



The Paradox of Buddhism: Decline in India, Resurgence in East Asia, and the Emergence of Tứ Pháp Symbols in First-Millennium Vietnam

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<http://doi.org/10.38119/cacs.2026.39.1>

Received August 31, 2026; accepted September 19, 2026; published online September 30, 2026

Abstract: Buddhism, once a dominant religious and cultural force in its birthplace of India, experienced a dramatic decline between the 7th and 13th centuries CE, eventually nearly vanishing from the subcontinent. This research examines the multifaceted causes of this "symbolic paradox," analyzing the intersection of external pressures and internal vulnerabilities. External factors included intense competition and strategic absorption into Brahmanical symbolism, in which the Buddha was recast as an avatar of Vishnu, and the decisive military destruction of major monastic universities, such as Nalanda, by Muslims. Internally, Buddhism suffered from sectarian fragmentation, a growing disconnect between monastics and the laity, and a shift toward complex scholasticism that alienated common followers. Despite its retreat from India, Buddhist symbols survived through migration to Tibet, East Asia, and Southeast Asia, and, significantly, through the emergence of Giao Chau Buddhist symbols (Vietnam today) via Tứ Pháp (Four Dharma). This research hypothesizes that although the institutional conditions for Buddhism can be fragile, its core teachings possess resilient symbolism that enables them to re-emerge across diverse cultural and social contexts and in different modes of practice.

Keywords: Buddhist symbolism, Buddhist localization, Tứ Pháp (Four Dharma)

1. Introduction: Outline of the Paradox of Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BCE and flourished for over a millennium as a primary spiritual light in India. It radiated outward, shaping the culture, ethics, and politics of the Indian subcontinent and beyond. However, a profound historical paradox emerged: by the late medieval period, the very religion that preached compassion, non-

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violence, and egalitarianism had almost entirely vanished from its land of origin (von Glasenapp, 1953). The decline of Indian Buddhist symbols was not a sudden event but a protracted process shaped by religious competition, political instability, and internal institutional changes. Therefore, researchers must explore how external assaults and internal fissures combined to erode the foundations of the Sangha in India, while also examining how the tradition's core message enabled its survival abroad and its modern revival in both secular and social-justice contexts (Mitchell et al., 2002).

The historical trajectory of Buddhism presents one of the most intriguing paradoxes in the history of world religions. Originating in northeastern India, Buddhism became one of Asia's most influential religious traditions, shaping philosophy, political thought, art, literature, and social institutions across vast regions of the continent. Over time, however, it gradually declined in its homeland and had largely disappeared as a major institutional religion in India by the thirteenth century. Beyond the Indian subcontinent, Buddhism not only survived but also underwent remarkable transformations, adaptations, and localizations, giving rise to distinctive religious traditions that differed substantially from its Indian origins. This apparent contradiction raises a fundamental question: how could a religion lose its institutional foundation in the civilization that gave birth to it, yet simultaneously flourish through creative reinterpretations elsewhere?

Existing scholarship has generally attributed Buddhism's decline in India to political, economic, and religious factors. Historians have emphasized the revival and expansion of Brahmanical Hinduism, the incorporation of the Buddha into the Hindu pantheon as an avatar of Vishnu, the loss of royal patronage after the Gupta period, the growing scholasticism and institutional rigidity within Buddhist monastic communities, and the destruction of major monastic universities during the Muslim invasions of northern India. At the same time, studies of Buddhist expansion have shown that the religion spread successfully along the Silk Roads and through maritime trade networks, where it encountered diverse cultural environments that reshaped Buddhist doctrines, rituals, and symbolism (Dinh, 2010). Rather than remaining a fixed religious system, Buddhism repeatedly adapted to local symbols, political structures, and indigenous belief systems (Dinh and Pham, 2023).

According to K.T.S. Sarao, former head of the Department of Buddhist Studies at the University of Delhi, the Buddhist Sangha's internal power was compromised by significant sectarian divisions after the Buddha's passing. The community split into numerous schools, at least 18 according to traditional accounts, each with differing interpretations of the Dhamma and the Vinaya (monastic code) (Sarao, 2014). These debates often became overly scholastic, focusing on theoretical points rather than practical religion, thereby distancing the tradition from the immediate needs of laypeople. As monasteries became centers of vast wealth and academic elitism, they sometimes lost the simplicity of the original teachings. Some scholars note a "softening" of the clergy and an accommodation to luxury that eroded their moral authority (Sarao, 2014). The development of complex Tantric (Vajrayāna) practices, while religiously profound, further separated the elite monastics from the common people, as these practices were often shrouded in secrecy and required specialized initiation.

Buddhism's reliance on the monastic community (Sangha) was a double-edged sword. While it helped preserve deep wisdom, it also created social distance between the monastics and the laity. Unlike Brahmanism, which integrated its priests into every stage of a layperson's

life, from birth to death, Buddhist monks often remained isolated within their schools. When these schools were destroyed, the lay followers, who had not been deeply integrated into a distinct social identity outside the monastic structure, were easily absorbed back into the Hindu fold or converted to Islam. The adoption of Sanskrit over vernacular languages for later Buddhist texts also contributed to this isolation from the common people.

The decline of Buddhism also reflected shifts in the collective psychology of Indian society. During periods of war with Muslims from the mid-7th century onward, chaos and social instability made the introspective, self-reliant nature of Buddhist teachings less appealing to those seeking immediate protection and divine intervention. The rise of theistic religions that offered miracles, rituals for security, and a clear divine hierarchy addressed these fears more directly. Furthermore, the Brahmanical system's strict adherence to the social order provided a sense of stability that the egalitarian yet socially detached Buddhist institutions could not match in a crumbling political landscape.

