Buddhism does not generally regard *citta* as a permanent substance or metaphysical soul. Mental states arise in dependence upon conditions and interact with feelings, perceptions, intentions, bodily processes, sense contact, habits, and environments. The absence of an immutable mental essence provides the basis for cultivation: what is dependently conditioned can be transformed through changes in its conditions (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013).

The mind is therefore both a condition of suffering and a field of liberation. When governed by greed, hatred, and delusion, it generates harmful intentions and distorted perceptions. When cultivated through ethical conduct, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, it becomes capable of recognizing impermanence, suffering, and non-self.

### 2. The Meaning of Bhāvanā

The term *bhāvanā* derives from a verbal root associated with bringing into being, developing, or cultivating. Translating it simply as “meditation” can be too narrow. It refers to the systematic development of particular mental and ethical qualities.

Buddhist texts and later traditions distinguish forms such as the cultivation of tranquility and insight, loving-kindness, compassion, mindfulness, concentration, and factors of awakening. These practices are not isolated techniques but components of an integrated path.

Citta-bhāvanā can consequently be understood as the deliberate cultivation and transformation of mental life. Its purpose is not merely relaxation or temporary emotional comfort. It aims to prevent unwholesome states, abandon those already arisen, cultivate wholesome states, and bring them to fulfillment.

### **3. The Meaning of Neuroplasticity**

Neuroplasticity is the capacity of neural systems to change through experience and biological processes. Such change may involve: Modification of the strength of synaptic connections; Reorganization of functional neural networks; Changes associated with learning and memory; Structural changes in gray or white matter; Adaptation following injury; and Altered patterns of neural activation and connectivity.

Neuroplasticity does not mean that every experience produces a large or permanent anatomical change. Nor does it mean that individuals can transform the brain in any desired way through willpower alone. Claims about neuroplasticity must specify what changed, how it was measured, how long it lasted, and whether the change caused a meaningful behavioral or clinical outcome.

Meditation-related neuroplasticity therefore refers to measurable changes associated with contemplative training, not to a neuroscientific synonym for spiritual development.

## **Buddhist Foundations of Mental Transformation**

### **1. Dependent Origination and Mental Malleability**

Dependent origination provides the philosophical basis for Buddhist mental transformation. Mental states do not arise from an unchanging self; they emerge through conditions. Sense contact conditions feeling, feeling may condition craving, craving conditions attachment, and attachment contributes to continued becoming and suffering.

Because this process is conditional, intervention is possible. Mindfulness may alter the transition from feeling to craving by enabling a practitioner to experience pleasant or unpleasant sensations without immediately reacting through attachment or aversion. Wisdom transforms the ignorance through which impermanent processes are interpreted as permanent or as belonging to an enduring self.

Buddhist mental cultivation is therefore neither fatalistic nor voluntaristic. It does not claim that individuals can change merely by deciding to be different. Transformation requires the systematic creation of appropriate conditions, including ethical restraint, supportive relationships, instruction, repeated practice, and clear understanding.

### **2. The Threefold Training**

The threefold training—ethical discipline (sīla), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā)—organizes Buddhist transformation into an integrated structure.

Ethical discipline regulates bodily and verbal action. Avoiding killing, theft, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants reduces harm to others while also preventing remorse, agitation, and conditions that obstruct meditation.

Concentration stabilizes attention and reduces mental fragmentation. It includes Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration within the Noble Eightfold Path. Concentration does not necessarily produce liberating insight by itself, but it establishes clarity and stability conducive to investigation.

Wisdom penetrates the conditioned, impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self nature of phenomena. It transforms not only the content of thought but also the mode through which experience is appropriated as “I,” “me,” and “mine.”

These dimensions are analytically distinguishable but mutually reinforcing. Ethical conduct supports concentration; concentration supports insight; and wisdom deepens ethical responsibility by weakening attachment and hostility (Bodhi, 2012; Gethin, 1998).

