

TRAI PHUM PHRA RUANG: FROM BUDDHIST COSMOLOGY TO THE ETHICS OF LIBERATION

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Abstract

Trai Phum Phra Ruang, one of the most influential texts in Thai Buddhist intellectual history, has conventionally been interpreted as a cosmological account of the universe and the cycle of rebirth. This article argues, however, that beyond its cosmological descriptions, the text articulates a coherent ethical vision grounded in the Buddhist path to liberation. Rather than functioning merely as a depiction of the three worlds—*Kāṃāvacara*, *Rūpāvacara*, and *Arūpāvacara*—Trai Phum Phra Ruang is examined as a moral and pedagogical framework aimed at ethical cultivation and liberation from *saṃsāra*. By reinterpreting Buddhist cosmology as symbolic and normative, this study emphasizes the central role of karma, moral causality, and spiritual development in shaping a Buddhist ethics of liberation. It further contends that Trai Phum Phra Ruang retains contemporary relevance as an ethical map guiding human conduct, rather than as a literal cosmological model.

Keywords: Buddhist cosmology, Ethics, karma, Liberation, Trai Phum Phra Ruang

Introduction

Trai Phum Phra Ruang occupies a central place in the intellectual and religious history of Thai Buddhism, functioning for centuries as a foundational text for religious education, moral instruction, and the formation of a shared cultural worldview. Traditionally attributed to King Lithai of the Sukhothai period, the text systematically presents a Buddhist cosmological model structured around the law of karma and rebirth. Its detailed descriptions of the three realms of existence—*Kāṃāvacara*, *Rūpāvacara*, and *Arūpāvacara*—have long served as a pedagogical framework through which Buddhist teachings were transmitted to both monastic and lay

communities (Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982). Owing to its vivid imagery and hierarchical cosmology, scholarly interpretations have often approached Trai Phum Phra Ruang as a pre-modern cosmological treatise shaped by mythological and symbolic imagination rather than as a work of philosophical reflection.

However, an exclusive focus on cosmological description risks overlooking the deeper philosophical and ethical intentions embedded in the text. In Buddhist thought, cosmology is inseparable from moral causality and spiritual practice, as the structure of the universe is understood to reflect the ethical quality of intentional actions (kamma). As scholars of Buddhist philosophy have noted, the depiction of multiple realms of rebirth functions less as a literal map of the universe and more as a moral framework illustrating the consequences of desire, attachment, and ignorance (Gethin, 1998; Harvey, 2013). Within this interpretive context, Trai Phum Phra Ruang can be read as a normative discourse that seeks to explain not only where beings are reborn but why such rebirth occurs, thereby emphasizing ethical responsibility and spiritual accountability.

This article proposes a reinterpretation of Trai Phum Phra Ruang as an ethical discourse oriented toward liberation (nibbāna) rather than as a purely cosmological narrative. By shifting the analytical focus from metaphysical description to ethical meaning, the study argues that the three worlds function as moral categories reflecting progressive levels of desire, mental refinement, and spiritual maturity. Such a reading aligns with contemporary scholarly approaches that emphasize Buddhism as a practical and ethical philosophy concerned with the transformation of human conduct and consciousness (Sivalaksa, 2004). Viewed in this light, Trai Phum Phra Ruang emerges as a moral map guiding practitioners from attachment-bound existence toward the ethical and cognitive conditions necessary for liberation.

Buddhist Cosmology as Moral Framework

In Buddhist thought, cosmology is inseparable from ethics, as the structure of the universe is understood to be governed by moral causality rather than by divine creation or chance. The division of existence into three realms—Kāṃāvacara (the sensual realm), Rūpāvacara (the form realm), and Arūpāvacara (the formless realm)—does not merely describe spatial or metaphysical locations but represents qualitative states of consciousness shaped by intentional action (kamma). Classical Buddhist texts consistently present cosmology as an ethical system in which rebirth reflects the moral and cognitive condition of beings (Gethin, 1998). From this perspective, cosmology functions as a normative framework that explains how ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom directly shape one's existential condition.

The Kāṃāvacara realm, which includes both states of happiness and suffering, is dominated by sensual desire and attachment. It encompasses human existence, various heavenly realms, and the realms of deprivation such as hell beings, animals, and ghosts. According to Buddhist ethical theory, actions rooted in greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) generate unwholesome kamma leading to rebirth in lower realms, whereas actions motivated by generosity, compassion, and moral restraint result in rebirth in more favorable conditions (Harvey, 2013). In this way, cosmology operates as an ethical mirror, reflecting the consequences of moral choices and reinforcing ethical responsibility within everyday human life.

The Rūpāvacara realm represents a higher level of ethical and meditative refinement, attained through the cultivation of concentration (jhāna). Beings reborn in these realms have transcended coarse sensual desire and developed stable mental discipline and moral purity. Buddhist scholars have emphasized that jhānic rebirth is not a reward granted externally but the natural outcome of sustained ethical conduct and mental training (Keown, 2005). The Rūpāvacara realm thus illustrates a deeper integration of ethics and meditation, showing that moral development and mental cultivation are inseparable stages on the Buddhist path.

