Indian Influenced Buddhist Heritage: Examples from Thailand and Southeast Asia

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Present-day Thailand is situated on Indochina Peninsula, at the centre point of Southeast Asia. In the past when the land was not divided into countries, it was located by several ancient towns which developed from agricultural villages whose origin could be traced back to the Neolithic period. Those ancient towns had developed and prospered from trading local produce, namely, forest finds, spices and herbs which were abundant in the area. Trade brought about intercommunication between local towns as well as visits from foreign countries, even from a basin of civilization such as India, from which beliefs, religions and arts were imported along with business and merchandise. Apart from Brhaminism, later known as Hinduism, Buddhism, also originated in India, was introduced into the land that was called “Suvannabhumi” in those days as has been recorded that Emperor Ashoka had sent Buddhist monks to Suvannabhumi on religious mission. Contemporaneously, a graft of the Bodhi tree from Bodh Gaya was delivered to Sri Lanka, thus initiating Sri Lanka as one of the prominent centres of Buddhism and distinguished Buddhist architecture had evolved accordingly. Architectural style from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka has influenced that of several trade towns and administration centres in Southeast Asia, which, eventually, had developed into Buddhist architectural heritage with distinctive styles according to each specific location as seen in Thailand and neighbouring countries. Several sites of heritage as mentioned have been approved of their Outstanding Universal Values and have been listed as World Heritage, for instance, Sukhothai and Associated Towns and Ayutthaya Historic City, where a great number of Buddhist temples clearly indicates its significance as centre of Buddhism. In Cambodia and Indonesia, eminent Buddhist structures still exist, for instance, Bayon Temple of Angkor and Borobudur. Apart from these, other sites in Thailand which are now in the Tentative List are: Phuphrabat Historical Park, Phimai, and most recently, the site to be nominated in the near future is Wat Phra Mahathat Nakhon Si Thammarat, which is, apart from the architectural characteristics that evidently reflect the Indian and Sri Lankan influence, the place is a sacred site, a centre faith where traditional religious festivals are still practiced continually from the past until today.
### Indian Influenced Buddhist Heritage: Origin from the Indian sub-continent (India / Pakistan / Sri Lanka)

**India**

- Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya
- Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi
- Ajanta Caves

**Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya**

Date of Inscription: 2002  
Criteria: (i)(ii)(iii)(iv)(vi)

The Mahabodhi Temple Complex is one of the four holy sites related to the life of the Lord Buddha, and particularly to the attainment of Enlightenment. The first temple was built by Emperor Asoka in the 3rd century B.C., and the present temple dates from the 5th or 6th centuries. It is one of the earliest Buddhist temples built entirely in brick, still standing in India, from the late Gupta period.
Buddhist Monuments at Sanchi

Date of Inscription: 1989
Criteria: (i)(ii)(iii)(iv)(vi)

On a hill overlooking the plain and about 40 km from Bhopal, the site of Sanchi comprises a group of Buddhist monuments (monolithic pillars, palaces, temples and monasteries) all in different states of conservation most of which date back to the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. It is the oldest Buddhist sanctuary in existence and was a major Buddhist centre in India until the 12th century A.D.

Ajanta Caves

Date of Inscription: 1983
Criteria: (i)(ii)(iii)(vi)

The first Buddhist cave monuments at Ajanta date from the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. During the Gupta period (5th and 6th centuries A.D.), many more richly decorated caves were added to the original group. The paintings and sculptures of Ajanta, considered masterpieces of Buddhist religious art, have had a considerable artistic influence.

The style of Ajanta has exerted a considerable influence in India and elsewhere, extending, in particular, to Java. With its two groups of monuments corresponding to two important moments in Indian history, the Ajanta cave ensemble bears exceptional testimony to the evolution of Indian art, as well as to the determining role of the Buddhist community, intellectual and religious foyers, schools and reception centres in the India of the Gupta and their immediate successors.
Pakistan

- Taxila
- Buddhist Ruins of Takht-i-bahi

Taxila

Date of Inscription: 1980
Criteria: (iii)(vi)

From the ancient Neolithic tumulus of Saraikala to the ramparts of Sirkap (2nd century B.C.) and the city of Sirsukh (1st century A.D.), Taxila illustrates the different stages in the development of a city on the Indus that was alternately influenced by Persia, Greece and Central Asia and which, from the 5th century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D., was an important Buddhist centre of learning.

