

ON OBJECTS OF WORSHIP IN TRADITIONAL BUDDHIST TEMPLES IN THE NORTH OF VIETNAM

Lê Tâm Đắc ⁽¹⁾

1. The statues in Northern Buddhist temples describe history of Sakyamuni

As you know there is difference between Buddhist temples in the North and Khmer Buddhist temples in the South. According to Theravada Buddhist tradition, the history of Sakyamuni is manifested by pictures on the wall and on the ceiling of Khmer Buddhist temple. These pictures describe the important events in the life of Sakyamuni from he was born to he entered into Nirvana.

Most Buddhist temples in the North are Mahayanist. The history of Sakyamuni is manifested by statues. They are placed from low to high. The lowest level is statue of newly born - Sakyamuni. According to legend, when Sakymuni was born, nine dragons spouted water for his bath. The statue of newly born-Sakyamuni is an infant pointing his left hand to the sky and his right hand to the earth. This statue places under a curved vault figuring nine dragons flying in cloud, many gods, goddesses and eight Vajrapanis.

The statue of Sakaymuni in Himalayas is placed in the fourth level or third level. This statue depicts the period when Sakymuni underwent an ascetic life for mediation in ice-covered mountain. This statute shows his body in a state of emaciation with the ribs clearly protruding from his chest. The statue of Sakaymuni in Himalayas contrasts with the statue of Maitreya. The statue of Maitreya is sculptured with a smiling face, wide-open cloak to show his fat belly.

On the third level or second level of the altar in the main sanctuary, there is the statue of three kings in Avatamsaka. The statue of Avatamsaka is in the middle, statue of Manjusri is on the left and the statue of Samantabhadra is on the right. Manjusri stands on lotus throne or mounts on the back of blue lion. Samantabhadra stands on the lotus throne or mounts the back of a white elephant. Sometimes, in place of Manjusri and Samantabhadra are two of Sakyamuni's disciples: Kasyapa and Ananda Kasyapa stands on the left of

¹ Dr., Institute for Religious Studies, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences.

Sakyamuni. Ananda looks younger and he stands on the right of Sakyamuni. This set of three statues depicts the scene of Buddha Sakyamuni preaching.

In some Northern Buddhist temples, there are statues of Parinirvana. This statue describes Sakyamuni lying on his side with one hand supporting his head and half - closed eyes.

The statues of newly born Sakyamuni, of Sakyamuni in the Himalayas, of Parinirvana and of three kings in Avatamsaka describe the stages of Sakyamuni's life: from he was born; he became a monk; he preached Buddhism and he entered in Nirvana

2. The worshipping statues in Northern Buddhist temples depict the history of Mahayana Buddhism

The highest level of the altar in the main sanctuary is the place for the statues of Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs. There are many ways to divide the Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs.

On time, the Trinity of Buddha of three epochs consists of Dipankara Buddha, Sakyamuni and Maitreya. Three Buddhas represent the innumerable Buddhas in the past, present and future. Dipankara Buddha represents 1000 Buddhas in the past⁽²⁾. Sakyamuni represents 1.000 Buddhas at present and Maitreya represents 1.000 Buddhas in the future. The statues of the Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs are placed as follows: Sakyamuni is in the middle, Dipankara Buddha is on the left; Maitreya is on the right.

According to dogmas of Mahayan Buddhism, Dipankara Buddha was the first teacher who taught Gautama Siddhartha when he was a boy. Dipankara recognized that after an endless number of ages had elapsed, Sumedha would become a Buddha⁽³⁾.

Sakyamuni considered Maitreya to succeed his position in the world.

On the space

The Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs consists of Bhaisajyagura, Sakyamuni and Amitabha

Sakyamuni is the head of the *Saha* world (it means the present world).

Bhaisajyagura is considered to eliminate illness of human beings

² Thousand denotes the greatest part in the concept of "Thiên" in Mahayana Buddhism.

³ On the Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs, see: Mã Thứ Điền. *Deities in Chinese Buddhism*, Culture and Information Publisher, 2002 .