### **3. Right Mindfulness**

Mindfulness, or *sati*, includes remembering to remain attentive to relevant aspects of experience. In the establishments of mindfulness, practitioners contemplate body, feelings, states of mind, and categories of phenomena while observing their arising and passing.

Contemporary definitions often emphasize nonjudgmental present-moment awareness. This captures an important feature of many modern interventions but does not exhaust the early Buddhist meaning. Traditional mindfulness operates within Right View and Right Effort. It includes ethically and soteriologically guided discernment rather than neutral awareness of any object whatsoever.

Right Mindfulness helps practitioners recognize whether greed, hatred, or delusion is present; whether a mental hindrance has arisen; and what conditions contribute to its arising and abandonment. Mindfulness therefore participates in ethical evaluation and causal understanding.

## **Contemporary Psychological Models of Change**

### **1. Behavioral Learning and Self-Regulation**

Behavioral psychology explains change through learning, reinforcement, exposure, habit formation, and environmental conditions. Maladaptive patterns can be weakened by changing the cues and consequences that maintain them.

This approach resembles Buddhist recognition that repeated actions establish dispositions. An intention repeatedly enacted becomes easier to repeat, while restraint and alternative responses can gradually weaken established habits.

However, behavioral psychology does not necessarily classify action through the Buddhist distinction between wholesome and unwholesome roots. Its goals are typically defined in terms of observable functioning, clinical need, or the individual's chosen values.

### **2. Cognitive Restructuring**

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy examines relationships among beliefs, interpretations, emotions, and actions. Distress may be intensified by inflexible or inaccurate patterns of thought. Therapy helps individuals identify these patterns, test them against evidence, and develop more adaptive interpretations (Beck, 2011).

A limited parallel may be drawn with Buddhist investigation of distorted cognition. Both recognize that suffering is shaped not only by external events but also by the manner in which events are interpreted.

The comparison should not be overstated. Cognitive restructuring commonly replaces inaccurate thoughts with more realistic ones, whereas Buddhist insight investigates the impermanence and non-self character of all mental constructions, including conventionally accurate ones.

### **3. Metacognitive Awareness and Decentering**

Metacognition is the capacity to monitor and evaluate one's own cognitive processes. In mindfulness-based and acceptance-oriented therapies, decentering allows thoughts to be experienced as mental events rather than unquestionable descriptions of reality.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy employs cognitive defusion to reduce domination by verbal thought. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy similarly trains participants to recognize patterns of rumination without automatically identifying with them.

This is structurally comparable to Buddhist observation of thoughts, feelings, and states of mind without appropriating them as self. Yet clinical decentering is usually directed

toward psychological flexibility and relapse prevention, not necessarily toward complete liberation from self-grasping.

## **Neuroplasticity and Meditation Research**

### **1. Attention and Executive Control**

Focused-attention meditation repeatedly directs attention toward an object, recognizes distraction, and returns attention to the object. This practice exercises attentional monitoring and regulation.

Lutz et al. (2008) proposed that meditation practices can be studied through interacting attentional processes, including focused attention and open monitoring. Research reviewed by Tang et al. (2015) suggests that meditation may affect networks associated with attention, body awareness, emotional regulation, and self-processing.

These findings are compatible with the Buddhist claim that attention can be trained. However, improved performance on a laboratory attention task is not equivalent to *samādhi* in its full Buddhist meaning. Concentration in Buddhism is embedded within ethical and liberating purposes.

### **2. Self-Referential Processing**

The default mode network is associated with processes including autobiographical reflection, future simulation, and mind-wandering. Brewer et al. (2011) found differences in default-mode activity and connectivity between experienced meditators and controls, consistent with reduced mind-wandering during meditation.

Such findings have generated comparisons with the Buddhist doctrine of non-self. Yet decreased default-mode activity does not demonstrate that the self does not exist or that a practitioner has realized *anattā*. The network supports multiple cognitive functions and should not be identified simplistically as the neural location of the self.

