



BUDDHISM: THE BRIDGE CONNECTING ANCIENT INDIA TO THE WORLD

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Abstract: Buddhism, originating in the sixth century BCE in India under Gautama Siddharta, not only emerged as a transformative religious and philosophical system but also functioned as a conduit for cultural exchange and diplomacy across Asia. Rooted in principles such as the Four Noble Truths, the Middle Path, and the Bodhisattva ideal, Buddhism gained prominence through royal patronage from Indian dynasties including the Mauryas, Shungas, and Guptas, which facilitated the construction of stupas, monasteries, and educational centres like Nalanda. Ancient travelers and scholars, notably Fa Hien, Sung Yun, and Xuanzang, documented these developments while transmitting Buddhist texts, relics, and art to China, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia, highlighting the religion's role in fostering interregional connections. The diffusion of Buddhist iconography, literature, and practices across kingdoms illustrates its capacity to unify diverse cultures while encouraging intellectual and artistic growth. The paper also briefly examines contemporary manifestations, including Buddhist tourism and global summits, reflecting enduring influence. This study aims to explore Buddhism as both a spiritual tradition and a bridge connecting ancient India to the wider world.

Keywords: Ancient India, Buddhism, Culture, Diplomacy, Silk Road, World

Received : 30 September 2025

Revised : 10 October 2025

Accepted : 12 November 2025

Published : 31 December 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Sharma, T. (2025). Buddhism: The Bridge Connecting Ancient India to the World. *Journal of History, Art and Archaeology*, 5: 2, pp. 119-125
<https://doi.org/10.47509/JHAA.2025.v05i02.03>

Introduction

Throughout ancient history, India occupied a unique position as both a cradle of spiritual innovation and a hub of intercultural exchange. Buddhism, emerging in the sixth century BCE

under Siddharta Gautama, exemplifies this duality, serving not only as a transformative religious and philosophical system but also as a conduit for diplomacy, cultural exchange, and

intellectual connectivity across Asia. While extensive scholarship has examined the doctrinal and philosophical dimensions of Buddhism, the strategic and diplomatic functions embedded within its expansion remain comparatively underexplored. Researchers such as Tansen Sen, Juyan Zhang, and Richard Foltz have documented trade networks, political ties, and cultural transmissions influenced by Buddhist presence, yet the intricate ways in which Buddhist theology underpinned interregional relations, facilitated the movement of relics, texts, and artistic traditions, and reinforced political cohesion have been less systematically analysed. Similarly, travellers and pilgrims like Fa Hien, Sung Yun, and Xuanzang provide rich descriptive accounts of India's religious and educational prominence, but the broader implications of these journeys for diplomacy and cultural connectivity warrant deeper attention.

This paper seeks to address this gap by focusing primarily on the ancient period, examining how royal patronage, monumental architecture, monasteries, and scholarly centres like Nalanda fostered both internal consolidation and cross-border engagement. The travels of Buddhist emissaries and the circulation of texts, relics, and iconography are analysed as instruments of cultural diplomacy that extended India's influence across Central, East, and Southeast Asia. A brief consideration of contemporary phenomena, including Buddhist tourism and global summits, highlights the enduring relevance of these historical networks. Artistic legacy of Buddhism is reflected by Gandhara and Mathura style of art. This artistic realm acted as a link between Ancient India and the world

By situating Buddhism as both a spiritual tradition and a medium of intercultural connectivity, this study aims to illuminate the religion's multifaceted role in linking ancient India to the wider world, emphasizing its historical significance and continuing global impact.

