

## **The Third Buddhist Council, its historical significance and impact on southeast Asia**

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**Abstract:** The Third Buddhist Council, held in the 3rd century BCE under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka, marked a significant moment in the history of Buddhism. The council, convened in **Pataliputra (modern-day Patna)**, aimed to address doctrinal discrepancies within the Buddhist community and ensure the purity of the Buddha's teachings. Led by the monk **Moggaliputta Tissa**, the council clarified and codified the **Buddhist scriptures** and established a unified standard for the Sangha, resolving internal disputes. One of the most lasting outcomes of the council was the **missionary work** initiated by Ashoka, who sent Buddhist emissaries to various regions, notably to **Southeast Asia**, to propagate the teachings of the Buddha.

The council's influence on **Southeast Asia** was profound, shaping the region's **cultural and religious landscape** for centuries. Buddhism, especially **Theravada**, began to take root in countries such as **Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia**, where it became integrated into local customs, beliefs, and political structures. The introduction of **Buddhist monasticism**, local adaptations of Buddhist teachings, and the fostering of **cultural exchange** between India and Southeast Asia were key developments. This paper explores the historical significance of the Third Buddhist Council and its lasting impact on the spread and institutionalization of Buddhism across Southeast Asia, highlighting the council's role in shaping the **doctrinal and cultural** aspects of Buddhism in the region.

**Keywords**

**Third Buddhist Council, historical significance, impact, southeast Asia, moggaliputta tissa, Theravada, pataliputra.**

**Introduction:**

The Third Buddhist Council, convened in the 3rd century BCE under the patronage of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, represents a crucial turning point in the history of Buddhism. Held in Pataliputra (modern-day Patna), the council aimed to address doctrinal disputes and refine the teachings of the Buddha to ensure their authenticity and unity. This council not only sought to preserve the purity of the Buddhist doctrine but also marked the official establishment of a unified religious framework that would shape the future of Buddhism. Under the leadership of the monk Moggaliputta Tissa, the council worked to eliminate heresies within the Buddhist

community, resulting in a more cohesive and standardized interpretation of the Buddha's teachings. The council's primary achievement was the reinforcement of the canonical texts and the promotion of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, which offered a detailed philosophical analysis of the Buddha's teachings. However, the impact of the Third Buddhist Council extended far beyond doctrinal matters. King Ashoka's commitment to spreading Buddhism as a state religion resulted in sending missionaries to various regions, including Southeast Asia, which significantly contributed to the widespread dissemination of Buddhism across the region.

The Third Buddhist Council's influence on Southeast Asia cannot be overstated. It marked the beginning of the region's engagement with Buddhist thought, philosophy, and practices, and established Buddhism as a major spiritual and cultural force. Countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos received the teachings of Buddhism, leading to the establishment of Buddhist institutions and the integration of Buddhist values into the local cultures. Over time, the ideals and practices refined at the council became deeply rooted in Southeast Asian societies, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to shape the region today.

#### [Background of the Third Buddhist Council:](#)

The Third Buddhist Council, held in the 3rd century BCE, was a significant event in the history of Buddhism. It took place during the reign of Emperor Ashoka, one of the most influential figures in Buddhist history. Ashoka, initially a conqueror, underwent a dramatic transformation after the Kalinga War, which led to his conversion to Buddhism. Motivated by his newfound faith, he sought to consolidate and propagate the teachings of the Buddha not only within his empire but also throughout the world.

#### ***Context and Leadership:***

The Third Buddhist Council was convened in **Pataliputra** (modern-day Patna) during the reign of **King Ashoka** in the 3rd century BCE. Ashoka, one of the greatest emperors of ancient India, played a pivotal role in both the political and religious landscape of the time. After his conversion to Buddhism, which followed the traumatic aftermath of the Kalinga War, Ashoka embraced the Buddhist principles of non-violence, compassion, and dharma (moral law). Seeking to unify and propagate Buddhism across his vast empire, Ashoka organized the Third Council to address growing concerns within the Buddhist monastic community and ensure the doctrinal purity of the religion. Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism was instrumental in establishing it as the state religion of the Maurya Empire, and his support for the council reflected his deep commitment to preserving the teachings of the Buddha. The emperor not only provided the necessary resources for the gathering but also took active steps to support the spread of Buddhism beyond India's borders, particularly to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia.

