

# Buddha's Footprint in Folk Narratives in the Northeastern Region of Thailand: Imagination, Belief, and the Cultural Roles

Athiwat Buddanang<sup>1</sup> and Pathom Hongsuwan<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*This research aims to study the ideas and beliefs of Buddha's footprint in the northeastern region of Thailand. Six folk narratives were analyzed using qualitative research methods: 1) Myth of Phra Bat Wern Pla 2) Myth of Phu Khwai Ngoen 3) Myth of Phra Bat Bua Bok, 4) Myth of Phra Bat Bua Ban 5) Myth of Phra That Choeng Chum and 6) Myth of Phra Chao Liap Lok. The research results reveal that Buddha's footprint in the northeastern folk narratives have four roles and meanings that are linked to cultural ideas, namely 1) the idea of evangelizing Buddhism 2) the idea of preaching and practicing Dhamma 3) the idea of imprinting the Buddha's footprint and 4) the idea of paying homage to Buddha's footprint. This article explores and interprets the imagination and beliefs associated with Buddha's footprint by examining its symbolic meanings, which bridge the material and spiritual worlds. Notably, Buddha's footprint has a profound influence on people's thoughts, beliefs, worldviews, values, and social ideologies.*

**Keywords:** *Buddha's Footprint, Folk Narratives, Beliefs, Cultural Roles, Human Thought.*

## INTRODUCTION

Buddha's footprint, also known as Phra Phutthabat or Phra Bat, is a revered symbol in Buddhist tradition believed to be the footprint marked by the Lord Buddha (*Phra Phuttha Chao*). These footprints can feature either one or both feet and are significant for their representation of the living Buddha and the evangelization of Buddhism.

There are two types of Buddha's footprints: natural footprints found imprinted on rocks and those specifically created and enshrined to be worshipped, representing the presence of the Buddha and the teachings of Buddhism. Since the time of the Buddha, creating places or objects as symbols of worship has been a tradition, with Buddha's footprint being one of the most popular objects made for this purpose.

Buddha's footprint is thought to be a direct sign that the Lord Buddha once walked on the earth, leaving his mark for future generations to worship and follow his teachings. It serves as a way for Buddhists to connect with the Buddha's journey and the principles of Dhamma teachings.

Additionally, Buddha's footprint symbolizes the continuation of Buddhism in the land, as it is considered a physical connection between the Buddha and the earth. This reverence for the footprint allows Buddhists to grasp the true meaning and teachings of Buddhism.

In the book "Buddhadharma of Phradhammapitaka" (2000: 482-483), the significance of the Buddha's footprint is explored. According to the story, as the Lord Buddha was traveling a great distance, he encountered a Brahmin who noticed the Dharmachakra image in the Buddha's footprint and was astonished. The Buddha continued his journey and rested at the base of a tree. The Brahmin, following the Buddha's footprints, witnessed how the Buddha rested peacefully, an admirable sight. Intrigued, the Brahmin approached and asked, "You must be a god." The Lord

Buddha calmly replied, "I am not a god." The Brahmin proceeded to ask if the Buddha was a Gandharva, giant, or human, but the Lord Buddha ultimately responded, "I am a Buddha."

---

<sup>1</sup> Department of Thai and Oriental Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham 44150, Thailand, Email: [bhatrakavii@gmail.com](mailto:bhatrakavii@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Department of Thai and Oriental Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Mahasarakham University, Mahasarakham 44150, Thailand

The Buddha's footprint is a sacred symbol in Buddhism, representing the path to enlightenment and the revelation of the Buddha's teachings. It serves as a historical marker, indicating the Buddha's presence on earth to save all beings from suffering. Numerous Buddha's footprints can be found throughout India, offering evidence of the Buddha's existence in this world and his exceptional status as the highest being in the universe (Elaine, 1995: 302). The creation of Buddha's footprint serves as an object of reverence, embodying the Buddha himself. However, there is no need to be concerned about the authenticity of the footprint; according to Buddhist principles, attachment to physical representations is not essential for understanding the true essence of Buddhism.

Phra Chaiwat Achito's exploration of Buddha's footprints in Thailand (Achito, 2009: 16-27) uncovered a significant number of footprints distributed across the country. In the Northeast region, 206 footprints were found, the highest concentration, followed by 148 in the North, 49 in the South, 39 in the central region, 34 in the western region, and 15 in the eastern region. These statistics suggest that the majority of Buddha's footprints are located in the Northeast, reflecting the local belief that the Lord Buddha visited and left his mark on the land.