Taxila reached its apogee between the 1st and 5th centuries AD. Buddhist monuments were erected throughout the Taxila valley, which was transformed into a religious heartland and a destination for pilgrims from as far afield as Central Asia and China.

Buddhist Ruins of Takht-i-bahi

Date of Inscription: 1980
Criteria: (iv)

The Buddhist monastic complex of Takht-i-Bahi was founded in the early 1st century. Owing to its location on the crest of a high hill, it escaped successive invasions and is still exceptionally well preserved. The complex, the most impressive and complete Buddhist monastery in Pakistan, consists of four main groups: the Court of Stupas, the monastic complex with residential cells, the temple with a main stupa in the middle and the tantric monastic complex with a series of dark cells. These ruins are among the most characteristic of this type of structure.
Sri Lanka
- Sacred City of Anuradhapura
- Ancient City of Polonnaruwa
- Sacred City of Kandy

Sacred City of Anuradhapura
Date of Inscription: 1982
Criteria: (ii)(iii)(vi)
This sacred city was established around a cutting from the 'tree of enlightenment', the Bodhi tree, brought there in the 3rd century B.C. by Sanghamitta, the founder of an order of Buddhist nuns. Anuradhapura, a Ceylonese political and religious capital, flourished for 1,300 years. The city is one of the principal shrines of Buddhism. The relics of Siddharta have, moreover, shaped the religious topography of Anuradhapura, where the big stupa (Dagaba Thuparama) was built in the 3rd century BC to house the clavicle of Buddha, an important religious relic presented by Ashoka.

Ancient City of Polonnaruwa
Date of Inscription: 1982
Criteria: (i)(iii)(vi)
Polonnaruwa was the second capital of Sri Lanka after the destruction of Anuradhapura in 993. It comprises, besides the Brahmanic monuments built by the Cholas, the monumental ruins of the fabulous garden-city created by Parakramabahu I in the 12th century. It is also a shrine of Buddhism and of Sinhalese history. The tooth of the Lord Buddha, a remarkable relic placed in the unique structure called Vatadage, was considered as the talisman of the Sinhalese monarchy.

Sacred City of Kandy
Date of Inscription: 1988
Criteria: (iv)(vi)
This sacred Buddhist site was the last capital of the Sinhala kings whose patronage enabled the Dinahala culture to flourish for more than 2,500 years until the occupation of Sri Lanka by the British in 1815. It is also the site of the Temple of the Tooth Relic (the sacred tooth of the Buddha), which is a famous
A first temple was built in 1603, destroyed by the Portuguese in 1637, and rebuilt in 1697. As a reference to the great architecture of Anuradhapura, the first historic capital, the present grander edifice was built upon a granite substructure. In addition to granite a wide variety of materials were used for this extraordinarily rich building: limestone, marble, sculpted wood, terracotta, metal and ivory.

Indian Influenced Buddhist Heritage: Examples from Southeast Asia

Borobudur Temple Compounds

Date of Inscription: 1991
Criteria: (i)(ii)(vi)

This famous Buddhist temple, dating from the 8th and 9th centuries, is located in central Java. It was built in three tiers: a pyramidal base with five concentric square terraces, the trunk of a cone with three circular platforms and, at the top, a monumental stupa. The walls and balustrades are decorated with fine low reliefs, covering a total surface area of 2,500 m². The Borobudur Temple Compounds consists of three monuments: namely the Borobudur Temple and two smaller temples situated to the east on a straight axis to Borobudur. The two temples are Mendut Temple, whose depiction of Buddha is represented by a formidable monolith accompanied by two Bodhisattvas, and Pawon Temple, a smaller temple whose inner space does not reveal which deity might have been the object of worship. Those three monuments represent phases in the attainment of Nirvana.

Criterion (i): Borobudur Temple Compounds is a harmonious marriage of stupas, temple and mountain that is a masterpiece of Buddhist architecture and monumental arts.

