

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vajrayāna in Thailand: The Journey of Buddhism as Reinterpreted in a Local Context

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the emergence and adaptation of Vajrayāna Buddhism within contemporary Thai society, focusing on how Vajrayāna is interpreted, represented, and practiced under Thailand's dominant religious and cultural structures. Drawing on the anthropology of religion, particularly Clifford Geertz's concept of religion as a system of symbols, the study analyzes how Vajrayāna provides a meaningful framework for spiritual practice, ethical self-cultivation, and religious identity among Thai practitioners. The article further engages with sociological discussions of power and religious capital to demonstrate how Vajrayāna in Thailand is selectively interpreted and adapted in accordance with prevailing social norms. Case studies from Vajrasiddha Thailand, FPMT Thailand, and Kagyu Samye Dzong Bangkok illustrate that Vajrayāna Buddhism in Thailand is not reduced to a mere psychological technique or individual self-improvement project. Instead, it continues to function as a living religious tradition whose system of meaning is continually reorganized and reinterpreted within the conditions of contemporary Thai society.

Keywords: Vajrayāna Buddhism; Thailand; Thai Buddhism; Religious Translation; Anthropology of Religion; Tibetan Buddhism

FULL PAPER

Introduction

Since the late twentieth century, Vajrayāna Buddhism, or Tibetan Buddhism, has increasingly expanded beyond its traditional cultural and geographical contexts through transnational networks of Tibetan exile communities, educational institutions, and meditation centers. This expansion has not been confined to Western societies alone, but has also become increasingly visible in South and Southeast Asia, including Thailand. In these new settings, Vajrayāna Buddhism has been practiced, interpreted, and institutionalized in forms that differ markedly from its historical configurations in Tibet.

This article argues that Vajrayāna Buddhism in Thai society should not be understood merely as a process of religious transmission from a cultural “center” to a passive “periphery.” Rather, it constitutes a process of religious translation and reconfiguration, in which doctrines, rituals, and symbolic systems are selectively appropriated and rearticulated in relation to local cultural frameworks, class structures, and lived experiences of Thai practitioners. The localization of Vajrayāna in Thailand thus forms part of a broader landscape of transnational Buddhism, linking Thai practitioners to wider Vajrayāna networks in India, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the contemporary Tibetan diaspora.

Theoretically, this study draws on the anthropological approach to religion proposed by Clifford Geertz (1973), who conceptualizes religion as a system of symbols that establishes powerful and enduring moods and motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence. From this perspective, Vajrayāna practices in Thailand such as meditation, ritual performance, mantra recitation, and guru disciple relationship function not merely as spiritual techniques, but as cultural resources through which practitioners interpret suffering, uncertainty, and ethical self-cultivation in modern life. Geertz’s framework helps illuminate why Vajrayāna in Thailand is frequently articulated in terms of inner transformation, emotional healing, and personal meaning.

However, reliance on a purely symbolic interpretation risks obscuring the role of power, history, and social structure in shaping religious forms. To address this limitation, the article engages with Talal Asad’s (1983) critique of Geertz, which emphasizes that religion cannot be separated from the discursive traditions and institutional conditions that authorize certain religious meanings while marginalizing others. In the Thai context, the tendency to frame Vajrayāna primarily as a non-

political, inward-oriented spiritual path reflects not only individual preferences, but also broader social constraints related to state regulation of religion and dominant Theravāda Buddhist norms.

The concept of Buddhist Modernism further clarifies this process of reinterpretation. As McMahan (2008) argues, modern forms of Buddhism across the globe have been reshaped to emphasize rationality, individual experience, meditation practice, and psychological well-being. Vajrayāna centers in Thailand often reflect this modernist orientation by downplaying Tibetan ethno-political history and ritual authority, while foregrounding meditation, compassion, and everyday applicability. This orientation corresponds closely with the social profile of Thai Vajrayāna practitioners, who are predominantly urban middle-class individuals seeking ethical meaning and self-development within the conditions of late modernity.

