

The Role of Buddhist Education in the Propagation of Buddhism^{*} in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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Abstract

The Mekong Delta constitutes a culturally and religiously plural region shaped by long-term interactions among Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese, and migrant communities, within which Buddhism occupies a central position. This paper examines the role of Buddhist education in the propagation of Buddhism in the Mekong Delta, with particular attention to Khmer Theravāda Buddhism and its relationship with ethnic identity and cultural continuity. Drawing on archaeological, historical, and contemporary studies, the paper analyzes multiple educational mechanisms, including monastic-based education, formal Buddhist schools, ritual practices, transnational networks, and digital media. The findings suggest that Buddhist education functions not only as a channel for transmitting religious doctrine but also as a key social institution for preserving language, moral values, and collective memory, especially within the Khmer community. At the same time, processes of urbanization, labor migration, and media transformation pose significant challenges to traditional educational models. The paper argues that strengthening Buddhist education through curriculum standardization, human resource development, digital integration, and policy support is essential for sustaining Buddhism's social role and cultural relevance in the contemporary Mekong Delta.

Keywords: Buddhist education; Propagation of Buddhism; Mekong Delta; Khmer Theravāda Buddhism; cultural identity

Introduction

The Mekong Delta is a region characterized by cultural convergence and interaction among Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese, and various migrant communities, resulting in a

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highly diverse religious landscape in which Buddhism occupies a prominent position. For the Khmer community, Khmer Theravāda Buddhism constitutes a core component of ethnic identity. Khmer monasteries function not only as religious institutions but also as educational centers where young people acquire literacy in the Khmer language and Pāli, learn monastic discipline, and internalize moral norms. For the Vietnamese population, the coexistence of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism has created a rich religious environment that responds to diverse spiritual, ethical, and philosophical needs in modern society.

Archaeological and historical studies indicate that Buddhism appeared in southern Vietnam and the Mekong Delta at a very early stage, at least from the first centuries CE, as evidenced by sculptural art and material remains influenced by Gandhāra and Mathurā styles. The introduction and development of Buddhism were closely linked to processes of land reclamation, settlement, and regional exchange along the Mekong basin. Throughout this historical trajectory, Buddhist education has consistently served as a crucial channel for transmitting doctrine, shaping moral norms, preserving languages, and reproducing communal cultural identities.

In the contemporary context, the Mekong Delta has been strongly affected by urbanization, labor migration, livelihood transformations, and the rapid expansion of digital media. These changes generate new demands for Buddhism in general and for Buddhist education in particular, especially with regard to religious propagation, the preservation of Khmer cultural heritage, and contributions to social stability. Research into the role of Buddhist education in the Propagation of Buddhism in the Mekong Delta therefore carries both theoretical and practical significance, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of its values, operational mechanisms, challenges, and appropriate responses in the current context.

Theoretical Framework

Buddhist education may be defined as the totality of institutionalized and non-institutionalized practices through which Buddhist doctrines, monastic discipline, ethical values, and cultural knowledge are transmitted to monastics and lay followers. It encompasses both monastic-based education and formal training provided by Buddhist

secondary schools, colleges, and academies. According to Harris, Theravāda monasteries in Cambodia and neighboring regions function as comprehensive cultural institutions through which communities acquire knowledge, internalize moral norms, and maintain social order.

McDaniel's studies of monastic education in Laos and Thailand demonstrate that the transition from monastery-based learning to modern Buddhist school systems represents a widespread regional trend in the Mekong area, driven by the need to standardize knowledge, enhance educational levels among monastics, and adapt to national education frameworks. Taylor's analysis of contemporary Vietnamese religion highlights the "re-enchantment" of religion in modern contexts, emphasizing the ways in which Buddhist institutions, lay associations, and social welfare activities serve as important channels for extending religious influence.

From these perspectives, the role of Buddhist education in disseminating Buddhism can be conceptualized through several theoretical propositions. First, Buddhist education functions as a mechanism for transmitting religious knowledge and for maintaining and reproducing Buddhist cultural capital through the training of monastics, lay practitioners, and youth. Second, Buddhist education serves as a space of socialization in which moral values, lifestyles, and ethnic identities are internalized and reaffirmed, particularly within the Khmer community of southern Vietnam. Third, in the context of globalization and integration, Buddhist education is increasingly embedded in transnational networks, academic exchange, and digital technologies, generating new modes of propagation that transcend local boundaries.

