

CONCEPT NOTE

Asian Buddhist Summit 2024

In tandem with strengthening its bond with Buddhist nations across Asia, the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) proposes to organize a grand two-day Asian Buddhist Summit (ABS), tentatively on **5-6 November 2024 in New Delhi**. The theme of this summit is on **'Role of Buddha Dhamma in Strengthening Asia'**. The ABS aims to bring together Sangha leaders, scholars, experts and practitioners from various Buddhist traditions across Asia to foster dialogue, promote understanding and address contemporary challenges faced by the Buddhist community. Through ABS, IBC aims to find a common link between various traditions, practices, beliefs prevalent in the Asian Buddhist circuit. This will enable in outlining the scope and potential areas of sustaining the Buddhist narrative in the modern world and future. The role of Dhamma, involving the youth will help in strengthening and nurturing a new value-based society.

Background

India has a rich heritage reflecting a glorious past in almost all spheres of life, more so in spirituality. If we delve into the rich ancient Buddhist literature of the various traditions, we find panoramic view of India of the 6th century BCE and later period, particularly of the area known as *Majjhima Desa* or the Middle Land which consists of the places where Buddha Dhamma originated and developed, i.e., the entire *Jambu Dvipa* (Indian sub-continent).

The journey of Buddha Dhamma (Buddhism) began in the 6th century BCE when Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment and started teaching his profound insights. After the Mahaparinirvana of the Buddha, his teachings were preserved and disseminated by his followers, leading to the formation of three major Buddhist traditions as it exists now: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

The Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (268–232 BCE) played a crucial role in propagating Buddha Dhamma within India and beyond borders. His reign over the vast empire of Ancient Indian sub-continent is a good example of how much the teaching and practice of Dhamma can bring transformation in the individual and in the Society, largely bringing Peace, Happiness, Prosperity and Harmony to the land. Ashoka's rule saw not only the good Dhamma governance but all-round development in his kingdom. His rock-edicts and pillar-edicts etc. even now stands as a Dhamma-marker, witness to the pan-Asian dissemination.

The Buddhist art that originated from its original homeland India was transported to other parts of Asia and the world, adapting to local styles and norms in each new host country. It developed to the north through Central Asia and into Eastern Asia to form the Northern

branch of Buddhist art, and to the east as far as South East Asia to form the Southern branch of Buddhist art.

Buddha Dhamma is a way of life that emphasizes compassion towards all beings. Dhamma emphasizes on the relevance of impermanence and interdependence which remind us that everything in the world is changing and are interconnected, and we must learn to live in a way that ensures the well-being of the self, others and our planet.

India talks about shared cultural development instead of export of culture. The values of peace, accommodation, inclusiveness, and compassion that are part of our societies can be attributed to the influence of the teachings of the Lord Buddha and his Dhamma. Buddhist thought on Dhamma provides a unique framework for political action, emphasizing moral principles, compassion and ethical governance. In an era marked by political challenges, the integration of Dhamma inspired values can contribute to a more ethical and harmonious political landscape. India had already indoctrinated these values since its independence through *Pañchaśhīla* principles, by the ideals of “peaceful co-existence”.

India has a deep spiritual connection with the Buddhist faith which originated in India, with Gautam Buddha attaining enlightenment in Bodhgaya and preaching his disciples the fundamental concepts of Dhamma, known as the turning of the wheel of Dhamma, at Sarnath. Scholars and monks from India travelled throughout far off nations on pilgrimages while carrying the Buddha’s teachings. Buddhism was spread through China, Japan, Tibet and South East Asia as a result of this mystical journey, with Sri Lanka at times being the transit route. India has adopted Buddha’s teachings and incorporated them in the development journey. His message of non-violence and compassion has inspired India’s constitution. Buddha’s Dhamma Chakra on the Indian flag provides momentum and the Parliament House of India has his engraved mantra- ‘Dhamma Chakra Pravartanaya’.

A number of heritage sites of importance to the Buddhist faith, such as Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Sankissa, Shravasti, Vaishali, Rajgir and Nalanda, among others are all spread out in India. Moreover, India being *Aryabhumi*, the basic principle based on compassion, wisdom, peace and harmony has been the very foundation of the rich Indian Culture and Society for centuries and even today it plays a dominant part in our daily lives. It has emerged as a sanctuary to people from different corners of the world who visited here and nurtured their faith; also serving as a home to a large Tibetan diaspora for many decades.