According to Jaruworn (2004: 163-164), Buddha's footprints in Thailand can vary in form; some are individual, while others appear in pairs or even overlap. Most commonly, the footprints represent the Buddha's right foot, although some locations feature the left foot. Pairs of Buddha's footprints can either be side by side or spaced apart. Overlapping footprints are believed to symbolize the imprints of all four Lord Buddhas according to the myth of Buddha's footprint, with the largest print attributed to the Lord Buddha Kakusandho, followed by the imprints of Lord Buddha Konagama, Phra Kassapa, and Phra Samana Gotama, in decreasing size and increasing depth.

In the beliefs and traditions of some specific Thai groups, such as the Isan people of Thailand's northeastern region, Buddha's footprint holds a unique place within Folk Buddhism. These footprints are thought to be physical markers of the Lord Buddha's visit to the Isan region, with many found across various northeastern provinces. This association goes beyond the Buddha or his teachings; it plays a key role in cultural continuity, symbolizing prosperity and reinforcing social ties. The portrayal of Buddha's footprint in Isan folk narratives extends beyond spiritual significance, serving as a bridge between faith and culture. These footprints embody diverse beliefs, reflecting the richness of cultural heritage and the depth of the connection between the physical landscape and spiritual worldviews. As such, they highlight the importance of Buddha's footprint in shaping thoughts, beliefs, worldviews, values, and social ideologies among the Isan Thai people.

## **MAIN QUESTION AND OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH**

The main question of this research is: In what ways does the myth of Buddha's footprint reflect the cultural roles within Isan society?

This research aims to examine the conceptualization and beliefs surrounding Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai folk narratives and its impact on the role of culture in human thought.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this study, the concept of language within mythological stories is applied, positing that when myths are shared within a society, they are often perceived as true accounts of past events. Typically, members of the society regard these stories as sacred and use them to explain or teach about societal values and questions. Language serves as a medium for conveying meaning, and in the context of myths, it may necessitate understanding hidden meanings or symbolic codes to grasp the intended message. In analyzing the structure of myths, prominent scholars like Lévi-Strauss (1963) have identified three key concepts: binary opposition, mediation or mediator, and inversion. These structural elements, according to Lévi-Strauss's perspective, provide a framework for shaping and progressing narratives within myths (Na Thalang, 2020).

Furthermore, we incorporate the perspectives of Tambiah (1970), who wrote "Myth and Rite: The Naga Symbol and the Rocket Festival." This work utilizes the myths and rituals of the Isan Thai people, including the stories of *Pha Daeng-Nang Ai* and the myth of *Phra Upakut*, to analyze the meaning and symbols found

within myth and rite, such as the Naga, White Squirrel, *Phra Upakut*, and guardian spirits of swamps. Tambiah introduces four types of relationships between Buddhism and spirit cults: 1. Syncretism, which refers to the blending of different beliefs; 2. Hierarchy, which describes the ordered relationship between different spiritual practices; 3. Linkage, emphasizing the connection between Buddhism and indigenous beliefs; and 4. Complementarity, highlighting how Buddhism and local beliefs can coexist and mutually reinforce each other.

Additionally, the relationship between Buddhism and indigenous rituals was explored by drawing on the work of Condominas (1975) in his book "Change and Persistence in Thailand." Condominas explored the beliefs and religious practices of Thai people and wrote an article on *Phi Baan* cults in rural Laos. His study drew on data from a Laotian village, examining traditions and rituals associated with worshiping house spirits. His research provides insights into traditional beliefs and their intersections with Buddhism by analyzing various aspects such as the sacred spaces for worshiping house and temple spirits, methods of offering food to spirits, and traditional festivals like *Bun Bang Fai* and *Bun Duen Hok*, which also involve making offerings to spirits.

This review aims to analyze the language of myths and the relationship between Buddhism and other belief systems. By combining our own insights, the study examines folk narratives related to Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai culture. This multifaceted approach offers a nuanced exploration of how these narratives integrate with and reflect the region's spiritual and cultural landscape.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

By studying folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai culture, we can gain insight into the imagination, beliefs, and cultural roles that shape human thought. We used qualitative research methods and documentary research to survey and collect information about Buddha's footprints found in Isan Thai folk narratives. The study focuses on five prominent stories that offer clear depictions of Buddha's footprints and are widely known: The Myth of *Phra Bat Phu Khwai Ngoen*, The Myth of *Phra Bat Buabok*, The Myth of *Phra Bat Phu Singh*, The Myth of *Phra Bat Phra That Choeng Chum*, and one other myth. The research follows a systematic approach:

1. Collecting folk narratives about Buddha's footprint from documents and interviews with Isan Thai people.
2. Analyzing and interpreting these folk narratives using theoretical concepts and folklore research methods. This approach helps provide a deeper understanding of imagination, beliefs, and the cultural role in human thought.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The study of folk narratives about Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai culture reveals the imagination, beliefs, and cultural roles that influence human thought. Four main themes were found: 1) the idea of evangelizing Buddhism, 2) the concept of preaching and practicing Dhamma, 3) the act of imprinting Buddha's footprint, and 4) the tradition of paying homage to Buddha's footprint. Each theme is explored in detail.