The Arūpāvacara realm, characterized by formless meditation, represents the highest level of conditioned existence within saṃsāra. In these states, attachment to material form has been abandoned, and consciousness is refined to subtle levels of perception. Nevertheless, Buddhist doctrine consistently maintains that even these exalted states remain impermanent and subject to rebirth (Collins, 1998). This reinforces a crucial ethical insight: liberation cannot be achieved through cosmological ascent alone. Rather, true liberation requires the cultivation of wisdom (paññā) that penetrates the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and non-self nature of all conditioned existence. Cosmology, therefore, serves not as an ultimate goal but as a moral framework guiding practitioners toward ethical transformation and final liberation.

Karma and Ethical Causality

Central to Trai Phum Phra Ruang is the doctrine of karma, which functions as the ethical principle governing both individual destiny and the broader structure of the cosmos. Karma is not depicted as divine judgment or supernatural reward and punishment but as an impersonal law of moral causality linking intention (cetanā), action, and result. In classical Buddhist thought, it is intention rather than mere action that determines karmic outcome, emphasizing ethical responsibility at the level of consciousness (Gethin, 1998). Within Trai Phum Phra Ruang, this principle provides the underlying rationale for the hierarchical organization of the

three worlds, transforming cosmology into a moral map that reflects varying degrees of ethical and spiritual development.

This ethical framework implies that cosmological hierarchy corresponds directly to moral hierarchy. Rebirth in higher or lower realms is not arbitrary but reflects the cumulative moral quality of one's actions. As scholars have noted, Buddhist cosmology consistently portrays existence as ethically stratified, with each realm symbolizing a particular configuration of desire, attachment, and mental clarity (Harvey, 2013). In Trai Phum Phra Ruang, the cosmos thus becomes a mirror of ethical causality, where one's position in the universe is determined by one's moral and spiritual cultivation rather than by social status or divine favor.

Such an ethical interpretation challenges a purely literal reading of the text. While the heavens and hells of Trai Phum Phra Ruang are often described in vivid and concrete terms, their primary function is pedagogical rather than metaphysical. These realms illustrate the consequences of ethical and unethical conduct in a manner accessible to a broad audience. According to Reynolds and Reynolds (1982), the detailed depictions of suffering and bliss are intended to cultivate moral awareness, encouraging restraint from harmful actions and commitment to wholesome behavior. Cosmology, in this sense, becomes a narrative strategy for ethical education rather than a speculative account of the universe.

Fear of suffering and aspiration for happiness play a crucial role in this ethical pedagogy. Buddhist ethical theory recognizes that ordinary beings are often motivated by concern for personal well-being rather than abstract philosophical ideals. Trai Phum Phra Ruang skillfully employs this psychological insight by linking moral behavior to tangible outcomes across lifetimes. As Keown (2005) argues, Buddhist ethics does not reject consequential reasoning but integrates it within a broader framework aimed at moral transformation. The promise of favorable rebirth and the warning of suffering thus serve as provisional motivations guiding individuals toward ethical discipline, generosity, and mindfulness.

Ultimately, however, Trai Phum Phra Ruang situates karma and ethical causality within a larger soteriological horizon. While moral action may lead to rebirth in higher realms, even the most refined karmic results remain within *saṃsāra* and are subject to impermanence. This reinforces a central Buddhist insight emphasized in both canonical and post-canonical literature: ethical causality alone is insufficient for liberation without the development of liberating wisdom (*paññā*) (Collins, 1998). Karma structures the cosmos, but insight into the nature of conditioned existence is what ultimately transcends it. In this way, Trai Phum Phra Ruang presents karma not as an end in itself but as an ethical foundation upon which the path to liberation is built.

From Cosmology to the Ethics of Liberation

While Trai Phum Phra Ruang provides an extensive description of numerous realms of existence, its ultimate concern is not the attainment of higher rebirth but liberation from the entire cycle of conditioned existence. The text consistently emphasizes the impermanence (anicca) of all realms, including the highest formless states of existence. This emphasis reflects a fundamental Buddhist ethical insight: attachment to any form of existence, however refined or pleasurable, inevitably leads to suffering (dukkha). As Buddhist scholars have observed, cosmological hierarchies in Buddhist literature are often employed to demonstrate the limitations of conditioned happiness rather than to glorify celestial rebirth (Gethin, 1998; Collins, 1998).

From this perspective, the cosmological narrative of Trai Phum Phra Ruang implicitly directs readers beyond cosmology toward liberation (nibbāna). The text repeatedly underscores that even rebirth in exalted realms remains subject to decay and eventual downfall, reinforcing the Buddhist critique of all conditioned states. This moral emphasis aligns with canonical teachings that regard rebirth—even in the highest heavens—as ultimately unsatisfactory due to impermanence and lack of self (Harvey, 2013). Cosmology thus serves as a means to reveal the ethical insufficiency of worldly aspiration and to redirect attention toward the liberating path.