In addition to this, historical links to Theravada tradition of Buddhism enable India to further relations with other Buddhist countries and create conversation between multiple streams of this faith. Deepening ties with Asian nations on the basis of Buddha Dhamma has potentially fed into India’s larger policy objectives, the ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy, and the ‘Act East’ policy, for instance. Moreover, speaking at the ASEAN Summit in Jakarta in

September 2023 Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said that “The 21st century is Asia’s century”.

Spread of Buddha Dhamma to Southern Asia

Buddha Dhamma has been a significant cultural and religious bridge (*Setu*) between India and Southern Asia, encompassing countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Bengal which constitutes present day Bangladesh, West Bengal and Bihar was the main center of Buddha Dhamma during the Pala period in 8th century where Mahāyāna and Tantric form of Buddhism was prevalent. The Pala kings were so devoted to Buddha Dhamma that they had built a number of large viharas and centers for Buddhist studies. The Vikramashila and Sompura Vihara are some examples to mention. Bengal was also a homeland of great Buddhist masters like Chandragomi and Atisha Dipankara, who was the abbot of the Vikramashila Vihara and played a prominent role in dissemination of Buddha Dhamma in Tibet in the 11th century.

In Bhutan, the Buddha Dhamma first flourished in the 8th century under an exiled Indian King Sindhu Raja who established his government in Bumthang at Jakar Gutho Palace. The King in order to cure his illness invited Guru Padmasambhava who later became a key figure in propagating the Buddha Dhamma in Bhutan, thereby, making it one of the thriving Buddhist nations today.

Likewise, it is believed that after the commencement of the 3rd Buddhist Council, the Mauryan emperor Ashoka sent nine missionaries of the elders to preach the Dhamma in various states and foreign countries as *dhammaduta*. Of these, the first mission headed by the Elder Mahinda, son of King Ashoka himself carried the message of Buddha Dhamma as well as Tripitaka to Sri Lanka. This event marked the beginning of strong religious and cultural ties between India and Sri Lanka, which have persisted for over two millennia.

Monastic communities played a crucial role in maintaining and spreading Buddha Dhamma. Indian monks traveled to Southern Asia to teach, while monks from these regions traveled to India for study and pilgrimage. The establishment of monasteries and centers of learning facilitated the exchange of religious texts, practices, and ideas. The practice of monks from different Buddhist countries coming to study in Indian monasteries continues even today.

In contemporary times, notwithstanding that “Neighbourhood First” policy is not a new concept in Indian foreign policy, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi took new directions, showing distinct imprints in his policies. He has formulated his foreign policy doctrine (Modi doctrine) and introduced new pillars of India’s foreign policy (*Panchamrit*), including five pillars: dignity, dialogue, shared prosperity, regional and global security, cultural and civilization linkages aimed at affirming India’s position as a rising power in the world.

Spread of Buddha Dhamma to South East Asia

India, as the land of Buddha Dhamma, holds a unique position in the spiritual and cultural history of Asia. Buddha Dhamma has emerged as a valuable component of India's cultural history, aiding the country in developing steadfast foreign policy and effective diplomatic ties. It has allowed India to establish its presence, particularly in Asian nations through various key drivers like India's 'Look East' Policy of 1991 and the 'Act East' Policy of 2014.

In South East Asia, Buddhism began to flourish from the 3rd century BCE onwards. Emperor Ashoka's *dhammaduta* were instrumental in establishing Buddhist communities in modern-day Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Likewise, the archaeological record of countries like Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia points to trade as the primary factor in the spread of Buddha Dhamma. The Theravada tradition, emphasizing the original teachings of the Buddha, became predominant in these regions. The cultural and religious exchanges facilitated by Buddha Dhamma significantly influenced local culture, art, architecture, literature, and governance. South East Asian countries have many structures and monuments that depict influences of Indian culture, art and architecture from the ancient period. Borobudur, for instance, is a Buddhist monument present in Java. Its style incorporates influences of Gupta and post-Gupta art. In Myanmar, the art and architecture in terracotta plaques of Pagan and its Buddhist religious monumental architecture attained deep influence of eastern India along with imbibing traits of its indigenous cultural form. Similarly, the cosmological depictions in Angkor Wat of Cambodia integrated Hindu cosmology with Buddhist themes, illustrating the fluid boundaries between religious traditions in this region.