From the perspective of sociology of religion, this pattern can be understood as part of the broader privatization of religion, whereby religious practice is relocated from the public and institutional sphere to the domain of personal morality and self-cultivation (Casanova, 1994). Nevertheless, the Thai case also demonstrates important variations within this trend. Certain centers, such as Vajrasiddha Thailand, actively encourage forms of social awareness and ethical engagement, suggesting that Vajrayāna Buddhism can function as a resource for public moral reflection without assuming an overtly institutional or political role. This observation resonates with Robert Bellah's (1967) argument that religion continues to possess the capacity to generate shared moral meanings even within modern, pluralistic societies.

Accordingly, this article examines Vajrayāna Buddhism in Thai society as a site of negotiation between religion, modernity, class, and Asian regional dynamics. By situating Thai case studies within broader discussions of Tibetan Buddhism in India and Southeast Asia, the article demonstrates that Vajrayāna in Thailand is not merely a derivative or diluted form of Tibetan Buddhism. Rather, it represents a locally grounded yet globally connected religious formation, continuously reshaped by the social conditions and cultural imaginaries of contemporary Thai society.

Vajrayāna as a “World of Meaning”

Understanding Vajrayāna Buddhism in contemporary Thai society requires moving beyond institutional history or doctrinal transmission and toward an analysis of how Vajrayāna functions as a “world of meaning” for its practitioners. Drawing on Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, religion may be understood as a system of symbols that establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and

motivations by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with an aura of factuality (Geertz, 1973). From this perspective, Vajrayāna in Thailand does not merely offer new rituals or meditation techniques; it provides an alternative symbolic universe through which practitioners organize spiritual experience, ethical self-understanding, and perceptions of reality.

For many Thai practitioners, Vajrayāna introduces a distinctive symbolic grammar mandalas, mantras, visualization practices, and tantric lineages that reconfigures how suffering, compassion, and enlightenment are interpreted. These symbols do not operate in isolation but are embedded in everyday life, shaping how individuals narrate personal crises, emotional struggles, and moral responsibilities. Vajrayāna thus functions as a coherent interpretive framework through which practitioners make sense of both inner experience and social reality.

This symbolic world resonates strongly with urban, educated Thai Buddhists who often experience a sense of dissonance between traditional Theravāda religiosity and the complexities of modern life. Vajrayāna's emphasis on conscious awareness, disciplined self-cultivation, and the integration of emotion and insight offers a structured response to this tension. In this sense, Vajrayāna reorganizes spiritual experience not by rejecting Thai Buddhist values, but by rearticulating them in a new symbolic language that feels more psychologically refined and experientially intense. However, following Talal Asad's critique of purely symbolic approaches to religion, it is crucial to recognize that this "world of meaning" is not socially neutral (Asad, 1983). The accessibility of Vajrayāna teachings in Thailand often mediated through specialized centers, charismatic teachers, and transnational networks means that participation requires certain forms of cultural competence and social positioning. The capacity to interpret tantric symbols, engage with abstract teachings, and sustain disciplined practice is closely tied to educational background and middle-class habitus.

In this context, Vajrayāna does not simply provide meaning; it disciplines perception and subjectivity. Through regular meditation, ethical reflection, and symbolic identification with enlightened figures, practitioners cultivate a particular mode of being self-aware, emotionally regulated, and morally reflexive. This process aligns with what Michel Foucault describes as "technologies of the self," whereby individuals actively shape themselves according to valued ethical ideals (Foucault, 1988). Vajrayāna practice in Thailand thus becomes a means of producing a morally serious subject without directly challenging existing social or political structures.

The Vajrayāna “world of meaning” in Thailand is not a direct reproduction of Tibetan religious cosmology. Rather, it is selectively translated and domesticated. Elements related to ritual authority, institutional power, or overt political theology are often downplayed, while aspects emphasizing compassion, mindfulness, and inner transformation are foregrounded. This selective adaptation allows Vajrayāna to function as a meaningful spiritual framework while remaining compatible with dominant Thai Buddhist norms and social expectations.