Criterion (ii): Borobudur Temple Compounds is an outstanding example of Indonesia’s art and architecture from between the early 8th and late 9th centuries that exerted considerable influence on an architectural revival between the mid-13th and early 16th centuries.

Criterion (vi): Borobudur Temple Compounds is an exceptional reflection of a blending of the very central idea of indigenous ancestor worship and the Buddhist concept of attaining Nirvana.
Angkor

Date of Inscription: 1992
Criteria: (i)(ii)(iii)(iv)

Angkor is one of the most important archaeological sites of Southeast Asia. It extends over approximately 400 square kilometres and consists of scores of temples, hydraulic structures as well as communication routes. For several centuries Angkor, was the centre of the Khmer Kingdom. Temples such as Angkor Wat, the Bayon, Preah Khan and Ta Prohm, exemplars of Khmer architecture, are closely linked to their geographical context as well as being imbued with symbolic significance. The architecture and layout of the successive capitals bear witness to a high level of social order and ranking within the Khmer Empire. Angkor is therefore a major site exemplifying cultural, religious and symbolic values, as well as containing high architectural, archaeological and artistic significance.

Criterion (i): The Angkor complex represents the entire range of Khmer art from the 9th to the 14th centuries, and includes a number of indisputable artistic masterpieces (e.g. Angkor Wat, the Bayon, Banteay Srei).

Criterion (ii): The influence of Khmer art as developed at Angkor was a profound one over much of Southeast Asia and played a fundamental role in its distinctive evolution.
Criterion (iii): The Khmer Empire of the 9th-14th centuries encompassed much of Southeast Asia and played a formative role in the political and cultural development of the region. All that remains of that civilization is its rich heritage of cult structures in brick and stone.

Criterion (iv): Khmer architecture evolved largely from that of the Indian sub-continent, from which it soon became clearly distinct as it developed its own special characteristics, some independently evolved and others acquired from neighboring cultural traditions. The result was a new artistic horizon in oriental art and architecture.

Indian Influenced Buddhist Heritage: Examples from Thailand

Historic Town of Sukhothai and Associated Historic Towns

Date of Inscription: 1991
Criteria: (i)(iii)

Sukhothai was the capital of the first Kingdom of Siam in the 13th and 14th centuries. It has a number of fine monuments, illustrating the beginnings of Thai architecture. The great civilization which evolved in the Kingdom of Sukhothai absorbed numerous influences and ancient local traditions; the rapid assimilation of all these elements forged what is known as the 'Sukhothai style'. Three old towns were the principal centres of the kingdom: Sukhothai (the capital), Si Satchanalai (second royal residence), and Kamphaengphet. In their architecture, built from brick with decorations in stucco and wood, they offer a great variety and skilful mixture of elements inspired by the Singhalese or Khmers.

(i) The main sanctuary of Wat Mahathat is in the shape of a lotus bud, only found in the Sukhothai era. Therefore the lotus-bud chedi is typically the main element of a temple in Sukhothai style.

Sukhothai

The historic town of Sukhothai lies approximately 12 kilometres from the modern town. The town was surrounded by rings of earthen walls, a large part of which still remains until today. The principal monuments comprise, for instance, Wat Mahathat, the royal temple situated in the centre of the town with Sukhothai’s typical lotus bud stupa as principal structure and minor stupas which contain relics of Sukhothai’s royal family; Wat Si Sawai with Khmer-influenced style stupas; and an impressive Buddha image at Wat Si Chum. The site has been excavated and studied since the mid-20th century.
Si Satchanalai

The historic town of Si Satchanalai, famous for its ceramics, is separated from the modern town by the river Yom. Some of the most outstanding monuments among the 140 monuments on the site are: Wat Chedi Chet Thaeo, impressive with the lotus-bud style stupa and seven rows of minor stupas, erected to house the ashes of the royal family and Wat Changlom with the bell-shaped stupa surrounded by elephant statues. Three km southeast of the city of Si Satchanalai lies another ancient town called Chaliang, which is believed to have existed circa 13th century AD.

