

## **Reframing Buddhist Pilgrimage Promotion through Early Buddhist Ethics: Towards a Concept of Mindful Marketing**

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### **Introduction**

Buddhist pilgrimage is not merely travel to places associated with religious memory, but a sacred journey shaped by reverence, recollection, moral reflection and the aspiration to encounter spiritually significant places. Yet contemporary pilgrimage is increasingly mediated before physical presence. Websites, social media, destination campaigns, travel platforms and digital storytelling provide the first point of contact. Sacred places may therefore gain visibility while being framed through spectacle, emotional appeal or destination desirability. Scholarship has examined pilgrimage in relation to sacred space, mobility, devotion, visitor motivation and religious tourism (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Kim, Kim and King, 2020). However, the ethical evaluation of pilgrimage promotion remains underdeveloped, especially within an early Buddhist framework.

This gap is significant because promotion shapes how sacred places are made intelligible, attractive and publicly meaningful. Studies of mediatized pilgrimage and religious destination image show that online circulation frames expectations before arrival (de Sousa and da Rosa, 2020; Zarkada, Kashif and Zainab, 2025). However, existing scholarship does not provide an explicitly early Buddhist normative framework for determining when promotional communication preserves or compromises the sacred character of pilgrimage. The research problem is the absence of ethical criteria for evaluating Buddhist pilgrimage promotion under contemporary media and market conditions.

To address this problem, the study reframes pilgrimage promotion as a question of Buddhist ethics and sacred representation, developing mindful marketing as a normative framework. Here, mindful marketing is a concept developed for this inquiry rather than a canonical Buddhist term or direct synonym for *sati*. It refers to an ethically bounded mode of public communication that preserves pilgrimage as a sacred journey, represents sacred meaning responsibly, is guided by right intention and right speech, restrains commercial dominance, and respects custodians and local communities.

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## Objectives

This study addresses the following research question: What ethical criteria can be reconstructed from early Buddhist teachings to evaluate whether pilgrimage promotion preserves the sacred character of Buddhist pilgrimage? It has three objectives: to identify early Buddhist ethical resources relevant to the public representation of pilgrimage; to reconstruct those resources into ethical coordinates for assessing promotion; and to formulate mindful marketing as a normative concept for communicating sacred destinations without reducing them to consumable attractions.

## Methodology

This study uses a qualitative textual-conceptual approach, combining textual-doctrinal analysis with reconstructive normative inquiry. It does not describe current promotional practice empirically; instead, it examines how such practice may be evaluated through early Buddhist ethics. Close reading identifies the ethical force of selected canonical passages, doctrinal reconstruction derives broader normative orientations, and philosophical argument places those orientations in dialogue with contemporary pilgrimage promotion. The study therefore explores and reconstructs the normative implications of selected teachings rather than treating the canonical texts as direct discussions of modern marketing.

The primary textual corpus comprises five texts from the Pāli Nikāyas: the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (DN 16; Sujato, 2018b), *Vibhaṅgasutta* (SN 45.8; Sujato, 2018d), *Abhayarājakumārasutta* (MN 58; Sujato, 2018a), *Vaṇijjāsutta* (AN 5.177; Sujato, 2018c), and *Saṅghasutta* (AN 4.32; Bodhi, 2012). These texts are selected for their relevance to reverential pilgrimage, right intention, responsible speech, the ethical evaluation of economic conduct, and relational responsibility.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the selected texts are read closely to identify ethical principles relevant to pilgrimage promotion. Second, those principles are grouped into six thematic categories: sacred journey, sacred representation, right intention, right speech, moral restraint in commercialisation, and relational care oriented towards community well-being. Third, these categories are placed in dialogue with contemporary scholarship on pilgrimage, tourism and representation. This reconstructive process produces mindful marketing as an evaluative ethical framework. The study is deliberately bounded and does not claim to represent all Buddhist traditions.

## Results

The conceptual synthesis produces six interrelated ethical coordinates for evaluating Buddhist pilgrimage promotion. These coordinates do not form a promotional toolkit. They function as normative criteria for judging whether public communication remains compatible with pilgrimage as a sacred journey.

The first coordinate is sacred journey. The *Mahāparinibbānasutta* links visitation to faith, recollection and reverential regard (DN 16; Sujato, 2018b). Promotion should therefore avoid reducing pilgrimage to ordinary travel, leisure experience or visual consumption. Instead, it should preserve pilgrimage as a disciplined, reverential and morally serious journey.