In sum, Vajrayāna in Thai society operates as a culturally mediated system of meaning that reorganizes spiritual experience, ethical orientation, and self-understanding. By framing suffering and awakening within a symbolically rich yet socially disciplined worldview, Vajrayāna offers Thai practitioners not only a path of practice, but a coherent way of inhabiting the modern world as Buddhists.

Vajrayāna and Adaptation in Thai Society

The adaptation of Vajrayāna Buddhism in contemporary Thai society cannot be sufficiently explained as a matter of spiritual preference or individual religious curiosity. Rather, it should be understood as a socially structured process shaped by class position, cultural capital, and symbolic power. In this respect, the growing presence of Vajrayāna among urban Thai practitioners reflects not only a religious transformation but also a reconfiguration of religious distinction within the Thai Buddhist field.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice, Vajrayāna may be approached as a form of religious capital a resource unevenly distributed and differentially valued within the social hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1987). For many middle class Thai Buddhists, engagement with Vajrayāna functions as a marker of refined religious taste, intellectual seriousness, and cosmopolitan orientation. Mastery of tantric vocabulary, meditation techniques, and ethical discourse becomes a means of distinguishing oneself from what is often perceived as “routine,” ritualistic, or unreflective forms of popular Buddhism. This dynamic operates within what Bourdieu conceptualizes as a religious field, structured by relations of power that define which forms of religiosity are recognized as legitimate, advanced, or authoritative. In Thailand, this field is historically dominated by a Theravāda centered orthodoxy closely aligned with state institutions and nationalist ideology. Vajrayāna, as a transnational and symbolically dense tradition, enters this field not as a challenger to orthodoxy but as a supplementary form of distinction, carefully positioned to avoid overt institutional or political confrontation.

Here, Clifford Geertz's notion of religion as a *system of symbols* remains analytically relevant, but requires sociological sharpening. Vajrayāna symbols in Thailand do not simply generate meaning in a cultural vacuum; they function as markers of ethical and cultural refinement within a stratified social context (Geertz, 1973). Tantric practices are selectively translated into idioms of self-awareness, compassion, and psychological insight forms of symbolic capital that resonate strongly with middle class dispositions shaped by higher education, global mobility, and exposure to transnational discourses.

However, as Talal Asad has argued, religious meaning is never detached from power and discipline (Asad, 1983). The domestication of Vajrayāna in Thailand reflects not only cultural translation but also structural constraint. Discourses that might associate Vajrayāna with collective authority, political theology, or institutional autonomy are systematically muted. What remains is a form of Buddhism that emphasizes ethical inwardness and personal responsibility qualities that align comfortably with state-sanctioned ideals of social harmony and political restraint. This process also exemplifies what David McMahan describes as Buddhist modernism, wherein Buddhist traditions are reshaped to conform to modern values such as individualism, reflexivity, and experiential authenticity (McMahan, 2008). Yet the Thai case suggests that Buddhist modernism is not merely a response to abstract modernity; it is also a classed phenomenon, articulated through middle class sensibilities and aspirations. Vajrayāna becomes modern not only by being rationalized or psychologized, but by being embedded in practices of distinction that separate "reflective" practitioners from mass religiosity. This domesticated and classed form of Vajrayāna does not necessarily imply political disengagement. Rather, political awareness is often internalized as ethical reflexivity, transforming social critique into a matter of personal awakening rather than collective mobilization. This mode of engagement allows practitioners to sustain a sense of moral seriousness while remaining within the acceptable boundaries of Thai Buddhist respectability. The case of Vajrayāna in Thai society thus reveals how transnational Buddhism operates as a technology of distinction, enabling practitioners to negotiate identity, morality, and power within a constrained religious field. Far from being a marginal or purely spiritual phenomenon, Vajrayāna illuminates the ways in which religion, class, and symbolic power intersect in the ongoing reconfiguration of Buddhism in modern Thailand.

