

## Images of Buddha and the Great Deities of Brahmanism in the Original Buddhist Pantheon from the Practice of Thailand and Vietnam



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**ABSTRACT:** Buddhism is a major religion in the world, it was born in India 2600 years ago, and has spread to many countries, including Vietnam and Thailand. Due to the same origin, the image of Buddha in Thailand and Vietnam has many things in common, and is closely associated with the culture of worshiping the great Brahmanical gods. However, in the process of migration, combined with the different cultures between countries, the image of Buddha and the Great Brahmanical God has had differences between the two countries. In this article, the group of authors focuses on clarifying the image of Buddha and the Great Brahmanical God in the original Buddhist temples of the two countries of Vietnam and Thailand, thereby comparing the differences between them to understand the religious culture of each country.

**KEYWORDS:** Buddha, Great Brahman God, Theravada Buddhism, Thailand, Vietnam.

### I. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The primitive era, Buddhism is the period when Buddha was born, lasting 100 years after Buddha's Nirvana, is the era of pure Buddhism. Primitive Buddhism was born due to the need for adaptation of people, the contemporary Indian society led to: people were dependent on Gods, the philosophical thoughts of sublime religions, making people confused and vague. Every religion wants to bring out philosophical thoughts to deeply impact people's spiritual life, the division of classes has created injustice, exploitation of labor, oppression, slavery, lack of freedom, inequality, imbalance in life, the desire to have something that can free them from both material and spiritual suffering. The birth of Buddhism has responded to those aspirations, when it brought new ideas of life, more adaptive and suitable than dependence on God, no longer dominated by contemporary social classes, inequality, instead there is freedom of belief, freedom of worship, freedom between people, no longer distinguishing between classes, status, emphasizing the right to control destiny and fate. From the origin of primitive Buddhism, it has led to the formation of the image of Buddha and the great Brahmanical gods, which are increasingly rich and diverse; a characteristic of the long historical process and cultural beliefs that exist to this day.

Thailand and Vietnam are two countries that have been influenced by the introduction of primitive Buddhism very clearly in the lives of the majority of people, becoming an indispensable spiritual culture. So what is the difference between the relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism, as well as the relationship between the image of Buddha and the great Brahmanical gods in the primitive Buddhist pantheon in two typical countries, Vietnam and Thailand?

### II. RESEARCH METHODS

To study the image of Buddha and the Great Brahman Gods in the primitive Buddhist temples of Thailand and Vietnam, the group of authors used the main method of collecting, analyzing and synthesizing documents. Based on the analyzed and synthesized documents, the group of authors combined with the method of field survey at some pagodas in Tra Vinh and Ho Chi Minh City to conduct comparisons and assessments to clarify the differences in the image of Buddha in primitive Buddhism between Vietnam and Thailand.

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## III. RESEARCH CONTENT

### 1. Images of Buddha and great Brahmanical deities in the original Buddhist pantheon in Thailand and Vietnam

#### 1.1. In Thailand

The results of some archaeological excavations have shown traces of Buddhism in Thailand. The excavation at the famous Buddhist stupa: Nakhon Phra Chedi (located in Nakhon Phathom), there are many Buddhist traces such as Buddha plaques, Dharmachakras and deer statues symbolizing the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath. The existence of Buddha plaques and deer statues without Buddha statues shows that Central Thailand had contact with India at a time when Buddha statues had not yet been formed, and the Buddha was only represented by symbols.

Excavations at Pong Tuk have found many architectural foundations and fragments of stone pillars, which can be recognized as the main hall of a Buddhist temple similar to the Anuradhapura temple in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Among the Buddha images discovered at Pong Tuk are many bronze and limestone Buddha images, reliefs depicting the life of the Buddha. These works of art are related to the art of the Gupta period in India (dated: 300-600). However, there is also a bronze Buddha image in the Amaravati style originating from South India dated to the 2nd century. All these evidences indicate the involvement of early Buddhism in present-day Central Thailand [5].

