

The comparative study of beliefs on Bodhi tree between Myanmar and Thailand

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Abstract

This study is the comparative study of beliefs on Bodhi tree between Myanmar and Thailand. This study aims to study the beliefs of Myanmar and Thai Buddhist people on Bodhi tree, to analyze the reasons of belief in Bodhi tree and to analyze the similarities and differences of beliefs on Bodhi tree between two countries: Myanmar and Thailand. In this study, the researcher collected data by books, myths, website about Bodhi tree in both countries and interviewed people who know well about Bodhi tree like prophet and elders. By this study, it is found that both Myanmar and Thai have beliefs on Bodhi tree because not only Bodhi tree has relations with the lord of Buddha but also they believe that doing good deeds with Bodhi tree will bring luck because of the cool shade and grandeur as well as dignity of Bodhi tree. Both countries believe that Bodhi tree has guardian. Moreover, each country has ceremony rites, beliefs about astrology and fate.

Keywords: Bodhi tree, Beliefs, Buddhism

I. Introduction

Bodhi tree is an important tree in Buddhism because it is the place of enlightenment and attains the Lord Buddha's existence. Therefore, Bodhi tree can be said as a symbol of Buddhism. In countries which have Buddhism like Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand, we can see Bodhi trees in pagodas, Buddha temples or parks which concern with religion. Moreover, there have beliefs on Bodhi tree, too.

Myanmar and Thailand are located in Southeast Asia and both countries are neighboring countries for a long time. Therefore, both countries have many similarities such as religion (Buddhism), traditions, cultures rituals, etc. As both countries are major Buddhism countries, there have rituals or beliefs concerning Buddhism. For example, both countries have the culture of offerings to monks and 12-month-traditional ceremonies. Both countries have not only pagodas, Buddha temples or Buddha statues but also Bodhi trees all over the countries. Moreover, people have strong beliefs in Bodhi tree. Therefore, the researcher wants to study how Bodhi tree has the major part on Buddhism in Myanmar and Thailand, the reasons of beliefs on Bodhi tree and the similarities and differences of beliefs on Bodhi tree between Myanmar and Thailand.

II. Case Study

Objectives

The objectives of this study were set as follows:

- to study the beliefs of Myanmar and Thai Buddhist people on Bodhi tree.
- to analyze the reasons of beliefs on Bodhi tree.
- to analyze the similarities and differences of beliefs on Bodhi tree between two countries: Myanmar and Thai.

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Data Collection

The data in this study were collected from books, myths, researches and websites about Bodhi tree in English, Myanmar and Thai languages. The sacred things in Bodhi tree in Thailand were interviewed to students and staffs from Naresuan University, Phisanulok, Thailand. And then, people who know well about Bodhi tree like prophet and the elders were interviewed in Yangon, Myanmar in April, 2020.

Research Questions

For this research paper, research questions were set as follows:

1. Did all Buddhists in Myanmar and Thai believe on Bodhi tree?
2. Why Buddhists in Myanmar and Thai believe on Bodhi tree?
3. Are there any similarities and differences concerned with beliefs on Bodhi tree between Myanmar and Thailand?

Literature review

Historical background of Bodhi tree which is related with Buddhism and the research works about Bodhi tree are as follow.

One of the major religions in the world is Buddhism. Buddhism was founded by the Lord of Gautama around 6th century B.C.E in India. Later it spreads in neighboring countries such as China, Korea, Myanmar, Thailand, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Cambodia and etc. Nowadays, there are about over 300 million of Buddhists around the world. In Buddhism, everyone can reach enlightenment through practice, wisdom and meditation, which is called Bodhi wisdom. (Ruchi Agarwal 2015:2)

According to U Tin Hla (an elder ,age 81), there is a belief that there are four Buddhas who went to enlightenment. There is one Buddha, Maitreya Buddha who has not got enlightenment yet.. Each of Buddha has its own tree of enlightenment differently. For example, the Lord of Kakusandha Buddha enlightened at the rain tree, so the rain tree was called the Bodhi rain tree and the Lord of Gautama enlightened at the Banyan tree (scientific name: *Ficus religiosa*).