By the 13th century, Buddhism had largely disappeared from the Indian heartland. Yet its decline in India did not signal its extinction. Even as monastic centers fell, the tradition's core teachings migrated to new lands (von Glasenapp, 1953). The transmission of Indian Buddhism to Tibet was particularly significant; many monks fled the Islamic invasions, carrying their texts and lineages to the Himalayas, where they were preserved and further developed. Similarly, Buddhism found fertile ground in Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and East Asia, where it evolved into the diverse traditions we see today. Buddhism's survival abroad shows that its disappearance from India reflected a failure of institutional conditions, not the doctrine itself (Herrmann-Pfandt, 2024).

In the 20th and 21st centuries, Buddhism has experienced a major resurgence, particularly in the West. This revival is driven by its perceived compatibility with modern science and psychology. Practices such as meditation and mindfulness have been secularized and integrated into clinical settings to treat stress, anxiety, and depression (Christopher et al., 2025). Neuroscience research has shown that Buddhist contemplative practices can produce measurable changes in brain structure and function, a phenomenon known as neuroplasticity (Wang, 2025). Programs such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) have brought these ancient techniques to millions who do not necessarily identify as Buddhist. This "secular Buddhism" emphasizes the practical benefits of the teachings, appealing to a modern demographic that values empirical results over dogma (Huxter, 2012).

In India, the most significant modern revival was led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution and a tireless advocate for Dalit rights (Fitzgerald, 1997; Mukerji, 2020). In 1956, Ambedkar led a mass conversion of hundreds of thousands of "untouchables" to Buddhism in Nagpur. He called this new vehicle "Navayana" (Neo-Buddhism), which emphasized social equality, human rights, and rejection of the caste system (Sonowal, 2023). Navayana Buddhism reinterprets the Dhamma as a social gospel focused on liberty, equality, and fraternity (Shukla, 2024). This movement gave millions of Dalits a new identity and a sense of dignity, transforming Buddhism from a historical relic into a living force for social justice in modern India. Today, the Ambedkarite Buddhist community continues to grow, using the Buddha's teachings as a tool for political assertion and cultural emancipation (Nina, 2025; Suna, 2025).

This research examines these historical developments through the lens of Buddhist symbolism, arguing that the apparent paradox of decline and expansion is better understood by distinguishing between the fragility of Buddhist institutions and the resilience of Buddhist symbolic systems. While monasteries, royal patronage, and ecclesiastical organizations proved vulnerable to political upheaval and religious competition, Buddhist symbols, including the Buddha, bodhisattvas, dharma, relics, and sacred narratives, exhibited remarkable cultural flexibility. Their capacity to engage with indigenous religious traditions enabled Buddhism to be reinterpreted in new cultural settings without losing its essential ethical and cosmological foundations. In other words, Buddhism survived not merely through geographical diffusion but through symbolic transformation.

Vietnam offers one of the earliest and most illuminating examples of this process. During the first millennium CE, the region of Giao Châu occupied a unique position at the intersection of Indian maritime networks and the expanding Chinese imperial sphere. As a result, Buddhism entered northern Vietnam through multiple channels and encountered a religious landscape already populated by agricultural fertility cults, nature deities, and ancestor worship. Rather than displacing these indigenous traditions, early Buddhism integrated with local symbols, giving rise to the cult of Tứ Pháp (Four Dharma) — Pháp Vân (Cloud), Pháp Vũ (Rain), Pháp Lôi (Thunder), and Pháp Điện (Lightning). These female symbols embodied the natural forces essential to wet-rice agriculture while functioning within a Buddhist cosmological framework. The emergence of Tứ Pháp symbols, therefore, represents one of the earliest documented cases of Buddhist localization in East Asia, illustrating how Buddhist practice could be reconstructed through indigenous religious concepts to produce an entirely new form of Buddhist symbolism.

2. Buddhist Dharma within the Religious Context

Buddhism initially emerged as a soteriological discipline aimed at eradicating suffering through insight into impermanence, non-self, and dependent origination, articulated in the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013). As it spread across Central Asia and into China, and later to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, it encountered dense ethical systems, political hierarchies, ritual ecologies, and indigenous cosmologies that did not merely passively receive Buddhism but actively reshaped it. The historiography of Buddhist transmission thus centers on adaptation: how doctrine is translated, ethics are reframed, ritual and monastic life evolve, and institutions negotiate power (Zürcher, 2007; Ch'en, 1964).

Two contrasting frames recur in interpreting these transformations. A purist critique laments the loss of ascetic rigor and doctrinal focus, arguing that institutional consolidation, ritual proliferation, and syncretism distort the Buddha's original intent (Lopez, 1995). A constructive interpretation invokes *upāya*, the compassionate tailoring of teachings to circumstances, and argues that flexible embodiment does not betray but advances Buddhism's salvific aim (Williams, 2009). This research adopts the latter frame while acknowledging risks: syncretism can devolve into an uncritical amalgam; political patronage can compromise integrity; and commercialization can alienate publics (Sharf, 1999).

Early Buddhism centers on the Four Noble Truths, namely suffering (*dukkha*), its origin (craving), its cessation (*nirvāṇa*), and the path (the Eightfold Path), all grounded in an analysis

of impermanence (*anicca*), non-self (*anattā*), and dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*) (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013). The Eightfold Path prescribes a comprehensive program of ethical discipline (*sīla*), mental cultivation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Liberation entails insight into the constructed nature of personal identity and the cessation of clinging (Gombrich, 1988). As a result, the *saṅgha* developed rules codified in the *Vinaya* collections to regulate monastic conduct, including celibacy, propertylessness, and the almsgiving round (*piṇḍapāta*). Monks wore simple robes, shaved their heads, and relied on lay generosity, modeling detachment from lay obligations and familial ties (Schumann, 2004; Wynne, 2007).