Buddhism : Origin and Core Ideas

Buddhism arose in the sixth century BCE as a profound spiritual and philosophical response to the prevailing Brahmanical dominance, ritualism, and widespread animal sacrifice in ancient India. Its founder, Siddharta Gautama, later known as the Buddha, was born around either 563 or 480 BCE in Lumbini, as a member of the Śākya clan, which was a vassal of the Kosala *mahājanapada*. At the age of twenty-nine, he renounced his princely life in an act known as the *mahābhiniṣkramana* (Great Departure), embarking on an ascetic quest for truth. After years of rigorous meditation, he attained enlightenment (*nirvana*) under the *Bodhi* tree at Bodh Gaya. His first sermon at Sarnath was delivered to five disciples, marking the "Turning of the Wheel of Dharma" (*dharmacakrapravartana*), laying the foundation of a tradition that emphasised inclusiveness, knowledge, and the possibility of liberation for all beings.

Buddha's teachings were eventually codified in the *Tripitaka* or "Three Baskets": the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (monastic rules), the *Sutta Piṭaka* (sermons and doctrinal discourses), and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (philosophical and metaphysical reflections). Early Buddhist symbolism also reflected key episodes of the Buddha's life and doctrine: the white lotus symbolised his birth, the horse his renunciation, the wheel the spread of his teaching, and the *stūpa* his final passing (*mahāparinirvāṇa*).

At the heart of the Buddha's philosophy lies the Middle Way (*madhyamā pratipad*), which avoids both extreme self-indulgence and severe self-mortification. Instead, it advocates for moderation, balance, and ethical living. This principle is most fully realised in the Noble Eightfold Path, which integrates ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom as the road to liberation (Laumaki: 2008:4). Closely linked to this is the doctrine of the Four Noble Truths, which articulate the reality of suffering

(*duḥkha*), its cause in craving and attachment, its cessation through the removal of desire, and the path to this cessation through the Eightfold Path (Gethin:1998:63–64).

Over time, Buddhism evolved into diverse traditions, the most significant being *Mahayana* (Greater Vehicle) and *Hinayana* (Lesser Vehicle, a term often applied to early schools). *Mahayana* emphasised the *Bodhisattva* ideal, wherein an awakened being postpones final *nirvāṇa* in order to liberate others. This tradition incorporated devotional practices, worship of Buddha and Bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara and Amitābha, and an expansive cosmology. By contrast, *Hinayana* schools, particularly Theravāda, emphasised the ideal of the *Arhat*, individual enlightenment, strict adherence to monastic discipline, and meditation practices such as *samatha* (calming) and *vipasanā* (insight).

Thus the personal quest of an Indian prince developed into a global religion and philosophy. Its universal message of compassion, moderation, and liberation became the intellectual and spiritual bridge that connected ancient India with the wider world, influencing cultures across Asia and, in time, the globe.

Royal patronage and Political Support

From its inception, Buddhism benefited from significant royal patronage and political support, which played a critical role in its consolidation and spread. Historical records, such as the *Samyutta Nikaya*, recount that even ministers of Kosala were distressed at the Buddha's departure from the kingdom, reflecting the deep emotional and spiritual connection early Indian polities had with the Buddha and his teachings. Following his passing, as many as eight kingdoms vied for possession of the Buddha's relics, further illustrating the profound respect and devotion that royal courts accorded to him. Prominent lay supporters such as Anathapindika invited the Buddha to Shravasti and donated a park for his use,

while the Kosala monarchs, King Prasenajit and Queen Mallika, became adherents of Buddhism (Zhang: 2012:6–7). Similarly, Bimbisara, the king of Magadha, extended hospitality to the Buddha and the *sangha* in Rajgriha and contributed a cave, Venuvan, for monastic purposes.