Vajrayāna and the Thai Middle Class

The growing appeal of Vajrayāna Buddhism in Thailand cannot be adequately understood without situating it within the socio-cultural dynamics of the urban Thai

middle class. Rather than representing a random or purely spiritual preference, participation in Vajrayāna communities reflects a broader process of class-based religious selection, in which specific forms of Buddhism are embraced because they resonate with middle-class aspirations for self-cultivation, ethical distinction, and reflexive awareness.

Contemporary Thai middle-class practitioners are typically characterized by higher levels of education, global cultural exposure, and familiarity with transnational discourses on psychology, mindfulness, and social justice. For this demographic, Vajrayāna offers more than ritual or devotional practice; it provides a symbolic repertoire for constructing a morally refined and intellectually sophisticated self. Tantric practices, when reframed through ethical and psychological language, become technologies of self-fashioning that align closely with modern middle class sensibilities.

From the perspective of Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology, Vajrayāna functions here as a system of symbols that renders the world intelligible while simultaneously shaping dispositions and moral orientations (Geertz, 1973). However, in the Thai middle class context, this symbolic system is selectively reorganized. Elements that emphasize hierarchy, ritual authority, or collective religio-political power are often muted, while those that support introspection, emotional literacy, and ethical reflexivity are foregrounded. The result is a form of Vajrayāna that appears inward-looking, yet remains deeply embedded in social structures of class and power.

This process also reflects what David McMahan has described as Buddhist modernism: a reconfiguration of Buddhist traditions in response to modern values such as individualism, rationality, and experiential authenticity (McMahan, 2008). Thai Vajrayāna communities frequently translate tantric concepts into idioms of self-awareness, trauma healing, and personal responsibility. Awakening, in this framework, is no longer imagined as liberation from *samsāra* alone, but as the cultivation of a heightened ethical consciousness suited to navigating modern social life. Yet this transformation is not politically neutral. Drawing on Talal Asad's critique, it becomes clear that the very conditions that make certain religious expressions acceptable are shaped by broader regimes of power and discipline (Asad, 1983). In Thailand, where Buddhism is closely tied to ideals of social harmony, political restraint, and national identity, middle class Vajrayāna practitioners often articulate social critique indirectly through ethical discourse rather than overt political confrontation. This mode of engagement allows practitioners to maintain moral seriousness while avoiding direct conflict with dominant political norms.

In this sense, the Thai middle class does not simply depoliticize Vajrayāna; rather, it repoliticizes it through ethical interiorization. Concepts such as compassion, awareness, and responsibility are mobilized as tools for interpreting social suffering, inequality, and structural violence, but these concerns are framed as matters of personal awakening rather than collective struggle. Awakening thus becomes a deeply political act, even as it is rhetorically distanced from formal politics.

Certain communities, such as Vajrasiddha Thailand, push this dynamic further by explicitly linking contemplative practice with political awareness and youth activism. However, even in these cases, political engagement is articulated primarily through moral reflection and critical consciousness rather than institutional religious authority. This reflects a distinctly middle class mode of Buddhist engagement one that privileges reflexivity over obedience, awareness over ideology, and ethical self-transformation over doctrinal orthodoxy.

Vajrayāna's resonance among the Thai middle class reveals that contemporary Buddhism operates not only as a religious tradition but as a cultural technology of identity formation. It provides a language through which practitioners negotiate their position within modern Thai society, balancing spiritual aspiration, ethical critique, and political constraint. Far from being a marginal phenomenon, Vajrayāna thus illuminates how religion, class, and power intersect in the ongoing reconfiguration of Buddhism in modern Thailand.

Vajrayāna and Political Awareness among Thai PractitionersThe Case of Vajrasiddha Thailand

While Vajrayāna Buddhism in Thailand is often characterized by an emphasis on inner cultivation, meditation, and psychological well-being, this general pattern does not fully capture the diversity of contemporary Vajrayāna engagements. A notable exception can be observed in the case of Vajrasiddha Thailand, a Vajrayāna inspired Buddhist community led by Vichak Panich, which explicitly integrates spiritual practice with political awareness and social critique.