**Key Figure: Moggaliputta Tissa:**

The council was presided over by **Moggaliputta Tissa**, a prominent and respected monk who was chosen for his deep knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and his ability to lead the Sangha (Buddhist monastic community). Tissa was tasked with resolving internal conflicts and doctrinal disputes that had begun to fragment the Buddhist community. At the time of the council, there were various sects and schools of thought, each claiming different interpretations of the Buddha's teachings, leading to growing confusion and division within the Sangha. Moggaliputta Tissa's role was critical in guiding the council towards a unified understanding of Buddhist doctrine. He is best known for his efforts in promoting the **Theravada school** of Buddhism, which emphasized adherence to the original teachings of the Buddha and the Pali Canon. Tissa's leadership helped ensure that the council focused on doctrinal purity and the preservation of the Buddha's teachings in their most authentic form.

**Objective:**

The primary objective of the Third Buddhist Council was to address and resolve the doctrinal controversies and heresies that had arisen within the Buddhist community. The council sought to clarify and codify the core teachings of the Buddha, ensuring that all interpretations remained consistent with the original scriptures. As the council convened, it became clear that the Buddhist monastic community needed a standardized approach to understanding the Buddha's teachings, particularly in terms of discipline, ethical conduct, and meditation practice. The council's work was crucial in preserving the **Sangha's** unity and preventing further sectarian divisions. Moggaliputta Tissa, alongside the monks at the council, worked to identify and expel those monks who were deemed to be spreading erroneous teachings. Additionally, the council played a key role in the **finalization of the Abhidhamma Pitaka**, a text that systematized Buddhist philosophy and offered in-depth analysis of the Buddha's doctrines, further enhancing the coherence of the Buddhist tradition.

**Historical Significance:**

The Third Buddhist Council, convened in the 3rd century BCE, holds immense historical significance not only for Buddhism but also for the broader cultural and religious landscape of Asia. Under the patronage of Emperor **Ashoka**, this council played a pivotal role in shaping the future of Buddhism, ensuring its doctrinal integrity and facilitating its spread across regions far beyond India.

**Doctrinal Standardization and Unity:**

One of the council's most important achievements was the **standardization of Buddhist doctrine**. During the centuries following the Buddha's death, various interpretations and sects had emerged, leading to fragmentation within the Buddhist community. The Third Council sought to address these discrepancies by reaffirming the original teachings of the Buddha and eliminating any practices or beliefs deemed inconsistent with the Pali Canon. This doctrinal purification helped to maintain the

unity of the Sangha, ensuring that the Buddha's message remained clear, authentic, and unaltered. Under the leadership of **Moggaliputta Tissa**, the council resolved internal disputes and firmly established the **Theravada** tradition as the orthodox school of Buddhism. The council not only preserved the integrity of Buddhist teachings but also helped clarify essential aspects of the religion, particularly its ethics, monastic discipline, and philosophy. The **Abhidhamma Pitaka**, a critical text elaborating on Buddhist metaphysics and ethics, was emphasized and further codified during the council, laying the foundation for systematic Buddhist thought.

