

# Beliefs and Rituals Concerning Buddha statue in *Lān Nā*

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## Abstract

The article on “Beliefs and rituals concerning Buddha-stature in *Lān Nā*” aims to study the beliefs and rituals concerning Buddha-stature in *Lān Nā*. This is a documentary research which composed of in-depth interviews with local scholars in the eight northern provinces. The data were analyzed and presented in descriptive way.

The study found that the belief is the emotion of all persons, irrespective of intelligence. The cause of belief is ignorance and fear and it is the most powerful. In Buddhism, the word belief is translated from *Pālī* word “*Saddhā*” which also means confidence or trust. Belief has another word that has close meaning, that is, “*Pasāda*” which means luminous joy and sometimes both of them have been used together as *Saddhāpasāda* which means belief with luminous joy. The sources of luminous joy can be divided into four, they are, admiring body, lovely sound, gloomy uniform and *Dhamma*. When people have trusted in anyone, they will treat that one with respect. Such practice is considered a ritual. And when ritual has been practiced for a long time, it will become a tradition. In the religious point of view, the ritual can be compare to barks of the tree. Generally, people will have beliefs and adhere to something concrete or connected with supernatural power or holy things. Such people are majority in the society. For them, ritual are the major practice of social life. Those who have a chance to hear the *Dhamma* and see the truth, their ignorant belief will be reduced and, more rational, will be used as the sapwood which is the initiation of the wood, which after some time, it will became a staple wood.

Buddha-stature is created as Buddha’s representative, the one that devoted to the Buddha is called *Uddesikachedī*, one out of four Buddhist *Chedīs*, they are, *Dhātuchedī*, *Paribhogachedī*, *Dhammachedī* and *Uddesikachedī*. Buddha-stature hold the most important part to the lives and thoughts of Buddhists, despite of being created by various materials such as clay, bricks, concrete, stone, brass, copper or gold in different size, small or big one. The importance of the Buddha-stature derives from belief and base on that the ritualistic practice follows. The belief in Buddha-stature can be divided into two categories; (1) the belief that

Buddha-stature is a living thing such as ordinary man. This leads to the ritual of face-cleansing, offering rice porridge, offering the new grain, offering yellow robe, offering firewood, offering light, offering water ablutions, and the ritual of celebration for becoming Buddha and the fireballs. And (2) the belief that Buddha-stature is omnipotent, which leads to the ritual of asking for rain, cooking holy rice and ritual for auspicious boon etc.

Although belief is a private matter for each individual, when it turns into practice, and was accepted for longer period, it will become tradition, and as long as those beliefs and rituals are not harmful to individuals and society, they will be practiced continuously.

## Introduction

The belief is an emotion of all persons irrespective of intelligence. The belief caused by ignorance, fear and it becomes the most powerful one. Because of the fear and ignorance, man will deal with things according to his own belief. When the thing was done, the suffering will end and causes happiness to happen. This belief is quite blind one. There is no reason in such belief. Before believing in something, one should consider and contemplate the things rationally. This is the reliable and rational belief.

## Belief and Ritual

In Buddhism, belief is etymological derived from a *Pālī* word “*Saddhā*” which means confidence, trust and belief also has a very close meaning with a *Pālī* word “*Pasāda*” which means luminous joy and sometimes was used together as *Saddhāpasāda* which means belief with luminous joy. In other word, it is *Pasādasaddhā* which means a belief caused by luminous joy. For general, the sources of luminous joy can be divided into four, they are, admiring body, lovely sound, gloomy uniform and *Dhamma*. However both words have been related to each other. *Saddhā* has a belief in manner, adherence in acting, unclouding in result and having the object of belief in cause. *Saddhā* can be classified into two types; *Saddhānānasampayutta* which means the belief composed of wisdom and *Saddhānānavippayutta* which means the belief without wisdom.

Classification of beliefs is not found in the *Tipitaka*. However, in commentaries, there are four kinds of *saddhā* or beliefs.

- 1) *Kammasaddhā* belief in action.
- 2) *Vipākasaddhā* belief in the result of action.

3) *Kamassakatāsaddhā* belief that human beings have their own *Kamma*.

4) *Tathāgatabodhisaddhā* belief in Buddhā's enlightenment.