Neuroscience can measure changes in self-referential processing. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self is a philosophical and experiential analysis of the absence of an independent, permanent owner of the aggregates. The two may enter productive dialogue, but neither can be reduced to the other.

### **3. Structural Findings**

A meta-analysis by Fox et al. (2014) identified brain regions in which meditators showed structural differences relative to nonmeditators. The regions implicated were associated with functions such as awareness, memory, emotional regulation, and communication between brain regions.

These findings are suggestive but require caution. Much of the early literature relied upon cross-sectional comparisons. If experienced meditators differ from nonmeditators, meditation may be one explanation, but pre-existing characteristics, lifestyle, education, diet, social support, or self-selection may also contribute.

Longitudinal randomized studies provide stronger evidence of causation but are difficult to conduct with intensive meditation practice. Structural differences should also not automatically be interpreted as improvements; their functional meaning must be demonstrated rather than assumed.

### **4. Stress and Emotional Regulation**

Meditation-based interventions may influence stress appraisal, emotional regulation, and physiological responses. Davidson and McEwen (2012) describe how social and behavioral interventions may affect neural systems related to stress and well-being.

A systematic review and meta-analysis by Goyal et al. (2014) found moderate evidence that meditation programs can improve anxiety, depression, and pain, although evidence for some other outcomes was weaker. This is more cautious than popular claims that mindfulness is universally effective.

Mindfulness should therefore be considered a potentially useful intervention rather than a guaranteed cure. Its effectiveness depends upon population, condition, instructional quality, practice, comparison group, and outcome measure.

### **Major Areas of Convergence**

Buddhist mental cultivation and contemporary psychology converge in several important areas.

#### **1. The Mind Is Dynamic**

Both frameworks reject a completely fixed account of mental life. Thoughts, emotions, habits, and attentional patterns arise through interacting conditions and may change through repeated practice.

#### **2. Repetition Shapes Dispositions**

Buddhism emphasizes that repeated intentions and actions establish habits. Psychology explains comparable processes through learning, reinforcement, and automaticity. Neuroscience investigates the neural mechanisms supporting these changes.

#### **3. Attention Is Trainable**

Buddhist meditation systematically cultivates sustained attention and awareness. Contemporary research similarly regards attentional control as a trainable cognitive capacity, although effect sizes and generalizability vary.

#### **4. Metacognitive Distance Reduces Reactivity**

Both mindfulness practice and contemporary therapies teach individuals to observe thoughts and emotions without automatically reacting to them. This can interrupt habitual cycles of rumination, anxiety, craving, or anger.

#### **5. Context Matters**

Neither tradition supports the idea that transformation results from isolated willpower. Buddhist cultivation depends upon ethical conduct, teachers, community, and repeated practice. Psychological change depends upon therapeutic relationships, environments, learning history, social support, and other conditions.

### **Fundamental Differences**

#### **1. Different Objects of Explanation**

Neuroscience studies neural structures and processes. Buddhism investigates suffering, intentional action, experience, and liberation. These fields may examine related events but formulate different questions.

Neural imaging can indicate where blood-oxygen signals change during a task. It cannot by itself establish whether an experience constitutes Right Mindfulness, liberating wisdom, or freedom from attachment.

#### **2. Different Normative Frameworks**

Neuroplasticity is ethically neutral. Repeated practice may strengthen compassion, but repeated aggression or addictive behavior may also consolidate harmful patterns.

Citta-bhāvanā is normatively directed. It seeks the development of non-greed, non-hatred, wisdom, compassion, and freedom from suffering. Change alone is insufficient; the ethical quality and liberating direction of change matter.

#### **3. Different Goals**

Contemporary psychology generally aims to reduce symptoms, improve functioning, and increase well-being. Buddhist cultivation ultimately aims at the cessation of ignorance, craving, and suffering.

Clinical improvement may support Buddhist practice, but symptom reduction is not identical to nirvāṇa. A person may become calmer and more productive while continuing to be governed by attachment and distorted views.

