



Models Of Kingship And Buddhist Ideals: Dharma-Rāja Concepts In Indian And Vietnamese Contexts

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Abstract: This study employs historical-comparative analysis to examine the concept of the dharma-rāja - the righteous Buddhist king - across Indian and Vietnamese contexts, tracing the trajectories of its reception, adaptation, and transformation from ancient to contemporary times. Taking the Emperor Aśoka (r. 268–232 BCE) as the paradigmatic model of Buddhist kingship in the Indian tradition, the study investigates how the dharma-rāja ideal - characterized by the subordination of political power to moral authority, the propagation of the Dharma as an instrument of governance, and the cultivation of the king's personal virtue as the foundation of legitimate rule - was transmitted into Vietnamese political and religious culture across successive dynastic periods. Through comparative analysis of Aśokan rock edicts, Pāli canonical texts, and Vietnamese royal chronicles, inscriptions, and Buddhist literary sources spanning the Lý (1009–1225), Trần (1225–1400), Lê (1428–1788), Nguyễn (1802–1945), and postcolonial periods, the study identifies deep structural convergences and significant contextual divergences in the translation of the dharma-rāja ideal across these two civilizational contexts. The study argues that the persistent tension between moral authority and political power constitutes the defining problematic of Buddhist kingship in both traditions, and that this tension has been negotiated through historically specific institutional, ritual, and literary strategies that illuminate the creative adaptability of Buddhist political thought.

Keywords: dharma-rāja, Buddhist kingship, Aśoka, Vietnamese Buddhism, Lý dynasty, Trần dynasty, moral authority, political power, cakkavatti

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the most enduring and consequential contributions of Buddhism to the political imagination of Asia is the concept of the dharma-rāja - the righteous king whose authority derives not from conquest or divine lineage alone but from his embodiment of the Dharma, the moral and cosmic law that sustains both the natural order and the social fabric. From the Mauryan Empire of ancient India to the royal courts of medieval Southeast Asia, the ideal of the Buddhist king as a moral sovereign has profoundly shaped the political cultures of nearly every society into which Buddhism has been transmitted (Tambiah, 1976; Collins, 1998).

No figure has done more to define and disseminate this ideal than the Emperor Aśoka (r. 268–232 BCE), the third ruler of the Maurya dynasty, whose conversion to Buddhism following the devastation of the Kalinga war and whose subsequent propagation of a Dharma-based model of imperial governance became one of the most influential political acts in the history of Asia. Aśoka's rock and

pillar edicts - the earliest substantial body of writing in the Indian subcontinent - articulate a vision of kingship grounded in non-violence (ahimsā), compassionate concern for all beings, and the promotion of the Dharma as a universal principle of right conduct. This vision, transmitted through Buddhist missionaries, literary texts, and the prestige of the Aśokan model itself, became the template against which subsequent Buddhist rulers across Asia measured and legitimated their own authority.

Vietnam presents a particularly rich and underexplored case study in the reception and transformation of the dharma-rāja ideal. Situated at the intersection of Indian and Chinese civilizational influences, Vietnam offers a site at which the Aśokan model of Buddhist kingship underwent a series of creative negotiations with Confucian political philosophy, indigenous religious traditions, and the imperatives of national sovereignty and anti-colonial resistance. The Lý and Trần dynasties in particular - often identified as the golden age of Vietnamese Buddhism - produced royal figures and monastic institutions that engaged the dharma-rāja ideal with philosophical depth and political sophistication that deserves sustained scholarly attention.

Despite the richness of this material, comparative studies of Buddhist kingship that bring Indian and Vietnamese contexts into sustained dialogue remain relatively rare. Studies of Aśoka's political legacy (Thapar, 1961; Strong, 1983; Pollock, 2006) and studies of Vietnamese Buddhist history (Nguyen, 1997; Nguyen Lang, 2000; Taylor, 1983) have largely proceeded in parallel. This study bridges this gap through historical-comparative analysis guided by the question: How was the dharma-rāja ideal as exemplified by Aśoka received, adapted, and transformed in Vietnamese Buddhist and political culture from ancient to contemporary times, and what does this trajectory reveal about the enduring tension between moral authority and political power in Buddhist political thought?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Dharma-rāja Ideal in Indian Buddhist Political Thought

The concept of the dharma-rāja has its roots in both pre-Buddhist Indian political thought and the earliest strata of Pāli canonical literature. In the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, the Buddha offers a mythological account of the origin of kingship in which the first king - the Mahāsammata, the “Great Elect” - is chosen by the community to maintain social order. This account grounds the legitimacy of kingship in popular consent and makes the king's moral function the criterion of his authority. A king who fails in this moral function loses his legitimation (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012).

