

# POWER, KAMMA, AND KINGSHIP: POLITICAL COSMOLOGY IN THE TRAI PHUM PHRA RUANG

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## Abstract

The Trai Phum Phra Ruang is traditionally recognized as a foundational Buddhist cosmological text in Thai intellectual history. While previous studies have emphasized its religious and metaphysical dimensions, its political significance has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. This article argues that the Trai Phum Phra Ruang functions as a form of Buddhist political cosmology in which power, social hierarchy, and kingship are legitimized through the moral law of kamma rather than divine right or coercive authority. By analyzing the interrelationship between cosmology, moral causation, and political order, the study demonstrates how the text constructs a normative model of kingship grounded in ethical responsibility, merit accumulation, and adherence to the Dhamma. The king is portrayed as a moral exemplar whose authority is conditioned by ethical conduct and karmic consequence, thereby subjecting political power to moral accountability. Furthermore, the vivid cosmological narratives of reward and punishment operate as mechanisms of social discipline that align individual behavior with collective order. The article concludes that the political vision embedded in the Trai Phum Phra Ruang offers enduring insights into the ethical foundations of authority and governance, contributing to broader discussions in Buddhist ethics, political philosophy, and comparative religious studies.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Political Cosmology, Kamma, Trai Phum Phra Ruang

## Introduction

The Trai Phum Phra Ruang occupies a foundational position in the intellectual and religious history of Thai Buddhism and has long been regarded as one of the most influential Buddhist texts in pre-modern Thailand. Traditionally attributed to King Lithai of the Sukhothai period, the text is commonly interpreted as a comprehensive exposition of Buddhist

cosmology, describing the structure of the universe, the three realms of existence, and the processes of rebirth governed by kamma. Scholarly studies have shown that the Trai Phum Phra Ruang played a central role in shaping Thai Buddhist worldview, moral imagination, and religious education for centuries, functioning as both a doctrinal reference and a didactic narrative for rulers and laypeople alike (Reynolds, 1976; Gethin, 1998).

However, limiting the interpretation of the Trai Phum Phra Ruang to cosmology and soteriology alone risks overlooking its broader social and political significance. Recent scholarship in Buddhist studies and political philosophy has increasingly emphasized that Buddhist cosmological texts often encode implicit theories of power, authority, and social order (Tambiah, 1976; Collins, 1998). In this light, the cosmological structure presented in the Trai Phum Phra Ruang does not merely describe the universe as it is, but also prescribes how society ought to be organized. Hierarchies of realms, beings, and moral consequences function symbolically to legitimize political hierarchy and ethical governance within a Buddhist moral universe. Cosmology thus becomes a normative framework through which power and authority are morally interpreted and socially justified.

This article argues that the Trai Phum Phra Ruang should be understood as a form of Buddhist political cosmology in which kamma operates as the central principle linking cosmic order, moral conduct, and kingship. Within this framework, political authority is not grounded in divine right, hereditary absolutism, or coercive force, but in accumulated merit and ethical leadership aligned with the law of kamma. Kingship is portrayed as a moral vocation rather than a mere institution of power, subject to ethical responsibility and karmic consequence. By analyzing the interplay between power, kamma, and kingship, this study demonstrates that the Trai Phum Phra Ruang offers a normative model of political legitimacy grounded in Buddhist moral causation—one that continues to provide valuable insights for the study of religion, ethics, and political thought in both historical and contemporary contexts.

## **Buddhist Cosmology and Political Order**

In Buddhist thought, cosmology is inseparable from ethics and social order, as the structure of the universe is understood to be shaped by moral causation rather than divine creation or randomness. The division of existence into the three realms—*Kāma*vacara (the sense-desire realm), *Rūpa*vacara (the form realm), and *Arūpa*vacara (the formless realm)—represents not merely metaphysical categories but graded moral conditions determined by intentional action (kamma). In the Trai Phum Phra Ruang, this cosmological framework is elaborated in narrative and descriptive detail, portraying the cosmos as a moral landscape in which beings occupy positions corresponding to their accumulated ethical conduct. As Reynolds (1976) and Gethin (1998) have noted, such cosmological schemes function

pedagogically, teaching moral responsibility through vivid representations of karmic consequence.