Examining the folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan communities has uncovered recurring events that highlight significant cultural roles, as detailed below.

### **The Idea of Evangelizing Buddhism**

The act of traveling to promote Buddhism involves characters journeying to different lands to make the religion known and respected. In Isan Thai folk narratives about Buddha's footprint, this often includes the direct imprinting of Buddha's footprints. Some stories describe characters traveling from the Lanka continent to leave their footprints in this region. Nonetheless, the method of travel varies: some narratives show consistency while others differ. The stories typically depict two main modes of travel: by air or water. Most often, these narratives highlight travel by flying. Additionally, the journey to promote Buddhism can involve a single character or a group traveling together. Examples of Isan Thai folk narratives about Buddha's footprint include the myth of *Phra Phutthabat Wern Pla*, the myth of *Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok*, the myth of *Phra Phutthabat Phu Khwai Ngoen*.

The myth of *Phra Phutthabat Wern Pla* (Nakhon Phanom Province) emphasizes the significance of the Wern Pla Buddha's footprint, which is mentioned in the myth of *Phra Urangkhatbat* since the construction of *Phra That Phanom*. The story tells how, after reaching enlightenment, the Lord Buddha journeyed to spread Dhamma across the Indian subcontinent and the Mekong Basin. He traveled through the air, following the Mekong River, where he encountered the Nagas and *Phaya Pla Pak Kham*, a believer in Buddhism who transformed into a monk and invited him to teach Dhamma underground. Before returning to the human world, the Nagas and *Phaya Pla Pak Kham* requested a sacred representation of the Lord Buddha to honor him. In response, the Buddha imprinted his footprint on a rock, creating the footprint of *Phra Phutthabat Wern Pla* that remains to this day. During the rainy season, the rising water level of the Mekong River submerges the Buddha's footprint, believed to be a site of worship for mysterious beings beneath the city. When the dry season arrives, the Mekong water level drops, revealing the footprint and allowing Thai and Lao people to worship it. The Wern Pla footprint is located on a large rock in the middle of the Mekong River within a whirlpool, which is why villagers refer to it as "Wern" for its location in the whirlpool. The site is also known as "Wern Pla" because it is the dwelling of *Phaya Pla Pak Kham*.

The myth of *Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok* in Udon Thani Province recounts how the Lord Buddha flew along the edge of the world to defeat two Naga brothers at *Phu Ku Wian* (Phu Phra Bat). After overcoming the two Nagas, the Buddha left his footprints in two locations: *Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok* and *Phra Phutthabat Bua Ban*.

The myth of *Phra Phutthabat Phu Khwai Ngoen* in Loei Province takes place during the time of the Lord Buddha. The story describes the Buddha and his disciples traveling by air across the world to spread Buddhism in the Mekong River Basin. This journey demonstrated the Buddha's compassion for both humans and animals, as he aimed to show mercy and promote spiritual teachings.



**Figure 1** *Phra Bat Wern Pla* (Buddha's Footprint), Wern Phra Bat Subdistrict, Tha Uthen District, Nakhon Phanom Province and *Phu Khwai Ngoen*'s Footprint, Chiang Khan District, Loei Province. (Photos by researchers, 2019)

In the myths discussed, flying is a common method of travel referenced in stories about Buddha's footprint during the period when the Lord Buddha was alive. These narratives depict the Lord Buddha and his disciples journeying from the Indian subcontinent to demonstrate mercy to all living beings in the land of *Suvarnabhumi*. The method of flying through the air is often described in the myths as "*Phra Chao Liap Lok*" (Buddha flying through the air), emphasizing the Lord Buddha's supernatural powers and sacred nature. It conveys his ability to travel through the sky and showcases his transcendental state, which Thai Isan people can easily comprehend. The act of flying to spread Buddhism symbolizes the Buddha's role as an "angel" who brings Dhamma teachings to people of various places and beliefs, guiding them toward Buddhism. This portrayal highlights the sacredness of the Lord Buddha as the founder of Buddhism and reinforces the Isan Thai folk Buddhist perspective on his divine presence.