The second coordinate is sacred representation. Promotional communication should support reverence for and understanding of a site's religious meaning. It becomes ethically problematic when spectacle, novelty, emotional excess or competitive appeal displaces that meaning. The ethical issue is therefore not visibility itself, but whether the form of representation preserves or distorts the sacred significance of the destination. This finding accords with studies showing that mediated narratives and destination imagery shape expectations before physical arrival (de Sousa and da Rosa, 2020; Zarkada, Kashif and Zainab, 2025).

The third coordinate is right intention. The *Vibhaṅgasutta* identifies right intention through renunciation, non-ill will and non-cruelty (SN 45.8; Sujato, 2018d). Applied reconstructively to promotion, this means that effectiveness, reach and attractiveness cannot be the only criteria. Promotion must also be assessed by the orientation it expresses and the desire it cultivates.

The fourth coordinate is right speech. The *Abhayarājakumārasutta* suggests that communication should be truthful, beneficial and appropriate (MN 58; Sujato, 2018a). Factual accuracy alone is insufficient if the framing manipulates spiritual longing, trivialises devotional practice or turns sacredness into persuasive decoration.

The fifth coordinate is moral restraint in commercialisation. The *Vaṇijjāsutta* demonstrates that economic conduct remains subject to moral evaluation (AN 5.177; Sujato, 2018c). Read reconstructively, the discourse is not treated as a direct teaching on pilgrimage marketing. Rather, it supports the broader proposition that economic activity associated with sacred destinations must remain ethically accountable. Sacred places require care, access, infrastructure and material support; however, commercial logic becomes problematic when it dominates how sacred destinations are represented, valued and consumed.

The sixth coordinate is relational care oriented towards community well-being. The *Saṅgahasutta* emphasises generosity, kindly speech, beneficial conduct and impartiality (AN 4.32; Bodhi, 2012). Applied to pilgrimage promotion, these principles recognise that sacred destinations are sustained by custodians, local communities, institutions and pilgrims. Promotion is ethically stronger when it preserves their dignity, avoids distortion, recognises local care and supports responsible encounters between pilgrims, communities and sacred places.

Together, the six coordinates assess the sacred meaning represented, the intention expressed, the form of communication employed, the limits placed on commercialisation, and the relationships affected by pilgrimage promotion. They also clarify what mindful marketing is not. It is not merely the use of Buddhist vocabulary, calming imagery or emotionally persuasive spiritual storytelling. A campaign may sound sacred while remaining ethically weak if religious symbols are treated primarily as promotional devices.

Taken together, the findings define mindful marketing as a normative framework that sets ethical boundaries for the public representation of Buddhist pilgrimage. It does not seek to make sacred destinations more attractive by employing softer religious language or spiritual imagery. Instead, it evaluates whether the conditions of visibility, desire and representation remain compatible with pilgrimage as a sacred journey. Mindful marketing therefore shifts the evaluative question from “How can this destination be made more appealing?” to “Under what ethical conditions may this sacred destination be made publicly visible?”

## **Discussion / Conclusion**

The study contributes to Buddhist Studies by relocating pilgrimage promotion from destination communication to Buddhist ethics. Its main contribution is the reconstruction of promotion as a morally significant act of sacred representation. This reframing matters because sacred destinations are increasingly mediated through digital circulation, competitive visibility, emotional branding and market-oriented attraction. Under such conditions, pilgrimage sites may become more visible while becoming less intelligible as sacred places.

The study concludes that Buddhist pilgrimage promotion is ethically defensible when it preserves pilgrimage as a sacred journey, represents sacred meaning responsibly, is guided by right intention and truthful, beneficial and appropriate speech, restrains commercial dominance, and respects custodians and local communities. Together, these six ethical coordinates constitute mindful marketing as a normative framework for evaluating not only what is communicated about sacred destinations, but also the intentions and desires cultivated, and the relationships shaped, through that communication.

Mindful marketing should therefore be understood as an evaluative framework rather than an operational marketing formula. It neither prohibits all forms of publicity nor assumes that the economic activity surrounding pilgrimage is inherently unethical. Promotion becomes ethically problematic when it distorts sacred meaning, instrumentalises Buddhist symbols, stimulates inappropriate desire or disregards the communities that sustain sacred environments. Conversely, promotion can ethically support pilgrimage when it fosters reverence, truthful understanding, moral restraint and relational responsibility.

This study is limited to selected teachings from the Pāli Nikāyas and does not offer a universal account of all Buddhist traditions. Its applicability to Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna and local Buddhist interpretive traditions requires further comparative research. Within this limitation, the study demonstrates that the central ethical question is not simply whether Buddhist pilgrimage may be promoted, but whether its promotion preserves the conditions under which pilgrimage remains a sacred and morally meaningful journey.

**Keywords** - Buddhist pilgrimage, early Buddhist ethics, mindful marketing, sacred representation, pilgrimage promotion

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