When a person has been cultivated four kinds of *Saddhā* completely, he/she will want to meet a monk, desires to listen the *Dhamma* and his/her mind is free from the taint. He/she is willing to relinquish, to give charity and to distribute alms.

If people have belief in someone, they will treat that person with respect. The practice of respect is considered a ritual. And when the practice was kept on for long time, it will become a tradition. . In the religious point of view, the ritual can be compare to barks of the tree. Generally, people will have beliefs and adhere to something concrete or connected with supernatural power or holy things. Such people are majority in the society. For them, ritual are the major practice of social life. Those who have a chance to hear the *Dhamma* and see the truth, their ignorant belief will be reduced and, more rational, will be used as the sapwood which is the initiation of the wood, which after some time, it will became a staple wood.

## **Buddha-statue**

Theravāda Buddhism has been established in *Lān Nā* since the time of the Queen *Chammadevī* and has been spread throughout the region. From that time, Buddha-statue has also came and the tradition of making of Buddha-statue has been popular since then. Generally, king will be sponsor in making the Buddha-statues and has dedicated them to many monasteries. For common folks, when they migrated to new place, along with building houses for accommodation, they would have to build a monastery and Buddha-statue for worship. Buddha-statue is a representative of Buddha, and the one that created with intention to devote to Buddha is called *Uddesikachedī*, one among the four *Chedīs* in Buddhism. Buddha-statue, Buddha-painting and Bodhi tree were included in *Uddesikachedī*.

*Lān Nā* people call Buddha-statue as “*Phra Chao*” and believe that making Buddha-statue has caused great merits. So they make many Buddha-statues for worship as representatives of the Buddha. In a monastery, there can be Buddha-statues more than one. Buddha-statue has a psychological meaning to those who live in the monastery and the people who have been monastery supporters. In making Buddha-statue, its magnificence is vary according to the skill of the technician, but the belief in supernatural power of the Buddha-statue is also important. In doing that, the technicians try to make completely in the 32 great characteristics (*mahāpurisalakkhana*). Buddha-statues have been made in many ways,

such as by drawing, carving, molding, casting with determination of the date, month and year that is sacred. When it has been completed, there will be a big celebration which is called “*Boud Prachao*” (*Buddhābhiseka* - becoming Buddha). After completion of that ritual, the Buddha-statue will be regarded as something with mind like a human being. So ritual of becoming Buddha for Buddha-statue has been followed up. Moreover, Buddha-statue was given name, such as, standing Buddha-statue is called *Phra Yuen*, reclining Buddha-statue called *Phra Non*. Among them, seating Buddha-statue is more popular. Sometime, the names are given according to materials of the making or its weight such as *Phra Chao Kao Tue*, *Phra Chao Lān Tue*, *Phra Chao Mai Sak*, *Phra Chao Mai Sa Luem Vān*, *Phra Chao Din*, *Phra Chao Tong Tip* and so on.

### **Beliefs and Rituals Concerning Buddha-statue in *Lān Nā***

Buddha-statue has played important role in lives and thoughts of *Lān Nā* people. Irrespective to what materials it made of, let it be clay, bricks, concrete, stone, brass, copper or even gold and to which size it was designed, let it be small or big. Buddha-statue is important to the people. In each province, the belief in the sanctity and others will be more or less depends on traditional belief and devotion of each region. Due to such belief and devotion, people in different places have been practiced to the Buddha-statue with different ritual. The belief in Buddha-statue can be divided into

- Buddha-statue is a living thing such as ordinary man.
- Buddha-statue is omnipotent.

#### **- Buddha-statue is a living thing such as ordinary man**

The belief that Buddha-statue is a living thing such as ordinary man causes various concerned rituals such as.

- A) the offering of face-cleansing water,
- B) the offering of rice porridge,
- C) the offering of rice to Buddha
- D) the offering of new grain,
- E) the offering of blanket,
- F) the offering of firewood,

- G) the offering of light and lamp,
- H) the offering of water ablutions,
- I) the initiate ritual for becoming Buddha,
- J) the offering of fireballs.