Within this moralized cosmos, social and political hierarchy appears as an extension of ethical causality. The Trai Phum Phra Ruang suggests that distinctions between rulers and subjects, elites and commoners, are not arbitrary products of force or convention but reflections of karmic differentiation. This view aligns with a broader Theravāda Buddhist understanding in which worldly status is interpreted as the result of merit (puñña) accumulated across lifetimes (Collins, 1998). Political order thus mirrors cosmic order: just as beings ascend or descend among realms according to moral quality, individuals rise or fall within social hierarchies according to ethical action.

Kingship, in this context, is embedded within a comprehensive moral universe governed by kamma. The ruler occupies a privileged position not solely because of lineage or institutional power, but because kingship is interpreted as the karmic fruition of past generosity, discipline, and wisdom. Tambiah (1976) has shown that in traditional Southeast Asian Buddhist polities, such cosmological ideas legitimated political authority while simultaneously constraining it. The king is powerful precisely because he is morally accountable to cosmic law; failure to govern ethically risks karmic decline and political instability. Political authority is therefore transformed from entitlement into moral responsibility.

Philosophically, this cosmological-political model challenges modern distinctions between religion and politics by integrating metaphysical belief with normative governance. The Trai Phum Phra Ruang does not advocate blind obedience to rulers; rather, it frames political power within an ethical horizon that transcends individual will. By situating kingship within the law of kamma, the text articulates a form of moral realism in which justice is ultimately grounded in cosmic causation rather than human decree. This vision of political order underscores the Buddhist conviction that sustainable authority must be ethically justified, socially beneficial, and aligned with the moral structure of reality itself (Gethin, 1998; Collins, 1998).

## **Kamma as the Basis of Political Legitimacy**

In the Trai Phum Phra Ruang, kamma functions as the central explanatory principle linking individual action, social hierarchy, and political authority. Unlike Western political theories that often ground legitimacy in social contracts, sovereignty, or divine command, the Buddhist political imagination situates authority within a moral-causal framework. Power is not an inherent right but a conditional outcome of intentional action accumulated over time. Kingship, therefore, is understood as the karmic fruition of past generosity, moral discipline, and wisdom, rather than merely the result of conquest or hereditary succession (Gethin, 1998; Reynolds, 1976). This view embeds political authority within a broader ethical universe governed by causal law rather than arbitrary will.

Within this framework, the legitimacy of a ruler depends not only on past merit but also on present ethical conduct. The Trai Phum Phra Ruang repeatedly emphasizes royal virtues such as *dāna* (generosity), *sīla* (moral discipline), and *mettā-karuṇā* (loving-kindness and compassion) as conditions for sustaining power. Kingship is thus conceived as an ongoing moral practice rather than a fixed status. As Keown (2005) argues, Buddhist ethics does not separate moral character from social role; ethical excellence is inseparable from legitimate authority. A king who fails to embody these virtues undermines the karmic basis of his rule, regardless of institutional strength.

This conception places clear ethical constraints on political power. A ruler who governs unjustly, exploits subjects, or disregards moral norms risks karmic decline that may manifest as social unrest, natural calamities, or loss of political stability. Political failure, in this cosmological vision, is not merely a result of poor strategy or economic weakness but a moral consequence rooted in unwholesome kamma. Tambiah (1976) has shown that in Theravāda Buddhist polities, such interpretations provided a powerful moral critique of rulers, enabling subjects to understand political disorder as ethically meaningful rather than random. Kamma thus operates as a form of supra-institutional accountability that transcends legal enforcement.