The ethical trajectory implied in Trai Phum Phra Ruang corresponds closely to the classical Buddhist path of moral conduct (sīla), mental discipline (samādhi), and wisdom (paññā). Although the text does not systematically expound the Noble Eightfold Path in philosophical terms, its cosmological structure presupposes these three dimensions of practice. Moral conduct conditions favorable rebirth, meditative discipline refines consciousness, and wisdom ultimately dismantles attachment to all forms of existence. Scholars have argued that such cosmological presentations function as implicit ethical curricula, guiding practitioners from moral restraint toward deeper insight (Keown, 2005; Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982).

Accordingly, the three worlds described in Trai Phum Phra Ruang may be reinterpreted not as literal destinations but as stages in ethical and spiritual development. Liberation, in this framework, does not consist in spatial transcendence or escape to a higher realm but in a radical transformation of understanding and ethical orientation. This interpretation resonates with contemporary Buddhist philosophy, which emphasizes liberation as a cognitive and ethical awakening rather than a metaphysical relocation (Collins, 1998). Read in this way, Trai Phum Phra Ruang emerges as a sophisticated ethical text that uses cosmology as a narrative device to articulate the path from moral causality to ultimate liberation.

Contemporary Relevance and Interpretation

In the modern intellectual context, traditional Buddhist cosmological models often appear to conflict with scientific understandings of the universe, particularly in fields such as astronomy and cosmology. When read literally, texts such as *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* may seem incompatible with contemporary scientific worldviews. However, many modern scholars argue that Buddhist cosmology was never intended as a scientific explanation of the physical universe but as a symbolic and ethical framework for understanding human experience (Gethin, 1998; Collins, 1998). When interpreted symbolically, the three worlds can be understood as metaphors for psychological and ethical states, reflecting varying degrees of attachment, mental refinement, and freedom rather than as spatial locations.

This symbolic and ethical reading allows *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* to retain its relevance in contemporary Buddhist ethics. The sensual, form, and formless realms can be interpreted as representing levels of craving, concentration, and cognitive subtlety within the human mind. Such an interpretation resonates with modern Buddhist psychology, which emphasizes the transformation of mental states as central to ethical development and liberation (Harvey, 2013). Rather than functioning as an outdated cosmological map, the text may thus be appreciated as a moral guide that encourages ethical responsibility, self-awareness, and mindful engagement with desire and attachment in everyday life.

Moreover, this approach aligns with contemporary scholarly interpretations that emphasize Buddhism as a practical and ethical philosophy rather than a speculative metaphysical system. Modern Buddhist thinkers and scholars have increasingly highlighted the pragmatic orientation of Buddhist teachings, focusing on their relevance to ethical decision-making, mental well-being, and social responsibility (Keown, 2005; Sivalaksa, 2004). Read in this light, *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* continues to offer valuable ethical insights, functioning as a moral map that guides individuals toward liberation through ethical conduct, mental cultivation, and wisdom, even within the context of a scientifically informed modern world.

Conclusion

This study has argued that *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* should be understood not merely as a cosmological text but as an ethical vision deeply rooted in the Buddhist path to liberation. While its vivid descriptions of the three worlds have often been interpreted as pre-modern cosmology, a closer philosophical analysis reveals that these depictions function primarily as a moral framework illustrating the law of karma and the ethical structure of existence. Consistent with broader Buddhist doctrinal traditions, cosmology in *Trai Phum Phra Ruang* serves to communicate the moral consequences of intention and action rather than to offer a literal explanation of the universe (Gethin, 1998; Reynolds & Reynolds, 1982).

By reinterpreting the three worlds as ethical and spiritual categories, this article has shown that Trai Phum Phra Ruang articulates a progressive vision of moral cultivation. The sensual, form, and formless realms correspond to increasing levels of ethical discipline, mental refinement, and detachment, while simultaneously demonstrating the limitations of all conditioned states. Even the highest realms remain impermanent and bound to *saṃsāra*, reinforcing the central Buddhist insight that liberation cannot be achieved through favorable rebirth alone but requires liberating wisdom (*paññā*) (Collins, 1998; Harvey, 2013). In this way, the text integrates cosmology, ethics, and soteriology into a coherent moral narrative oriented toward the cessation of suffering.

Finally, this ethical reinterpretation affirms the continuing relevance of Trai Phum Phra Ruang in contemporary Buddhist thought. When read symbolically rather than literally, the text offers a moral map that remains applicable within modern intellectual contexts shaped by scientific worldviews and ethical pluralism. As contemporary scholars have emphasized, Buddhism's enduring significance lies in its practical and ethical orientation rather than in metaphysical speculation (Keown, 2005; Sivalaksa, 2004). Viewed in this light, Trai Phum Phra Ruang continues to provide profound ethical insights, guiding individuals toward moral responsibility, self-understanding, and ultimately liberation from suffering.

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