In research “Bodhi tree: the most well-known tree in the world” Sri Phumphop (1992) described the meaning of Bodhi tree that Bodhi is a word that comes from Pali and Sanskrit, means enlightenment. Bodhi tree means tree of enlightenment, means the tree in which the Lord Buddha resided at the time of enlightenment.

Depictions of the Bodhi tree, the tree the Bodhisattva sat beneath during the moment of his enlightenment, have been a part of Buddhist visual culture since its earliest permanent structures from circa the second to first centuries before BCE. Further, the depiction of the same species of tree as the Bodhi Tree, the sacred fig, predates the advent of Buddhism in India, beginning with the Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 BCE), which demonstrates the long held significance of this particular tree species in Indian culture. Bodhi tree, a term derived from Sanskrit, simply means tree of enlightenment. (Amanda J. Spradling 2019:3)

In the Royal Thai Institute Dictionary (1999) it provides the definition of the word Pho(Thai usage for Bodhi tree) that Pho is *Ficus religiosa* in the Moraceae family which is a tree enlightened by the Lord Buddha. The leaves are heart-shaped and long. The fruits are

edible and medicinal. Pho (Bodhi) means enlightenment. Bodhi tree means the tree that the Lord of Buddha got the enlightenment.

In thesis “Leaves of the Bodhi from east to west: the symbol of the sacred fig tree in ancient India, Southeast Asia and contemporary contexts” Amanda J. Spradling. (2019) studied the depiction of the sacred fig tree from its beginnings in India, through its application in India and Southeast Asian Buddhist art and contemporary uses in the East and West, Thailand and the United States, respectively. Moreover, he studied the appearance, use and meaning of this symbol from ancient to contemporary times and Buddhist to non-Buddhists contexts by adding to the history and myth of one of the world’s many sacred trees, beyond its association with the Buddha’s enlightenment.

Thorachok Ketkaew (2010) mentioned in “Bodhi Tree: from Bodh Gaya to Huachiew” that Bodhi tree was a species of fig in the Moraceae family. This plant was considered sacred by Buddhists because Siddhartha Gautama was referred to have been sitting underneath of Bodhi tree when he was enlightened. And also, Bodhi tree has been involved in many aspects of Thai ways of life. Thai Buddhists usually plant Bodhi Trees in Buddha temples for show remembrance to the Lord of Buddha’s enlightenment.

III. Findings and discussion

By studying beliefs on Bodhi tree of Myanmar and Thailand, it is found that both Myanmar and Thai people worship Bodhi trees as a symbol of Buddhism. Therefore, in the places which have Buddhism temples have Bodhi trees. Because they regard Bodhi tree as the dignity place where the Lord of Buddha got enlightenment. Moreover, they believe the sacred things in Bodhi tree. In the sector of Bodhi tree as the symbol of Buddhism, both countries have the festivals and rituals for remembrance to the Lord of Buddha and for showing respect to Buddhism.

3.1 Watering Festival to Bodhi Tree in Myanmar and Thailand

3.1.1 Watering Festival to Bodhi Tree in Myanmar

In all pagodas and temples in Myanmar, Bodhi tree can be seen as a Buddha's symbol. Since a long time ago, Myanmar has the Watering festival to the Bodhi tree in the month of Kason. Kason is the second month of Myanmar between April and May, which is a month that is arider and hotter than other months. Buddhists in Myanmar water Bodhi trees on the full moon of the month of Kason. In order to prevent the replicas from the Bodhi trees that the Bodhisattva enlightened being dry and damage in the full moon day of Kason which was the same day with the day the Lord Buddha was born, reached enlightenment and nirvana. Therefore, in Myanmar, Kason Full moon day is one of the most important days in Buddhism culture. (Wirat-Oranut niyomtham 2008:84)



Figure 1: Watering Festival at ShweDagon Pagoda

According to U Tin Hla (an elder, age 81), on the full moon day of Kason, long lines of Myanmar people carry pots of water, Eugenia spring and flowers and pour water to the root of Bodhi tree and Buddha statues at Bodhi tree which are nearby (figure 1). Moreover, they chant Paritta verse by rites to express the piety and show respect to the traditional Buddhist ritual.