Philosophically, the use of kamma as a basis of political legitimacy offers a distinctive alternative to coercive or procedural models of authority. It integrates power with moral responsibility by insisting that political authority is ultimately answerable to an impersonal moral law rather than human decree. As Sivaraksa (2004) observes, this karmic conception of power provides resources for ethical resistance, allowing unjust rule to be criticized without invoking rebellion against cosmic order. In the Trai Phum Phra Ruang, kamma therefore functions simultaneously as a legitimizing principle, a regulatory mechanism, and a moral horizon within which kingship must continually justify itself.

### **Kingship as Moral Exemplarity**

The Trai Phum Phra Ruang presents kingship as a form of moral exemplarity in which the ruler's ethical conduct directly shapes the well-being and stability of the kingdom. This conception resonates strongly with the Theravāda Buddhist ideal of the *dharmarāja*, the righteous king who governs in accordance with the Dhamma rather than through coercive power alone. In this model, political authority is inseparable from ethical self-cultivation; the king's inner moral qualities—such as generosity, restraint, and compassion—are believed to manifest outwardly in social harmony and cosmic balance (Tambiah, 1976; Reynolds, 1976). Kingship thus functions as a moral institution embedded within a karmically ordered universe.

Philosophically, this vision of rulership emphasizes ethical leadership over absolute sovereignty. Authority is not secured permanently by lineage or military strength but must be

continually renewed through virtuous action. The king's legitimacy depends on ongoing moral performance, reflecting the Buddhist understanding that all conditioned states are impermanent and subject to change (anicca). As Gethin (1998) notes, Buddhist ethics consistently links moral character with social responsibility, suggesting that leadership without virtue is inherently unstable. The Trai Phum Phra Ruang extends this ethical logic to the political sphere, portraying kingship as an ethically demanding role rather than an unconditional privilege.

Moreover, the cosmological narrative of the Trai Phum Phra Ruang serves an important pedagogical function for both rulers and subjects. By depicting the cosmic consequences of moral and immoral rulership, the text educates kings about the ethical conditions necessary for maintaining authority while simultaneously instructing subjects in the moral logic underlying social hierarchy. Respect for political authority is encouraged, but it is framed as conditional upon the ruler's conformity to ethical norms. This reciprocal moral framework discourages blind obedience and instead promotes an understanding of power as morally accountable (Jackson, 2003).

In this sense, kingship in the Trai Phum Phra Ruang is best understood as a performative moral role situated within a larger cosmological order. The ruler embodies ethical ideals that sustain both cosmic and social equilibrium, while failure to do so invites decline through karmic causation. As Tambiah (1976) observes, this Buddhist political imagination provides a non-authoritarian critique of power by locating ultimate authority in moral law rather than in individuals. Kingship as moral exemplarity thus functions as a normative model that integrates ethics, cosmology, and governance into a coherent vision of political legitimacy.

## Political Cosmology and Social Discipline

Beyond legitimizing kingship, the Trai Phum Phra Ruang also functions as a powerful mechanism of social discipline by embedding moral regulation within a cosmological framework. Through detailed and often graphic descriptions of hell realms (niraya), the text illustrates the severe consequences of immoral actions such as violence, deception, greed, and disrespect toward social and religious authority. These depictions are not merely metaphysical speculation but serve a pedagogical purpose, shaping moral imagination and ethical behavior. Scholars have noted that fear of karmic retribution and aspiration for favorable rebirth operate as internalized forms of discipline that guide conduct without reliance on constant external coercion (Collins, 1998; Gethin, 1998).

In this respect, political cosmology in the Trai Phum Phra Ruang aligns individual self-interest with collective order. Ethical conformity is framed as beneficial not only for social harmony but also for one's long-term karmic destiny. Obedience to authority, respect for hierarchy, and adherence to moral norms are presented as actions with direct cosmological consequences. This integration of ethics and cosmology transforms social discipline into a

voluntary, self-regulating process grounded in belief rather than force. Such a system reduces the need for overt punishment by cultivating moral restraint through internalized ethical awareness (Tambiah, 1976).

