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Southeast Asia

A CONCISE HISTORY

Thames & Hudson
Multiplicity of Beliefs
The Religions of Southeast Asia

The world's major religions meet in Southeast Asia, and often mix. Although Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity penetrated the region, these belief systems seldom appear in a theologically 'pure' form, as preceding chapters have shown. Instead, indigenous traditions and mutual influences characterize religious practices in Southeast Asian societies; like believers anywhere, most pay little attention to doctrinal stringency, their main concerns being material improvement and spiritual release.

This chapter begins with Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, the faiths that were at their most influential in the period already covered by this book. It then looks at popular forms of religion and their influence in Southeast Asia since the thirteenth century, a period that coincides with the Mongol invasions, the expansion of the Tai peoples, and the beginning of Islamization in the Malay-Indonesian world.

Hinduism
In Southeast Asia's early kingdoms, individual monarchs were glorified through their identification with Buddha and with Hindu deities. Hinduism is still the vibrant, living religion of India, and is characterized by a wealth of beliefs and practices. Its traditions go back to about 800 BC, or even earlier, and it emphasizes the unity of all living beings, the inevitability of rebirth and the worship of a diverse pantheon of deities. Some Hindus see all these gods as manifestations of the trinity of Brahma, Siva and Vishnu, or even of a single deity. Some are atheists. Devoid of dogma or required ritual, Hinduism's diversity expresses itself in a wealth of custom,
In this Balinese cremation ceremony, a woman places offerings before a papier-mâché bull housing the corpse of a Brahman. Like Hindus elsewhere, Balinese cremate their dead, although the deceased are usually buried temporarily while the family gathers funds for a more elaborate ceremonial cremation. Members of other castes are now also cremated in bovine effigies.

tradition and literature. This variety probably made it appealing to the spiritually eclectic early rulers of Southeast Asia; its role there is discussed in Chapter Two.

BUDDHISM

Hinduism's teachings greatly influenced Buddhism. The Buddha was a historical figure, a prince who lived along the present border of India and Nepal in the fifth (some sources say sixth) century BC. The central teaching of Buddhism is that karma, retribution for good or evil deeds, determines humans' situation both in life and after death, when they will be inevitably reborn. Meditation and asceticism can help individuals to escape this cycle of rebirth and suffering by bringing them to enlightenment, a state called Nirvana, where no suffering and no human attachments exist. Rebirth affects lower and higher beings alike, including gods, and there is no creator-god or other being directing the universe. There are only the cycles of birth and rebirth and the long-term world cycles of renewal and
destruction. Buddha himself attained enlightenment, but he is not a god – even if sometimes his followers appear to treat him as one.

The teachings of the Buddha spread rapidly throughout India, although they failed to displace Hinduism and earlier beliefs there. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism was a missionizing religion, and it soon spread to other Asian countries. It was probably merchants and itinerant preachers who brought these beliefs to Southeast Asia, in the first centuries AD at the latest. Buddhism is known to have been established in the Indonesian Archipelago by the fifth century, since statues of that period have been found.

The earliest form of Buddhism to reach the Southeast Asian region was Mahayana, the 'greater vehicle', although the texts of Mahayana Buddhism are considered to be younger than those on which Theravada Buddhism is based. Mahayana teachings open the way to enlightenment not just to a few ascetics, as in Theravada, but to many individuals. As a result, although there are monasteries and monks, they are less important than in Theravada societies, since the path to enlightenment is not limited to monks. Adherents of the Mahayana tradition venerate bodhisattvas, individuals who have attained enlightenment but remain in contact with the world in order to help others gain enlightenment as well. Mahayana Buddhism was the inspiration for great religious architecture in Java and at Angkor. It is still important in East Asia, but in much of Southeast Asia has now vanished. After the decline of Angkor and Majapahit in particular, Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism alike lost relevance for most Southeast Asian societies. Vietnam remains an exception, explained by its close relationship and cultural interchange with China, where Mahayana beliefs also remain popular. For similar reasons, Vietnamese courts also emphasized Confucianist orthodoxy, a trend that reached a peak in the nineteenth century.