The ideal of the cakkavatti - the “wheel-turning monarch” who rules through the power of righteousness - elaborates the dharma-rāja concept in explicitly cosmological terms. The cakkavatti is presented as the political counterpart of the Buddha: as the Buddha turns the wheel of Dharma in the spiritual domain, the cakkavatti turns it in the political domain. This symbiotic relationship between political and religious authority - the “two wheels of Dharma” - is already fully present in the Pāli canonical literature (Tambiah, 1976; Collins, 1998).

B. Aśoka as the Paradigmatic Dharma-rāja

Emperor Aśoka occupies a unique position in the history of Buddhist political thought as the historical ruler whose reign most fully embodied the dharma-rāja ideal. His transformation from a king who felt deep remorse at the destruction of the Kalinga war, to a ruler who renounced military expansion and devoted his energies to moral governance, became one of the foundational narratives of Buddhist political thought. His rock and pillar edicts articulate a vision of governance grounded in ahimsā, moral concern for all beings (sarvaprājā), and the promotion of dhamma-vijaya - conquest through Dharma rather than military force (Strong, 1983).

Scholars have debated the precise nature of Aśoka's conversion and the relationship between his personal faith and his political program (Thapar, 1961; Gombrich, 1988). What is beyond dispute is that Aśoka established an enduring template: the Buddhist king as a moral agent whose authority derives from his embodiment of Dharmic values, whose legitimacy is expressed through acts of generosity (dāna) and protection (abhaya), and whose governance aspires to the welfare of all beings. This image was transmitted through the Aśokāvadāna and Pāli Mahāvamsa, transforming the historical Aśoka into a legendary figure of paradigmatic moral authority.

C. Buddhist Kingship in Vietnamese Historical Scholarship

The study of Buddhist kingship in Vietnam has been approached from several scholarly perspectives. Cuong Tu Nguyen (1997) provides the most comprehensive account in English of Zen in medieval Vietnam, including detailed analysis of the relationship between Buddhist institutions and royal authority during the Lý and Trần dynasties. Taylor (1983) examines the birth of Vietnam as a political

entity and the role of Buddhist institutions in sustaining cultural identity under Chinese domination. Nguyen Lang (2000) offers an extensive study of Vietnamese Buddhist history, documenting the institutional and doctrinal dimensions of royal patronage across dynastic periods.

What the existing literature has not yet provided is a systematic comparative analysis of Vietnamese Buddhist kingship against the backdrop of the Aśokan dharma-rāja model - an analysis that would illuminate both the depth of Indian influence on Vietnamese Buddhist political thought and the distinctive ways in which Vietnamese rulers adapted this influence to meet local political, cultural, and religious imperatives. This study fills that gap.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by a theoretical framework integrating three analytical perspectives: (1) Tambiah's (1976) model of the “galactic polity” and the symbiotic relationship between Buddhist kingship and Saṅgha; (2) Pollock's (2006) concept of the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” and the role of cosmopolitan literary culture in transmitting and adapting political ideals across civilizational boundaries; and (3) the concept of “Buddhist political legitimation”- the complex of textual, ritual, architectural, and institutional strategies through which Buddhist rulers have grounded their authority in Dharmic principles.

Together, these frameworks support the study's central analytical distinction: the tension between moral authority and political power that constitutes the defining problematic of dharma-rāja kingship. This tension - between the king as an embodiment of Dharmic virtue whose authority is grounded in personal moral cultivation, and the king as a political and military sovereign whose authority is grounded in the effective exercise of power - is never definitively resolved in either tradition. Rather, it is continuously negotiated through the historically specific strategies this study examines.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employs historical-comparative analysis as its primary methodological framework. Historical-comparative analysis, as elaborated by Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003), involves the systematic comparison of historical cases - here, Indian and Vietnamese Buddhist kingship - with the aim of identifying both structural patterns that recur across cases and the specific mechanisms through which these patterns are produced and transformed in different historical contexts. The comparative dimension operates at two levels: macro-level comparison of institutional, ritual, and literary structures; and micro-level examination of specific historical cases that illuminate the mechanisms of negotiation between moral authority and political power.