Importantly, this cosmological discipline does not function solely through fear but also through aspiration. The detailed portrayal of heavenly realms (*sagga*) and higher states of rebirth provides positive moral incentives, encouraging generosity, moral discipline, and social responsibility. By linking virtuous conduct to social recognition and cosmic reward, the text reinforces desirable behavior while sustaining existing social hierarchies. Scholars of Southeast Asian Buddhism have observed that this dual mechanism—fear of punishment and hope for reward—played a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion in premodern Buddhist polities (Reynolds, 1976; Jackson, 2003).

From a contemporary perspective, the disciplinary function of political cosmology invites critical reflection. While such a system can promote ethical conduct and social stability, it may also reinforce unequal power relations by naturalizing hierarchy and discouraging dissent. Nevertheless, when interpreted symbolically rather than literally, the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* offers insight into how moral narratives shape social behavior and political order. Its integration of cosmology, ethics, and discipline demonstrates that governance operates not only through institutions and laws but also through shared moral imaginaries that influence how individuals understand responsibility, authority, and the consequences of action.

## Contemporary Reflections

Modern readers may initially find the cosmological worldview of the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* incompatible with contemporary scientific understandings of the universe. The depiction of layered realms of existence, karmic rebirth, and cosmic hierarchy appears distant from empirical cosmology and secular political theory. However, scholars of religion and political philosophy have emphasized that such cosmological systems need not be interpreted literally in order to retain philosophical relevance. When read symbolically, Buddhist cosmology functions as a moral language through which social order, ethical responsibility, and political legitimacy are articulated (Tambiah, 1976; Jackson, 2003). From this perspective, the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* remains a valuable resource for reflecting on the moral foundations of power.

Interpreted in this way, the text offers a powerful critique of modern political paradigms that prioritize efficiency, technocratic rationality, or nationalist authority while marginalizing ethical accountability. Contemporary governance systems often rely on legal compliance, bureaucratic performance, or economic growth as primary measures of legitimacy. In contrast, the *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* insists that political authority must be evaluated in moral terms, linking power directly to intention, virtue, and long-term consequences. This ethical framing resonates with contemporary critiques of instrumental

rationality, which argue that political systems detached from moral values risk eroding social trust and human dignity (Keown, 2005; Sen, 2009).

The emphasis on kamma as moral causation also challenges purely procedural or legalistic models of governance. Rather than viewing political responsibility as limited to rule-following or institutional compliance, the karmic framework highlights the cumulative effects of intention and action over time. Political decisions are not morally neutral acts confined to the present moment but are embedded in causal chains that shape future social conditions. This perspective aligns with contemporary ethical approaches that stress responsibility, sustainability, and the ethical consequences of power beyond immediate outcomes (Gethin, 1998; Sivaraksa, 2004).

In this respect, the Trai Phum Phra Ruang continues to offer a rich conceptual framework for interdisciplinary dialogue among political philosophy, Buddhist ethics, and comparative studies of authority. Its symbolic integration of cosmology, morality, and governance provides an alternative vision of political legitimacy grounded in ethical self-cultivation and moral responsibility. Far from being an obsolete relic of premodern thought, the text invites modern readers to reconsider how power might be reoriented toward justice, compassion, and long-term moral accountability in an increasingly complex political world.

## Conclusion

The Trai Phum Phra Ruang is more than a cosmological text; it is a sophisticated articulation of political cosmology that integrates power, kamma, and kingship into a unified moral vision. By grounding political authority in moral causation rather than divine command or coercive force, the text presents an ethical model of governance rooted in Buddhist principles. Kingship is portrayed as a moral vocation subject to karmic law, ethical responsibility, and cosmic order.

This study has shown that the political dimension of the Trai Phum Phra Ruang deserves greater scholarly attention. Its vision of power as morally conditioned remains a compelling alternative to modern conceptions of authority divorced from ethical accountability. As such, the text continues to offer enduring insights into the relationship between ethics, religion, and political life.

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