Many Buddhist stories emphasize the ability to fly, which is considered a supernatural power according to Buddhist beliefs. In Buddhism, this ability is seen as the first of the four magical powers (Khamana). The narratives suggest that only those who can fly have access to the Anodard Pond, with Lord Buddhas and Arahants reaching such places almost instantly (Snodgrass, 1998: 336). Coomarasamy (1997: 452) notes that flying requires wings, characteristic of angels, which gives these beings a divine form and the ability to move freely without physical limitations. Similarly, Eliade (1960: 106) interprets flying as symbolizing a state beyond the material world and freedom from earthly constraints. This ability reflects the exceptional power of the Lord Buddha and his noble disciples.

In terms of land travel, the journeys often involve walking through forests, over mountains, or other more conventional travel methods. The individuals depicted are typically monks or ordinary people without miraculous powers. This type of journey usually represents travel from the Indian subcontinent to Suvarnabhumi, with the goal of leaving Buddha's footprints on the Lord Buddha's relics. For instance, in the myth of *Phra Bat Phonson* (Bolikhramchai Province, Lao PDR), it is said that the Lord Buddha and his disciples traveled to the Mekong River Basin, leaving his footprints as a spiritual anchor and a symbol of his journey to spread Buddhism, known as "showing clemency to animals" in the area.

After the Lord Buddha attained nirvana, many Buddhists embarked on pilgrimages to sites connected to his life, such as his birthplace, place of enlightenment, location of his first sermon, and site of his passing into nirvana. This reverence for places associated with the Buddha led to the emergence of additional sacred sites: locations where the Buddha's footprints are said to be enshrined. These sites are believed to mark lands the Buddha visited during his lifetime and have become destinations for worship and homage. This tradition illustrates the concept of pilgrimage in Buddhism, where devotees travel to honor revered aspects of the faith. It underscores the idea of the Indian subcontinent as a sacred realm or center of Buddhism, drawing people from afar to venerate its sacred sites.

### **The Concept of Preaching and Practicing Dhamma**

A sermon refers to the act of preaching a lecture on the teachings of the Dhamma, as discovered by the Lord Buddha (Phradhammapitaka, 2000: 452). It encompasses the thoughts and teachings of the Buddha and his disciples. The first sermon in the history of Buddhism was delivered after the Buddha attained enlightenment and is known as the "First Sermon." This inaugural sermon is called "*Dhammajakkappavattana Sutta*" and was delivered to the Panchavaggi at the Isipattana Maruekhathayawan Forest in Varanasi.

Upon analyzing the Thai Isan people's folk narratives about the Buddha's footprint, it was found that these tales include significant events that occurred after the Buddha's enlightenment. These events often contrast with the established history of the Buddha. After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha is said to have traveled and preached sermons to various parts of the Indian subcontinent, ultimately arriving at the last land he remembered and felt compelled to visit, known as "*Suvarnabhumi*," before entering nirvana. This journey was seen as a necessary part of the Buddha's duty, aligning with the traditions of Buddhahood. The stories suggest that the Buddha Gautama came to Suvarnabhumi to share teachings and free all beings from suffering, framing this visit as his final sermon. This portrayal contrasts with his first sermon and emphasizes the sacredness of the moment. It implies that the northeastern region of Thailand was significant in the Buddha's journey and teachings. For instance, the myth of *Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok* in Udon Thani Province describes how the Buddha, after gaining enlightenment, traveled to *Phu Ku Wian* (Phu Phra Bat) to show compassion to all living beings. He delivered a sermon to two Naga brothers known for causing frequent trouble to humans. After the Buddha defeated them and preached to them, they developed faith, declared themselves as upasakas, and adopted the Threefold Guide as their belief. This narrative underscores the Buddha's role in bringing enlightenment and harmony to the region.

Delivering sermons to guide sentient beings is viewed as a key Buddhist duty, particularly by the Thai Isan people. Lord Buddha, who achieved enlightenment independently, preached the Dharma to enlighten others. One of his main tasks as a Buddha was to spread his teachings and guide people to live according to his moral code. This aligns with the myth of *Phra Chao Liap Lok*, which describes the Buddha providing sermons to help

various beings attain physical, verbal, and mental happiness based on their accumulated merit. The Buddha's teachings promote respect, reverence, and moral principles as fundamental aspects of the religion.

It was found that stories involving the preaching of Dhamma in narratives about Buddha's footprints among Isan Thais encompass more than just spiritual teachings. These stories also include guidance on Dhamma conduct related to everyday life and traditional beliefs. In some cases, the narratives feature the direct words of the Lord Buddha or his disciples. For example, in the myth of *Pbra Chao Liap Lok*, the Buddha is said to have delivered a sermon instructing monks, novices, and laypeople on the proper conduct when paying homage to Buddha's footprint or relics. The teachings emphasized the need for individuals to purify themselves according to their respective precepts and to seek forgiveness and offer merit to the gods. Failure to do so could result in various forms of harm, such as physical ailments and other dangers. Proper worship and adherence to the precepts were deemed essential at sites where Buddha's footprint or relics were enshrined.

