

Tipitaka as Soft Power

Posted at: 07/04/2025

Tipitaka as Soft Power: India's Spiritual Diplomacy in Southeast Asia

Context: India

- During a recent diplomatic exchange, **Prime Minister Narendra Modi was presented with the 'World Tipitaka: Sajjhaya Phonetic Edition'** by his Thai counterpart, **Paetongtarn Shinawatra**.
- This symbolic gesture is a reflection of the **shared civilizational and spiritual ties** between India and Thailand, particularly rooted in **Buddhism**.
- The gift emphasizes the **importance of cultural and soft power diplomacy** in foreign relations.
- It also serves to highlight India's role as the **cradle of Buddhism** and its continued influence across **South and Southeast Asia**.

What is the Tipitaka (Tripitaka)?

- The **Tipitaka**, also known as **Tripitaka** in Sanskrit, is the **earliest and most authoritative collection of Buddhist scriptures**.
- The term means **"Three Baskets"**, referring to the **three divisions** of the Buddhist canon:
 - **Vinaya Pitaka** (rules for monastic discipline)
 - **Sutta Pitaka** (discourses of the Buddha)
 - **Abhidhamma Pitaka** (philosophical and psychological analysis)

- Also known as the **Pali Canon** in the **Theravāda Buddhist tradition**.
 - Initially **preserved orally**, the Tipitaka was first **written down in the 1st century BCE** in **Pali language in Sri Lanka**.
-

Three Baskets of the Tipitaka

1. Vinaya Pitaka (Basket of Discipline)

- Contains over **220 rules** governing the conduct of **monks (bhikkhus)** and **nuns (bhikkhunis)**.
 - Includes **origin stories** explaining the context of each rule.
 - **Significance:**
 - Ensures **ethical discipline** within the monastic order (Sangha).
 - Promotes **community harmony and moral integrity**.
-

2. Sutta Pitaka (Basket of Discourses)

- Contains the **teachings and sermons** of Gautama Buddha.
- Divided into **five Nikayas**:
 - **Digha Nikaya** - Long Discourses
 - **Majjhima Nikaya** - Middle-Length Discourses
 - **Samyutta Nikaya** - Thematic Discourses
 - **Anguttara Nikaya** - Numerical Discourses
 - **Khuddaka Nikaya** - Minor Collection (includes **Dhammapada, Jataka Tales**, etc.)

- **Significance:**

- Serves as the **foundation of Buddhist philosophy**, ethics, and practice.
 - Widely studied by both **monastics and lay practitioners**.
-

3. Abhidhamma Pitaka (Basket of Higher Doctrine)

- Focuses on **systematic classification** of:

- Mind (citta)
- Matter (rupa)
- Mental formations and states

- Highly **abstract and analytical**, used by scholars for metaphysical inquiry.

- **Significance:**

- Basis for **Buddhist psychology**, epistemology, and meditative development.
 - Played a key role in **later doctrinal schools** of Buddhism.
-

Historical Background of the Tipitaka

- **Orally transmitted** after Buddha's Mahaparinirvana (~483 BCE).
- **First Buddhist Council (Rajgir)**: Recollection of teachings by disciples.
- **Fourth Buddhist Council (Sri Lanka, 1st century BCE)**: Tipitaka **inscribed on palm leaves**, preserving it in **Pali language**.
- The **Theravāda school** maintains the **only complete Tipitaka** in Pali.

- Versions in **Sanskrit (Sarvāstivāda)**, **Chinese**, and **Tibetan** exist in other Buddhist traditions.
-

About the World Tipitaka: Sajjhaya Phonetic Edition

- A **modern recitation-based edition** of the Tipitaka aimed at preserving **accurate phonetics and oral tradition**.
 - 'Sajjhaya' means **recital or chanting**, a key method of traditional Buddhist learning.
 - Highlights the importance of **oral transmission** in **Theravāda Buddhist practice**.
 - The edition strengthens **transnational Buddhist connections**, especially among **India, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Laos**.
-

Significance of the Event for India

- **Showcases India's civilizational legacy** as the birthplace of Buddhism.
- Enhances **India's soft power diplomacy**, especially in Southeast Asia.
- Reinforces India's role in:
 - **Preservation and promotion of Buddhist heritage**
 - **Spiritual diplomacy** through shared values and history
- Strengthens **India-Thailand relations** through **cultural and religious dialogue**.