#### 4. Different Understandings of the Self

Many psychological therapies aim to create a healthier, more coherent, and flexible sense of self. Buddhism does not necessarily reject this therapeutic aim, but it ultimately examines the belief that any constructed identity constitutes an independent and permanent self.

The difference is not simply between having and eliminating personality. Buddhist non-self challenges the appropriation of bodily and mental processes as an enduring owner, while conventional personal functioning continues.

#### A Four-Dimensional Comparative Framework

A useful comparison can be organized through four dimensions of transformation.

| Dimension                     | Buddhist framework                | Psychological or neuroscientific parallel       | Principal outcome                         |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Ethical-behavioral regulation | Sīla and Right Effort             | Self-regulation and habit change                | Reduction of harmful behavior             |
| Attentional stabilization     | Samādhi and focused attention     | Attention training and executive control        | Reduced distraction and greater stability |
| Metacognitive awareness       | Sati and clear comprehension      | Decentering, monitoring, and cognitive defusion | Reduced identification with mental events |
| Liberating insight            | Paññā, impermanence, and non-self | No complete scientific equivalent               | Eradiation of reification and attachment  |

##### 1. Ethical-Behavioral Regulation

Transformation begins with the regulation of conduct. Buddhist ethics reduces harm and creates conditions for mental stability. Contemporary psychology similarly recognizes that changing routines, environmental cues, and responses can influence emotional and cognitive patterns.

The difference lies in normative orientation. Buddhist discipline is evaluated through the reduction of greed, hatred, delusion, and harm, not only through personal effectiveness.

##### 2. Attentional Stabilization

Attention training reduces fragmentation and increases the capacity to remain with an object or monitor changing experience. Neuroscience may study this dimension through behavioral tasks and network activity.

Attentional skill alone, however, is not necessarily wholesome. A thief may possess highly developed concentration. Buddhist concentration becomes Right Concentration only within an appropriate ethical and cognitive path.

##### 3. Metacognitive Awareness

At this level, practitioners recognize thoughts and emotions as events rather than as commands or identities. Clinical psychology describes related processes as decentering, defusion, or metacognitive monitoring.

Buddhist practice extends this investigation to the arising, passing, and non-self character of mental events. The aim is not merely to manage thought but to understand its conditioned nature.

##### 4. Liberating Insight

Liberating insight concerns direct understanding of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, dependent origination, and non-self. Psychology may examine changes in self-referential processing or reports of altered self-experience, but no neural measurement is presently equivalent to Buddhist wisdom or nirvāṇa.

This fourth dimension marks the most significant boundary between the traditions. It also prevents Buddhist cultivation from being reduced to an intervention for attention or stress.

### **Methodological Limitations in Meditation Neuroscience**

Responsible comparison must address limitations in the evidence.

First, meditation is not one standardized activity. Focused attention, open monitoring, loving-kindness, body contemplation, and visualization may involve different cognitive and neural processes. Combining them under the general term “meditation” reduces conceptual precision.

Second, studies vary greatly in participant experience. A beginner completing a short mindfulness course cannot be directly compared with a monastic practitioner who has trained for decades.

Third, cross-sectional studies cannot establish whether meditation caused observed differences. Individuals who choose long-term practice may already differ from controls.

Fourth, small samples and flexible analytical procedures may increase the risk of unstable findings. Van Dam et al. (2018) caution that scientific and popular claims about mindfulness sometimes exceed the strength of available evidence.

Fifth, positive publication bias may make beneficial results more visible than null findings. Brain images may also create an exaggerated impression of objectivity even when their interpretation remains uncertain.

Sixth, meditation can produce difficult or adverse experiences for some practitioners. Lindahl et al. (2017) documented a range of challenging meditation-related experiences. Their findings do not show that meditation is generally dangerous, but they challenge the assumption that it is universally harmless. Research should therefore report meditation type, teacher qualifications, practice intensity, participant characteristics, adverse events, and the distinction between subjective, behavioral, clinical, and neural outcomes.