The mendicant ideal of lightness, mobility, and non-accumulation was integral to early identity formation and to social differentiation from Brahmanical and household life (Gombrich, 1988; Harvey, 2013). Early discourses portray the body as a composite of impermanent aggregates subject to conditioning, craving, and decay. Familial attachment, while a natural locus of care, is a primary site of clinging that perpetuates suffering (Collins, 1990; Gethin, 1998). Renunciation severs the karmic entanglements of household life, enabling a disciplined pursuit of awakening. This motif would collide with Confucian valorization of filial piety and bodily integrity in China.

When the Muslim legions' advance temporarily halted, the resurgence of Brahmanical Hinduism posed a systemic challenge to Buddhism. Brahmanism was deeply entrenched in the Indian social fabric through the caste hierarchy and the authority of the *Vedas* (Social Research Foundation, 2025). As Brahmanism evolved into the diverse traditions of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism, it began to incorporate Buddhist ethical values and philosophical concepts, effectively narrowing the distinctiveness of the Buddhist path (Verardi et al., 2022).

A key strategy in this process was recasting the Buddha as Vishnu's ninth incarnation (*Avatar*). This integration allowed the Brahmanical tradition to absorb Buddhist followers without requiring a formal change in their social status or rituals. Furthermore, the intellectual synthesis led by philosophers such as Śaṅkara revitalized Brahmanical thought, while emotional devotional (*Bhakti*) movements attracted the masses seeking a more personal connection with the divine. By the late medieval period, Buddhism had "nothing unique to offer" compared to the revitalized Hindu sects that had adopted its best features (von Glasenapp, 1953).

The final and most violent blow to Indian Buddhism came with the Islamic invasions from Central Asia beginning in the late 12th century. Unlike Brahmanism, which could survive as a decentralized, household-based tradition, Buddhism in India had become heavily dependent on large, centralized monastic institutions/universities. Between approximately 1193 and 1197 CE, forces under Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji targeted these institutions, often mistaken for fortified citadels because of their wealth and size (von Glasenapp, 1953). The destruction of the Nalanda center, the greatest center of Buddhist learning, which housed millions of manuscripts and thousands of monks, was catastrophic. Similar fates befell other major centers, such as Vikramashila and Somapura. The slaughter of the monastic elite and the burning of their libraries effectively decapitated the tradition, leaving lay followers without spiritual or educational leadership.

Another consequence is that Buddhism's institutional power was inextricably linked to royal patronage. While early dynasties such as the Mauryas and later the Guptas supported the *Saṅgha*, the Pala dynasty's collapse in Eastern India in the 12th century removed Buddhism's

last major political protector. The subsequent rise of dynasties that were either hostile to Buddhism or preferred Brahmanical and Jain traditions further marginalized the religion. Without royal funding, the vast monastic complexes could not be maintained, and the monks lost their social status as advisors and power brokers (Czyżykowski, 2016).

Buddhism's journey in India is a story of profound loss and remarkable resilience. Its decline stemmed from a "perfect storm" of external assaults and internal decay — a reminder that even the most enlightened institutions require a stable social and political environment to survive. The destruction of Nalanda and its absorption into Brahmanism and Hinduism serve as historical warnings about the fragility of intellectual centers. Yet the modern resurgence of Buddhism, whether through neuroscience in the West or social liberation in India, demonstrates the enduring power of its core message. Buddhism's ability to adapt to new cultures and scientific paradigms suggests that its "light" may dim in one place only to be rekindled elsewhere. The tradition's ultimate survival depends not on the permanence of its stone-and-brick monasteries, but on the continued relevance of its insights into the human mind and the persistent search for a more compassionate and equal world.

In the following sections, we will explore the spread of Buddhism in Asia and its East Asian adaptation, focusing on how Buddhism and East Asian culture shaped one of the world's largest Buddhist centers outside India. We will journey from Sinicization in China, as a process of translation and transformation, to Kami and Buddhas through Honji Suijaku in Japan. We will also examine Zen and the warrior ethos, compassion, the sword, and monastic militarism (the Sōhei) to understand clerical marriage and hereditary temples in Japan. Finally, we will delve into the intertwining of Buddhism and folk beliefs in Korea to arrive at one of the most fascinating religious transformations: the Tứ Pháp in Vietnam.

3. The Spread of Buddhist Symbols in Asia and East Asian Adaptation

When Buddhism entered Han China (traditionally dated to the 1st–2nd centuries CE), it encountered a culturally confident civilization governed by Confucian ethics, ritual, and bureaucratic order (Zürcher, 2007; Ebrey, 1993). Filial piety (孝, xiao) was the central virtue organizing family continuity, ancestral rites, and social hierarchy. The body, “received from parents,” was to be preserved intact; shaving the head or self-mutilation could signal grave disrespect (De Bary & Bloom, 1999; Teiser, 1994). Monastic celibacy and withdrawal contradicted Confucian duties to marry, reproduce, and maintain ancestral sacrifices. Renunciation appeared socially irresponsible—economically unproductive and potentially undermining agricultural labor and military service (Ch'en, 1973). Critics argued that monks were “parasitic,” enjoying tax exemptions and labor privileges while failing to contribute to the state (Ch'en, 1964).