Unlike many Vajrayāna centers that frame practice primarily as a means of personal liberation or emotional healing, Vajrasiddha positions Buddhist practice as a foundation for critical awareness of social suffering, structural inequality, and ethical responsibility in the public sphere. Public teachings, writings, and activities associated with Vajrasiddha frequently address issues such as state violence, youth political movements, authoritarianism, and the moral implications of social injustice in contemporary Thailand. In some instances, members of the community have also

participated in civic activism and youth-led political mobilizations, albeit without framing these actions as institutional religious campaigns.

From an anthropological perspective, this case complicates the dominant narrative that portrays Vajrayāna in Thailand as a depoliticized or purely privatized form of Buddhism. Drawing on Clifford Geertz's concept of religion as a system of symbols, Vajrasiddha can be understood as reconfiguring Vajrayāna symbolism to generate not only personal meaning but also ethical interpretations of collective suffering (Geertz, 1973). Here, tantric practices and Mahāyāna ideals such as compassion (*karuṇā*) and bodhisattva commitment are mobilized as symbolic resources that orient practitioners toward social responsibility rather than withdrawal from public life.

At the same time, Talal Asad's critique of symbolic anthropology is particularly relevant in interpreting this case. Asad reminds us that religious expressions are always shaped by historically specific relations of power and discipline (Asad, 1983). In the Thai context where Buddhism is closely aligned with state ideology, political restraint, and the discourse of social harmony the emergence of a Vajrayāna community that openly cultivates political awareness is highly significant. Vajrasiddha's approach subtly challenges dominant expectations of "proper" Buddhist behavior by reframing political consciousness as an ethical and contemplative necessity rather than a violation of religious neutrality.

Vajrasiddha does not reject the modernist tendency toward inwardness identified by David McMahan. Instead, it radicalizes it. Political awareness is not articulated through institutional confrontation or doctrinal authority but through ethical self-transformation, reflective dialogue, and contemplative inquiry (McMahan, 2008). This mode of engagement exemplifies what may be described as ethical interiorization of political critique, where social transformation is imagined to begin with the cultivation of awareness, responsibility, and moral courage within the practitioner.

Sociologically, the Vajrasiddha case also aligns with broader patterns observed among urban Thai middle class Buddhists, who often possess high levels of education, media literacy, and exposure to global discourses on democracy and human rights. For this demographic, Vajrayāna practice provides not only spiritual meaning but also an alternative moral language through which political realities can be reflected upon without direct reliance on partisan ideology. In this sense, Vajrasiddha represents a form of middle class engaged Vajrayāna, situated at the

intersection of Buddhist modernism, ethical activism, and contemporary Thai political consciousness.

In comparative perspective, this pattern resonates with emerging forms of socially reflective Buddhism in other Asian and global contexts, yet remains distinct in its careful negotiation with Thailand's restrictive political environment. Vajrasiddha thus illustrates that Vajrayāna in Thailand cannot be reduced to a single mode of adaptation. Rather, it encompasses multiple trajectories ranging from therapeutic inwardness to ethically grounded political awareness each shaped by specific configurations of culture, class, and power.

Vajrayāna and Modern Buddhism

In contemporary scholarship, the global spread of Vajrayāna Buddhism is increasingly understood through the analytical framework of Buddhist Modernism. This concept refers to the reconfiguration of Buddhist traditions in response to modern conditions such as rationalism, individualism, secular education, and the political structures of nation-states (McMahan, 2008). Rather than representing a decline or distortion of tradition, Buddhist modernism highlights how Buddhism actively rearticulates itself to remain socially intelligible and culturally viable.

Within this framework, Vajrayāna in Thai society can be seen as participating in a broader modernist transformation. Although Vajrayāna is often characterized by ritual complexity, esoteric symbolism, and hierarchical teacher-disciple relationships, its contemporary presentation in Thailand tends to emphasize meditation, ethical self-cultivation, emotional awareness, and psychological well-being. These emphases resonate strongly with modern, urban, middle-class audiences who seek religious practices compatible with scientific rationality and everyday life.