### **The Risk of Neuro-Reductionism**

Neuro-reductionism occurs when a complex psychological, ethical, or contemplative phenomenon is treated as nothing more than a brain event. All human experience has neural conditions, but describing those conditions does not exhaust the experience’s meaning.

Compassion, for example, may be associated with measurable neural activity. Yet compassion also involves intention, ethical understanding, relationships, cultural learning, and action. A neural description does not replace these dimensions.

Similarly, if meditation changes functional connectivity, that finding does not explain the complete Buddhist path. It does not establish whether a practitioner has purified intention, understood dependent origination, or reduced harm toward others.

The opposite error is “neuro-validation,” in which any brain change associated with meditation is treated as proof that Buddhism is scientifically true. Neural data may support specific empirical claims, such as changes in attention or stress regulation. They cannot independently verify karma, rebirth, non-self, or nirvāṇa, which involve philosophical, experiential, and religious questions beyond the design of ordinary imaging studies.

Interdisciplinary dialogue should therefore neither reduce Buddhism to neuroscience nor use neuroscience as decorative authority for Buddhist doctrine.

### **Secular Mindfulness and the Loss of Context**

Mindfulness-based programs have increased access to contemplative practices and contributed to clinical care. MBSR and MBCT translate selected practices into formats suitable for health care and psychological treatment. Their benefits should not be dismissed merely because they are secular adaptations.

Nevertheless, removing mindfulness from its Buddhist context changes its purpose. Traditional Right Mindfulness is integrated with Right View, Right Intention, ethical conduct, effort, and concentration. A secular intervention may emphasize present-moment attention while remaining neutral about craving, consumerism, occupational exploitation, or the ultimate goal of liberation.

Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) recognize that mindfulness has diverse meanings and applications. The key issue is not whether secular mindfulness is authentic or inauthentic in an absolute sense, but whether its modified goals and assumptions are clearly acknowledged.

Clinical mindfulness should not claim to reproduce the entire Buddhist path. Conversely, traditional Buddhist institutions should not reject empirical evaluation when contemplative practices are used as health interventions.

### **Ethical Implications of Neuroplasticity**

The concept of neuroplasticity can deepen Buddhist reflection when interpreted carefully. It illustrates that repeated attention and behavior can reinforce particular patterns. This provides a biological dimension to the Buddhist emphasis on habit and cultivation.

However, neuroplasticity also raises ethical questions. If environments continually shape neural and psychological patterns, responsibility cannot be placed solely upon isolated individuals. Poverty, violence, discrimination, digital technologies, education, and social relationships influence the conditions under which habits develop.

A Buddhist interpretation of mental development should therefore avoid blaming suffering individuals for failing to “train their brains.” Dependent origination includes social and material conditions as well as personal intention. Compassionate intervention may require changing institutions and environments, not only teaching individual meditation.

At the same time, conditionality creates space for agency. Individuals are not completely determined by prior habits, even though freedom is constrained. Practice changes the conditions from which later choices emerge.

### **Toward a Responsible Interdisciplinary Model**

A responsible integration of Buddhist mental cultivation and contemporary psychology should follow several principles.

First, key terms must remain distinct. Citta is not simply the brain, mindfulness is not identical to all forms of attention, and neuroplasticity is not synonymous with awakening.

Second, comparisons should be made at the level of specific mechanisms. Attentionregulation may be compared with focused-attention practices; decentering may be compared with observation of mental events; and emotional regulation may be compared with the weakening of reactive patterns.

Third, differences in goals must be preserved. Clinical well-being and liberation may overlap, but they are not identical.

Fourth, ethical context must be included. Buddhist cultivation integrates behavior, intention, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. Extracting attention exercises alone changes the practice.

Fifth, scientific findings should be evaluated according to research design rather than used as general proof of contemplative claims.