#### 1.1.1. The Buddha and the Brahmanical Gods in the Early Period

Historical studies show that the Mon people in the Dvaravati Kingdom (now part of Thailand) followed Theravada Buddhism very early. The oldest stele of Theravada Buddhism was found in Nakhon Pathom Province, dating back to around the 6th century AD. Other Buddhist relics of the Dvarati Kingdom were also discovered at two archaeological sites, Pra Pathom and Pong Tuk. One of the most impressive features of Mon Theravada Buddhist art is the depiction of the Buddha descending from the Tavatimsa heaven with the Brahmanical gods Indra and Brahma. Another sculpture depicts the Buddha standing on the head of the King of the Jungle (the King of the Jungle (Pana-Bati) is a beast with the beak of the eagle Garuda, the ears and horns of the divine bull Nandin (the mount of the god Shiva), and the wings of the divine goose Hamsa (the mount of the god Brahma)). The image shows the superiority and power of the Buddha over the Brahmanical gods. The image is also seen on a bas-relief depicting the two Brahmanical gods Vishnu and Shiva and two other gods listening to the Buddha's sermons standing in the middle of the gods. The Mon carvings show that the relationship between primitive Buddhism and Brahmanism was formed as soon as Buddhism arrived in Southeast Asia in general and in Thailand in particular. In particular, the role of the Buddha was elevated to the highest position. The Brahmanical gods, especially the two main gods Vishnu and Shiva revered in Thailand, became the Buddha's assistant gods (although Brahma is the supreme god, Vishnu and Shiva are the two most popular gods). This harmony did not diminish the role of the Buddha but on the contrary, increased the respect for Buddhism [5].



*Hình 1: Đức Phật cùng thần Vishnu và Shiva đứng trên mình thú chủ Vanaspati. [7].*

#### 1.1.2. The Buddha and the Brahmanical Gods in the Late Period

Buddhists following the original Buddhist sect in the Khmer people of the South or in mainland Southeast Asian countries highly value the role of Brahmanical gods, such as Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), Shiva (the Destroyer), and Indra (the Thunder God) in the original Buddhist pantheon. Similar to the culture of the Mon people before, Brahmanical gods are still present in the original Buddhist pantheon of the Buddha, but the Buddha is still revered as a Teacher of the three worlds.

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In the early historical period of the Thai people, the Sukhothai Dynasty had two giant Buddhist temples, Pra Pai Luang and Sisawai, built to worship Buddha and Brahmanical gods, such as: Vishnu, Shiva, Uma, Lakshmi, Ganesha... Many temples in Thailand have the same way of arranging statues according to the principle: Buddha sits in the middle of the main hall, around and on the gable appear four statues of gods: Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Indra, in the role of heavenly kings protecting Him. The paintings on the walls of primitive Buddhist temples often depict the life of the Buddha, with the opening scene of the story of Buddha's birth in Lumpini Garden with the four main Brahmanical gods: Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Indra worshipping Him.

During the fourteenth century, Theravada Buddhism in Thailand received additional Brahmanical elements from the Khmer religious tradition, which had been fused with Buddhism since the Angkorian period. An inscription dated 1361, during the reign of King Boromaraja I of Thailand, describes: the king must revere the Buddha but also possess knowledge of the Vedas and Brahmanical astrology.

The problem of reconciling Theravada Buddhism with Brahmanism continued to develop in an increasing trend after 1431, when Thailand invaded Angkor. The influence continues into the present period, but the Brahmanical tradition has not been able to replace Theravada Buddhism as the state religion in the societies of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.

In the cultures of most Theravada Buddhist countries, Brahmanical mythology has been transformed into Buddhist mythology, with stories showing the relationship between the Buddha and gods and sacred creatures, such as the Garuda bird, Kinari, the Airavata elephant and the Naga snake. The names of the main Brahmanical gods are also changed to their native or Pali names such as Phra Phrom (Brahma), Pra Isuan (Shiva), Phra In (Indra), Phra Narai (Narayana) and Burana (Vanura). The high and low positions of Brahmanical gods in the Theravada Buddhist pantheon are also changed according to local concepts. In Thailand, Vishnu is the image of the king, considered by Buddhists as the Dharmaraja, the leader of the gods protecting Buddhism; Lord Shiva observed the Buddhist precepts by staying away from the world and practicing asceticism on Mount Kalaisa (Buddhist Mount Sumeru), so he was considered the Buddha's closest disciple.

In Thai art, the motif of Buddha sitting in the middle with Vishnu and Shiva protecting him on both sides often appears. Next is Brahma, who helps Buddha teach the Dharma and suppress demons, so Brahma statues are often erected at intersections. Finally, Indra rides the three-headed snake Naga to help Buddha make rain to save people, so his statue is often placed on the roof of temples [5].

### **1.2. In Vietnam**

#### **1.2.1. Khmer Southern Buddhism**

Besides the Northern Buddhism that has a profound influence on the Vietnamese community, Vietnam also received another Buddhist tradition from the South, which is Southern Buddhism, or Theravada Buddhism. The group of residents who were most influenced by Theravada Buddhism were the Khmer people, who lived mainly in the Mekong Delta. They received the Southern Buddhism sect most deeply starting from the decline of the Angkor empire, after the 14th century. This was also the period that marked the peak of decline of Brahmanism, which had dominated the Khmer royal court since the 6th century.