Preaching sermons serves as a path to guide listeners toward the profound truths of Buddhism, offering both laypeople and monks happiness and peace when they follow the teachings. In the myth of *Pbra Phutthabat Bua Bok* (Udon Thani Province), the Lord Buddha arrives at the Bua Bok Cave at *Phu Pbra Bat*, home to Milinthanak. Milinthanak attempts to harm the Buddha in various ways but ultimately fails. In the end, Milinthanak transforms into a human, seeks the Buddha's forgiveness, and receives a sermon from him. Although Milinthanak wishes to take ordination, the Buddha instead gives him the Threefold Guides as a refuge, urging him to change his life from one of harm to one of support in line with Buddhist teachings. In a similar tale, the myth of *Pbra Phutthabat Phu Khwai Ngern* (Loei Province) tells of the Lord Buddha visiting a town along the Mekong River. He encounters a giantess who eats humans, defeats her, and preaches the Dhamma to her. After listening to the teachings, the giantess transforms her ways, becomes a faithful follower of the Dhamma, and vows to dedicate herself to doing good and helping others. Through these narratives, the transformative power of the Buddha's sermons and their ability to inspire profound change in beings is evident.

In the history of Buddhism, King Ashoka the Great stands out as a figure who underwent a profound transformation. Initially known for his violent and aggressive nature, he waged wars that caused significant loss of life. However, after hearing the teachings of Buddhism, he developed a deep faith in the religion. Ashoka immersed himself in studying Buddhist principles and applying them to the governance of his kingdom, eventually earning the title of a great Dharmaraja, or righteous king (Harvey, 2013). Similar to Ashoka, narratives in Buddhist history tell of "evil giants and ferocious Nagas" who, after being exposed to Buddhist teachings, experience a transformation from malevolent beings to those deeply devoted to the Dhamma. They often attain the status of Sotapanna monks, indicating their entry onto the noble path of enlightenment.

The narratives so far highlight that the Buddha taught Dhamma to all people. When individuals contemplate the Dhamma preached in his sermons and apply it to their lives, they achieve the realization of the teachings. As Punyanupap (1997: 215-216) explains, Dhamma serves as a tool for refining body, speech, and mind. The Lord Buddha did not position himself as the central focus; instead, he centered his teachings on Dhamma, which represents truth, righteousness, and uprightness. His teachings were not based on speculation but were the product of his own realization and practice. He refrained from teaching about deities creating the world and did not seek worship for himself. Instead, he demonstrated that true veneration does not come from offering incense, candles, and flowers but from adhering to Dhamma through one's conduct. The Lord Buddha stressed the importance of practicing the principles of Dhamma in everyday life for all Buddhists.

Respecting the Buddha is a fundamental aspect of Buddhism. The Buddha, along with the Dhamma and Sangha, comprises the "Triple Gem," which serves as a sanctuary for all Buddhists. As stated in the Tripitaka (Collection of Minor Works, Works of the Doctrine, quoted in Phra Thepvedi, 1986): "Whoever takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha sees with complete wisdom: the nature of suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the Noble Eightfold Path leading to peace and the end of suffering. This is the safe refuge, the rich Dhamma, that frees people from all suffering." This concept underscores the importance of the

Triple Gem to Buddhists, who see themselves as followers of Buddhism, also known as "Buddha Mamaka." These individuals cultivate a pure mind rooted in faith in the Triple Gem.

### **The act of Imprinting the Buddha's Footprint**

Buddha's footprint symbolizes reverence and faith in Buddhism, a tradition that has been a part of Buddhist history for centuries. For instance, the story of King Ashoka the Great reveals how he constructed 84,000 stupas across India to house the Buddha's relics. He also commissioned the search and collection of the Buddha's relics to be placed in various stupas (Chaudhuri, 1971: 25; Dutt, 1962: 109). The enshrinement of the Buddha's footprint mirrors the placement of the Buddha's relics in various regions, reflecting faith and devotion in Buddhism. It also highlights the spread and flourishing of Buddhism in those areas.

In the folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai, there are recurring themes of journeys marking the Lord Buddha's footprints across Suvarnabhumi, which can be categorized into two types of events. The first involves the Lord Buddha himself imprinting his footprints in various locations after offering his hair as a relic for future stupa construction. The second event takes place after the Lord Buddha's passing, with discovered footprints believed to have been left during his travels while he was still alive. These narratives intertwine stories of the Buddha's relics and his imprints, enriching the overall account.