Amitabha was considered head of Western paradise. He had many different names. He had great influences to Buddhist believers. People in countries followed Mahayana Buddhism including Vietnamese people.

Beside the statues of the Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs, there are many other statues such as the statues of Avalokitesvara, Majusri, Samantabhadra, Anada, and Sakyamuni in the Himalayas... These Buddhas belong to Mahayana Buddhism. Their lives and duties are will be stated in following parts.

3. The worship-statues in Northern Buddhist temples have two types of characters of Mahayana Buddhism: *Nhân thần* and *Thần Nhân*

On Buddha altar in Khmer pagoda there is the statue of Sakyamuni. However, on the altar in Northern Buddhist temple there are statues of Sakyamuni, of Buddhas and of Bodhisattvas.

Nguyễn Duy Hinh separated Buddhist characters into two types: *Nhân thần* and *Thần Nhân*⁽⁴⁾. *Nhân thần* means that the Buddhist characters were spiritualized. *Thần Nhân* means that deities are personified. Some statues of *Nhân thần* are worshipped in Northern Buddhist temples such as statues of Sakyamuni, of Anada, of Kasyapa.

In the Northern Buddhist temples there are three statues of *Nhân thần* relating to the life of Sakyamuni such as the statue of newly born Sakyamuni, the statue of Sakyamuni in the Himalayas and the statue of Parinirvana. In the patriarch house besides the statues of the late patriarchs who lived and died in pagoda, there is the statue of Bodhidharma. In the two corridors, there are statues of Arhats (16 or 18 Arhats).

Besides statues of *Nhân thần*, in Northern Buddhist temples there are statues of *thần nhân* such as the statues of Dipankara Buddha, of Sakyamuni and of Maitreya in the Statues of the Trinity of Buddhas of the three epochs. We can affirm that Dipankara Buddha, Sakyamuni and Maitreya are fictional characters.

The fictionality of Buddhist characters is manifested clearly in the names and significance of names of Buddhas in statues of the Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs and statues of Trikaya of Buddhas. People often confuse between two sets of statues because appearances of these two set of statues are similar.

⁴ Nguyễn Duy Hinh. *Chapter 6: Avalokitesvar - Connotation and Art*, in the book *Avalokitesvara in Buddhist Temples in the Red River Delta* by Nguyễn Minh Ngọc, Nguyễn Mạnh Cường, and Nguyễn Duy Hinh, Social Sciences Publisher, 2004, p. 386.

In statues of the Trinity of Buddhas of three epochs: Dipankara Buddha means the light; Maitreya means mercifulness. However, the statues of Trikaya of Buddhas only show Buddhist concepts such as Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya. Dharmakaya is then literally a body or person that exist as principle and it has now come to mean the highest reality from which all things derive their being and lawfulness; Sambhogakaya denotes all people who reach the peak of the Way; Nirmanakaya means that Buddha transforms himself into Sakyamuni in order to respond to the requirements of living beings ⁽⁴⁾.

Bodhisattvas belonging to *Thần nhân* who are worshipped in Northern Buddhist temples are Manjusri, Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta, Manjushi, and Samantabhadra. Next to the Trinity of Buddhas are other statues called “the Amitabha trinity” including Amitabha (in the middle), Avalokitesvara (on the left) and Mahasthamaprapta (on the right). In Northern Buddhist temples there are statues of Indra, of Brahma, of eight Vajrapanis ⁽⁵⁾. Indra and Brahma are considered to be the supreme rulers of the world men and gods. They, therefore, should always accompany Sakyamuni as guardians before his enlightenment.

When giving the common remark on Buddhist gods belonging *Nhân thần*, Nguyễn Duy Hinh thought that these gods have family names and religious names. Sakyamuni has 10 religious names. Each religious name manifests his sacred level. However, Buddhist gods belonging to *Thần nhân* have not family names but they have religious names. Each religious name manifests sacred concept: For example, Dipankara Buddha means the light; Maitreya means mercifulness; Manjushi means intelligence; Samantabhadra means truth; Avalokitesvara is present everywhere ⁽⁶⁾.