Spread of Buddha Dhamma to Central and Eastern Asia

Buddha Dhamma flourished to Central and East Asia along the silk route, facilitated by Indian monks like Kasyapa Matanga and Dharmaratna in the 1st century C.E. Similarly, Bodhidharma is revered as the father of Chan (Zen) Buddhism in China and Kumarajiva translated Buddhist texts and taught the Dhamma. Later, several monk scholars like Xuanzang and I-tsing travelled to India and studied at Nalanda University which produced eminent Buddhist masters. Among them Acharya Shantararakshita, Acharya Kamalashila, Acharya Atisha Dipankara and many others played a crucial role in the dissemination of Buddha Dhamma. Central Asia served as a crucial conduit for the transmission of Buddha Dhamma from India to China and further East. The Silk Road not only promoted trade but also the exchange of religious and cultural ideas. Monks, pilgrims, and traders played vital roles in this process.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the definite date of the advent of Buddha Dhamma to Central Asia, it is almost certain that the nomadic tribes, the Sakas and Kushanas as well as Indian merchants had carried elements of Indian culture with Buddha Dhamma to the

different states of Eastern Turkestan¹ around 1st century AD. The Kushan Empire (circa 1st-3rd century CE), which spanned much of Central Asia and Northern India, was instrumental in the spread of Buddha Dhamma. The Kushan rulers, especially King Kanishka, were great patrons of Buddha Dhamma. It was under his patronage the Fourth Buddhist Council of Mahāyāna tradition was supposed to have been held in Kashmir in 72 AD. They supported the building of viharas, stupas, and the propagation of Buddhist teachings. The region of ancient Gandhara became a significant center of Buddhist art, blending Hellenistic and Indian styles. The famous Gandharan art influenced Buddhist iconography throughout Central and East Asia.

Contemporary Relevance

The Buddhist narrative has time and again been reflected in India's policy towards Asian nations. The shared Buddhist heritage promotes and continues to shape mutual understanding, respect, and cooperation amongst the nation in the modern era. In this connection, the IBC along with the Ministry of Culture organized the First Global Buddhist Summit in April 2023 bringing together senior Sangha members, distinguished scholars and academicians and Dhamma practitioners from all across the world to discuss the contemporary challenges facing the world and seek to find ways and means of dealing with them.

In March 2023, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of External Affairs and the IBC organized the first International Conference on Share Buddhist Heritage under India's presidency of SCO on 14-15 March 2023 in New Delhi. Similarly, India recently extended its gesture of goodwill by transporting the Holy relics of the Buddha and his two chief disciples Arahant Sariputta and Arahant Mahamoggallana to Thailand for 26 days in February-March 2024. This endeavour was preceded by successful Holy relic exchanges with Mongolia in 2022 and Sri Lanka in 2012.

IBC along with the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, Embassy of India in Bangkok, Thailand and Silpakorn University, Bangkok jointly organised a One-Day International Symposium on the "*Significance of Vipassana Meditation for Wellbeing & Global Peace*" on 27 February 2024 in Bangkok. While Vipassana has been an ancient form of meditation that originated in India many thousands of years ago taught by the Buddha, its relevance remains more apt in today's time and age with complex contemporary challenges that all of us are dealing with on a daily basis across the world. This is a thought that the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi reminded us earlier this year in his address celebrating centenary birth year of Vipassana Acharya Dr. S. N. Goenka. Quoting Gurujī Goenka, he emphasized on the concept of self-transformation which is imperative for self-realisation. Separately, among other programmes, over 21 countries represented by leading scholars, teachers of spirituality and religion, venerable *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis*, political leaders and former heads of state,

¹ East Turkestan is an ethnic group and homeland to the Turkic speaking Uyghurs and other Central Asian peoples such as Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tatars and Tajiks.

converged for the 'Samvad – Global Hindu-Buddhist Initiative on Conflict Avoidance and Environmental Consciousness' in New Delhi, which was also inaugurated by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in 2015.

Thus, the ABS in continuation to the above activities represents a unique opportunity to bring together the diverse voices of Buddha Dhamma across Asia. By fostering dialogue, addressing contemporary challenges, and promoting the rich cultural heritage of Buddha Dhamma, the Summit aims to contribute to a more compassionate, sustainable, and peaceful world. Through collective reflection and action, the summit aspires to strengthen the role of Buddha Dhamma in the modern era and ensure its enduring relevance for future generations.