Finally, contemplative traditions can contribute questions that science does not normally prioritize. These include how craving structures experience, how identity is constructed, how ethical conduct affects attention, and whether well-being is possible without examining the assumptions underlying the self.

## Discussion

The comparison between *citta-bhāvanā* and neuroplasticity reveals genuine convergence without conceptual identity. Both recognize that mental life is dynamic and that repeated practice can transform perception, emotion, attention, and behavior. Contemporary neuroscience adds evidence that such changes may be accompanied by altered neural functioning and, in some cases, structural differences.

Buddhist cultivation contributes a broader ethical and existential framework. Mental change is evaluated not merely by efficiency, calmness, or productivity but by whether it reduces greed, hatred, delusion, attachment, and suffering.

Neuroplasticity explains a capacity for neural change; it does not determine the moral or spiritual direction of that change. Buddhist practice supplies a normative orientation but does not provide the experimental measurements required to establish neural mechanisms. The two approaches can therefore be complementary when their domains are respected.

The proposed four-dimensional framework—ethical-behavioral regulation, attentional stabilization, metacognitive awareness, and liberating insight—shows where comparison is strongest and where equivalence ends. The first three dimensions have recognizable counterparts in psychological research. The fourth, liberating insight, cannot presently be reduced to a clinical outcome or neural marker.

## Conclusion

Buddhist *citta-bhāvanā* and contemporary accounts of neuroplasticity converge in rejecting a completely fixed conception of mental life. Both maintain that repeated experience and disciplined practice can alter patterns of attention, emotion, cognition, and behavior.

Their convergence, however, should not conceal their fundamental differences. Neuroplasticity is a descriptive biological capacity that can support wholesome or harmful development. Buddhist mental cultivation is an ethically directed and soteriological path aimed at purifying conduct, stabilizing the mind, developing wisdom, and ending suffering.

Scientific studies provide promising evidence that some forms of meditation are associated with changes in attention, emotional regulation, self-referential processing, and neural organization. Yet the evidence remains heterogeneous, and many studies face limitations involving sample size, self-selection, control conditions, measurement, and causal inference.

Neural changes should not be interpreted as direct proof of non-self or *nirvāṇa*. Decreased default-mode activity is not identical to realization of *anattā*, and structural brain differences are not equivalent to moral purification. Buddhist liberation includes ethical, experiential, philosophical, and soteriological dimensions that exceed the scope of ordinary neuroscientific measurement.

Nevertheless, dialogue between the traditions is valuable. Psychology and neuroscience can clarify mechanisms of attention, learning, stress regulation, and metacognition. Buddhism can contribute an integrated account of ethical conduct, mental training, identity, suffering, and liberation.

The most productive relationship is consequently neither reduction nor uncritical validation. It is a disciplined comparison in which each tradition illuminates dimensions the other may overlook. From this perspective, neuroplasticity helps explain how training may change the nervous system, while citta-bhāvanā asks the deeper normative question: toward what kind of mind, life, and freedom should that capacity for change be directed?

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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:

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- name of the author(s)
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- Keywords (maximum 7)
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- Introduction
- Research methodology
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5. An original article should range between 3000 and 7000 words excluding abstract, references, diagrams and data sets.

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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.

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- Wasee, P., (2007). Sufficient Economics and Civil Society if Social Economic Revived Way. (2nd ed.). Bangkok: Pimdee.

#### 2. Article in Journal

Author's name. (Publishing year). Title. Name of journal, year (Volume), page. etc.

- Dhillon, K. (2001). Challenges and strategies for improving the quality of the information in a university setting: A case study. Total Quality Management, 12(2), 167-177.
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CNN Wrie Staff. (2011). How U.S. forces killed Osama bin Laden. Retrieved May 3, 2011, from [https://www.cnn.com/WORLD/ asiapcf/ 05/02/bin.ladin.raid/index.html](https://www.cnn.com/WORLD/asiapcf/05/02/bin.ladin.raid/index.html)

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