One thing to be added is that scientists separate statues of Buddhas into two types. *Tượng phàm tướng* (common statues) are figured as normal people with curly hair, big bust and big lappets... *Tượng thần tướng* have many heads, faces, eyes hands, for example statue of Cundi Avalokitesvara, the statue of Avalokitesvara with one thousand eyes and one thousand arms. In the Khmer Buddhist, temples there are only *Tượng phàm tướng*. However, in Northern Buddhist temples there are two types of statues *Tượng phàm tướng* and *Tượng*

⁵ Nguyễn Duy Hinh. *Chapter 6: Avalokitesvar: Connotation and Art...* ibid, pp. 433 - 434.

⁶ See: Trần Trọng Kim. *Phật lục*, Religion Publisher, Hanoi, 2002, pp. 107-126.

⁷ Nguyễn Duy Hinh. *Chapter 6: Avalokitesvar: Connotation and Art...* ibid, pp. 433 - 434, and pp. 444 - 445.

thần tượng. These statues reflect sacredness of objects who are worshipped in Northern Buddhist temples.

4. The statues in Northern Buddhist temples reflect the harmony of three sects of Mahayana Buddhism: Zen sect, Pure Land sect and Mantrayana

In Northern sanctuaries, Zen sect's factor is manifested in the statues of three kings in Avatamsaka: Sakyamuni is seated on a lotus throne. Sakyamuni is between Ananda and Kasyapa.

Zen sect's factor is also manifested in the worship of Bodhidharma in Northern Buddhist temples. Legend has it that Bodhidharma was 28th patriarch of Indian Zen sect and 1st patriarch of Chinese Zen sect. Before passing away, he preached dharma and monk's robe to Tuệ Khá.

The Pure land sect's factor is manifested in the statues of Amitaha trinity in Northern Buddhist temples. The statues of Amitaha trinity consist of statues of Amitabha, of Avalokitesvara and of Mahasthamaprapta. Amitabha is in the middle, Avalokitesvara is on the left and Mahasthamaprapta is on the right. Amitabha was the head of Western Paradise. According to Buddhist legend, Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta were Bodhisattvas. They helped Amitabha to save all living creatures. Avalokitesvara saved all living creatures by his mercifulness. Mahasthamaprapta illuminated his intelligence to all living creatures.

The Mantrayana's factor is manifested in the statues of Avalokitecvara with one thousand eyes and one thousand arms, of Cundi - Avalokitesvara and Avalokitesvara.⁽⁸⁾ Avalokitesvara was a former deity of Pure Land sect, afterward he became deity of Mantrayana.

In the Northern Buddhist temple, the statue of Avalokitecvara with one thousand eyes and one thousand arms has many heads and many hands; in the centre of each hand is an eye.

Another type of Avalokitecvara belonging to Mantrayana Buddhism is the statue of Cundi - Avalokitecvara. This statue is worshipped in Northern Buddhist temple.

5. The statues in Northern Buddhist temples manifest harmony of Buddhism and other religions and beliefs

The Northern Buddhist temples not only worship Buddhas and Bodhisattvas but also gods of other religions. These gods are divided into following groups.

⁸ Quán Thế Âm is translated from Avalokitesvara in Sanskrit.

Natural and agriculture gods

The typification of these gods is the system of Four Dharmas. When Buddhism was introduced in Vietnam, it combined with Four Dharmas belief. As a result, four agricultural gods were feminized to become four goddesses: the Goddess of Cloud, the Goddess of Rain, the Goddess of Thunder, and the Goddess of Lightning. The system of Four Dharmas Goddesses is worshipped in many Northern Buddhist temples. The most typical and ancient system of Four Dharmas Buddhist temples can be found in Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh province.