Royal sponsorship continued to shape the institutional development of Buddhism through the councils convened to preserve and codify the teachings. The First Buddhist Council (c. 483 BCE) at Rajgriha, under King Ajatashatru, sought to compile the *Vinaya Pitaka* and *Sutta Pitaka*, forming the foundation of the *Tripitaka*. Approximately a century later, the Second Council at Vaishali, patronised by King Kalasoka, addressed monastic disputes, resulting in the first schism of the *Sangha* into *Sthaviravada* and *Mahasamghika* schools. The Third Council (c. 250 BCE), held in Pataliputra under Emperor Ashoka, aimed to purify the *Sangha*, solidify orthodox teachings, and compile the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, while also promoting missionary activity to regions such as Sri Lanka. The Fourth Council, with dual traditions—*Theravada* in Sri Lanka and *Sarvastivada/Mahayana* in Kashmir—further exemplified royal involvement in the formal preservation and dissemination of Buddhist doctrines, including the first writing of the Pali Canon and the compilation of the *Mahavibhasha Sastra*.

Beyond India, royal patronage facilitated Buddhism's international expansion. Emperor Ashoka sent envoys to Suvarnabhumi (modern Myanmar) and dispatched missionaries to multiple regions, exemplifying the policy of *Dhammavijaya* (Guruge: 1995:50). Over the centuries, rulers from East Asia, including Syong Myong of Korea, Shotoku Taishi of Japan, and various Chinese emperors, continued this tradition of support, revering the Buddha and enabling Buddhism to flourish globally. The sustained engagement of kings and emperors, therefore, not only safeguarded Buddhist teachings but also

ensured their transmission across regions and generations, establishing Buddhism as a bridge connecting ancient India to the broader world.

Buddhism as a Diplomatic Tool

Buddhism functioned as a critical instrument of diplomatic engagement, facilitating cultural, political, and commercial exchanges between ancient India and the broader Asian world. The movement of Buddhist ideas, images, and relics often accompanied diplomatic missions, shaping interstate relations and enhancing mutual understanding. The Chinese envoy Chang-Kian, during his expedition to Central Asia, reported the worship of a golden Buddha statue in Thian, which was later brought to China during military campaigns against the Hioung-nu (Huns), marking the introduction of Buddhist iconography into the imperial court. This early interaction exemplifies how Buddhist symbols served as cultural bridges, intertwining military, political, and religious spheres. Similarly, the Chinese emperor Ming Ti, in 62 CE, sent emissaries to India, who returned eleven years later with Indian scholars translating key *sutras* such as the *Dasabhumis* and *Lalitavistara*, reflecting the state-sanctioned promotion of Buddhism as a vehicle for diplomatic and intellectual exchange (Beal: 1869:31). By the third century CE, Buddhist monks like Dharmaraksha (Fa Hui) traveled west from the Tsin Empire, returning with texts that enriched Chinese religious life, illustrating the active movement of knowledge along diplomatic and mercantile routes.

The establishment of monasteries and *stupas* under local rulers, such as the Prince of Chau's permission for monastic ordination around 335 CE, the erection of forty-two pagodas, and the invitation of Indian priests like Kumarajiva by King Yaohing for textual translation, further underscores Buddhism's role in forging trans-regional alliances and cultural diplomacy. Pilgrimages, relic transfers, and ceremonial

practices, including the *Panchavarsha* festival documented by Fa-Hien, reveal how Buddhist rites functioned as instruments of statecraft, cultivating goodwill and fostering ties across kingdoms (Beal: 1869:31). Similarly, the circulation of sacred objects such as the *Bodhi* tree branch to Sri Lanka and Buddha's relics across Gandhara, China, and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) reflects the tangible use of religious diplomacy to maintain interregional connections (Beal: 1869:151).

The Ashokan edicts, particularly Rock Edict XIII, exemplify the strategic deployment of Buddhist moral and ethical principles as instruments of soft power. Ashoka's promotion of *dhamma* not only consolidated his rule but also influenced distant rulers, including the Greek king Antiyoga (Antigonos II Gonatas of Macedon) and other neighbouring kingdoms, fostering adherence to ethical precepts without coercion. The establishment of *Dhamma Mahamatras* to propagate ethical governance among Yavanas, Kambojas, and Gandharas reflects the conscious intertwining of Buddhist philosophy with diplomatic outreach (Hultzsch: 925:43). Furthermore, Sogdian merchants and translators, such as Kang Senghui, facilitated commerce and cultural exchange between South Asia, Central Asia, and China, illustrating the convergence of trade and religious diplomacy (Sen: 2003:161-162). The adoption of Indian artistic motifs, including representations of Vajrapani inspired by Heracles or *Jataka* narratives visualised through Graeco-Roman iconography, underscores how Buddhist art served as a visual language of cross-cultural diplomacy along the Silk Road (Foltz: 1999:44).