Description of Sub-Themes

1. Buddhist Art, Architecture and Heritage

The Buddhist art, architecture, and heritage hold immense significance as they embody the spiritual and cultural essence of Buddha Dhamma, a religion practiced by millions worldwide. These artistic and architectural treasures, spanning centuries and continents, serve as tangible manifestations of Buddhist literature and philosophy, symbolizing the path to enlightenment. From the majestic stupas of Sanchi to the intricate frescoes of Ajanta, Buddhist art and architecture not only showcase exceptional craftsmanship but also convey the teachings of the Buddha, making them an integral part of the ancient heritage. Moreover, these cultural relics provide a window into the history and evolution of Buddha Dhamma, allowing us to appreciate the diversity and richness of this ancient legacy. By preserving and celebrating Buddhist art, architecture, and heritage, we can foster cross-cultural understanding, promote spiritual growth, and honor the enduring legacy of Buddha Dhamma.

2. Buddha Cārikā and Dissemination of Buddha Dhamma

Buddha Cārikā, or the sublime wandering of the Buddha played a crucial role in the dissemination of the Buddha Dhamma. After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha spent the rest of his life traveling throughout the Indian sub-continent, sharing his insights with people from all walks of life from Kings to commoners. His tireless efforts to spread the Dhamma led to the establishment of the Sangha, a community of monks and nuns who further continued preaching his profound Dhamma. Through their efforts, Buddha Dhamma spread rapidly, reaching distant lands and cultures, adapting to local contexts while maintaining its core principles. The Buddha Cārikā thus ignited a spiritual movement that transcended borders, transforming lives and shaping civilizations, making Buddha Dhamma one of the world's most widespread and enduring philosophy that guides humanity towards enlightenment.

3. Role of Holy Buddhist Relics and its Relevance in Society

The Holy Buddhist relics play a significant role in Buddhist culture and society, serving as a tangible connection to the Buddha and his teachings. These relics, often enshrined in stupas or temples, are believed to embody the spiritual energy of the Buddha and his enlightened disciples. They inspire devotion, spiritual growth, and a sense of community among Buddhists, who venerate them as a means of cultivating merit and wisdom. The reverence for the relics also nurtures a sense of cultural heritage and historical continuity, linking generations of Buddhists across time and space. Moreover, the symbolism of relics

reminds us of the impermanence of all things, encouraging us to cherish the present moment and strive for spiritual liberation. In this way, holy Buddhist relics remain a powerful and enduring presence in society, nurturing spiritual growth, cultural identity, and compassion.

4. Significance of Buddha Dhamma in Scientific Research and Well-Being

The Buddha Dhamma has a profound role to play in scientific research, particularly in the fields of psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy. The teachings of the Buddha on the nature of the mind, consciousness, and the self, have influenced modern theories of cognitive science and psychology. His insights on the impermanence and interconnectedness of all phenomena have parallels with modern scientific concepts such as quantum mechanics and ecology. Additionally, the Buddha's emphasis on empirical observation, experimentation, and critical inquiry has inspired scientific methodologies. Furthermore, the practice of mindfulness, a core Buddhist meditation technique, has been incorporated into modern therapies and research on mental health, well-being, and peak performance. The Buddha Dhamma's emphasis on compassion, ethics, and non-harming has also informed discussions on the ethical implications of scientific research, promoting a more holistic and responsible approach to scientific inquiry.

5. Role of Buddhist Literature and Philosophy in 21st Century

Buddhist philosophy and literature form a rich and intricate tapestry that explores the human condition, the nature of reality and the path to enlightenment. The philosophy of the Buddha as encapsulated in Buddhist literature offers a profound and timeless wisdom that has captivated minds for centuries. Buddhist literature encompasses a vast array of texts, including sutras, scriptures, commentaries, biographies, and poetry. Through these sacred texts the teachings of the Buddha on the Four Noble Truths, Eight Fold Path, and the nature of reality are revealed which was initially delivered in the first sermon of the Buddha that was delivered on the Āshāḍha Pūrṇima, the full moon day of July. These literary and philosophical works form a rich tapestry that not only illuminates the path of Dhamma to enlightenment but also provides a window into the cultural and spiritual legacy of ancient India. Through the literary writings, the philosophy of Buddha continues to inspire and guide the humanity, offering a universal message of peace, compassion, wisdom and liberation.