The myth of *Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok* in Udon Thani Province tells the story of two Naga brothers who requested the Buddha's footprint as an offering. The Buddha imprinted his footprint on a stone tablet at what is now known as *Phu Ku Wian* or *Phu Phra Bat*. Later, monks who settled and practiced Dharma in the area built a stupa to enshrine the Buddha's footprint, creating a sacred site for both humans and divine beings to worship. Similarly, the myth of *Phra Phutthabat Phu Khwai Ngoen* in Loei Province tells of poor farmers who offered food to the Buddha. The Buddha then ascended to the foot of *Phu Khwai Ngoen* Mountain in Chiang Khan District and found a suitable spot for his footprint on a large rock. After imprinting his footprint, he returned to Savatthi. The footprint was later discovered by people who built a mandapa to enshrine it, transforming the site into a sacred place for Buddhist worship.

The story above illustrates those who requested the Buddha's footprint to be imprinted in various locations including both non-human beings like the Naga and human characters such as farmers. This suggests that, initially, the journey to imprint the Buddha's footprints often involved the Naga requesting the footprint as an offering and a representation of the Buddha. The Buddha then left his footprint on stone slabs or terraces as a mark of his presence. The act of imprinting the Buddha's footprint during this time is intertwined with stories of supernatural beings and miraculous powers. Subsequently, efforts were made to preserve the Buddha's footprint, often through the construction of stupas and pagodas over them or by gilding them for added reverence. These practices make the footprints more visible to those tasked with preserving or discovering them, typically monks or groups of local villagers.

The Buddha's footprint holds great significance as an emblem of Buddhist identity and is considered one of the most important symbols in Buddhism. In the northeastern region of Thailand, also known as Isan, it is a common practice to establish religious sites that enshrine the Buddha's footprint. These footprints are often found in natural settings such as mountains, rock terraces, caves, or even on rocks in the middle of large rivers like the Mekong. Historically, many of these sites were originally associated with local beliefs, such as *Phu Phrabat*, which was once home to a Naga, or *Phu Khwai Ngoen*, which was inhabited by a giantess and was a place of worship for spirits. However, as Buddhism spread throughout the region, these sites were repurposed for Buddhist worship. For instance, in the myth of *Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok* in Udon Thani Province, the Buddha's footprint is now a significant religious site but was previously a dwelling for Nagas. Similarly, *Phu Khwai Ngoen* in Loei Province, where the Buddha's footprint is enshrined, was originally the abode of a giantess. As Buddhism became the dominant religion in Thailand, traditional sites of animism and other local beliefs gradually transformed into Buddhist places of worship. Pagodas and other religious structures were constructed to house and protect the Buddha's footprints, further establishing the religious identity and practices of the people in these areas.

The study of Isan folk narratives reveals that the Buddha's footprint is portrayed as a sacred symbol, specifically the sole of the foot, representing the Buddha's spiritual power and authority. This emblem is closely associated with the Buddha's ability to conquer malevolent forces or antagonistic characters. To grasp the significance of this symbolism, the researcher will examine the role and meaning of the Buddha's footprint as a representation of the Buddha's profound influence and honor.

The power and prestige of the Lord Buddha reflect his profound ability to inspire transformation in others, guiding their thoughts, attitudes, goals, and values in a specific direction. This influence can be exerted directly or indirectly on the intended audience. In Isan folklore, the Buddha's footprint symbolizes the Buddha's power and spiritual authority, showcasing him as a revered figure with supernatural abilities capable of overcoming malevolent forces. Examples from myths illustrate these themes.

The myth of *Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok* (Udon Thani Province) recounts the Buddha's journey to extend compassion to various animals across different locations. One day, the Lord Buddha resided at *Doi Nantakanghi* in Luang Prabang and became aware of the Nagas along the Mekong River who were fierce and often caused trouble for humans and animals. To free these beings from their suffering, the Buddha traveled to Tham Nong Bua Ban and Tham Bua Bok, the dwellings of the Nagas Kutthopana and Milinthanak. The Buddha imparted the Dhamma to Kutthopana Naga, inspiring him to gain faith and commit himself as an upasaka, taking refuge in the Threefold Guides for the rest of his life.

The myth of *Phra Phutthabat Phra That Choeng Chum* (Sakon Nakhon Province) recounts the Lord Buddha's visit to *Phu Kamphra*, a site near the Mekong River. During his visit, the Buddha delivered a sermon to *Phraya Suwanphingkar* and his wife, Phra Nang Narai Cheng Weng. Following this, the Buddha left his footprints on top of three existing footprints from his previous visits. In a gesture of deep reverence and devotion, *Phraya Suwanphingkar* removed his royal crown, adorned with gold and precious stones, and placed it on the footprints as an offering to the Lord Buddha.