Buddhist Education and the Propagation of Buddhism in the Mekong Delta

1. Buddhist Educational Institutions and Modern Education

In the traditional period, Buddhist education in the Mekong Delta was conducted primarily within Khmer monasteries, focusing on the teaching of the Khmer language, Pāli, ritual practices, monastic discipline, and norms of communal conduct. This model enabled the Khmer community to preserve its ethnic language, basic Buddhist knowledge, and the village-monastery social structure. However, as demands for higher levels of education, professional expertise, and social skills increased, monastery-based

education gradually revealed limitations, particularly with regard to secular knowledge, modern pedagogical methods, and curriculum standardization.

From the late twentieth century and into the early twenty-first century, a system of formal Buddhist educational institutions was established and expanded in the region, including secondary Buddhist schools, Vietnam Khmer Theravāda Buddhist academy. Training programs were developed through collaboration among secondary Buddhist schools, Buddhist academies, and universities at both regional and national levels, incorporating interdisciplinary fields such as history, philosophy, linguistics, sociology of religion, religious administration, pedagogy, and social work. The standardization of curricula, textbooks, and evaluation criteria has contributed to the formation of a monastic community with solid academic foundations, greater capacity to integrate into the national education system, and an enhanced ability to serve local communities.

For Khmer Theravāda Buddhism, Pāli–Khmer schools play a particularly crucial role. These institutions not only preserve the Khmer and Pāli languages but also train bilingual monastics who are capable of teaching, preaching, and participating in social activities within a multilingual national context. Furthermore, the practice of sending monastics to international Buddhist education centers in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar has enriched academic quality and strengthened regional-level capacities for the dissemination of Buddhism.

2. Monastic-Based Education and the Preservation of Khmer Cultural Identity

Monastic-based education among the Khmer in the Mekong Delta continues to function as a highly influential mechanism for the dissemination of Buddhism. Khmer monasteries are regarded as comprehensive educational spaces where children and youth acquire literacy, moral instruction, and values related to filial piety, communal solidarity, and karmic causality. Scholarly studies have emphasized that Khmer monasteries serve as the “last stronghold of the Khmer language” in a context where the national formal education system primarily operates in Vietnamese.⁷

The practice of temporary ordination allows young Khmer men to spend a period of time living and studying in monasteries, where they gain direct exposure to Buddhist scriptures, ritual practices, and the disciplined life of the monastic community. Through this process, they not only internalize Buddhist teachings but also develop a deeper

understanding of the history, customs, and identity of the Khmer community. After returning to lay life, they become natural agents of dissemination, carrying Buddhist knowledge into family and community contexts.

Monastic-based education thus functions as a mechanism that closely links the dissemination of Buddhism with the preservation of Khmer culture. Through the teaching of the Khmer and Pāli scripts, performing arts, ritual music, and life-cycle ceremonies, Khmer monasteries sustain a rich symbolic world that counterbalances the risks of cultural assimilation and identity erosion in the context of deepening integration.

3. Rituals, Festivals, and Spaces of Cultural Reproduction

Buddhist rituals and festivals such as Chôl Chnām Thmây, Ok Om Bok, Sen Dolta, and the Kathina robe-offering ceremony function simultaneously as religious events and as open educational spaces. On these occasions, Buddhist teachings are conveyed through multiple forms, including sermons, chanting, folk performances, traditional games, and communal activities.¹

Through participation in festivals, different generations within families and communities share lived experiences, transmit collective memories, and reaffirm Buddhist values embedded in everyday life. The integration of Buddhist rituals with agricultural customs and folk beliefs creates spaces of cultural reproduction in which Buddhist education plays a guiding role in shaping content, language, and symbolism. This process enables Buddhism to continue spreading in a natural and flexible manner through annual cycles, with minimal disruption to the socio-economic life of local communities.

4. Transnational Networks and Digital Media

Cross-border exchanges among Buddhist communities in the Mekong region have contributed to strengthening the role of Buddhist education in religious dissemination. Khmer monastics from the Mekong Delta frequently travel to Cambodia and Thailand for ordination, Pāli studies, and meditation training before returning to teach in their local communities. Academic connections between Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism and Sri Lanka and Myanmar—particularly in the field of Pāli Canon translation—have likewise generated extensive knowledge networks.

In the contemporary context, digital media has emerged as a new channel for dissemination closely linked to Buddhist education. Many monasteries, Buddhist schools, and teachers utilize social media platforms, websites, and online classes to share lectures, organize virtual retreats, and introduce rituals and charitable activities. These practices enable Buddhism to engage younger generations more effectively and to expand its sphere of dissemination beyond village boundaries and national borders.

5. Emerging Challenges

Despite its positive contributions, the system of Buddhist education in the Mekong Delta faces multiple challenges. First, there is a shortage of instructors and teachers with deep expertise in Pāli, Theravāda Buddhist studies, and modern pedagogical methods, particularly in remote areas. Many trained personnel do not return to serve local educational institutions after completing their studies in major centers, resulting in persistent human resource gaps.

