

Concept Note

Symposium on “Buddhist cosmopolitanism and exchange along the silk road: Interplay between Buddhism and trade in ancient Asia”

In honour of Vesak, which commemorates the birth, the enlightenment, and the passing of the Buddha, a symposium will be organized by the Permanent Delegation of Sri Lanka under the auspices of UNESCO on 12 May 2025 to explore the interplay between Buddhism and trade in ancient Asia, underscoring the role of Buddhist communities as mediators of culture, trade, and artistic traditions. Through textual narratives, archaeological findings, and art historical perspectives, the presentation will reveal how Buddhism became a cornerstone of social and cultural networks.

The symposium follows the historic adoption of Decision 219 EX/27 on the Commemoration of the International Day of Vesak at UNESCO by the UNESCO Executive Board at its 219th Session. The Decision underscores UNESCO's enduring commitment to promoting peace and intercultural dialogue through the profound values embedded in Vesak.

The symposium will focus on the symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and trade in ancient South and Southeast Asia. It will demonstrate how images and associated symbols can be seen as the visual manifestations of social, commercial, and religious networks, and will illuminate patterns of circulation and exchange between India and Sri Lanka in particular, and more broadly across the Indian Ocean.

The symposium will outline how, from its early history, Buddhism was closely linked with the merchant class, which came to support Buddhist monasteries and other institutions. Buddhist communities were established along trade routes linking important political and economic centres, where they provided hospitality for merchants and other travelers. This positioned Buddhist practice to spread dramatically as merchants within the Buddhist tradition expanded the geographical range of their commercial activities. The growth of the maritime mercantile networks, in particular, facilitated the movement of Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka and then to Southeast Asia. Within this process, Buddhism was not merely a passive recipient of the largesse of the merchant classes but actively promoted itself as “protector” of trade, as mediated through rich textual and visual narratives and the development of divine cults.

The symposium will open with a keynote address by Prof. Osmund Bopearachchi, Corresponding Member of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres and Emeritus Director of Research at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS-ENS).

The keynote address will be followed by a panel discussion featuring distinguished scholars: Prof. Jean-Noël Robert, Member of the Académie des inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Paris; Prof. Vincent Lefèvre, Professor of South and Southeast Asian archaeology and art history at Sorbonne University, Paris; Dr. Ms. Ariane de Saxcé, Research Associate - South Asia, German Archaeological Institute, Bonn; and Mr. Shabahang Mehrdad, UNESCO's specialist of the Silk Roads programme.

The highlights of the symposium include:

1. The Role of Trade in the Spread of Buddhism

- Merchant networks as conduits for Buddhist ideas and artistic traditions.
- Buddhist monasteries along trade routes serving as hubs of hospitality and exchange.

2. Visual Manifestations of Commercial and Cultural Exchange

- How Buddhist symbols, images, and iconographies reflect interconnected commercial and religious systems.
- The development of a vibrant Buddhist artistic tradition influenced by India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia.

3. Cultural Crossroads in the Maritime Networks

- The transmission of esoteric Buddhism and the movement of Buddhist merchants, monks, and teachers across the Indian Ocean to China and beyond.
- The role of Sinhalese ambassadors and Buddhist nuns in shaping Chinese monastic life and iconographic traditions.

The symposium will also highlight the role of Buddhist cosmopolitanism in fostering intercultural dialogue. From the contributions of traveling monks like Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra to the establishment of monastic communities along trade routes, Buddhism played a pivotal role in connecting diverse civilizations. These exchanges enriched Buddhist traditions, encouraged mutual understanding, and stimulated the creation of new artistic and cultural forms that blended local aesthetics with shared spiritual ideals.

Keynote Speaker

Professor Osmund Bopearachchi, Corresponding Member of the French Academy of Inscriptions and Belles Lettres, is a distinguished scholar whose expertise spans numismatics, art history, and archaeology. As the Emeritus Director of Research at the French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS-ENS), Paris, and a former Visiting Professor at Paris-Sorbonne University and University of California, Berkeley, he has made monumental contributions to the study of ancient civilizations.

A graduate of the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, and Paris 1 Sorbonne University, where he earned a doctorate in 1987, Prof. Bopearachchi has meticulously cataloged pre-Sasanian coins and linked numismatics with the iconography of Gandhāran art. His fieldwork and research across museums and archaeological sites in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and beyond have yielded groundbreaking publications, including 16 books and over 150 articles, earning numerous accolades such as the George Perrot Medal and the L'ordre des Palmes Académiques from the French government.

As Director of the French-Sri Lankan Archaeological Mission, Prof. Bopearachchi has spearheaded innovative projects exploring Sri Lanka's maritime trade and Buddhist art, including the use of GIS mapping to analyze historical patterns. His work continues to illuminate the interconnectedness of ancient cultures, making him a leading figure in the study of Buddhist cosmopolitanism.

April 2025