

BUDDHISM AS SOFT POWER

1. Soft power, a concept coined by Joseph Nye, refers to a country's capacity to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. Buddhism, emphasizing peace, compassion, and mindfulness, has historically played a significant role in Asia's cultural diplomacy. It still acts as a strategic tool of soft power, particularly for countries such as India, China, Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.

2. Historical Roots of Buddhist Soft Power –

- Ancient Dissemination (3rd century BCE onwards) –

In this context, Emperor Ashoka was pivotal: following the Kalinga War, he adopted Dhamma and sent missions to Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Buddhist monks such as Mahinda and Sanghamitta played key roles in bringing the faith to Sri Lanka. The Silk Route functioned as a conduit for Buddhist philosophy, art, and iconography, spreading across Asia from India to China, Korea, and Japan.

- Civilizational Connections -

The Buddhist texts and monasteries, serving as beacons of wisdom and tranquility, have established a common spiritual and cultural space throughout Asia.

3. Core Buddhist Values as Instruments of Soft Power – The core values of Buddhism, such as Ahimsa and Karuna, are not just principles, but powerful instruments of soft power that can inspire peace and tolerance globally.

- Ahimsa (Non-Violence), aligned with the global call for peace, echoes in peace movements around the world. Its gentle influence promotes conflict resolution and tolerance.
- Karuna (Compassion) represents a universal moral principle that serves as a global appeal. The Soft Power Manifestation includes elements of humanitarian diplomacy.
- Mindfulness and meditation are increasingly popular as part of the global focus on mental health and wellness. They also act as a form of soft power, including practices such as Yoga, Vipassana, and mindfulness diplomacy.

- Interdependence (Pratityasamutpada) incorporates environmental awareness as a global call to action. Its soft power aspect includes diplomacy focused on climate and ecology.
- The Middle Path emphasises balancing extremes and encourages moderation in global politics, including the use of soft power.

4. Contemporary Reinterpretation of Buddhist Authority

- India's Buddhist Diplomacy –

India promotes Buddhism as a key element of its civilizational diplomacy and cultural revival efforts.

Key initiatives –

- International Buddhist Conclave organized by the Ministry of Tourism
- Revival of Nalanda University (2014)
- Buddhist Circuit Development Project – Connecting Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and other key sites.
- ASEAN-India Cultural Exchange via Buddhist Heritage Routes
- India and Japan are cooperating in the Act East strategy through the preservation of Buddhist heritage.
- Participation in Vesak celebrations at the UN and other international forums.

Soft Power Outcome –

- It enhances India's reputation as the birthplace of Buddhism, strengthens its image as a peaceful global leader, and challenges narratives of religious conflict.
- China's Buddhist Soft Power –

China advocates for 'Sinicized Buddhism', a term that refers to the adaptation of Buddhism to Chinese culture and values. This strategy allows China to leverage Buddhism to expand its regional influence.

- Organized the World Buddhist Forum in 2006.
- Supports the development of the Lumbini project in Nepal.

- It connects Buddhism with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)
- The strategy utilises monasteries and cultural diplomacy to project a unified and positive image.

Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Others –

- Japan promotes Zen Buddhism and exports its culture, including the tea ceremony, Ikebana, and mindfulness practices.
- Thailand – Leading Buddhist influence in Southeast Asia and worldwide meditation promotion.
- Sri Lanka employs Buddhist diplomacy to sustain relationships with East Asia and India.
- Bhutan's "Gross National Happiness" model, grounded in Buddhist ethics, garners worldwide admiration for its emphasis on spiritual governance. This model measures the country's progress not just in economic terms, but also in terms of the well-being and happiness of its citizens.

V. Buddhism in Global Power Networks –

- UNESCO World Heritage Buddhist sites such as Ajanta, Sanchi, Borobudur, and Bagan draw international tourists and foster cross-cultural understanding.
- International Buddhist Associations –
The World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) and the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC) are both based in India.
- Academic and cultural exchanges, such as Buddhist studies programs at global universities, promote intellectual diplomacy.

VI. Buddhism and Modern Global Concerns –

- The Climate Crisis encompasses Buddhist environmental ethics, particularly the concept of ecological interdependence.
- The Mental Health Crisis encompasses the global mindfulness movement.
- Geopolitical Conflicts includes models for peaceful conflict resolution.
- Over-consumption and inequality highlight the importance of simplicity and ethical economics.
- AI and Ethics encompasses Buddhist moral principles as they relate to technology ethics.