The gods of other religions

In Northern Buddhist temples there are many statues of Taoist deities such as the statues of the King of Heaven, of *Nam Tào* and of *Bắc Đẩu*. These statues are placed next to statue of newly born Sakyamuni in the fourth level or fifth level. Because of the similar appearance, people often mistake the statues of *Nam Tào* and *Bắc Đẩu* for statues of Brahma and Indra. In some Northern Buddhist temples, there are the statues of Confucius and of Confucian saints.

Beside statues of Taoist gods and of Confucian saints, we can find traces of foreign religions and beliefs in some Northern Buddhist temples. Some Buddhist temples there are altars to *Tứ Vị Hồng Nương*. According to legend, a Chinese imperial concubine and her children were drowned in Cửa Cờn (Nghệ An province) when they fled from Mongol enemy. However, Tạ Chí Đại Trường quoted documents by H. Maspero showed that *Tứ Vị Hồng Nương* was Po Riyark deity in system of deities of Cham people ⁽⁹⁾. The trace of Cham deities is showed clearly in the worship of Po Yan Dari deity in Bà Đanh pagoda, Thụy Khuê village, Hanoi ⁽¹⁰⁾.

The goddesses and Gods of Mẫu religion

Almost Northern Buddhist temples have altars to Mother Goddesses. The worship of Goddesses is the long-standing indigenous belief with many Goddesses: the Goddess of Water, the Goddess of Land, and the Goddess of the Mountain. One Goddess who occupied an important role in Vietnamese belief is Mẫu Liễu, i.e. Liễu Hạnh princess. She is considered as one of four immortal saints in Vietnam.

⁹ Tạ Chí Đại Trường. *Gods, Human begins and Vietnamese country*, California, USA, 1989, p. 194.

¹⁰ Tạ Chí Đại Trường. *Gods, Human begins and Vietnamese country*,...ibid, p. 194.

There have been bases for worship of Mother Goddesses. For developing, Mother Goddesses relied on Buddhas. As a result, Buddhism has combined with Mẫu belief. Mother Goddesses have been worshipped in Buddhist temples. Thanks to Mother Goddesses, Buddhist temples attract many people to visit.

The gods who are considered real people are worshipped in Northern Buddhist temples such as Trần Hưng Đạo, Lê Thánh Tông, Trần Thủ Độ, Nguyễn Trãi, Quang Trung... They did great service to the country (Đại Việt). Tutelary gods and professional patriarchs are worshipped in some Buddhist temples.

Some Buddhist temples worship people who were donors of materials or money for the construction of Buddhist temples. Another form of worship in Vietnamese Buddhist temples is Hậu (posthumous). Hậu altars are placed along a corridor with a joss-stick bowl in front of small stele on which names and address of the dead, the sum of money or piece of land they offered to the Buddhist temples are inscribed. This kind of inscription is essentially a 'contact' between pagoda and Hậu donor. People who are worshipped on Hậu altars were without offspring. When they were alive they donated a sum of money or a piece of cultivated land to pagoda and requested the Buddhist temples to take care their souls in the after life ⁽¹¹⁾. People who did great service to Buddhist temples are worshipped in some Buddhist temples. Their presences in Buddhist temples are showed by portrait-statues and statues.

Some people who donated money, land for construction of pagoda are worshipped in Northern Buddhist temples. The majority of these people were princesses, imperial concubines, spouses of court mandarins and aristocrats of various dynasties. The kind of worship shows deep gratitude of local people to builders of Buddhist temples. Because many people donated money and land for building and restoration of Buddhist temples, Vietnam has many Buddhist temples. Each Vietnamese village has at least one pagoda. Pagoda is the place for religious and belief activities of local people. Northern Buddhist temples have made considerable contribution to bringing up Buddhist believers and people on tradition of their village ⁽¹²⁾. /.

¹¹ In fact, not all the rich without offspring are objects of Hậu worship. Hậu worship not only originated from the dead without offspring.

¹² See: Lê Tâm Đắc, Tạ Quốc Khánh. *The Syncretic of Vietnamese Shows in the Objects of Worship in Hanoi Buddhist Temples*, Religious Studies Review, N^o. 2/2003, pp. 39-48.