Indian and Central Asian Buddhists found a welcome in Vietnam (then a Chinese province) in the second and third centuries AD, when commerce and religion mingled along the coasts of what is now northern Vietnam. Both holy men and merchants taught the new doctrine and the earliest temples date from this era. From there, Buddhism diffused into southern China. At the same time, Buddhists also visited Vietnam from the north, from China itself. Among them, in the sixth century, were adherents of the Thien (Zen) school. The resulting influence of this meditational school increased monastic and other exchanges with China. It may be that Vietnamese areas adjacent to China, where Buddhism was also strongly entrenched,
felt more loyal to China. Other regions, further from China and where a more pluralistic, frontier atmosphere prevailed, were the source of uprisings against Chinese authority.

Some observers assert that early forms of Hinduism and Buddhism remained the exclusive concern of rulers and religious adepts like priests and monks. Certainly, early temples were abodes for the god-king, and offered only enough room for a priest to perform offerings, not for an assembly of the faithful. Yet the attention that the kings of Srivijaya gave to promoting Buddhism and the visibility and accessibility of the Borobudur to visitors must have propagated these beliefs among a broader population. The common people may have retained earlier beliefs, but Buddhism in particular was highly successful in absorbing previously venerated deities: spirits of land and water like the nats of Burma; historic individuals; or other deities of pre-Buddhist, ‘animist’ traditions who even today are believed to inhabit the trees and beaches, seas and watercourses, mountains and caves of the Southeast Asian world. When Vietnam divided during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Nguyen rulers of the south chose to support Mahayana Buddhism as an integrative ideology for the ethnically plural society of their kingdom, which was also populated by Chams and other minorities.

Another variant of Buddhism was Tantrism or Vajrayana (‘Diamond Vehicle’). The tantra were esoteric Buddhist texts, and they emphasized the possibility of gaining enlightenment through mandalas and through ecstatic religious practices. Tantrism absorbed ideas from Hinduism. It was practised in Srivijaya and its successor states and among rulers in Java; it influenced the construction of Borobudur.

**THERAVADAN BUDDHISM**

Theravada (‘teaching of the elders’) Buddhism, less often called Hinayana (‘lesser vehicle’), became the dominant religion of most of mainland Southeast Asia, replacing Hinduism and previous Mahayana beliefs. Its sacred language is not Sanskrit but Pali. Earliest texts date from about the first century BC, but definitive reinterpretations came in the fifth century AD. A Sinhalese king resurrected the classical doctrine in the eleventh century, with the help, it is said, of monks from Pagan. Southeast Asian Buddhists later placed great emphasis on exchanges with Sri Lanka when they wished to restore or maintain orthodoxy.

Theravada Buddhism was probably first brought to mainland Southeast Asia by the Mons, whose kingdom was centred on the
southern coast of Burma, at Thaton and Pegu, but who also extended through much of present-day Thailand. It was a Mon monk who converted the Burmese ruler of Pagan, Anoratha, to Theravada Buddhism, and the king's subsequent invasion of Thaton enabled him to bring additional monks and scriptures, as well as the royal family of Thaton, to Pagan. In spite of its role in propagating Theravada Buddhism, which by the late twelfth century had been strictly defined, Pagan's religion remained a mixture of beliefs for some time, although contacts between Burma and Sri Lanka continued to promote orthodoxy. By the thirteenth century, Theravada Buddhism was spreading throughout mainland Southeast Asia. Perhaps the disruption of the classical kingdoms like Angkor opened the opportunity for conversion. Theravada Buddhism now became a truly popular religion, entering the villages, appealing to individuals of all walks of life. It could survive where kingdoms fell, and it has, even to the present.

Apart from Mons, Khmers and Burmans, Theravada Buddhism seems to have appealed particularly to the Tai peoples – Siamese, Shans, Lao and others – whose homelands were in south China (where they are related to the Zhuang of Guangxi Province) and in the mountainous areas of Vietnam. The Tai had not previously adhered to a major religion.