Dynastic authorities oscillated between patronage and suppression, depending on whether Buddhist institutions were perceived as useful for state legitimation or as a threat to social order (Weinstein, 1987; Zürcher, 2007). Policies enforced the registry of monks, restricted ordinations, and taxed or confiscated monastic lands; conversely, emperors sponsored translations, monastery construction, and rituals for state protection (Ch'en, 1964). These dynamics forced Buddhism to adapt its ethical and institutional presence to Confucian

hegemony, from translating Buddhist scriptures to interpreting them through Confucian and Chinese Taoist lenses to demonstrate that Buddhist teachings are also suitable for Chinese culture.

Since then, East Asian Buddhism has turned a new page, with countless interpretations of "Buddha - Dharma - Sangha" and teachings aligned with Chinese thought. One "unprecedented" interpretation holds that Sakyamuni Buddha was an incarnation of Lao Tzu (老子) (Ames & Kaltenmark, 2026). In the Sinosphere, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese cultures both adopted Indian Buddhist elements and Chinese Buddhism as a derivative. At the same time, these cultures localized Buddhism to suit each place's culture and ideology.

3.1. Sinicization Process: Translation as Transformation in China

Chinese translators, most famously Kumārajīva-鳩摩羅什 (344–413), drew on Daoist and Confucian semantic fields to render Buddhist technical terms (Zürcher, 2007; Nattier, 2008). Concepts such as nirvāṇa, emptiness (śūnyatā), and non-action were sometimes mapped onto existing Chinese categories (e.g., wu 無 or wuwei 無為), a strategy that made texts intelligible but risked doctrinal slippage (Nattier, 2008).

The translation project did not merely transmit meaning; it created new semantic syntheses that set the conditions for Chinese schools and practices. To counter allegations of unfiliality, Chinese Buddhists advanced a Buddhistized filial piety (大孝), arguing that the highest form of filial devotion is to rescue parents—and ancestors—from suffering in the afterlife through merit transfer (Teiser, 1994). Monastic renunciation thus becomes indirectly filial, as the monk's merits benefit kin beyond biological ties. This reframing realigned Buddhist soteriology with Confucian ethics without surrendering its otherworldly aim.

The Ulambana/Yulanpen festival, rooted in the story of Maudgalyāyana (摩訶目犍連 or 目連/Mulian) rescuing his mother from the hell realms, became a central ritual for ancestors and hungry ghosts (Teiser, 1988). Its Chinese amplification made Buddhism a key ritual technology for filial salvation, harmonizing monastic and lay piety. These rites exemplify how narrative, liturgy, and social practice converged to domesticate Buddhism within the moral economy of family and community (Teiser, 1994). Abandoning pure mendicancy, Chinese monasteries adopted agriculture, managed estates, and accumulated wealth through patronage, donations, and commercial ventures. Material culture (stupas, images, relics) proliferated, embedding Buddhism in visible, tactile practices that appealed to lay sensibilities. This economic turn institutionalized Buddhism as a social actor, stabilizing it while introducing temptations of power and wealth.

Chinese courts drew on Buddhist ritual expertise, including prayers for rain, protection of the realm, and rites for the dead, while conferring titles and land on monasteries (Ch'en, 1964; Weinstein, 1987). In return, Buddhist leaders endorsed the sacrality of imperial rule, framing the emperor as guardian of the Dharma and beneficiary of monastic merit (Weinstein, 1987;

Zürcher, 2007). This accommodation created a durable church-state symbiosis, periodically punctuated by purges when monasteries appeared too autonomous or lavish (Ch'en, 1973).

3.2. Kami and Buddhas: Honji Suijaku in Japan

In Japan, Buddhism aligned with indigenous Shinto through the honji suiaku theory, in which local kami were interpreted as provisional manifestations (suijaku) of original Buddhist divinities (honji) (Grapard, 1992; Teeuwen & Rambelli, 2003). This hermeneutic created a two-way bridge: Buddhism naturalized itself within sacred landscapes and lineages, while kami worship gained soteriological depth. The result was a syncretic ecology of shrines and temples (*jingū ji*) in which ritual specialists. Zen (Chan) emphasized direct, non-conceptual insight (*kenshō*), rigorous discipline, and the training of the mind under conditions of austerity—an ethos that resonated with the samurai (Bodiford, 1993; Dumoulin, 2005). The ideal of *mushin no shin* (無心の心, “mind of no mind”) became associated with spontaneous, fearless action, especially in the mastery of swordsmanship (Haskel, 2012; Friday, 2004). Monastic training techniques, including breath control, posture, and attentional focus, were adapted to martial practice, while warrior patronage endowed Zen institutions (Bodiford, 1993; Dumoulin, 2005).

However, the entanglement of Zen and warfare is debated. Some modern scholars argue that certain monks and texts rationalized violence as compassionate when it aimed to protect the innocent or preserve order (Victoria, 1997; Sharf, 2013). Others caution against generalizations, distinguishing a complex spectrum of attitudes across periods and lineages (Sharf, 1999; Friday, 2004). Nonetheless, the moral ambiguity of martial adaptation highlights a recurring risk of politicization: when the Dharma is braided into state or class interests, the rhetoric of compassion can be commandeered to justify coercion (Victoria, 1997; Sharf, 2013).

Medieval Japan saw the rise of *sōhei* (armed monks) who defended monastic privileges, lands, and political influence, sometimes mobilizing large forces and fighting decisive battles. These developments culminated in violent suppression in the 16th century, as political consolidation undercut monastic militarism (Adolphson, 2007; Friday, 1992). The episode underscores how property, patronage, and regional power drew Buddhist institutions into the dynamics of warlord politics.