**Figure 2** Four footprints are enshrined at the chapel of *Wat Phra That Choeng Chum*, Mueang District, Sakon Nakhon Province and *Phra Bat Bua Bok*, Ban Phue District, Udon Thani Province (Photos from <https://www.finearts.go.th/fad8/view/23891> and <https://bcudru.wixsite.com/phuthabath/boauboak> (Photos from website, 2024)

From the myths above, it is evident that the Buddha's footprint plays a significant role in reflecting the religious traditions of the Isan Thai people. These myths suggest that during the Buddha's time, the Lord Buddha traveled to this region, signifying the sacred land of Buddhism within the Isan communities. The presence of the Buddha's footprints serves as a symbol of divine connection and reverence, establishing this area as a holy place in Buddhist tradition. The tradition is exemplified in the myth of *Phra That Phanom* (Nakhon Phanom Province), which narrates the Lord Buddha's visit to *Phu Kamphra*, now located in present-day Nakhon Phanom Province. The story emphasizes the sanctity of the land, as three past Buddhas—*Phra Kakusantho*, *Phra Konagamana*, and *Phra Kassapa*—had previously visited the area to enshrine the Buddha's relics and leave their footprints. This has since become a revered tradition for future Buddhas, reinforcing the land's spiritual significance.



## **The Tradition of Paying Homage to Buddha's Footprint**

Paying homage to the Buddha's footprint signifies a demonstration of faith and acceptance of Buddhism. This reverence can manifest in various forms, such as paying homage to symbols of Buddhism, including the Lord Buddha, his Dhamma teachings, and his monastic community of monks and disciples. In some myths, this homage is depicted through offerings to the Lord Buddha, such as food, flowers, and water. Another way to show respect for Buddhism is by observing precepts and practicing Dhamma according to the Lord Buddha's teachings.

Worshiping the Buddha's footprint demonstrates a profound belief in Buddhism and reverence for its teachings. This is evident in the myths and folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai culture, where paying homage and showing respect signify virtue and merit-making. Characters in these stories who exhibit reverence for the Buddha's footprint often undergo a transformation in behavior and temperament, becoming more gentle and virtuous even if they were once cruel or malevolent. For instance, the myth of *Phra Phutthabat Bua Bok* (Udon Thani Province) tells of the Lord Buddha visiting *Phu Ku Wian* (Phu Phra Bat) and using his miraculous powers to calm two Naga brothers known for their fierce personalities. The Nagas, humbled by the Buddha's display of power, clasped their hands in worship. The Lord Buddha then gave them a Dhamma sermon, guiding them toward a righteous path. Similarly, the myth of Phra Buddha's Footprint at *Phra That Choeng Chum* (Sakon Nakhon Province) recounts how *Phraya Suwanphingkar* and his wife, *Phra Nang Narai Cheng Weng*, witnessed the Lord Buddha performing miraculous feats. The Buddha manifested three gems from his mouth, which inspired great faith in *Phraya Suwanphingkar*. Deeply moved, he offered prayers and bowed in respect to the Lord Buddha.

In the example of the myth in the folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai culture, worshiping reflects the central tenets of Buddhism and is an integral part of Buddhist practice. Paying homage is a meaningful way to honor the Buddhist religion and the teachings of the Buddha, serving as a form of respect and devotion within the Buddhist community. This act also represents the accumulation of merit through the practice of good deeds.

The act of worshiping through wai, a gesture of paying homage in Buddhism, holds significant symbolism. According to the Phradhammapitaka (2000: 728), paying homage is a fundamental principle of Buddhism and is closely linked to taking refuge in the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem signifies one's adherence to Buddhism, whether as an upasaka, upasika, or Sotapanna. Faith is a distinguishing trait among Buddhists at all levels, marked by unwavering trust and belief in the Triple Gem.

The concept of worship is a demonstration of paying homage to Buddhist beliefs and values, aiming to foster peace, order, and harmonious coexistence among all individuals. In the context of the myths in the folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai culture, paying homage also encompasses offering various items to the Buddha and his disciples as a sign of respect and devotion.

The myth of *Phra Phutthabat Phu Khwai Ngoen* (Loei Province) illustrates this tradition, where farmers brought food and water to offer to the Lord Buddha, as described: "The Lord Buddha traveled through the world to the land of Suvarnabhumi. He then spent the night by the side of *Phu Khwai Ngoen* mountain. The following morning, he partook of food offered to him by Umung villagers." This demonstrates the practice of giving alms as an essential Buddhist duty, fostering faith among all people. According to the Tripitaka, as referenced in the Phradhammapitaka (2000: 273), the Buddha emphasized the importance of monks practicing Dhamma and receiving alms from villagers, sharing the teachings of Dhamma in return. This mutual exchange nurtures a sense of devotion and community.