Collectively, these examples demonstrate that Buddhism functioned not merely as a spiritual doctrine but as a potent diplomatic tool, bridging diverse polities, mediating cultural exchanges, and facilitating both political and commercial networks across Asia. Its influence extended from the subcontinent to Central and East Asia,

shaping interstate relations and reinforcing India's position as a cultural and moral epicentre.

Cultural Heritage of Buddhism

The cultural heritage of Buddhism represents one of the most profound legacies of ancient India, bridging philosophical thought, literature, and visual art across Asia. Early literary contributions by luminaries such as Aśvaghoṣa (c. 1st–2nd century CE) exemplify how Buddhist ideas were transformed into high literary forms; his epic poems, the *Buddhacarita* and *Saundaranandakāvya*, not only narrate the life and teachings of the Buddha but also established Sanskrit as a medium for spiritual and aesthetic expression, thereby popularizing Buddhist narratives among elite literary circles. Philosophical advancement followed with figures like Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE), whose *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* formulated the Middle Way doctrine, profoundly influencing Mahāyāna thought and providing the intellectual foundations that shaped Buddhist scholasticism across India, Tibet, and East Asia. Similarly, Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu systematised *Yogācāra* philosophy, consolidating doctrinal knowledge that would guide both monastic study and textual transmission. In the Theravāda tradition, Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* exemplifies the translation and systematization of ancient Sinhalese commentaries into Pali, creating a comprehensive manual that unified meditative practice and doctrinal learning. Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* further enriched devotional and philosophical literature, illustrating the integration of poetic expression with the ethical and spiritual ideals of the *Bodhisattva* path.

Buddhist cultural heritage is equally manifest in art and architecture, which visually disseminated religious ideas along the Indian subcontinent and beyond. The Gandharan School of art, centred in Peshawar, Takshila, and Afghanistan, created anthropomorphic depictions of the Buddha with refined Hellenistic influences, as exemplified by

the Fasting Buddha at Lahore Museum (Watters: 1973:173). Concurrently, Mathura produced the earliest indigenous free-standing Buddhist statues, blending local sculptural traditions with classical Roman elements, demonstrating the syncretic nature of Buddhist artistic culture (Dalrymple: 2024:87). Buddhist rock-cut caves, including the *Chaitya* and *Bhaja* complexes at Karle during the Shunga period, and *stupas* such as *Amravati* and *Nagarjunakonda*, display sophisticated carvings of *Dhamma* symbols, *Bodhi* trees, and narrative reliefs that testify to the widespread patronage of Buddhist visual culture (Ahirwar: 2025:21-27). The Gupta period marked the pinnacle of this artistic expression, with monumental structures at Nalanda University supporting both literary and astronomical studies, while relic worship and elaborate statuary reflected a vibrant religious and aesthetic ethos.

Buddhism's transmission across the Silk Road further amplified its cultural impact. *Nikayas* such as the *Sarvāstivādins* and *Mahāsāṃghikas* facilitated the spread of Buddhist texts, images, and ceremonial objects to Central and East Asia, inspiring monumental works such as the Bamiyan Buddha in northwest Afghanistan and the establishment of Samye Monastery in Tibet (Folz: 1999:37-39).

This transnational flow of literature, philosophy, and art exemplifies Buddhism's role as a bridge connecting ancient India's intellectual and artistic heritage to the broader world, leaving a legacy that continues to inform both scholarship and spiritual practice.