A revolutionary shift came with Shinran (1173–1263) of the Jōdo Shinshū movement, who advocated reliance on Other Power (*tariki*) and normalized clerical marriage, reconfiguring temples as hereditary institutions (Dobbins, 1989; Blum, 2005). Later legal changes in the modern era further routinized married clergy across sects, transforming the social base of Buddhist leadership and turning many temples into loci for funerary rites and local administration. This professionalization aided institutional continuity but also spurred critiques of worldliness and commercialization (Rowe, 2011; Porcu, 2014)..

3.3. Buddhist Symbols and the Folk Beliefs in Korea

The history of Buddhism in Korea is marked not only by the transmission of Buddhist doctrine from China during the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE–668 CE) but also by ongoing

interaction with indigenous religious traditions. After its official introduction to Goguryeo in 372 CE, followed by Baekje in 384 CE and Silla in the sixth century, Buddhism rapidly became an influential religious, philosophical, and political force on the Korean Peninsula. Rather than supplanting pre-existing beliefs, Buddhism developed through accommodation and syncretism with Korea's indigenous folk religion, creating a distinctive religious landscape in which Buddhist teachings and local spiritual practices coexisted and mutually reinforced one another (Baker, 2008; Grayson, 2002).

Before the arrival of Buddhist symbols, the religious life of ancient Korea was dominated by a complex set of folk beliefs centered on nature worship, ancestor veneration, and shamanism (Musok). Mountains, rivers, trees, rocks, and villages were regarded as dwelling places of sacred spirits (*sin*), while shamans (*mudang*) served as intermediaries between the human and supernatural worlds. These beliefs reflected an animistic worldview in which maintaining harmony with nature and ancestral spirits was essential to individual and communal well-being (Baker, 2008; Grayson, 1989).

Rather than suppressing these indigenous traditions, Buddhism adopted a flexible strategy that incorporated local deities into Buddhist cosmology. Mountain spirits (*Sanshin*), solitary sages (*Dokseong*), and the Seven Stars (*Chilseong*) became protective deities enshrined within Buddhist temple complexes, typically in separate shrines behind the main Buddha Hall. This symbolic accommodation enabled Buddhist temples to serve as centers of Buddhist practice and as local sacred spaces where worshippers prayed for health, longevity, prosperity, and protection. The integration of the *Sanshin* symbol into Korean Buddhist temples is widely regarded as a defining characteristic of Korean Buddhism (Grayson, 1992; Jang, 2010).

The interaction between Buddhist symbols and folk beliefs became especially significant during the Unified Silla (668–935) and Goryeo (918–1392) periods, when Buddhism received strong state patronage and absorbed indigenous religious symbols. Sacred mountains long revered in local traditions were reinterpreted as ideal sites for Buddhist cultivation, and many temples were built within these sacred landscapes. Consequently, indigenous concepts of mountain spirits and Buddhist notions of sacred space gradually merged, producing a uniquely Korean religious geography in which Buddhist institutions and folk religious traditions became mutually reinforcing (Buswell, 1987; Baker, 2008).

Even during the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), when Neo-Confucianism became the official state ideology and Buddhism faced political suppression, Buddhist temples continued to preserve many elements of folk religion. Rituals honoring the symbols of *Sanshin*, *Chilseong*, and *Yongwang* (Dragon King) remained integral to temple life, underscoring the remarkable adaptability of Korean Buddhist symbols. Contemporary scholarship therefore characterizes Korean Buddhism not as a purely doctrinal tradition but as a dynamic religious system of symbols in which Buddhism, shamanism, Daoist cosmology, and local folk beliefs have continuously interacted through religious syncretism and symbolic accommodation (Baker, 2008; Lim, 2018).

This enduring interaction shows that Buddhism's success in Korea cannot be understood solely through institutional history or doctrinal transmission. Rather, its resilience lies in its ability to reinterpret indigenous symbolic systems without rejecting them. The incorporation of mountain spirits, celestial deities, and local guardian gods into Buddhist temples exemplifies

how Buddhism localized itself through symbolic adaptation, producing a distinctly Korean form of Buddhism that continues to shape religious life on the peninsula.

3.4. The Tứ Pháp symbols in Vietnam

The Tứ Pháp tradition challenges conventional narratives that portray the spread of Buddhism as a unidirectional transmission of Indian religious doctrines. Instead, it shows that Buddhism's success depended on reciprocal cultural negotiation, in which Buddhist symbols and local religious systems mutually transformed one another. From this perspective, the emergence of Giao Châu Buddhism in Vietnam in the First Millennium was neither a peripheral imitation of Indian Buddhism nor merely an extension of Chinese Buddhism, but rather a creative synthesis that reflected the ecological, social, and symbolic conditions of early Vietnam (Dinh and Pham, 2024). This case illustrates how Buddhist symbolism acquired new meanings while preserving its broader religious identity, contributing to Buddhism's long-term resilience beyond India.

Building on this theoretical perspective, this section examines the historical paradox of Buddhist symbols through three interconnected stages. First, it analyzes the institutional and symbolic challenges that contributed to Buddhism's decline in India. Second, it explores how Buddhism spread across Asia by adapting its symbolic repertoire to diverse cultural contexts, particularly in East Asia. Finally, it investigates the emergence of the Tứ Pháp tradition in first-millennium Vietnam as a case study of Buddhist localization, showing how the interaction between Buddhist symbolism and indigenous religious beliefs gave rise to a distinctive Vietnamese Buddhist tradition.