Strictly speaking, the goal of Theravada Buddhists is the transcendence of suffering and of repeated rebirth through the attainment of enlightenment and Nirvana, the state beyond suffering and rebirth. Only a select few who have lived as monks can achieve enlightenment, not the laity, and not women, who must be reborn. Observers of practical, contemporary Buddhism believe that most faithful see Nirvana and even earthly perfection as a remote and probably unattainable goal. They hope simply for the reduction of suffering through ritual, meritorious deeds, and the avoidance of evil, in order to better their present earthly condition. As practised in Southeast Asian societies, Theravada Buddhism has a strong individualistic strain. Unlike Mahayana, it has no bodhisattvas who help others to achieve enlightenment; one travels the path to Nirvana alone. Theravada Buddhism has absorbed varieties of spirit worship, magic, astrology, and other non-orthodox beliefs.

Although royal patronage certainly aided the spread of the new teaching, the key institution of Theravada Buddhism is the sangha or monkhood. In the past, and in some villages today, virtually all males entered the monkhood, at least temporarily, as young boys.
A nineteenth-century Burmese palm-leaf manuscript, showing the Buddha and the places he visited during his earthly life. In the past, many Southeast Asian texts were written on this highly perishable material.

In an ordination ceremony in Thailand, a layman, dressed in white, receives the saffron robes he will wear as a monk.
Monasteries, located in the villages, were schools as well, and a large proportion of males in traditional Buddhist societies learned to read and write. Each day monks beg for their single meal, and the faithful can gain merit by filling their bowls. Often, adult men may retire temporarily to a monastery – a king might renounce his throne or, in modern times, a politician withdraw from public life and take the cloth. Young men may take orders to earn merit for their parents or benefactors. Buddhist festivals, ordinations and other feasts add colour and meaning to the calendar and to individual lives.

Rulers in Theravada Buddhist countries have often claimed the title of dharma raj, king of the dharma or law, and with that the right to oversee the saṅgha and to legislate on religious matters. In Burma, kings exerted great efforts to submit the saṅgha to their discipline, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Siamese kings adopted similar policies. The nineteenth-century Vietnamese Emperors Gia Long and Minh Mang also disciplined and regulated Buddhism, partly to ensure Confucianism’s primacy.

Buddhist rulers had good reason to enforce religious discipline, for the saṅgha had a potential not only for amassing wealth and power at the expense of the court, but also for criticizing royal rule. One of the greatest king-reformers of Siam, Rama IV or Mongkut (r. 1851–68), was himself a member of the monkhood before his accession to the throne. A learned and cultivated man, he began, while still a monk, to reform the saṅgha in accordance with his understanding of the dharma or law and to open it to Western learning, a gradual process that continued into the twentieth century. His successors followed him in maintaining royal control of the saṅgha.
(Right) A Buddhist funeral procession in Vietnam.

(Below) A monk sets himself on fire at a main intersection of Saigon in 1963, in protest against the government of Ngo Dinh Diem (see p. 143).

(Below right) Former Thai military strongman Thanom Kittikachorn, exiled since the democratic transition of 1973, returned to take the cloth in 1976. Unimpressed by this display of piety, Bangkok students demonstrated against his return, provoking a brutal military response and the temporary end of the democratic experiment (see p. 162).
Even after the abolition of the absolute monarchy in Siam in 1932, the relation between Buddhism and power persisted. Ecclesiastical positions, examinations, religious schools and so on are under bureaucratic control, although the administrators may themselves be monks. Religious activities receive small subsidies, but state-financed education, usually better provisioned, competes with monastery schools. General Sarit, who held dictatorial power in the country from 1957 to 1963, propagated the slogan: King, Buddhism and Nation, appealing to religion, nationalism and the monarchy to legitimize his regime.