**A) the Offering of Face-cleansing Water**



With the concept that Buddha-statue is still alive as the Buddha himself, Tai people believe that in early morning, Buddha-statue has also awoken up. Therefore, the Thera (elder monk) will take the cloth off to wipe the face of Buddha-statue and clean Buddha-statue's teeth. This ritual is found at *Wat Hua Wiang*, Muang district, Mae Hong Son province, which is enshrined *Phra Chao Palālakheng*. This Buddha-statue is more respected by people in the region. In *Kengtung*, in early morning Taikhuen people will wash the face and clean the teeth of the *Mahāmaimuni* at *Wat Luang*. These Buddha-statues are Burmese arts and were brought from Burma, so such ritual is also come together from Burma.

**B) Offering the Rice Porridge (*madhupāyāsa*)**



The offering of rice porridge has a long history. By the day before enlightenment (*Visākhā* Day in the eight month for northern people or

the sixth month for the central people) the Buddha-to-be has got the rice cooked with honey and molasses from *Suchādā* (the wife of the rich man of Magadha) who has brought it to worship deities at the *Bodhi* tree.

Another legend is that the offering rice porridge was given firstly in Buddha time. According to this, the exemplified persons who first performed the offering rice porridge are *Anāthapindika* and *Visākhā*, and this tradition was kept on until the present. The ritual was performed in special occasion with belief the doer will gain great happiness and merit.

Rice porridge is commonly known by several names in different countries as well as in India, such as ;

- *Madhupāyāsa* which means rice porridge stirred with honey.
- *Khaoyāgu* which means rice porridge mixed with salt and sugar. It is kind of salty and sweet.
- *Khaovitu* which means rice stirred with sugar-cane, sugar, bean and sesame, then makes powder and lumps.
- *Khaokrayāsārt* which means rice stirred with sugar, molasses, honey, bean and sesame, then pastes clot or a piece in the festival devoted to ancestors in the tenth month of the central Thai.
- *Khaokrayadip* which means rice stirred with sugar, molasses, honey, bean, sesame and milk then stirred by virgin-girls. It is considered to be sacred; one who would have eaten will free from the diseases and have lived a happy life.
- *Khaosomtorloun* which is another name given by Tai ethnic people. It will be performed in the 12th month and offered to the Buddha in early morning.

- *Khaophrachaoloun* which is another name of *Madhupāyāsa* called by northern Thai and offered in the big festivals such as *Yi Peng*, 4th month, 8th month and so on.

*Madhupāyāsa* is normally stirred in the fence and by the virgin girls or women at menopause who have been observed five or eight precepts.

### C) Offering the Rice to Buddha



In *Lān Nā* after going out for alms and before breakfast, monks will take food out from their alms-bowl, put on a tray or Buddha-bowl then offer to Buddha-stature. This called “*Khao Phra Chao*”. They perform this as if the Buddha would have breakfast with that rice. In ceremony of the initiation for becoming Buddha or *Buddhābhiseka*, people will prepare *Madhupāyāsa* and offer to Buddha-stature too. On Buddhist holy-days, lay people will offer rice to Buddha as well. These were called “the offering of rice to Buddha”.

#### D) Offering New Rice



After the rice harvest season, *Lān Nā* people will make merit concerning new rice or bowl overflowing together in the tradition of fourth month. When locals bring new rice into the barn already, before eating, they will bring some of them to the temple and offer to Buddha. This ritual is called “the offering new rice” is done in order to dedicate merit to Angels who protected water, grandparents, parents or the previous owners of the farm. Cuisine consists of cooked new rice along with popular local foods.

Moreover, in some areas there is a festival called the offering of *Khaochi* and *Khaolām*. The villagers bring new rice from the fields and cook in different styles, such as *Khaochi*, *Khaolām*, *Khaomao*, *Khaotom* and so on, then bring these food to the monastery, offer to Buddha-stature or monks in order to dedicate the merit to the relatives who have passed away.



*Khaochi* is one of the appetizers, done by plugging a sticky-rice on bamboo-stick and grilling on charcoal like barbecue till it became a rice with crispy and fragrant. For *Khaolām*, it is sticky rice cooked in bamboo with thick pulp.

In offering new rice, people will take the paddy and rice to temple, then put separately on a bowl. The bowl contains paddy called a “*Doigum*” and the other called “*Doi-ngern*”.

In addition, the offering new rice is regarded as a gesture to worship the goddess of water and to thank to the guardian-angel. It is also an opportunity for the community to shower one own generosity to the poor or those who gain low yields that year. The ritual also brings harmony into the community.