Currently, Khmer Theravada Buddhism has 450 pagodas, of which Tra Vinh province has the largest number with 142. Notably, in Ho Chi Minh City, there are also two Khmer Theravada pagodas, Candaransi and Po Thi Vong. In Hanoi, there is a symbolic Khmer Theravada Buddhist pagoda located in the Cultural Village of Vietnamese Ethnic Groups.

Khmer Theravada temples are deeply influenced by the worship of Brahmanical gods. For example, Quy Nong Pagoda - an ancient pagoda of the Khmer Theravada Buddhist sect located in Chau Thanh district, Tra Vinh province: on the ceiling of the main hall (Vihana) are decorated with drawings of Hera (a mascot combining the Naga snake god and the Chinese dragon. The origin of this mascot comes from Thailand in the late 18th century when the cultural exchange between the Thai and Chinese people became stronger in Thailand); or on the facade of the monastery building is the image of King Chan Krong Kriep (a guardian deity. In the cosmological concept of Khmer Theravada Buddhism, King Chan Krong Kriep is considered the guardian deity of the North according to the Brahmanical belief of the Eight Directions of the World, which influenced Khmer Theravada Buddhism).

Our field survey found that: the monks' quarters of Quy Nong Pagoda are located to the north of the main hall, the face of King Chan Krong Kriep is designed to look towards the main hall to worship Buddha and protect the Three Jewels. Outside the main hall of Quy Nong Pagoda, the Khmer designed a shrine on which a Buddha statue in a walking posture is placed, this feature is very similar to the famous Chiang Sean style Buddha statues of Thailand. Another characteristic between Quy Nong Pagoda and Wat Phra Keo of Thailand is the representation of the Khmer epic Riemke (Riêm – Kê) in wood drawings, then decorated around the main hall. The age of these collections is from the early 20th century, similar to the mural paintings around the Temple of the Emerald Buddha about the epic Rama-kien of Thailand.

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In addition, we must mention the four-faced Thai statues of Phra Phrom (Brahma), also known as Erawan, present in the shrines in front of the main hall of Po Thi Vong Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City and Quy Nong Pagoda in Tra Vinh Province. The shrine is usually built in front of the main hall, according to the concept that Maha Phra Phrom guards the sacred path leading to Tudi Mountain of Buddha. The Maha Phra Phrom statue is often depicted with four faces, wearing a Kiritamukuta-style hat (glorious hat) for the emperor, based on the description in the Indian genealogy. The god's clothing is in the style of ancient Thai costumes. The posture is sitting on a throne, the right leg is on the throne, the left leg is on the ground. The god has eight hands, holding treasures with meanings: the hand holding the Order Flag represents "Universal Dharma Power"; holding the Buddhist scriptures (actually the Vedas) represents Wisdom; holding the Dharma conch (precious snail) represents blessing; Holding the Wheel of Light symbolizes the destruction of afflictions; holding the scepter symbolizes the Supreme Accomplishment; holding the water jar symbolizes the blessing of saving the world; holding the Reciting Pearl symbolizes mastery over Samsara. The other hand forms a mudra in front of the chest to symbolize protection [7].

### 1.2.2. Theravada Buddhist sect

The Vietnamese in the South came to know about Khmer Theravada Buddhism during the process of settling and living together with the Khmer people. This predestined relationship fostered the propagation of the Theravada Buddhism into the Vietnamese community. The propagation of the Dharma took place in 1939, when the missionary delegation of Venerable Ho Tong, along with other Vietnamese eminent monks such as Venerable Thien Luat and Venerable Hue Nghiem, came from the capital Phnom Penh to Saigon to preach about the practice of the Theravada Buddhism. One year later (1940), the first pagoda of the Kinh Theravada Buddhism was established, which was Buu Quang Pagoda (today the pagoda has become one of the important ancestral temples of the Kinh Theravada Buddhism). In 1958, the Vietnam Primitive Sangha Church was established, officially marking the birth of the Kinh Theravada Buddhism in Vietnam, existing alongside other Buddhist sects. Today, Theravada Buddhism is one of nine sects and organizations of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.