Scholars such as David McMahan (2008) and Donald Lopez (1998) have noted that modern forms of Buddhism frequently downplay cosmology, ritual authority, and institutional power, while foregrounding experiential authenticity and personal transformation. Thai Vajrayāna centers reflect this tendency by translating tantric symbols and practices into psychological or ethical idioms. Mantras, visualization practices, and deity yoga are often explained not as metaphysical techniques but as methods for cultivating compassion, mindfulness, and self-awareness. This process does not eliminate traditional symbolism but reframes it in a language that aligns with modern sensibilities.

From an interpretive perspective, Clifford Geertz's notion of religion as a system of symbols remains analytically useful for understanding this transformation

(Geertz, 1973). Vajrayāna symbols in Thailand continue to function as meaning-making devices; however, the social horizons within which these symbols operate have shifted. The emphasis moves away from collective religious authority and toward the formation of modern moral subjects. In this respect, Vajrayāna becomes less a comprehensive socio-political order as it historically was in Tibet and more a resource for ethical orientation and self-fashioning within modern life.

At the same time, this modernist translation is not ideologically neutral. Talal Asad's critique of symbolic approaches to religion reminds us that the conditions under which religious meanings are deemed acceptable are shaped by power relations (Asad, 1983). In Thailand, where Buddhism is closely associated with national identity, social harmony, and political restraint, Vajrayāna's modernist framing allows it to exist without challenging dominant religious or political narratives. By emphasizing personal ethics over structural critique, Vajrayāna adapts to the implicit expectations imposed by the modern Thai state and middle class culture. The Thai case suggests that Buddhist modernism does not necessarily result in depoliticization, but rather in the ethical internalization of political awareness. Some Vajrayāna communities such as Vajrasiddha Thailand explicitly encourage critical reflection on social suffering, inequality, and collective responsibility. However, such concerns are articulated through moral imagination and inner transformation rather than direct political mobilization. This reflects what might be described as a *modern Buddhist mode of engagement*, where social critique is refracted through ethical self-work rather than institutional activism.

Vajrayāna in Thailand exemplifies how Buddhist modernism operates not as a uniform global process, but as a locally negotiated transformation. By selectively translating tantric traditions into modern ethical and psychological frameworks, Thai Vajrayāna communities demonstrate how a historically complex religious system can remain meaningful within contemporary social conditions. This case underscores the need to understand Buddhist modernism not as a loss of tradition, but as an ongoing process of reinterpretation shaped by culture, class, and power.

Vajrayāna beyond Tibet: Non-confrontational Social Awareness

When Vajrayāna Buddhism moves beyond its Tibetan socio-political context where religious authority, governance, and communal identity were historically intertwined it undergoes a significant transformation in its modes of social engagement. In many host societies, particularly in Southeast Asia, Vajrayāna tends to deemphasize overt political involvement and instead foreground ethical self-cultivation, compassion, and social awareness at the individual level. This shift does

not signify the depoliticization of religion per se, but rather a reconfiguration of political engagement into non-confrontational and morally oriented forms shaped by local state–religion relations (Casanova, 1994).

In Thailand, Vajrayāna practices are largely presented as paths of inner transformation and ethical cultivation rather than vehicles for institutional political activism. This orientation reflects the broader Thai socio-religious environment, where Buddhism is normatively associated with social harmony, moral order, and political neutrality. Within this context, centers such as Vajrasiddha Thailand, under the leadership of Vichak Panich, exemplify a form of political awareness without direct confrontation. While Vajrasiddha does not function as a political movement, its teachings emphasize mindfulness, critical awareness of social suffering, and ethical responsibility toward structural injustice. Such an approach resonates with Robert Bellah’s (1967) notion of religion as a source of public morality that shapes civic consciousness without necessarily manifesting as explicit political action.