3.1.2 Watering Festival to Bodhi Tree of Thailand

One of the traditional festivals that shows devotion to Buddhism and the unity of the local community with cultural identities in Kanchanaburi province is watering festival to Bodhi Tree which is the traditional festival of Mon ethnics. In the evening of the full moon of the 15th lunar 6th month, Mon people come together by bringing perfume, clean water, floating flowers and watering at Bodhi tree. From there, Thai people in Kanchanaburi province also participated in this festival (figure 2). (sanook news.27/5/2013)

Thai people in Kanchanaburi province believe that the Lord of Buddha got enlightenment at the base of the Bodhi tree on the full moon of the 15th lunar 6th month. The Dharma that he enlightened was liked a lotus blossoming and rising out of the water. Therefore, they consider this day is suitable for religious activities to be offered as Buddhist worship and celebrate watering festival to the Bodhi tree.

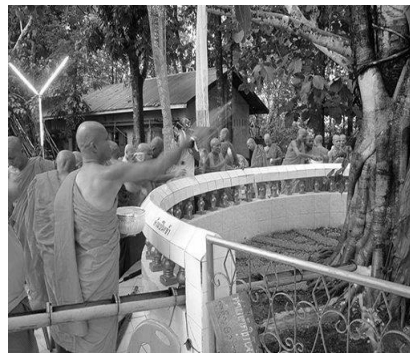


Figure 2: watering festival in Kanchanaburi province, Thailand

By studying about Watering Festival to Bodhi Tree in Myanmar and Thailand found that According to the most of interviewees, Bodhi tree is the tree of the Lord of Buddha enlightenment. So there are ceremonies which show remembrance to the Lord of Buddha or protect the Bodhi tree without being damaged or lost. In Myanmar people celebrate watering festival to the Bodhi tree in the month of Kason which is the hottest month of the whole year for protecting Bodhi tree being dried and damaged. This ceremony celebrates on the Full of day of Kason which is the same day of the Lord of Buddha was born, got enlightenment and reached nirvana. This means that Myanmar people celebrate watering festival for show remembrance to the special day of the Lord of Buddha.

Same with Myanmar, in Thailand also has watering festival to Bodhi tree. The day of pour water and the styles of pour water are same in both Myanmar and Thailand. But this festival is the traditional festival of Mon ethnics only in Kanchannaburi Province. Purpose of watering festival in Thailand is also only to show remembrance the special day of the Lord of Buddha.

3.2 Supporting pole to Bodhi tree in Myanmar and Thailand

3.2.1 Supporting pole to Bodhi tree in Myanmar

Myanmar people consider Bodhi tree as a holy, majestic and dignity tree because of being the tree of Lord of Buddha got enlightenment and they also believe that Bodhi tree can bring good fortune and luck.

Therefore, in Myanmar, some people believe in tradition of supporting Bodhi tree for longevity fortune, health and business like when build a house, there must be pillars in order to stand in a sharp manner. When supporting the pole to Bodhi tree, Myanmar people use tall and long bamboo. (Figure 3)



Figure 3: Supporting Bamboo to Bodhi Tree in Myanmar

According to U Aung Myo (prophet, age 52), myth about background history of supporting pole to Bodhi tree is in the era of Lord of Buddha, there was the man who was suffering from disease. The Lord of Buddha let him to go back home and make some good deeds on the way. This man also repaired the roads and supported the poles to the Bodhi tree which was nearly collapsed and can die because of branched increasingly. After making good deeds, this man also had pleasant and cured the disease as the belief in Buddhism is when we do some good deeds, will get good fortune and luck. Since then, Buddhists in Myanmar believe that if there has any problem with health, must support the pole to Bodhi tree.

When support the poles to Bodhi tree, one must use wood which has the same name with the day of birth. For example, if born on Monday, one must use the rain tree and support the pole at the east of the Bodhi tree. But, nowadays people use only bamboo which can fine easily and convenient to support quickly. (Suhtoopan U kyaw 2007:38)

3.2.2 Supporting pole to Bodhi tree in Thailand

Thai people believe on Bodhi tree about Buddhism. For example, during Songkran festival period Thai people make a traditional ritual to support the Bodhi tree because supporting Bodhi tree is considered as supporting Buddhism. Because Bodhi tree is a tree that relates with Buddhism. As the sharp of Bodhi tree, it is the large tree that branch increasingly and can collapse. Thai people believe that collapsing the Bodhi tree means bad fortune to Buddhism.