B. Primary Sources

Primary sources analyzed include three categories. First, Indian Buddhist sources: Aśoka's Major and Minor Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts (Dhammika, 1993; Hultzsch, 1925); Pāli canonical texts of the Dīgha Nikāya and Aṅguttara Nikāya (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012); and the Sanskrit Aśokāvadāna and Pāli Mahāvamsa (Strong, 1983; Geiger, 1912). Second, Vietnamese Buddhist and historical sources: the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (Complete Annals of Đại Việt); royal inscriptions and edicts from the Lý and Trần periods; the *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* (Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden); and the works of Trần Nhân Tông, including the *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo Phú* (Nguyen, 1997; Nguyen Lang, 2000). Third, secondary scholarly literature in English, Vietnamese, French, and Japanese that contextualizes these primary sources.

V. FINDINGS I: AŚOKA AND THE DHARMA-RĀJA IDEAL IN INDIAN BUDDHISM

A. Aśoka's Edicts and the Architecture of Righteous Governance

Aśoka's edicts articulate a coherent vision of Buddhist kingship analyzable under four principal headings. First, the subordination of military power to moral authority: in Major Rock Edict XIII, Aśoka explicitly renounces military conquest (dig-vijaya) in favor of dhamma-vijaya - conquest through Dharma, through moral example and persuasion rather than force. He expresses remorse for the suffering caused by the Kalinga war and commits to replacing the “sound of the drum” (bherighoṣa) with the “sound of the Dharma” (dhammaghoṣa).¹

¹ Major Rock Edict XIII, trans. Dhammika (1993, pp. 30–31). The Brāhmī original reads: hevaṃ vijite ca vijayaṃ mañate dhammavijayoti.

Second, the cultivation of royal virtue as the foundation of legitimate governance. Throughout the edicts, Aśoka presents his own moral cultivation - his practice of dhamma, his concern for the welfare

of all beings, his personal visits to attend to the needs of his subjects - not merely as personal piety but as political practice. The king's virtue is not separate from his governance; it is governance, in the sense that a virtuous king creates a moral atmosphere in which righteous conduct becomes possible for his subjects.

Third, the symbiotic relationship between royal authority and the Saṅgha. Aśoka's edicts document extensive material patronage of the Buddhist monastic community and present the king as a fellow practitioner whose authority is partly derived from his engagement with the Dharmic path. The king and the Saṅgha are not simply patron and client; they are fellow participants in the Dharmic project. Fourth, the universalism of the Dharmic vision: Aśoka's Dharma - characterized by *ahimsā*, respect for elders, generosity, and compassion for all living beings - is presented as a universal moral code accessible to and binding upon all human beings.

B. The Cakkavatti Ideal and the Tension Between Moral Authority and Political Power

The canonical figure of the cakkavatti makes explicit the fundamental tension that Aśoka's historical reign embodied but could not fully resolve: the tension between the king as moral sovereign and the king as political sovereign. In the Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta, the decline of the cakkavatti's kingdom is traced directly to his failure of moral governance: when the king fails to distribute wealth equitably, poverty arises; poverty gives rise to theft; theft to violence; violence to the progressive deterioration of the moral and physical world (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2012). The political is grounded in the moral: unjust governance produces cosmic disorder.

Yet the cakkavatti is also a conqueror whose wheel of gold rolls across the world. This dominion is achieved through moral persuasion rather than force, but it remains dominion - requiring institutions, armies, and administrative structures that inevitably exceed the purely moral domain. The tension between the moral ideal and the political reality - between the cakkavatti as a Dharmic figure and the cakkavatti as an imperial ruler - is structural rather than incidental, and it is this structural tension that Buddhist kingship traditions across Asia have continuously sought to negotiate.

VI. FINDINGS II: THE DHARMA-RĀJA IDEAL IN VIETNAMESE POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS HISTORY

A. Early Reception Under Chinese Domination (111 BCE–939 CE)

The earliest reception of Buddhist political ideas in Vietnam occurred during the long period of Chinese administration, when Buddhist monasteries served not only as religious institutions but as centers of cultural resistance and Vietnamese identity formation. The Zen master Mâu Tử, whose *Lý Hoặc Luận* composed around 200 CE represents one of the earliest Vietnamese Buddhist texts, argued for the compatibility of Buddhist and Confucian ethics in terms that anticipate the Dharmic legitimization strategies of later Vietnamese Buddhist rulers.

The most significant proto-dharma-rāja figure of this early period is Lý Bôn (reigned 544–548 CE), who led a revolt against Chinese rule, established the short-lived kingdom of Vạn Xuân, and patronized Buddhist institutions in ways that explicitly invoked Dharmic authority. The construction of a Buddhist temple as the ceremonial center of his court established a pattern that would be elaborated more fully by later Vietnamese rulers (Nguyen, 1997).