Comparable patterns of adaptation can be observed in Vietnam and Malaysia. In Vietnam, Vajrayāna practices are often integrated into the broader Mahāyāna Buddhist framework recognized by the state. Emphasis is placed on meditation, compassion, and psychological cultivation, allowing Vajrayāna to operate within a tightly regulated religious environment without being perceived as politically disruptive (Braun, 2013; Powers, 2007). Social concern is thus articulated through personal moral discipline rather than public critique of political structures.

In Malaysia, where Islam is the dominant religion and Buddhism occupies a minority position, Vajrayāna communities largely embedded within Chinese and transnational networks adopt an even more cautious public posture. Here, Vajrayāna emphasizes universal ethics, interreligious coexistence, and personal transformation, functioning as a form of moral and spiritual refuge rather than a platform for socio-political mobilization (McMahan, 2008). This strategy enables Vajrayāna to maintain social legitimacy while avoiding tension with state and religious authorities.

From a theoretical perspective, these cases illustrate what Clifford Geertz (1973) describes as the reconfiguration of religion as a symbolic system one that constructs meaning and motivation in ways that are intelligible and acceptable within specific socio-political contexts. At the same time, Talal Asad’s (1983) critique reminds us that such transformations are not merely cultural adaptations but are deeply shaped by power relations that define the legitimate boundaries of religious expression. The prevalence of non-confrontational social awareness

among Vajrayāna communities thus reflects structural constraints imposed by modern nation-states as much as doctrinal or ethical choices. Vajrayāna beyond Tibet particularly in Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia should not be understood as socially disengaged or politically neutral. Rather, it represents a form of ethically grounded social consciousness, articulated through personal practice, moral sensitivity, and critical awareness. For Thai practitioners in particular, Vajrayāna offers a mode of religious engagement that aligns with middle-class sensibilities and state expectations, while still fostering reflective concern for social inequality and collective suffering within contemporary society.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that Vajrayāna Buddhism in Thai society should not be understood as a straightforward transplantation of Tibetan religious traditions into a new cultural setting. Rather, it represents a continuous process of selective reinterpretation shaped by Thailand's social structure, political order, and class dynamics. In this sense, Vajrayāna in Thailand functions as a living religion, whose meanings, practices, and social roles remain fluid and subject to ongoing negotiation.

Drawing on Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretive framework, Vajrayāna can be seen as a symbolic system that provides practitioners with a meaningful moral universe through which suffering, ethical responsibility, and personal transformation are understood. However, the Thai case illustrates that such symbolic systems do not operate in isolation. As Talal Asad (1983) has argued, religious expression is always conditioned by relations of power that define what forms of religiosity are socially acceptable and politically legitimate. In Thailand, expectations that Buddhism should promote social harmony, moral order, and political neutrality significantly shape how Vajrayāna is practiced and publicly articulated.

The case of Vajrayāna centers in Thailand most notably Vajrasiddha Thailand highlights a distinctive mode of non-confrontational social awareness. While issues of social injustice, inequality, and structural violence are acknowledged, they are addressed primarily through ethical self-cultivation and heightened moral consciousness rather than through institutional political activism. This orientation aligns closely with Thai middle class sensibilities, which often seek critical reflection and social awareness without direct confrontation with state authority or dominant political structures.

A comparative perspective further reinforces this interpretation. Similar patterns of adaptation can be observed in Vietnam and Malaysia, where Vajrayāna

communities emphasize inner practice, universal ethics, and social coexistence in order to remain compatible with state regulations and religious hierarchies. These cases support McMahan's (2008) argument that contemporary forms of Buddhism are increasingly shaped by modern values such as individualism, rationality, and ethical universalism, while remaining constrained by the frameworks of modern nation-states. Vajrayāna in Thai society should not be viewed as politically disengaged or socially passive. Instead, it represents a carefully negotiated form of religious engagement that transforms political concern into ethical awareness and personal responsibility. This study suggests that future research on Vajrayāna and on modern Buddhism more broadly should move beyond binary distinctions between religion and politics, and instead explore how religious traditions generate new modes of moral subjectivity and social consciousness within specific socio-political contexts.

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