Kamphaengphet

Outstanding structures in the Kamphaengphet historic site are the archaeological remains of Chakangrao, ancient town to the east of the Ping river and Aranyik area, which was the area where a group of temples were located outside the town walls for monks who concentrated mainly on religious practice, following the tradition of Sukhothai and Si Satchanalai. Structures are usually made of big laterite blocks, for example, the monolith columns at Wat Phra Non. The distinguished Sukhothai style architecture found in Kamphaengphet is the Mandapa for Four-Postured Buddha Images, or Mondop Phra Si Iriyaboth, in which four Buddha images in different posture, standing, walking, seated, and reclining are enshrined.
Historic City of Ayutthaya

Date of Inscription: 1991
Criteria: (iii)

Founded c. 1350, Ayutthaya became the second Siamese capital after Sukhothai. It was destroyed by the Burmese in the 18th century. Its remains, characterized by the Prang (reliquary towers) and gigantic monasteries, give an idea of its past splendour.

Ayutthaya was a center of economics and trade at the regional and global levels, and an important connecting point between the East and the West. The Royal Court of Ayutthaya exchanged ambassadors far and wide, including with the French Court at Versailles and the Mughal Court in Delhi, as well as with imperial courts of Japan and China.

The large palaces, the Buddhist temples and monasteries constructed in the capital, for example at Wat Rachaburana and Wat Phra Si Sanphet, are testimony to both the economic vitality and to the appeal of the intellectual tradition they embodied. All buildings were elegantly decorated with the highest quality of crafts and mural paintings, which consisted of an eclectic mixture of traditional styles surviving from Sukhothai, inherited from Angkor,
and borrowed from the 17th and 18th century art styles of China, India, Persia and Europe, creating a rich and unique expression of a cosmopolitan culture and laying the foundation for the fusion of styles of art and architecture popular throughout the succeeding Rattanakosin (Bangkok) Era.

Criterion (iii): The Historic City of Ayutthaya bears excellent witness to the period of development of a true national Thai art.

**Phuphrabat Historical Park**

Criteria: [iii][iv][vi]

Designated as Phuphrabat Historical Park, the site is the landscape of a wooded sandstone hill adorned with patches of huge bare rocks in spectacular overhanging positions, some balanced on pedestals of oddity. The scenic Phuphrabat associative cultural landscape is unique in that this single site contains cultural treasures that represent cultures of different periods of the region Southeast Asia. All together, the site incorporates separate 68 cultural locations, most of which contain rock paintings of the prehistoric period as well as the stylised, religious icons and boundary stones (sema) of the Buddhist cultural periods. The iconic representing the earliest Buddhist Dhvaravadi civilisation as well as the Khmer and Lanchang cultures. It is significant that both Dhvaravadi and Khmer images carried the native characteristics typical of the Lao trait, which finally developed and established itself as what is known as the Lanchang Buddhist culture.
Moreover, there are also three symbolic footprints of Lord Buddha of carved stone which was enshrined in the stupa of Lanchang art style. It is for this reason that the hill is known as "Phuphrabat", which means the Hill of Buddha's Footprints. All this added to the uniqueness of Phuphrabat and harmonised with its overall cultural landscape and its significance as a sacred and ceremonial place.

In addition to this associative physical connection between nature and culture, an old Lao folklore had also added another cultural dimension to the cultural context of Phuphrabat and the associated groups of wondrous formations of the rocks. Their individual imagination had been ascribed to and named after the mythical figures of the Usa-Baros dramatic folklore of ancient Vientiane's origin.

**Phimai, its Cultural Route and the Associated Temples of Phanomroong and Muangtam**

Criteria: *(i)(ii)(iii)(iv)(vi)*

Phimai or Vimayapura is a large rectangular ancient Khmer city, lying 260 kilometres northwest of Angkor. Prasat Phimai was the Mahayana Buddhist sanctuary situated at the centre of the city. Phimai, together with the cultural route and the associated temples of Phanomrung and Muangtam are among the finest Khmer monuments and constitute a testimony to the civilisation, prosperity, and the power of the Khmer Empire at its peak during Mahidharapura dynasty founded by Jayavarman VI who built Phimai temple and later became the king of Angkor. Suryavarman II who built Angkor Wat and Jayavarman VII of Angkor Thom also belong to this dynasty.
From Pimai the ancient route stretched Southeast, leading to the pass across Phnom Dangrek mountain range. In the time of the Khmer Empire, travellers and pilgrims who travelled by this route, which connected Angkor to Phimai, had at their disposal rest houses (Dhammasala) which are set up at various locations along the route, as well as hospitals (Arogyasala). The remains of these rest houses and hospitals distinguish Phimai as a unique cultural route, covering a distance of 150 kilometres approximately.