Second, limited financial resources for monastics enrolled in Buddhist education programs affect their ability to pursue long-term studies and participate in advanced training programs both domestically and abroad. Third, teaching materials and curricula related to Buddhist studies and Pāli-Khmer language education remain uneven across provinces, hindering efforts toward curriculum standardization and quality assurance. Finally, economic pressures, labor migration, and the appeal of popular culture have reduced interest among some segments of Khmer youth in monastic education and Buddhist schools.

If these challenges are not adequately identified and addressed, they may weaken the role of Buddhist education in disseminating Buddhism and undermine efforts to preserve Khmer cultural identity and maintain religious stability in the Mekong Delta.

Solutions for Enhancing the Role of Buddhist Education in the Propagation of Buddhism in the Mekong Delta

First, it is necessary to develop strategic plans for cultivating highly qualified Buddhist monks, instructors, and educational administrators. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Buddhist Universities, and local authorities should cooperate in the recruitment, training, and deployment of personnel to ensure a balanced distribution of human

resources across regions. Transparent scholarship programs and incentive mechanisms encouraging young monastics to return to serve local communities after completing domestic and international training should be established.

Second, the standardization of curricula and teaching materials in Buddhist educational institutions—particularly Pāli-Khmer schools—is an urgent priority. Textbooks should be developed through careful integration of traditional experience with contemporary research in Buddhist studies and the social sciences and humanities. The participation of scholars specializing in Mekong Buddhism and Khmer culture will help ensure that training content is both academically rigorous and locally relevant.

Third, stronger linkages between Buddhist education and the national education system should be promoted. Credit recognition, articulation programs, and collaborative training initiatives with universities and colleges in the region can enable monastics and Buddhist youth to access secular knowledge while maintaining their religious orientation. Such connections will also contribute to enhancing the institutional status of Buddhist schools within the broader educational landscape.

Fourth, the application of digital technologies in Buddhist education and dissemination should be regarded as a key pillar. Buddhist schools, monasteries, and teachers can develop online learning platforms, digital libraries, and multimedia teaching resources, as well as social media channels targeting younger audiences. In implementing these initiatives, particular attention should be given to preserving the Khmer language and presenting Mekong Buddhist art, rituals, and history, thereby harmonizing tradition with modernity.

Fifth, greater socio-economic support policies for Khmer youth studying in monasteries and Buddhist schools are needed. Scholarships, dormitories, career orientation programs, and post-graduation support can help alleviate economic pressures and encourage sustained engagement in religious education and community service. At the same time, strengthening connections among monasteries, families, and communities through youth clubs, volunteer activities, and environmental initiatives will create additional spaces for Buddhist education to exert influence in everyday life.

Finally, enhanced interreligious dialogue, cultural cooperation, and policy engagement among religious actors, governmental authorities, and scholars should be

promoted. On this basis, Buddhist education in the Mekong Delta can make meaningful contributions to the formulation of culturally appropriate religious policies and reaffirm Buddhism's role in fostering solidarity among diverse ethnic communities.

Traditionally, Buddhist education in the Mekong Delta took place primarily within Khmer monasteries, focusing on the study of the Khmer language, Pāli, rituals, monastic discipline, and communal norms of conduct. This model enabled the Khmer community to preserve its language, basic Buddhist knowledge, and the village-monastery social structure. However, as demands for higher educational attainment, professional expertise, and social skills increased, monastery-based education gradually revealed limitations, particularly in terms of secular knowledge, modern pedagogical methods, and curriculum standardization.

From the late twentieth century onward, formal Buddhist educational institutions have been established and expanded in the region, including secondary Buddhist schools, college-level programs, and Buddhist academies. Their curricula integrate Buddhist studies with interdisciplinary fields such as history, philosophy, linguistics, sociology of religion, religious administration, teaching skills, and social work. The standardization of curricula, textbooks, and assessment criteria has contributed to the formation of a monastic community with solid academic foundations and enhanced capacity to serve society.

Conclusion

Buddhist education in the Mekong Delta functions simultaneously as a means of propagation of Buddhism and as a mechanism for preserving and reproducing the cultural identities of local communities, particularly the Khmer of southern Vietnam. Through monastic-based education, modern Buddhist schools, ritual practices, and emerging transnational and digital networks, Buddhist education has sustained the dynamic presence of Buddhism in the spiritual, moral, and cultural life of the region. Strengthening this educational system in ways that respond to contemporary challenges is therefore essential for ensuring the continued social relevance of Buddhism and for promoting cultural sustainability in the Mekong Delta.

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