Current Scenario

Buddhism, originating in ancient India, continues to serve as a significant cultural and philosophical bridge connecting India to the world in the contemporary era. As of 2020, there were approximately 324 million Buddhists globally, constituting around 4% of the world population, with India itself accounting for 9.2 million

adherents or 0.7% of its population. Recognizing the potential of Buddhism as a medium for cultural diplomacy, the Indian government initiated the Global Buddhist Summit in 2023, an international platform that brings together scholars, monks, *Sangha* leaders, and practitioners from around the world. This initiative not only promotes the study and practice of Buddhist philosophy but also fosters intercultural dialogue and strengthens India's global engagement. Monasteries and shrines across Asia, from Luyang, Changyang, and Dunhuang in China to Nara in Japan, Seoul in Korea, Ula Bantar in Mongolia, and Kandy in Sri Lanka, exemplify Buddhism's enduring influence on art, philosophy, and cultural identity (*The Economic Times*). These sacred sites, besides being centres of spiritual practice, also function as hubs for learning and cultural exchange, highlighting the religion's transnational significance. Buddhist tourism further amplifies this connection, creating avenues for India to engage with other Asian countries both culturally and economically (*The Hindu*). The spiritual leadership of the Dalai Lama, a global promoter of peace and non-violence, illustrates Buddhism's relevance in international politics and policy-making, as his advocacy for *ahimsa*, tolerance, and compassion informs contemporary global dialogues.

In October 2024, the Indian government's recognition of Pali as a classical language underscores a renewed commitment to Buddhist studies, research, and preservation of early Buddhist literature, particularly the Pali Canon.

On a global scale, the United Nations has acknowledged the significance of Buddhist teachings in fostering values of compassion, inclusiveness, and peace, designating *Vesak*—the full moon day marking Buddha's birth—as a day of international importance. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres noted, the principles of compassion, tolerance, and selfless service embedded in Buddhism offer timeless guidance amid the challenges of the modern world.

Together, these developments reflect how Buddhism functions not merely as a historical legacy of India but as a living bridge connecting its ancient philosophical heritage to global cultural, spiritual, and diplomatic landscapes .

Conclusion

Buddhism, which originated in ancient India as a quest for liberation from suffering, has over the centuries transcended its role as a spiritual tradition to become a powerful medium of cultural diplomacy, intellectual exchange, and global connectivity. Rooted in the teachings of the Buddha and systematized through councils, texts, and philosophical traditions, it shaped India's spiritual identity while simultaneously serving as a conduit for dialogue across Asia. Royal patronage, from the Mauryas to the Guptas, enabled the establishment of stupas, monasteries, and centres of learning such as Nalanda, which became hubs of intellectual exchange that drew scholars from diverse regions. The transmission of texts, relics, and artistic traditions through pilgrims, emissaries, and trade networks further ensured that Buddhism acted as a vehicle of soft power, weaving together the polities of Central, East, and Southeast Asia into a shared moral and cultural fabric.

Beyond antiquity, Buddhism's enduring relevance in the modern world underscores its unique bridging capacity. Initiatives such as the Global Buddhist Summit, recognition of Pali as a classical language, and the promotion of Buddhist tourism reflect India's strategic use of its Buddhist heritage as both a cultural and diplomatic resource. Globally, figures like the Dalai Lama and institutions like the United Nations invoke Buddhist values of compassion, tolerance, and inclusivity as guiding principles in addressing contemporary challenges. The celebration of *Vesak* as a UN-recognized day of peace testifies to Buddhism's universal appeal and its capacity to inspire ethical reflection in international discourse.

Thus, Buddhism continues to function as both a historical legacy and a living tradition. It not only illuminates India's ancient role as a spiritual and cultural epicentre but also reaffirms the timeless relevance of its teachings in shaping global peace, dialogue, and cooperation. Future research may further explore how Buddhism's diplomatic, cultural, and economic dimensions can be leveraged in strengthening transnational cooperation in the 21st century.

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