Through this analysis, the research argues that although Buddhist institutions may decline amid changing political and social circumstances, Buddhist symbolic systems possess an extraordinary capacity for cultural adaptation, allowing Buddhism to be continually recreated across different civilizations while maintaining its enduring philosophical and ethical core. This also highlights the special relationship between Buddhism and the Four Dharma Practices in Vietnam, which this study discusses in the following sections and which connects Buddhism, adaptation, syncretism, and the problem of continuity. This relationship is further illustrated by the resurgence of Buddhism and the emergence of Tứ Pháp practice in Vietnam in the first millennium.

4. Buddhist Symbols and Tứ Pháp Practice in Vietnam

Practicing the Tứ Pháp in Vietnamese Buddhism is a special religious phenomenon. Here, the Buddhist symbols and profound ideology discussed in the *Dīgha Nikāya* rarely appear. Instead, religious activities focus on folk beliefs about clouds, rain, thunder, and lightning. Legend also says a "Stone Buddha" symbol (Thạch Quang Phật) was born after an Indian monk named Khâu Đà La (Kaundinya/丘陀羅) once "stepped through" the body of a native girl (Man Nương). This is also the "official" ideology of Buddhism in the Giao Châu area (now in Bắc Ninh province), which still exists today as an interplay between an Indian Buddhist symbol and

local beliefs. Adaptation, syncretism, and the problem of continuity through legend are among the most important characteristics of Vietnamese Buddhism over the past 2000 years.

4.1. Buddhism, Adaptation, Syncretism, and the Problem of Continuity

This section examines how Buddhist symbols, originating in ancient India, transformed as they spread into China, Japan, and Vietnam. Far from simple distortions, these transformations involved strategic adaptations (linguistic, ethical, ritual, institutional, and political) that enabled Buddhist symbols' survival and flourishing within new civilizational horizons. They drew on the Indian doctrinal and monastic baseline and the Chinese encounter, especially with Confucian filial piety, and on processes of Sinicization (including translation strategies, ethical reframing, ritual innovations, and integration with imperial structures). It also focuses on the Japanese experience, where Buddhism was militarized, syncretized with Shinto, and institutionalized in ways that reshaped clerical life, and on the Vietnamese path, marked by deep syncretism with indigenous traditions and statecraft and by theological reflection on whether these processes constitute betrayal or evolution, with particular attention to the Mahāyāna doctrine of upāya (skillful means) and the Lotus Sūtra's "burning house" parable. This is the plasticity of Buddhist symbols: their capacity to assume the "shape of the container" while preserving the core aim of alleviating suffering, which has been pivotal to their resilience, even as they risk dilution when overly politicized or commodified (Gethin, 1998; Williams, 2009).

Skeptics argue that East Asian transformations compromised the Dharma: monastic property contradicts mendicancy; clerical marriage violates celibacy; militarization betrays non-harm; and ritual elaboration obscures insight through spectacle (Lopez, 1995; Robinson, 2005). In this reading, acculturation amounts to accommodation to worldly power and popular tastes, eroding the ascetic and contemplative core. Mahāyāna sources propose a counter-criterion: upāya (skillful means) permits adaptive strategies, provided they aim to alleviate suffering and lead beings toward liberation (Williams, 2009; Lopez, 2001). The Lotus Sūtra's "burning house" parable depicts a father who lures children to safety with expedient promises, thereby defending pedagogical flexibility for diverse capacities. Under this lens, Chinese filial rituals, Japanese syncretism, or Vietnamese folk idioms are not betrayals per se but culturally legible vehicles for salvific intent.

If authenticity is measured by telos (soteriological function) rather than by form (ascetic uniformity), historically syncretic expressions can count as faithful when they effectively relieve suffering, foster virtue, and orient minds toward insight (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013). Liturgy for the dead, narratives of compassionate rescue, and communal ethics extend Buddhist concern beyond solitary liberation to bodhisattva practice within social registers. The shift from mendicancy to landed monasteries, or from celibacy to married clergy, may be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to determine whether it enables or impedes this telos (Williams, 2009; Lopez, 2001).

Adaptation is not cost-free. When institutions accumulate wealth and power, dependence on patrons can distort priorities; when rites become commodified, means eclipse ends; when syncretism lacks discernment, superstition can crowd out reflective practice (Sharf, 1999). The

East Asian record offers examples of both constructive accommodation (e.g., filial piety reframed for compassion) and troubling entanglement (e.g., monastic militarism). Upāya requires wisdom: adaptation must remain answerable to the Dharma's ethical and contemplative demands.

The historical journey of Buddhist symbols across East Asia reflects the dynamics of a religion of water: it assumes the shape of its container while retaining its quenching essence, the compassionate release from suffering through insight and practice (Gethin, 1998; Williams, 2009). In China, Buddhism endured by translating itself into Confucian ethical currency and ritual forms; in Japan, it negotiated with kami, warriors, and modernity; in Korea, it was folklorized within local belief systems; in Vietnam, it entered village life, mother cults, and royal courts. Each adaptation foregrounds a perennial tension: fidelity requires flexibility, yet flexibility risks forgetting what it serves. A measured judgment, grounded in upāya (उपाय or Chinese 方便/fāngbiàn), sees these transformations not as betrayals but as contextual embodiments, some luminous, some ambiguous, of a transposable soteriology. The task for contemporary communities and scholars is to discern which adaptations liberate and which merely accommodate, ensuring that Buddhist symbols' enduring plasticity remains tethered to their deepest aim: alleviating suffering for all beings.