The statuary of Phimai clearly indicates that it was built as a Mahayana Buddhist sanctuary. It is significant to note that other Khmer temples belonging to the same era, such as Angkor Wat, Phanomrung or Muang tam, all were built as Hindu temples, thus the Buddhist sanctuary of Phimai is a unique exception. Apart from the Buddhist temple of Bayon in Cambodia, Phimai has duly been recognised as the most important full-fledged Khmer Buddhist sanctuary by Jayavaraman VII.

Phanomrung temple is magnificent, standing on top of an extinct volcano and dominates the historic village where Muangtam temple is situated in the middle.
Wat Phra Mahathat Nakhon Si Thammarat
Criteria: (i)(ii)(vi)

Wat Phra Mahathat Nakhon Si Thammarat is the main Buddhist temple of Nakhon Si Thammarat historic city, the largest province in Southern Thailand. According to the Nakhon Si Thammarat’s Chronicle, the Main stupa of the temple, called Phra Borommathat Chedi, literally, the Great Noble Relics Stupa, was built prior to other religious buildings in the temple by King Sri Dhammasokaraja in the early 13th century CE. in order to establish the Theravada Buddhist symbol on his land and to verify the belief of his people on the presence of the Buddha’s relics which should be housed in the stupa. The Great Noble Relics Stupa, regarded as the most important building of the temple, is a gigantic bell-shaped stupa inspired by Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture reflecting the belief on the transmission of Emperor Ashoka’s tradition of stupa from India to Sri Lanka.
After establishing the main stupa and other religious edifices of the temple, Nakhon Si Thammarat became the important centre of Theravada Buddhism, both in the religious and art aspects. Nakhon Si Thammarat had also a strong influence on Sukhothai Kingdom regarding Theravada Buddhism as well as the architectural style of the stupas. The sacredness and significance of the Buddha’s relics believed to have been enshrined in the stupa has made the place an important place of worship and pilgrimage site since ancient times.

Nowadays, the temple is still a centre of Buddhist traditions because of the continuity of a special worship festival “Hae Pha Khuen That”, carrying Phra Bot, the Buddhist painted robe to wrap around the bell-shaped body of the stupa. The long procession of people holding the incredibly long yellow robes is one of the most spectacular and unique living religious activities of the world.

**Conclusion**

As seen from various examples, the Outstanding Universal Value of Buddhist Heritage in Southeast Asia can be summarized as follows:

(i) Human creative genius: originated from the adoption of foreign influences via religious mission, from which distinguished styles evolved based on each specific cultural identity, as well as great faith in Buddhism that inspired the art creation, which was considered a form of merit making and dedication to Buddhism.

(ii) Interchange of culture: which should include both the giver and adopter. Communications and contacts which have been going on since ancient times between various places in the region must have naturally brought about cultural interchanges in the aspects of religion, art, architecture, or intangible cultural heritage such as traditional practices and beliefs, thus both sides influenced each other rather than one side being a prototype for the other.

(iii) Ancient lands or kingdoms, although situated in the same region or in close vicinity, having the same religious belief, could have cultural differences which have manifested in cultural heritage of various identities and styles, each style
representing each group of people and each date of creation. This is the testimony of cultural diversity.

(iv) Buddhist architectural heritage of different periods and cultures has its own uniqueness and identity, from which examples of architectural masterpieces could be distinguished as important representatives of various architectural styles.

(v) The relationship between the temple and the community is apparent through the characteristics of settlement. Religious place is spiritual centre, which could have certain administrative or political implications, for instance, the temple that is situated in the centre of urban community, or the temple which is situated far away on the mountain amongst natural setting, emphasizing sacredness in terms of cultural landscape.

(vi) Every site is relatable to the history of Buddhist propagation in different periods of time.