During three days of Songkran festival, the 13th day is the end of the year. The 14th day is the middle day and the 15th day is the New Year day. Thai people believe that if the old year was considered as not much good year or there had a lot of bad things, must make merit in the public interests such as support poles to the Bodhi trees, repair the roads and the bridges, etc. If cannot do anything, must bring a pole to support the Bodhi tree. Therefore, in the last day of Songkran festival, Northern Thai people usually celebrate the ritual of supporting pole to Bodhi tree. Trees that use to support the Bodhi tree must have at least one meter long, peeled, turmeric

painted. Then take to support the base of the Bodhi tree in the temple (figure 4). (Office of Culture, Chiang Mai 2018)

Not only Northern Thai People believe that supporting pole to Bodhi tree is supporting to Buddhism for not bring some bad fortunes in Buddhism society but also they have faith in the Bodhi tree for votive offerings. They believe that supporting pole to Bodhi tree will bring good fortune in health and luck in their lives and get long life.



Figure 4: Supporting poles to Bodhi tree in Northern Thailand

By studying about supporting poles to Bodhi tree in Myanmar and Thailand found that both countries similar in support the poles to Bodhi tree. But In Myanmar support poles to Bodhi tree individually according to their needs and desires. In Thailand, especially in Northern Thailand, celebrate the pole ritual to Bodhi tree in Songkran festival or New Year festival. As the poles that support to Bodhi tree, in Myanmar has been used the woods which were the same name with the birth day but now only use bamboos which have the shape of long and straight. That shape describes the needs of people who wish to have the life of smooth and any curves like problems or difficulties in their lives. As the poles that support to Bodhi tree in Thailand, use massive woods. Because woods can support the Bodhi tree branch increasingly and would collapse and can die. If Bodhi tree die, means bad fortune in Buddhism. Moreover, the pole ritual to Bodhi tree in Northern Thailand shows the unity in society and how people give the importance to Bodhi tree as the dignity tree in Buddhism.

3.3 Beliefs about sacred things or spirits in the Bodhi tree in Myanmar and Thailand

3.3.1 Beliefs about sacred things or spirits in the Bodhi tree of Myanmar

In Myanmar, there is the traditional belief among rural people that sacred things or spirits are in forests, mountains, houses or any environmental places as guardians. As for the tree, there has the guardian spirit or Nat which is called Yokkazoe. Myanmar people believe that Yokkazoe has the higher eligible than ghosts or spirits. Myanmar people believe that at the large tree especially the Bodhi tree which is the majestic and holy tree definitely has the Yokkazoe. And it is also believed that if has any needs or wish, one can make a wish and offer the Yokkazoe. Because they believe that the Yokkazoe has eligible to fulfill their needs. Moreover, they show the respect to the Bodhi tree without doing any damage or destroy. Because they believe that if they do, the Yokkazoe will punish them.

According to U Kyaw Win Oo (teacher, age 57), when he was young, there had the large Bodhi tree in the monastery of the village. All people in village believed that should not do any damage or destroy this Bodhi tree and also warned the kids too. They believed that if they do, there will have bad luck. Once time, his friend broke branch of the Bodhi tree with leg. In the next day, he can't walk without having any wounds. They believed that the Yokkazoe

in this Bodhi tree didn't like his behavior and punished him. Therefore, his parents and elders in village made ritual to apologize the Yokkazoe with candle and offerings of bananas and coconut.

3.3.2 Beliefs about sacred things or spirits in the Bodhi tree of Thailand

One of the beliefs of Thai people about trees is the sacred things or spirits resided in the large trees. Thai people believe that big trees have ghosts or deities of the tree, such as the Ta Ta tree. Moreover, Thai people believe that Bodhi trees have spirits. For example Bodhi trees at the Faculty of Engineering and Ekkotosar Building at Naresuan University in Thailand.