B. The Lý Dynasty (1009–1225): The Monk-King Synthesis

The Lý dynasty represents the period of most intensive and explicit engagement with the dharma-rāja ideal in Vietnamese history. Lý Thái Tổ's accession to power was framed in Dharmic terms from its inception: according to the *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* and the dynastic chronicles, he received the support and prophecy of the Zen master Vạn Hạnh, whose endorsement conferred Dharmic legitimacy on the new dynasty (Nguyen, 1997). The famous *Chiếu Dời Đô* (Edict on Moving the Capital, 1010) is saturated with Dharmic political language, presenting the king as a ruler motivated by concern for the welfare of all people - directly echoing Aśokan political language.

The Lý kings' patronage of Buddhism was extensive and institutionally sophisticated. Several Lý kings took Buddhist ordination or received the five precepts from eminent monks, blurring the boundary between the royal and monastic domains in a way that directly echoes Aśoka's self-presentation as a lay practitioner deeply engaged with the Dharmic path. The result was what scholars have called a “monk-king synthesis” - a model of Buddhist sovereignty in which the king's authority was simultaneously political and Dharmic (Nguyen Lang, 2000).

C. The Trần Dynasty (1225–1400): The Bodhisattva King and the Trúc Lâm Tradition

The Trần dynasty carried the dharma-rāja ideal to its most philosophically sophisticated expression in Vietnamese history through Trần Nhân Tông (reigned 1278–1293). Having successfully defended Vietnam against two Mongol invasions, he abdicated the throne, took full monastic ordination, and founded the distinctively Vietnamese Trúc Lâm (Bamboo Grove) school of Zen Buddhism. Trần Nhân Tông is the paradigmatic Vietnamese dharma-rāja figure: a king who combined military and political sovereignty with deep personal Buddhist practice, and who ultimately resolved the tension between political power and moral authority by renouncing the former to pursue the latter with complete devotion.

His literary work, particularly the *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo Phú*, articulates a vision of Dharmic life that is explicitly non-dualistic: “The Buddha is in the mind; seek not outside” (Phật tại tâm; mặc vị ngoại cầu) (Nguyen, 1997, p. 183). This interiorization of the dharma-rāja ideal - the movement from external Dharmic performance to internal Dharmic cultivation as the ground of royal authority - represents a significant development of the Aśokan model in the Vietnamese context. The Trần dynasty also elaborated the Dharmic legitimation of royal authority through the Mahāyāna concept of the bodhisattva king - a distinctly Vietnamese development absent from the Theravāda-oriented Aśokan model.

D. Lê and Nguyễn Periods: Confucianization and Syncretic Legitimation

The Lê dynasty (1428–1788), founded following the expulsion of the Ming Chinese occupation, marked a significant shift toward Confucian political philosophy and a corresponding marginalization of explicitly Buddhist models of kingship. The Confucian framework of governance progressively displaced the Buddhist framework as the dominant idiom of royal legitimation, though Buddhist patronage was retained as one among several strategies (Woodside, 2006). The Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945) navigated a complex negotiation between Confucian, Buddhist, and later French colonial frameworks, producing a syncretic political culture in which Buddhist and Confucian Dharmic frameworks were simultaneously invoked and never fully reconciled (Nguyen Lang, 2000).

E. The Contemporary Period: Buddhist Moral Authority and Political Power

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the dharma-rāja ideal has undergone a complex transformation in Vietnam's political culture. The 1963 Buddhist crisis, in which the self-immolation of Thích Quảng Đức and broader Buddhist opposition to the Diệm government invoked the moral authority of the Saṅgha against the political power of the state, demonstrated that the structural tension identified in the dharma-rāja tradition remains politically potent today (Topmiller, 2002). Thích Nhất Hạnh's “Engaged Buddhism” explicitly drew on the Buddhist political tradition to articulate a vision of moral authority as a resource for nonviolent resistance to political injustice - a contemporary reexpression of the Aśokan dharma-rāja ideal under modern conditions.

VII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

A. Structural Convergences

The historical-comparative analysis reveals three deep structural convergences between Indian and Vietnamese engagements with the dharma-rāja ideal. First, in both contexts, the king's moral cultivation - his personal practice of generosity (dāna), non-violence (ahiṃsā), and compassionate concern for all beings - is understood as the foundational source of his political authority. The legitimacy of kingship is not exhausted by military power, hereditary succession, or divine mandate; it requires ongoing moral performance.

