

# News from Southeast Asia *continued*

## Esoteric Buddhist networks in Maritime Asia, 7th-13th centuries

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ESOTERIC BUDDHISM – ALSO CALLED *MANTRANAYA* (Method of Mantra) or *Vajrayāna* (Diamond/Thunderbolt Way) – had a tremendous impact on the religious and cultural history of Asia. Esoteric Buddhist traditions were vectors for the circulation of philosophical ideas, cults and ritual technologies, artistic motifs, material culture, and political paradigms. This circulation spanned across Maritime Asia – a vast swathe of maritime, littoral and landmass territory spanning from the Indian subcontinent to East Asia, the geographical fulcrum of which encompasses mainland and insular Southeast Asia.

Perceived as an esoteric orientation within the Mahāyāna or as a self-conscious (Tantric) school, Esoteric Buddhism regarded its path as superior, and in any event faster and easier, than other Buddhist paths; it included an element of initiation, secrecy, transgressive devotional and ritual practice, the use (for both this-worldly and other-worldly purposes) of mantras, magical formulas and diagrams (*maṇḍala*), possession, exorcism, etc. Esoteric Buddhism shared significant common elements with Tantric Śaivism, to the extent that the two religions participated in an interdependence of discourse in the domains of soteriology, ritual, and iconography.

Networks of Buddhist clerics of various ethnicities adhering to esoteric developments begin to emerge in the 7th century in disparate Asian locales, moving along the maritime routes plied since time immemorial by seafaring traders, religious specialists, and pilgrims. The expansion of Esoteric Buddhism was initially driven by a handful of monks – including the famous Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra – endowed with a remarkably cosmopolitan vision and ‘international’ ambitions, who crossed oceans and lands in search of esoteric scriptures in Sanskrit, initiation masters, as well as – perhaps most importantly – royal patrons. Those charismatic

personalities, more often than not associated with a vigorous activity of translation, commentarial work and initiation of pupils, travelled both eastwards and westwards along the sea routes linking the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia, China and Japan. It is probably these networks of monks and their disciples that acquired, transformed, and propagated images, texts and devotional practices associated with esoteric forms of such popular Buddhist divinities as Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, Vajrapāṇi, and Tārā.

In spite of having suffered a sudden downfall in royal support in Tibet, Sri Lanka, Central Java, and China in the middle of the 9th century, Esoteric Buddhism by the 10th century had virtually become identical with Buddhist practice over much of Asia. Having died out in the Indian subcontinent by the late 13th century, it continued to live or even thrive (in its localised instantiations) until the late 15th century in Java and Sumatra, and to the present day in Nepal, Tibet, Bali, and Japan.

Major centres of Esoteric Buddhism were the Northeastern areas of the Indian subcontinent, roughly corresponding to modern Bihar (itself the cradle of Buddhism since the time of the Buddha), West Bengal and Bangladesh. Bihar was the seat of Nālandā, the cultural powerhouse that dictated the predominant religious and aesthetic paradigm in the Buddhist Cosmopolis from the 8th to the 13th century. Other locales that played a role in the formation of Esoteric Buddhism and its overseas expansion are the Western Deccan, Orissa, South India, and Sri Lanka. The last two areas once hosted important lineages of Esoteric Buddhist masters and repositories of Tantras, and acted as hubs for the spread of esoteric traditions and their foundational scriptures to Southeast Asia and beyond. Monks of the calibre of Punyodaya, Amoghavajra and Prajña travelled from China to South India and/or Sri Lanka to get hold of some esoteric texts unavailable elsewhere.

Below: Borobudur (8th-9th century, Central Java).  
Photo: Andrea Acri.

Inset:  
Paths travelled by the monks between India, mainland and insular Southeast Asia, China, and Japan-Korea. Map by Swati Chemburkar and Andrea Acri.

Cutting across the natural boundaries and barriers of continental topography, sea-based routes (the so-called ‘Maritime Silk Roads’) formed a network of conduits that led to the formation of a mediaeval global Buddhist Asia. Those routes played an important role in shaping premodern intra-Asian connectivity, and allowed both regional and cosmopolitan traditions of Esoteric Buddhism to participate in complex circulatory processes involving mercantile, diplomatic, and religious networks moving across the ‘Southern Seas’.

The appreciation of this ‘maritime dimension’ of Esoteric Buddhism reveals the limits of a historiography that is premised on land-based transmission of Buddhism from a South Asian ‘homeland’ across the Eurasian continent; furthermore, it advances an alternative historical narrative that overturns the perception regarding Southeast and East Asia as ‘peripheries’ that were mere consumers rather than generators of Esoteric Buddhism. Indeed, cults were transmitted from multiple centres across a much wider world of Buddhist cultural interchange than is usually assumed at present, and a strong point can be made for the re-evaluation of the creative and transformative force of (South)East Asian agents in the dissemination of Esoteric Buddhism across Asia.

Indeed Southeast Asia – and large areas of what are now the Malay peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago in particular – played an important, Asia-wide role as both crossroads and termini of (Esoteric) Buddhist contacts. The mention of pilgrims coming from Gurjaradeśa (Gujarat?) in a Śaileन्द्रa royal inscription from Central Java; the existence of a replica of the Sinhala monastic complex of Abhayagiri in the same locale, and of monasteries for monks and pilgrims coming from Śrīvijaya at Nālandā and Nagapattinam (South India); the survival, besides the Chinese reports, of Sanskrit and vernacular textual materials of Esoteric Buddhist persuasion, some of which contain quotations traceable to Sanskrit Tantras; and the significant remains of statues, ritual implements, and monuments (such as the majestic Borobudur), all suggest that insular Southeast Asia was a recognised seat of esoteric cults in a highly interconnected Buddhist cosmopolis rather than a remote and backward periphery.

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