According to the principles of Southern Buddhism, the main hall only houses a statue of Buddha Shakyamuni. In addition to the statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, images of deities originating from Thailand are also present in Southern Buddhist temples, such as the small shrine to the Thai god Phra Phrom (Brahma) located in front of the Gotama Stupa of Buu Long Pagoda. The pedestal of the shrine is embossed with the image of the three-headed elephant god Airavat, the mount of the god Phra In (Indra). On the left side of the stupa is a majestic four-faced statue of the god Phra Phrom, made in the traditional style of the Thai people but called by the Vietnamese as Pham Thien or Tu Dien Phat. At Thien Minh Zen Monastery in Vinh Long province, there is also a small shrine to the goddess Sakko Devino (wife of the god Sakka (Sakko) or god Phra In (Indra)). The statue is depicted in a throne position: the left hand makes a mudra, the right hand holds a scepter to protect the Buddha Dharma and govern the Three Realms. From there, we can see the integration characteristics of Kinh Theravada Buddhism with Theravada Buddhist countries in the current period [7].



***Hình 2: Bích họa đức Phật và hai vị thần Shiva và Brahma tại Chùa Monivongsa Bopharam***

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### 2. The difference between the image of Buddha and the great Brahman gods from Thai and Vietnamese practice

Buddhism in Southeast Asian countries in general and in Thailand and Vietnam in particular have similarities in cultural beliefs, in the proportion of people who worship Buddha, which is usually the majority and has a great influence on their material and spiritual life. However, due to historical contexts and different political and social factors, there have been differences in the images of Buddha and the great Brahman gods in the original Buddhist pantheon, which is most clearly shown in the main halls of temples in Thailand and Vietnam today.

Firstly, in Thailand, which is considered to be deeply influenced by the introduction of Buddhism from India, the temple clearly depicts the image of the Buddha with the two gods Vishnu and Shiva beside him to protect the Dharma. However, in practice in Vietnam, there are unique characteristics, divided into two sects: Khmer Southern Buddhism and Kinh Southern Buddhism. Although these two sects both illustrate the image of the Buddha with gods originating from Brahmanism, each sect has a different name, the combination of the image of the Buddha and the gods is also different (not only commonly seen in Thailand with gods Vishnu and Shiva) such as: Brahma, Indra, Chan... This difference comes from the beliefs, culture and history of the introduction of Buddhism between the two countries [6].

Second, in general, Buddhism from Thai practice has a deeper influence on people's lives, from birth to death, along with rituals associated with their culture. But in Vietnam, this is not as popular as in Thailand, the Southern Buddhist sect is mainly in the provinces in the Southwest, so the customs here are often known through travel and exploration, not deeply associated with material and spiritual life like in Thailand. In Vietnam, it can be affirmed that the Northern Buddhist sect accounts for a very high proportion and majority compared to the Southern Buddhist sect.

Although there are differences, according to the Buddha's teachings, the differences are only signs and external appearances due to geographical characteristics, local religious customs on the land of residence and the influence of many ignorant forces. These differences are not intended to divide sects but to have a comprehensive view, create sympathy, harmony with each other, solidarity in Buddhist affairs, recognize the difficulties of the path of practice, suffering, find ways to eliminate suffering, build a common path of happiness for the people.

## IV. CONCLUSION

Buddhism brings people a gentle spiritual life, knowing compassion, joy, letting go and enlightenment on the path to liberation, making people have faith in the context of unpredictable changes in life, especially in the context of an increasingly developing market economy. Through the length of history, with many different sects, depending on the conditions of economic and social development, the traditional culture of each nation, the form of practice and belief in each country is also different, however, the Buddhist perspective on practice has not changed, still keeping the essence of guiding people to do good and avoid evil.

The image of Buddha in Thailand and Vietnam is generally deeply influenced by India, associated with the culture of worshipping the great gods of Brahmanism. Although there are differences, these are also unique features, clearly demonstrating the historical process of introducing and spreading Buddhism over thousands of years of history. Although there are differences, according to the teachings of Buddha, the differences are only signs, external appearances due to geographical characteristics, local religious customs on the land of residence and the influence of many ignorant forces. These differences are not intended to divide sects but to have a comprehensive view, create sympathy, harmony with each other, solidarity in Buddhist affairs, recognize the difficulties of the path of practice, suffering, find ways to eliminate suffering, build a common path of happiness for the people.

The differences in cultural beliefs, the differences in the images of Buddha and the great Brahman gods in the original Buddhist temples in Thailand and Vietnam contribute to clarifying the characteristics of Buddhism in the two countries, and at the same time show the beauty of truth, goodness, and beauty of the people, towards a prosperous, happy life, a peaceful family, a beautiful life, and a beautiful religion.

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