### ***Ashoka's Role in the Spread of Buddhism:***

The Third Buddhist Council is also historically significant for the role it played in the **spread of Buddhism** across Asia. Emperor Ashoka, who had already embraced Buddhism following the Kalinga War, used the council as a springboard for his missionary activities. He sent Buddhist missionaries to several regions, including **Sri Lanka**, Southeast Asia, **Central Asia**, and even **the Mediterranean**. This missionary work not only spread Buddhist teachings but also established the religion as a major cultural and spiritual force in these regions. One of the most significant outcomes of this missionary activity was the conversion of **King Devanampiya Tissa** of Sri Lanka to Buddhism, which established the foundation for Theravada Buddhism in the island nation. Ashoka's influence also extended to Southeast Asia, where Buddhist institutions and practices were introduced, profoundly shaping the spiritual and cultural development of countries like **Thailand**, **Myanmar**, **Cambodia**, and **Laos**. As a result, the Third Buddhist Council helped lay the groundwork for Buddhism to become an enduring and unifying force in these regions.

### ***Long-Term Cultural and Political Impact:***

The council's impact was not confined to doctrinal matters; it also had long-lasting political and cultural consequences. Ashoka's promotion of Buddhism as a state religion contributed to the widespread adoption of Buddhist principles of non-violence, compassion, and ethical governance. His model of governance, inspired by Buddhist ideals, influenced rulers in the subsequent centuries, leading to the integration of Buddhist values into the political and cultural systems of many Asian countries. Moreover, the council's decision to send missionaries to Southeast Asia and beyond helped establish Buddhism as a global religion. Over time, Buddhism became a major force in shaping the art, architecture, literature, and social systems of countries in South and Southeast Asia. Buddhist monasteries became centers of learning and cultural exchange, fostering intellectual and artistic advancements.

### ***Impact on Southeast Asia:***

The Third Buddhist Council, held in the 3rd century BCE under the patronage of King Ashoka, had a profound and lasting impact on the spread and establishment of Buddhism in **Southeast Asia**. Ashoka's decision to send Buddhist missionaries to

foreign lands following the council laid the foundation for the widespread adoption of Buddhism in the region. The subsequent influence of Buddhism extended far beyond religious practice, touching nearly every aspect of Southeast Asian culture, including art, architecture, politics, and education.

### ***Spread of Buddhism:***

The Third Buddhist Council marked the beginning of a significant era in the **expansion of Buddhism** from India to Southeast Asia. Following the council, **King Ashoka** sent missionaries to various regions, including **Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos**, helping to establish Buddhism as a dominant religion in these areas. Ashoka's direct involvement in promoting the faith through missionary work ensured that Buddhism would take root in these cultures, influencing their spiritual and social structures for centuries. Perhaps one of the most notable missions was to Sri Lanka, where **King Devanampiya Tissa** of Sri Lanka was converted to Buddhism, leading to the establishment of Theravada Buddhism on the island. From Sri Lanka, Buddhism gradually spread to the Southeast Asian mainland, with countries such as **Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Cambodia** adopting Buddhism as the state religion. In these countries, the teachings of the Buddha took on unique local forms, merging with indigenous traditions and local cultures.

### ***Cultural Exchange:***

The **Third Buddhist Council** was not only a religious milestone but also a catalyst for deep **cultural exchange** between India and Southeast Asia. As Buddhist missionaries traveled to the region, they brought with them not only spiritual teachings but also Indian cultural practices, art, and architecture. The spread of Buddhist ideas had a profound influence on the development of Southeast Asian art, particularly in terms of **sculpture, temple architecture, and religious iconography**. Buddhist art in Southeast Asia became heavily inspired by Indian styles, and the region saw the construction of monumental Buddhist structures such as stupas and temples. This fusion of Indian architectural concepts with local traditions gave rise to a unique Southeast Asian style of Buddhist architecture, visible in sites like **Ankor Wat** in Cambodia and the **Shwedagon Pagoda** in Myanmar. Additionally, the practice of creating intricate **Buddha statues** and the development of **fresco paintings** depicting the life of the Buddha became central to Southeast Asian Buddhist art. The **philosophical exchange** was also significant. The influence of Buddhist thought helped shape the intellectual landscape of Southeast Asia. Buddhist principles of compassion, ethics, and mindfulness began to shape local philosophical schools, influencing not only religious practices but also social customs and daily life.