Most of students from the Faculty of Engineering at Naresuan University believe that the Bodhi tree near faculty is sacred and has female spirit. Faculty of Engineering students believe that if ask for something regarded with examinations at Bodhi tree after midnight with bottles of red juice, that female spirit can bless to fulfill the wish. After fulfill the wish, must come to worship with the bottles of red juice at the same time of making wish. (Miss Hisa Klinwan, 2nd year student of Faculty of Engineering, Naresuan University)

About the Bodhi tree at Aksotarot Building, in times of war, there was a commander named Khun Ronarit died at this place and became the spirit as the guardian of the Bodhi tree. When started to build School before Naresuan University, people cut this Bodhi tree but cannot because people who tried to cut this Bodhi tree faced with danger. Every year Before Songkran festival there is a ceremony to pay respect to Khun Ronarit. The offerings include pork, chicken, fruit, red juice, swords and a dance performance too. (Mr. Suchat Sompong, staff at Ekotarot Building, Naresuan University)

By studying about the sacred things or spirits in Myanmar and Thailand found that concerns with the sacred things at Bodhi tree, we can see how Myanmar people give importance to Bodhi tree as the great and dignity tree. Myanmar people believe that the large trees are the places of spirits or ghosts resided. But Myanmar people believe that however Bodhi tree is the large tree, there has no ghosts and only have yokkazoe which is the spirit with high level as Nat. Yokkazoe is the guardian of the Bodhi tree and have eligible to fulfill the needs of people who offering him. Myanmar people describe Yokkazoe as the male gesture because being male is the important fact in Buddhism. Males have the more dignity than female and the yokkazoe that Myanmar people oblate also must be the male gesture.

In Thailand, they also believe that Bodhi tree has the sacred things which were the guardians of the Bodhi tree same with Myanmar people. But different from Myanmar's beliefs was those sacred things will be spirits whatever male or female gestures but have the high eligible. And also can fulfill the needs of people who make a wish at Bodhi tree.

Whatever both countries have the same tradition of worship with the offerings to sacred things or spirits in Bodhi tree but the offerings that use in worshipping are different. Myanmar people worship with the offerings candle, coconuts and bananas which are the traditional ways of worship. Thai people use red juice as the main offering. In the past, Thai people use liqueur for worship the spirits but now change use red juice with soda instead of liqueur.

IV. Conclusion

Bodhi tree is the tree that the Lord of Gautama got enlightenment. Therefore, Buddhists in Myanmar and Thailand give the important to Bodhi tree. At almost all the religious places like pagodas, temples in both countries, one can see Bodhi trees. Thus, both countries have rituals and beliefs on Bodhi tree that similar with the styles and ways that different. Such as both countries have the belief concerns with supporting Bodhi tree for not have any damage by branched increasingly. Whatever the ways of support will be different. But have the same purpose is to get good fortune and long life by support Bodhi tree with poles.

Moreover, there is another ritual of Myanmar people concerning Bodhi tree is watering the Bodhi tree in the hottest month of a year for the purpose of making Bodhi tree not to dry and damage like the pole ritual to Bodhi tree in Northern Thailand. Thailand also has the watering festival to Bodhi tree on the same day as Myanmar: the full moon day of Kason, the day of lord of Buddha was born, got enlightenment and reached nirvana. But watering festival in Thailand is celebrated only in Kanchanaburi province where most of Mon ethics reside. Because that watering festival to Bodhi tree in Thailand is the belief of Mons only.

Not only both countries give importance to Bodhi tree but also they believe that Bodhi tree has the guardian that have the different features which in Myanmar Yokkazoe has male features and in Thai spirits in Bodhi tree can be male or female features. But the same fact is that Myanmar and Thai people believe that worshipping those guardians can fulfill the needs and wishes of them because those guardians are eligible and thus is why they are being guardians of Bodhi tree which was the great, majesty and dignity tree.

In conclusion, by studying the beliefs of Thai and Myanmar people on Bodhi tree, we can see how both countries give the importance to Buddhism and the lord of Buddha. Moreover, we can see rituals concerning Bodhi tree which show the beliefs and traditional cultures of both countries.

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Interviewees

Miss Hisa Klinwan, 2nd year student of Faculty of Engineering, Naresuan University. 5/3/2018

Mr. Suchat Sompong, staff at Ekotarot Building, Naresuan University 5/3/2018

U Aung Myo. Prophet. age 52. 4/7/2020

U Kyaw Win Oo. Teacher. age 57. 4/4/2020

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