Second, in both contexts, the relationship between the king and the Saṅgha is understood as mutually constitutive: the king provides material support and political protection to the monastic community, while the monastic community provides ritual legitimation, moral counsel, and spiritual authority. This reciprocal relationship - Tambiah's (1976) “dialectics of kingship and monasticism” - is a structural feature of Buddhist political culture that recurs across Indian and Vietnamese contexts with remarkable consistency.

Third, in both contexts, the tension between moral authority and political power is a permanent and irreducible feature of Buddhist kingship rather than a problem to be solved once and for all. The historical record of both India and Vietnam reveals a continuous negotiation of this tension through historically specific strategies - Aśoka's renunciation of military conquest, Trần Nhân Tông's abdication

and monastic ordination, Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism - that represent different historical solutions to the same structural problematic.

B. Significant Divergences

Alongside these structural convergences, the comparative analysis reveals two significant divergences. The most important doctrinal divergence is the Mahāyāna inflection of the Vietnamese dharma-rāja ideal. Where the Aśokan model draws primarily on Theravāda canonical concepts - the cakkavatti, the seven treasures of the righteous king - Vietnamese Buddhist kingship, particularly in the Lý and Trần periods, draws extensively on Mahāyāna concepts of the bodhisattva and the non-dual nature of wisdom and compassionate action. The figure of the king as bodhisattva has no direct parallel in the Aśokan tradition and represents a distinctively Vietnamese development.

A second significant divergence concerns the role of Confucian political philosophy as a mediating framework in the Vietnamese context. Vietnamese Buddhist kingship was never articulated in a purely Buddhist idiom; it was always negotiated with the vocabulary and values of Confucian political thought. This Confucian-Buddhist synthesis - the synthesis of the dharma-rāja and the Confucian "Son of Heaven" (thiên tử) - produced a distinctive Vietnamese political culture that has no direct parallel in the Indian context.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The findings of this historical-comparative study illuminate several dimensions of the dharma-rāja ideal with significant implications for the study of Buddhist political thought. The most fundamental implication is the demonstration that the dharma-rāja ideal is not a fixed doctrine transported unchanged from India to Vietnam but a dynamic and adaptable framework for negotiating the relationship between moral authority and political power that takes on historically specific forms in each context it enters.

This finding challenges both essentialist accounts of Buddhist political thought, which treat the dharma-rāja ideal as a timeless and context-independent doctrine, and purely constructivist accounts, which treat Buddhist political legitimation as merely a pragmatic rhetorical strategy deployed in the service of power. The historical evidence from both India and Vietnam suggests a more nuanced picture: rulers genuinely engaged with Buddhist Dharmic ideals as frameworks for understanding and performing their political roles, while simultaneously adapting these ideals to the specific constraints and opportunities of their historical situations.

The case of Trần Nhân Tông is particularly illuminating. His resolution of the tension between moral authority and political power through abdication and monastic ordination - having first demonstrated that he could exercise political and military power with distinction - represents the most radical possible engagement with the dharma-rāja ideal: the recognition that the fullest embodiment of Dharmic kingship ultimately requires the relinquishment of kingship itself. This resolution echoes, at a historical distance of fifteen centuries, the logic already present in the Pāli canonical texts: the suggestion that the highest form of Dharmic governance is the governance that transcends the need for governance altogether.

IX. CONCLUSION

This historical-comparative study has examined the reception, adaptation, and transformation of the dharma-rāja ideal - as paradigmatically exemplified by Aśoka - across Vietnamese Buddhist and political culture from the earliest dynastic periods to the contemporary era. The analysis has revealed both deep structural convergences and significant contextual divergences between Indian and Vietnamese engagements with the ideal of righteous Buddhist kingship, illuminating the creative adaptability of Buddhist political thought and the enduring significance of the tension between moral authority and political power.

The most enduring legacy of the dharma-rāja tradition in both India and Vietnam is the insistence that political authority is not self-legitimizing - that the effective exercise of power is not sufficient to establish the moral authority that genuine governance requires, and that this moral authority must be grounded in the ruler's personal engagement with the Dharmic values of compassion, non-violence, generosity, and epistemic humility. In a world where the subordination of moral authority to political power has produced devastating consequences, the Buddhist dharma-rāja tradition offers a sophisticated and historically tested account of the conditions under which political authority can be grounded in moral principle.

Future scholarship might productively extend this comparative analysis to other Southeast Asian Buddhist polities - Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar - in order to map the full spectrum of historical engagements with the dharma-rāja ideal and to extract from this map the deepest insights of the Buddhist political tradition for the contemporary world.

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