### ***Institutionalization of Buddhism:***

One of the most enduring impacts of the Third Buddhist Council was the **institutionalization of Buddhism** in Southeast Asia. As Buddhism spread, it became deeply integrated into the political and cultural fabric of many Southeast Asian kingdoms. **Royal patronage** played a central role in the establishment of Buddhism as the state religion in these regions. Kings and rulers in Southeast Asia, inspired by Ashoka's example, adopted Buddhism as the official religion of their courts, and in doing so, they helped establish its dominance over competing faiths. In countries like **Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand**, Buddhism became not just a spiritual practice but a cornerstone of governance and law. **Buddhist monasteries** became centers of learning, while the study of Buddhist philosophy and scriptures became an essential part of the education system. Buddhist monks played a crucial role in society, often serving as advisors to kings and helping to preserve religious and cultural traditions. The institutionalization of Buddhism also fostered the development of **Buddhist kingdoms** and **sacred sites**, such as temples and monasteries, which continue to serve as focal points of religious and social life in the region today. In addition to being a spiritual force, Buddhism became a unifying element that helped bring together diverse ethnic groups, especially in the royal courts where Buddhism provided a common cultural and religious foundation.

### ***Doctrinal and Cultural Influences:***

The Third Buddhist Council was instrumental in shaping the doctrinal landscape of Buddhism, particularly in Southeast Asia, where its influence became deeply embedded in both religious practices and cultural systems. The refinement of Buddhist teachings during the council helped solidify the framework of **Theravada Buddhism**, and its interactions with local belief systems in Southeast Asia created a unique blend of practices that persist today.

### ***Theravada Buddhism:***

The Third Buddhist Council, under the leadership of **Moggaliputta Tissa**, sought to purify the teachings of the Buddha and preserve the authenticity of the scriptures, specifically the **Pali Canon**. This doctrinal standardization became the cornerstone of **Theravada Buddhism**, which emphasizes the original teachings of the Buddha and the monastic lifestyle outlined in the **Vinaya Pitaka**. Theravada, meaning "Teaching of the Elders," focused on individual enlightenment through meditation, ethical conduct, and wisdom. In Southeast Asia, this form of Buddhism was particularly influential, as it was adopted as the state religion in countries like **Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos**. The teachings and practices codified during the Third Buddhist Council became central to the religious and social fabric of these countries. Over time, **Theravada Buddhism** became synonymous with the region, providing both spiritual guidance and social cohesion. The emphasis on the **monastic path** and the preservation of the **Sutras** and **Vinaya** underpinned

the teachings of Theravada monks, who played a pivotal role in maintaining doctrinal purity and guiding laypeople in their spiritual practices. As a result, Theravada Buddhism laid the foundation for the enduring Buddhist traditions in Southeast Asia, influencing everything from meditation practices to the organization of monastic life.

### ***Integration with Local Beliefs:***

While the Third Buddhist Council helped to refine and standardize Buddhist doctrine, the spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia was not a process of mere imposition; rather, it was marked by significant **integration with local beliefs**. Southeast Asia was home to various indigenous animistic and spirit-worshipping traditions, which often intertwined with Buddhist practices to create a unique blend of religious expression. In many Southeast Asian societies, Buddhism was not simply adopted as a foreign belief system but was rather **syncretized with existing local practices**. Elements of animism, ancestor worship, and the veneration of local spirits were incorporated into Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. For example, in **Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos**, Buddhist monks would perform ceremonies to appease local spirits or spirits of the ancestors, often in conjunction with Buddhist rites. These practices were seen as a way of ensuring the protection and well-being of individuals and communities while still adhering to the core teachings of Buddhism. The fusion of **Buddhist cosmology** with local belief systems also led to the incorporation of deities and mythological figures into Southeast Asian Buddhism. In some cases, **Buddhist imagery** and narratives were adapted to fit local mythological frameworks, allowing Buddhism to resonate more deeply with the indigenous populace. This integration allowed Buddhism to become a living and evolving religion, deeply rooted in the daily lives of the people while preserving its core teachings.