A more recent movement was the ‘missionary monks’ of the 1960s and beyond, whose mission was to promote government policy. Their task included both religious instruction and propagation of the goals of development and public health. In the face of regional dissatisfaction and unrest, they were also sent to preach to non-Buddhist hill tribes in order to ensure their loyalty to the nation. Lowland Buddhist peoples have tended, over centuries, to absorb hill peoples into their culture of sedentary agriculture and their religion of Theravada Buddhism. On the other hand, such proselytization can, as missions do, occasion hostility when it calls into question traditional cultures and insists that only the adoption of the majority culture and religion are appropriate to the nation.

Most Thais probably regard Buddhism as an integral part of their national identity, and confidently believe that conversion of non-Buddhist minorities is a necessary part of national integration. This opinion is shared by Burmese leaders like the former Prime Minister U Nu (in office 1948–58 and 1960–62). This devout leader repeatedly performed symbolic religious acts and eventually retired (temporarily) to a monastery. His strong emphasis on Buddhism as an integral part of Burmese nationhood contributed to the increased alienation of non-Buddhist minorities. The dictatorial military government led since 1962 by General Ne Win chose ‘Burmese Way to Socialism’ as a non-religious ideology for the regime. Nevertheless, this ideology reiterates Buddhist concepts of man and nature. When discipline among the monks became a problem, and some supported political protests, the military government tried to assert its authority over the sangha, first in 1965 and, more successfully, in 1980.

In Burma, politicization of the sangha is nothing new. By abolishing the Burmese monarchy, British colonial rule left no
(Above) Prime Minister U Nu's devotion to Buddhism and traditional beliefs sometimes mystified foreign observers, while his emphasis on the religion of the Burman majority alienated many of the country's non-Buddhist minorities.

(Above right) General Ne Win, military strongman and one of the Thirty Comrades (see p. 132) succeeded U Nu to the prime ministership in 1958. He later imposed strict rule over the sangha.

Institution to ensure that a wearer of the yellow robe was a true man of religion. Monks were often badly trained and disciplined, while some used the freedom of the cloth to attack colonialism or for less worthy purposes – to hide from the law, for example. The military regime's attempts to assert its authority over the sangha were made not only for reasons of religious discipline, but to ensure that the sangha did not harbour anti-government elements.

Though many factors have changed the position of Buddhism in society, it continues to be a part of the life of most Thai, Burmese and – despite cultural upheaval, war and ideological struggles – Khmers and Laotians. In Laos, Communist rulers after 1975 attempted to change attitudes to religion, in particular calling on monks to work, not beg. This caused many to return to lay life, but Buddhism remains popular. Cambodia’s terrible period of social revolution under the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1978 saw the destruction of temples and monasteries and the dispersal or murder of many monks. Buddhist practice is only slowly recovering from this trauma.

Buddhism was traditionally a rural institution, based in village monasteries and drawing its recruits from village youth. Urbanites do become monks, but in general only temporarily. Nonetheless,
Buddhism remains influential in Southeast Asian cities, as novel urban lay movements have sprung up to bring new impulses to Buddhist practice. This 'new middle-class' Buddhism, found in Thailand, may spread to other lands. In addition, monks in recent years have increasingly joined protest movements, adding a political quality to their position.

CONFUCIANISM

Confucius lived in northeast China, probably in the sixth century BC. He left a body of ethical teachings to his disciples that would enable them to live in accordance with the way of Heaven, which is not, it seems, a god so much as an impersonal force. His teachings were the source for an extensive body of classical texts that in turn became the basis of the Chinese educational system. Although Confucianism is not usually considered to be a religion, there are Confucian temples in China and Vietnam. In Indonesia, a Confucian movement among the Chinese minority sought in the twentieth century to have this tradition recognized as a religion with worship of Heaven as a central ritual.

Confucianism, as a kind of secular religion, is rightly placed in a discussion of the Vietnamese monarchy over time, for, apart from

Gateway to the Van Miêu (Temple of Literature), a Confucian edifice in Hanoi. Southeast Asian Confucianism, practised by Chinese minorities and more widely in Vietnam, blurs the boundary between ethical system and popular religion.