

## **Influence of Buddhism In Seven Kingdoms of Asia: A Brief Analytical Autoethnographic Study**

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### **Introduction**

Buddhism has played a foundational role in shaping the civilizations, moral systems, and cultural identities of many Asian societies for over two millennia. From its origin in India in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Buddhism spread across South, Southeast, and East Asia, adapting to diverse linguistic, political, and cultural environments. Robert A. F. Thurman (1988) stated that, “the Buddha, after enlightenment, returned to his society and instituted key changes that made it truly beneficial to its members, making it recognize their individual interests as its paramount concern” (P.153). In other words, the changes that had been taken by the Buddha, returning to the society after his enlightenment, were helpful and those changes were made based on the individuals’ matters. In each region, it developed distinctive traditions—*Theravāda* in mainland Southeast Asia, *Mahāyāna* in East Asia, and reform or revival movements in modern India—while maintaining shared doctrinal foundations such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. According to the words of Soma Thera (1962), “Buddhism was the first missionary religion of the world, both in point of time and in the excellence of its methods and results”(P.8). In other words, Buddhism would be considered as first missionary religion by seeing the history and the results it had gained from specific methods.

In the contemporary period (2023–2026), Buddhism continues to function not only as a religious tradition but also as a social, cultural, and institutional force. In countries such as Thailand and Laos, it remains closely tied to national identity and monastic governance structures. In Vietnam and Taiwan, it operates through organized Sangha systems and socially engaged movements. In Singapore and Malaysia, Buddhism exists within pluralistic, multi-religious societies, contributing to interfaith dialogue and community welfare. In India, Buddhism has re-emerged as both a spiritual path and a vehicle for social transformation.

Amid globalization, digitalization, and rapid socio-political change, Buddhist institutions and cultural practices are undergoing adaptation. This research emerges from the need to understand how Buddhism currently influences social norms, belief systems, and monastic administration across these

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seven Asian contexts, and how lived Buddhist culture is being reshaped in the contemporary era

Although Buddhism has historically shaped the moral, cultural, and institutional foundations of many Asian societies, its contemporary influence between 2023 and 2026 requires closer examination. According to the words of David L. McMahan (2012), “Just as Buddhist traditions centuries ago combined with Daoism, Confucianism, Bön, and popular religions in Asia, they now combine with the indigenous traditions of Western modernity, such as scientific rationalism, Romanticism, Christianity, Judaism, psychology, and pop culture”(P.3). in other words, Buddhist cultures and idea were mixing with deferent types of philosophies and concepts that are specific to each region like Daoism and Confucianism, and now Buddhist tradition is connecting and mixing with modern believes and concepts like psychology. Rapid globalization, technological change, urbanization, and shifting political landscapes have transformed religious life across Asia. In some countries, Buddhism remains deeply integrated with national identity and state structures, while in others it functions within pluralistic or minority contexts. This raises the central research problem: To what extent has Buddhism recently influenced social and cultural change in India, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Thailand, and Laos, and how can contemporary “Buddhist culture” be understood within these diverse national settings?

## **Objectives**

The objectives of this research are threefold. First, to identify the influence of Buddhism within different belief systems in each country. Second, to examine the historical background and administrative structures of monastic communities in each context. Third, to analyze the cultural and social norms connected to Buddhism, including rituals, ethical values, community practices, and institutional engagement in contemporary society.

## **Methodology**

Moreover, this study employs a qualitative autoethnographic methodology, combining personal lived experience with cultural and institutional analysis. According to Tullis J.A (2021), “this dynamic research environment which uniquely theaters researchers to their text, requires a type of ethical engagement that is highly contextual, consignment, and primarily relational” (P.244). in simple words, this changing research environment connects researchers closely to what they study. Therefore, they must act ethically in ways that fit the situation, take responsibility for their work, and build respectful relationships with others involved. Therefore, through participant observation, reflective field notes, and

engagement with monastic and lay communities across seven countries, the research interprets contemporary Buddhist practices, administrative structures, and social influences within their specific cultural contexts. On the other hand, this study is important because it provides a contemporary and comparative understanding of Buddhist cultures across seven Asian countries between 2023 and 2026. By integrating experiential autoethnographic insight with cultural analysis, it offers a lived perspective often missing in purely textual or historical studies. The study helps scholars better understand how Buddhism adapts to modernization, pluralism, and digital transformation while maintaining traditional foundations. It also contributes to regional Buddhist studies by highlighting similarities and differences in monastic administration, belief systems, and social practices, thereby enriching current academic discourse on contemporary Buddhism in Asia.

## Results

However, Donald K. Swearer (2010) states that, “A religion encompasses more than a stipulated set of beliefs and practices; it also embodies and expresses the meaning and aspirations of a particular culture” (P. XV). In other words, religion is not a set of specific beliefs but is a reflection of philosophy and ideology of a specific culture. Therefore, the findings of the study reveal that Buddhism in the selected countries reflects diverse cultural adaptations shaped by history, state regulation, and social transformation.

## Discussion

In India, contemporary Buddhism appears significantly influenced by Hindu cultural patterns, particularly in ritual expression. Many practices emphasize devotional and ceremonial elements, sometimes more visibly than meditative or philosophical dimensions. This suggests a contextual assimilation within a predominantly Hindu environment. On the other hand, in Singapore, Buddhism operates within a highly regulated and multi-religious society. It is largely organized and supervised by lay communities, and frequently interacts with Chinese folk religion, Taoism, and Confucian traditions. Both ritualistic practices, such as prayer and offerings, and spiritual activities, including meditation and Dhamma study, are present. Although many Singaporeans may not strongly identify as doctrinal Buddhists, diverse Buddhist centers representing *Himalayan*, *Mahayana*, and *Theravāda* traditions are active, with notable youth engagement.

Malaysian Buddhism historically developed around institutions such as the Buddhist Maha Vihara in Brickfields and remains community-centered and regulated by government frameworks. It reflects a balance between ritual

devotion and spiritual cultivation. In Vietnam, Buddhism is predominantly *Mahāyāna* in the north and central regions, with *Theravāda* influence in the south derived from Cambodia. Vietnamese Buddhism is conceptual, ritual-oriented, and socially engaged, maintaining strong interaction with the public. On the other hand, Buddhism in Taiwan is mainly based on the *Mahayana* tradition and strongly emphasizes social engagement. It actively connects with people through education, charity work, community service, and humanitarian activities.

Thailand and Laos represent *Theravāda*-majority contexts. Thailand demonstrates a dual structure: forest monasteries emphasize meditation and strict discipline, while urban temples focus on social services and community engagement. *Vinaya* observance is often strongly emphasized, though adaptation to modern conditions remains debated. Laos reflects a similar structure, though urban spirituality appears less pronounced compared to Thailand. Overall, Buddhism continues to shape social identity while adapting differently within each national framework.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Buddhism continues to play a significant yet diverse role across the seven Asian countries examined. While its expressions range from ritualistic and community-centered practices to spiritually oriented monastic traditions, Buddhism remains deeply connected to cultural identity and social life. Contemporary developments show adaptation rather than decline, as Buddhist institutions respond to modernization, regulation, and pluralism. Each national context demonstrates a unique form of Buddhist culture shaped by history, governance, and local belief systems, highlighting the dynamic and evolving nature of Buddhism in Asia today

**Keywords** - Asian Buddhism, Autoethnography, Buddhist Culture, Records from Travel, Society

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