### ***Buddhist Monastic Systems:***

Another profound influence of the Third Buddhist Council on Southeast Asia was the establishment of **Buddhist monastic systems**. The council's emphasis on monastic discipline, particularly in the form of the **Vinaya** (monastic code), led to the formation of structured monastic communities in Southeast Asia. Monks played an essential role not only in preserving and transmitting Buddhist teachings but also in the social and cultural life of their communities. In Southeast Asia, the **monastic system** became the primary means of spiritual training and education. Monasteries were often the centers of religious and cultural life, providing a place for meditation, study, and ritual. The monks, who followed the strict monastic code, were highly respected in society, and their teachings shaped the moral and ethical framework of their communities. The role of monks in **teaching and guiding** the lay population was also significant. Monks provided education to children, promoted ethical behavior, and were instrumental in organizing religious festivals, pilgrimages, and

ceremonies. Through the monastic system, Buddhism became deeply ingrained in the daily lives of Southeast Asian societies, providing spiritual guidance and promoting social harmony.

Additionally, **monastic schools** became centers of intellectual activity, where Buddhist philosophy, meditation techniques, and scriptures were studied and preserved. The establishment of these institutions allowed for the continuous development of Buddhist thought and practice in Southeast Asia, ensuring that the teachings refined at the Third Buddhist Council were passed down through generations.

### **Conclusion:**

The Third Buddhist Council, convened in the 3rd century BCE under the patronage of **King Ashoka**, was a defining moment in the history of Buddhism. Its historical significance lies in its role in purifying the teachings of the Buddha, resolving doctrinal disputes, and organizing the Buddhist community to preserve the authentic scriptures. The council was instrumental in shaping the trajectory of Buddhism as it moved beyond India, leading to the spread of the faith across **Southeast Asia** and establishing a lasting cultural and spiritual presence in the region. The most immediate impact of the Third Buddhist Council was the **codification of Buddhist teachings**. Under the leadership of **Moggaliputta Tissa**, the council addressed controversies within the Sangha and solidified the **Pali Canon** as the authoritative scripture. This doctrinal clarification helped establish a unified vision of Buddhism, with a focus on the **Vinaya** (monastic code) and the **Sutras**, which would serve as the foundation for the practice of **Theravada Buddhism** in Southeast Asia. As Buddhism expanded beyond India, the teachings refined at the council became the core of Buddhist practice in countries such as **Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos**.

The **spread of Buddhism** from India to Southeast Asia can be seen as a direct result of the Third Buddhist Council. King Ashoka's mission to send missionaries to foreign lands allowed Buddhism to become deeply embedded in the cultural and political systems of Southeast Asia. The faith was not only adopted by the ruling monarchs but also integrated into the fabric of local cultures. The syncretism of Buddhism with **animistic traditions** and indigenous beliefs resulted in unique practices that reflected the cultural diversity of Southeast Asia while preserving the essential Buddhist teachings. Moreover, the influence of the Third Buddhist Council on the **Buddhist monastic system** helped establish a strong institutional foundation for Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Monasteries became centers of religious life, education, and social guidance. Buddhist monks, with their role as both spiritual leaders and educators, played a key role in shaping the ethical and moral framework of their societies.

In conclusion, the Third Buddhist Council was a pivotal event that not only codified and refined Buddhist teachings but also facilitated the spread of Buddhism to Southeast Asia. Its influence continues to resonate in the region today, where Buddhism remains a central part of the cultural, spiritual, and social landscape. Through its missionary efforts, integration with local traditions, and establishment of monastic systems, the Third Buddhist Council helped shape the development of Buddhism in Southeast Asia, ensuring its preservation and growth for centuries to come.

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