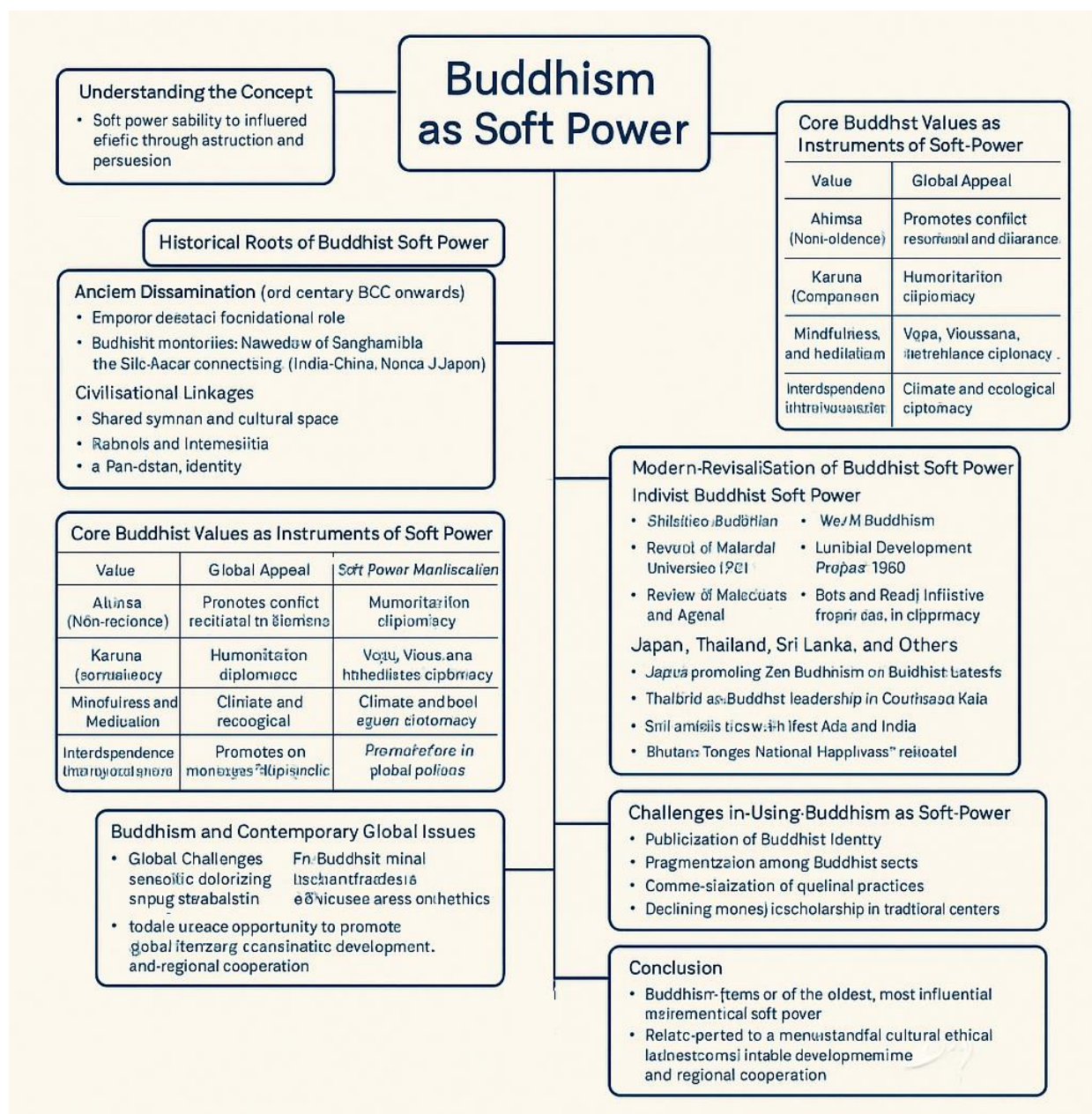
VII. Challenges in Using Buddhism as Soft Power –

- The way certain states, like China and India, compete over Buddhist heritage shows how Buddhist identity becomes politicized.
- Differences Among Buddhist Sects and Their National Views
- Commercialization of spiritual practices
- Decrease in monastic learning at historic centers.

VIII. Conclusion –

Buddhism remains one of the earliest and most influential forms of soft power in history. Today, it is increasingly seen not only as a religion but also as a transnational cultural and moral system that unites Asia through shared ideals of peace, compassion, and mindfulness. As its spiritual birthplace, India has a unique opportunity to utilize Buddhist soft power to promote global harmony, advance sustainable development, and strengthen regional collaboration.





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Email: info@muditabooks.com
Date of post: 17.07.2026