4.2. Resurgence of Buddhist Symbols Meets Indigenous Culture in Vietnam

Vietnam likely encountered Buddhism early through maritime trade routes across the southern seas, importing a mix of textual traditions and ritual practices before large-scale Sinitic influences consolidated. The cultural field was already plural: indigenous ancestor worship, spirit cults, and later Confucian and Daoist elements coexisted, creating fertile ground for Buddhist integration (Taylor, 2013).

Vietnamese temples often house Buddhist altars alongside shrines to local deities, heroes, and ancestors, signaling a multifunctional sacred complex that addresses both soteriology and worldly welfare (Salemink, 2015). The Mother Goddess tradition (Thờ Mẫu) and spirit mediumship (lên đồng) coexist within a ritual ecology in which Buddhist clergy frequently collaborate with or overlap with mediums, astrologers, and ritual specialists (Salemink, 2015). Far from marginal, these practices index a robust popular religiosity in which Buddhism mediates among cosmological orders.

A distinctly Vietnamese figure, Ông Bụt (a folk name for the Buddha), appears in folktales as a benevolent, accessible wonder-worker who offers practical help and moral guidance, rendering Buddhist compassion intimate and local. Rather than the austere ascetic, Ông Bụt serves as a village guardian, mapping soteriological values onto communal ethics and everyday justice. This narrative re-imagining thus extends doctrinal ideals into folk moral pedagogy.

The transformation of Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin) into the maternal Quan Âm epitomizes the feminization of compassion within Vietnamese religious consciousness. Visual culture emphasizes softness, nurturing, and miraculous rescue, aligning Buddhist soteriology with

familial and maternal ideals. This gendered embodiment parallels broader East Asian trends while taking on specifically Vietnamese moral textures .

Under the Lý (1009–1225) and Trần (1225–1400) dynasties, Buddhism became integrated into statecraft: monks served as advisors, educators, and moral authorities; kings patronized temples; and Buddhist ethics undergirded patriotic defense against invasions (Nguyễn, 2008; Woodside, 1971). The figure of Trần Nhân Tông, who abdicated to become a monk and founded the Trúc Lâm Zen school, symbolizes an indigenous synthesis of political leadership and Buddhist renunciation (Taylor, 2013). As in China and Japan, the nexus of throne and altar enhanced Buddhism's visibility and influence, even as it created dependencies and vulnerabilities.

In later centuries, some sectors viewed doctrinal dilution as Buddhism absorbed folk ritualism, astrology, and protective magic—practices critics deemed theologically problematic yet that sustained Buddhism's popularity (Salemink, 2015). The very pragmatism that broadened its lay base sparked debates over superstition versus compassionate accommodation. Nevertheless, Vietnamese Buddhism's capacity to mediate between worlds—imperial and village, elite philosophy and folk ritual—has been central to its durability (Taylor, 2013).

4.3. The Emergence of Tứ Pháp Practice in the First Millennium Vietnam

The emergence of the Tứ Pháp (Four Dharma) practice in the first millennium CE marks one of the earliest instances of Buddhism's localization in Vietnam. Rather than merely introducing Indian Buddhist doctrines to the Red River Delta, Buddhism underwent profound adaptation, integrating indigenous agricultural beliefs, local spirit worship, and Mahāyāna Buddhist cosmology into a new religious system centered on four female deities: Pháp Vân (Cloud), Pháp Vũ (Rain), Pháp Lôi (Thunder), and Pháp Điện (Lightning). This process transformed Buddhism from an imported religion into a vernacular tradition deeply embedded in northern Vietnam's ecological and social life.

The Tứ Pháp cult's origins are commonly traced to the second century CE, particularly the activities of the Indian monk Khâu Đà La (Kṣudra) in the Luy Lâu region, the earliest Buddhist center in Vietnam. According to the *Lĩnh Nam chí quái* and later Vietnamese chronicles, Khâu Đà La encountered the young woman Man Nương, whose miraculous pregnancy and the subsequent division of a sacred tree into four statues gave rise to the four goddesses. Although the narrative is clearly mythical, historians generally regard it as a symbolic account of the encounter between Indian Buddhism and indigenous fertility cults rather than a literal historical event.

The Red River Delta's ecological setting decisively shaped this religious synthesis. As a rice-growing civilization dependent on seasonal rainfall, floods, and favorable weather, early Vietnamese communities regarded natural forces as living powers that required ritual negotiation. Long before Buddhist symbols arrived, local populations worshipped spirits who controlled clouds, rain, thunder, and lightning, whose favor determined agricultural success or failure. Rather than eliminating these indigenous beliefs, Buddhist missionaries incorporated

them into Buddhist cosmology by identifying the weather spirits as manifestations of Buddhist protective deities.

Consequently, the four natural symbols became personified as compassionate, bodhisattva-like female figures who could respond to both Buddhist devotional and local ritual petitions. This process exemplifies what anthropologists call religious syncretism and vernacularization (Dinh, 2024). Rather than replacing indigenous cosmology, Buddhism adopted existing sacred geography, ritual specialists, and seasonal ceremonies. Temples dedicated to the Four Dharma deities served as both Buddhist temples and village shrines, where monks, local officials, and villagers participated in rituals for rain, harvests, and communal prosperity. This integration enabled Buddhism to spread rapidly among agricultural communities by addressing practical concerns while preserving its ethical and cosmological frameworks.