For laypeople, offering alms to monks is a significant Buddhist practice, representing support for those who dedicate themselves to the teachings of Dhamma. It is considered a meritorious act that aligns with ethical principles and cultivates a sense of spiritual growth.

In many folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai culture, it is noted that after laypeople offer alms to the Buddha, they may receive blessings such as relics of the Buddha's hair or his footprints. The Buddha would also offer a sermon to guide the faithful and reinforce their understanding of the teachings, thereby building faith and awareness of the truth.

## **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

An analysis of Isan Thai folk narratives and myths surrounding Buddha's footprint reveals several cultural roles within the context of Buddhist thought. These include the journey to evangelize Buddhism, the teaching and practice of Dhamma, and the imprinting or enshrinement of Buddha's footprint.

In conclusion, an examination of the events and actions of characters in Isan Thai myths surrounding Buddha's footprint reveals a shared behavior among monks and laypeople. This commonality is rooted in a deep faith in Buddhism and its principles. The behavior of both groups embodies key tenets of Buddhist thought: traveling to evangelize Buddhism, preaching and practicing Dhamma, and imprinting or enshrining Buddha's footprint. These actions reflect the belief that the people of Isan revere the Buddha as a powerful figure with dominion over the world, especially the realm of moral values. The Buddha is regarded as a divine being who can guide and influence human life, both in the everyday world and the spiritual Dhamma realm. Followers of Buddhism adhere to these principles as a path toward Dhamma, creating a foundation for sustained happiness, peace, and tranquility for individuals and the nation.

An analysis of the cultural ideas of Buddhism in the folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan Thai reveals distinct mythological language and concepts that differ from conventional expressions. Upon interpreting the language of the myth of Buddha's footprint, three central themes emerge: the idea of traveling to spread Buddhism, the idea of preaching and practicing Dhamma, and the idea of imprinting or enshrining the Buddha's footprint. These themes collectively convey a cultural understanding of acceptance and reverence for the Lord Buddha and his teachings.

The cultural role reflected in the folk narratives of Buddha's footprint in Isan has identified three key roles of the enshrinement of Buddha's footprint:

1. Reflection of Faith: The enshrinement of Buddha's footprint serves as a testament to the faith in Buddhism, leading to the establishment of sacred religious sites for worship.
2. Creation of Sacred Spaces: By enshrining the Buddha's footprint, sacred places for worship and merit-making are established, bringing happiness and prosperity to the community.
3. Identification of Sacred Land: The places where Buddha's footprints are enshrined are regarded as sacred, signifying the belief that these lands hold spiritual importance.

These roles highlight the Isan people's perspective that the creation, enshrinement, and preservation of Buddha's footprint contribute to their spiritual and communal well-being. This cultural practice enriches the lives of Isan people by sustaining their faith and maintaining the prosperity of their spiritual heritage.

## **REFERENCES**

- Achito, C. (2009). *Following the Footsteps of the Buddha*, Volume 1. Bangkok: Yellow printing.
- Chaudhuri, P. (1971). *Buddhist sites in ancient India*. Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya University.
- Condominas, G. (1975). Phiban cults in rural Laos. In G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch. (Ed). *Change and persistence in Thai society: essays in honor of Lauriston Sharp*. Ithaca : Cornell University Press.
- Coomaraseamy, A. K. (1997). *Selected Papers 1: Traditional Art and Symbolism, 2 Metaphysics*. Bollingen Series. Princeton: New Jersey.
- Dutt, S. (1962). *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India: their history and their contribution to Indian culture*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Eliade, M. (1960). *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*. London: Harvill Press.
- Elaine, M. (1995). Feet. In Mircea Eliade (Ed.). *The Encyclopedia of Religion* 5. (pp. 301-302). New York: Macmillan Library Reference, U.S.A.
- Harvey, P. (2013). *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press.

*Buddha's Footprint in Folk Narratives in the Northeastern Region of Thailand: Imagination, Belief, and the Cultural Roles*

- Jaruworn, P. (2004). Conflict and compromise in Thai myths. Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Thai, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). The structural anthropology. New York: Basic Book.
- Na Thalang, S. (2020). Folklore Theory: Methodology for analyzing legends and folktales. Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press.
- Phradhammapitaka. (2000). Buddha's Dharma. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.
- Phrathepvedi. (1986). Buddhist teachings. Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University.
- Punyanupap, S. (1997). Religious history. Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya University.
- Snodgrass, A. (1998). The symbol of the stupa. In Sirikan, P. and Kanaori, T. (Ed). Bangkok: Amarin Publishing House.
- Tambiah, S. J. (1970). Buddhism and the Spirit Cults in North-East Thailand. Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press.