Another distinctive feature of the Tứ Pháp symbolic system is its strong feminine orientation. Unlike the predominantly male pantheon of early Indian Buddhism, the Vietnamese Tứ Pháp symbols are all female, reflecting the importance of mother-goddess traditions in indigenous Vietnamese religion. Their association with fertility, agricultural abundance, and maternal protection foreshadows the later development of the Mother Goddess (Đạo Mẫu) tradition, suggesting a long continuity of female sacred authority in Vietnamese religious history. In this respect, Tứ Pháp practice is not merely a Buddhist adaptation but also a preservation and transformation of pre-Buddhist cosmological concepts through Buddhist symbolism.

Archaeological and historical evidence further supports the antiquity of this religious tradition. Luy Lâu (modern Bắc Ninh Province) emerged as one of East Asia's earliest Buddhist centers during the Han period, predating many Buddhist institutions in China. The establishment of major temples, including Dâu, Đậu, Tướng, and Dân, indicates that the Four Dharma cult had become institutionally organized by the early medieval period. These temples formed an interconnected sacred landscape in which Buddhist scriptures, local legends, and seasonal agricultural festivals reinforced one another, illustrating the coexistence of imported Buddhist institutions and indigenous religious practices.

More broadly, the emergence of Tứ Pháp practice shows that early Vietnamese Buddhism cannot be understood simply as the diffusion of Indian or Chinese religious traditions. Instead, Buddhism entered an existing symbolic universe of animism, ancestor worship, and fertility cults. Through cultural negotiation, these diverse religious elements were synthesized into a uniquely Vietnamese Buddhist tradition. The Four Dharma deities thus served as mediators between Buddhist universalism and local ecological realities, embodying both Buddhist compassion and the sacred powers governing the natural environment.

Consequently, the Tứ Pháp tradition should be regarded as one of the earliest expressions of Vietnamese religious identity in the medieval period. Emerging in the first millennium CE, it established a model of religious accommodation that would continue to characterize Vietnamese religion throughout later history, in which Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and indigenous beliefs coexisted within an integrated religious landscape. The Four Dharma cult, therefore, represents not only the earliest localization of Buddhism in Vietnam but also the foundation of a distinctive Vietnamese mode of religious pluralism and cultural resilience that endures to the present day.

5. Conclusion

The historical trajectory of Buddhism reveals a striking paradox in the evolution of world religious symbols. Although Buddhism gradually declined in the Indian subcontinent, the very region where it originated, it flourished across much of Asia, developing diverse institutional forms and symbolic traditions that continue to shape religious life today. The apparent contradiction between institutional decline and transregional expansion can be understood by distinguishing between the historical vulnerability of Buddhist institutions and the remarkable resilience of Buddhist symbolism. While monasteries, royal patronage, and scholastic traditions proved susceptible to political upheaval, religious competition, and social transformation, Buddhist ideas and symbols demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to adapt to new cultural environments.

The decline of Buddhism in India cannot be attributed to a single cause but resulted from the convergence of multiple historical processes. The revival of Brahmanical Hinduism, the incorporation of the Buddha into Hindu symbols, shifting patterns of political patronage, internal sectarian fragmentation, and the destruction of major monastic centers collectively undermined Buddhism's institutional foundations. Yet these developments did not signal the disappearance of Buddhist symbols. Instead, they marked a geographical and cultural shift, with Buddhism increasingly centered in Tibet, China, Korea, Japan, and Southeast Asia, where local societies reinterpreted Buddhist teachings in light of their own historical experiences and indigenous cosmologies.

The emergence of the Tứ Pháp symbols in first-millennium Giao Châu shows that the spread of Buddhism was not merely a diffusion of Indian doctrine or an extension of Chinese Buddhism. Rather, it involved a creative dialogue between Buddhist cosmology and the indigenous religious traditions of the Red River Delta. By incorporating local symbols of deities associated with clouds, rain, thunder, and lightning into a Buddhist framework, early Vietnamese communities transformed Buddhism into a religion that addressed both spiritual aspirations and the practical realities of an agricultural society. The Tứ Pháp symbols thus represent one of the earliest examples of Buddhist vernacularization in East Asia, illustrating how imported religious concepts could be reconstructed through local symbolic systems without losing their Buddhist identity.

More broadly, this study suggests that Buddhism should be understood not merely as a doctrinal or institutional tradition but also as a dynamic symbolic system capable of ongoing cultural adaptation. Its historical success lay less in preserving uniform institutions than in negotiating with existing religious landscapes, absorbing indigenous beliefs, and generating new forms of practice responsive to local social and ecological conditions. The emergence of Tứ Pháp symbols exemplifies this adaptive capacity and shows that localization is not a peripheral phenomenon but a fundamental mechanism by which Buddhism has sustained its vitality across civilizations.

The paradox of Buddhist symbols is therefore only apparent. Its decline in India and resurgence elsewhere are not contradictory historical outcomes but complementary aspects of the same process of religious transformation. As Buddhism crossed cultural boundaries, it

repeatedly redefined itself through interaction with local symbols, producing multiple regional expressions while retaining its core ethical and philosophical principles. The Tú Pháp tradition illustrates this process with exceptional clarity, revealing how Buddhist symbolism can be both universal and culturally specific. Recognizing this dynamic enriches our understanding not only of Buddhism's history but also of the processes by which world religions survive, evolve, and acquire new meanings across societies.

Finally, the Vietnamese experience contributes to a comparative framework for studying Buddhist localization across Asia. Future research may further explore similar processes of symbolic adaptation in other regions, including Korea, Japan, and maritime Southeast Asia, thereby advancing a more nuanced understanding of Buddhism as a transregional religious tradition whose continuity has depended less on institutional permanence than on its enduring capacity for cultural translation and symbolic reinvention.

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