#### E) The Offering of Blanket



*Lān Nā* people believe that Buddha-stature will feel cold in winter, because in this region the weather is quit cold. So people has brought yellow robe which may be made of plain cotton or satin with length and width according to the size of Buddha-stature, then covered the shoulder down. It is believed that one who has offered this kind of robe will get the great merit.

#### F) The Offering of Firewood





Around the end of the 3th month or in December, after completion of the grain harvest and waiting for a period that dry rice can be tied as a bundle and then bring up the yard. After finish the work on farms, and during the way back home, people will cut off the wood to make a fire for Buddha-stature by looking for a good-sized wood with long straight stems back home. Mostly they will have them according to the number of family members. Sometime the abbot of the monastery will order the monks and novices to look for firewood in the forest. They will choose a white wood which can be burn nicely, unbreakable and easy to find in the local area. The woods that suitable to make a firewood for Buddha-stature are;

-*Maigonda* or *maichingchi*

-*Maimokman*

-*Maichok*

-*Maimakham* or tamarind wood

Any kind of these woods will be cut and dry, then brought forward to temple and made a pile nearby or in front of *Vihāra*.

Around 4 or 5 A.M., the abbot will lit the fire-woods and hit the drum. Lay people will prepare food and sweet, then take them to the temple and offer to Buddha-stature and monks and novices.

### G) The Offering of Light and Lamp



Photographed by : abird

In the full-moon of 12th month, there will be a festival called *Yi Peng*. In the evening of the day, Lay people will come to the temple to listen the *Dhamma*, monk will give a sermon named *Anisamsapadīpa* (the advantage of the offering light). When the sermon is over, they will light

candles or *Padīpa* in front of Buddha-statue in the temple and their own houses as well.

#### H) The Offering of Water Ablutions



This ritual is to pour water on Buddha-statue or to bathe Buddha-statue. It was done in the first day of *Songkrān* festival (*Sangkhānlong*). This is a day for cleaning the house and washing one own hair. *Lān Nā* people will prepare water mixed with turmeric and *Sompoi* or perfume, then pour on Buddha-statue. In case of huge Buddha-statue, people will throw or splash water on the Buddha-statue. For the small one, they will bring to the floor, then do the same.

It was believed that the water which flow through them is sacred. Some may blend that with water in the bucket and take a bath or drink it to cure diseases or to sprinkle on some space in order to chase away the evil.

#### I) The Initiation Ritual for Becoming Buddha



This ritual would be performed for making anew Buddha-statue or repairing the old one.

Monks who were invited to perform the ritual, will chant the *Suttas* for whole night. In the morning, the head-monk will bring out the wax from the eyes of Buddha-statue, then use glasses to shine his face three times, while senior monk carved out of wax, the music will be performed and drum will be hit, then 49 rice porridge will be offered to the Buddha-statue as *Suchādā* had done to the Buddha in the Buddha time.

When the wax is already brought out, it means the initiation for becoming Buddha is over. That Buddha-statue is regarded as real one. People would offer alms to monks who performed the ceremony overnight. All monks bless, the ceremony finished.

### J) The Offering of fireworks



There are two types of fireworks. The first is a long bamboo tube contained with tightly fuel or gunpowder, when ignited, it would go up into the sky, it is called uprising fireworks. Another is contained with the fuel and small steels into a big bamboo tube, when ignited, it would burn and spark out as beautiful flowers, this called fireworks. (*Bokfaidok*).

In *Lān Nā*, in time of annual celebrations such as pouring water on relics, pouring water on Buddha-statue, *Songkrānt* festival and so on, people will perform the offering the fireworks as the gesture of worship Buddha (*Buddhapujā*). In *Chiangmai* the ritual will be hold at *Watphranonkhonmuang*, *Watphrathatdoisuthep*, In *Phayao* at *Watphrachaotonloung*, in *Phrae* at *Watphrathatchorhae*, In *Lamphun* at *Watphrathathariphunchai*, and In *Nan* at *Watphrathat*

*chaehaeng*, *Watphrathatkaonoi* and *Phrachaotongdip* and so on. There will be a beautiful parade before the performing the light of fireballs. In the past, the ruler of *Nan* must have at least three fireworks for himself, with bigger size than another. On this occasion, the ruler himself must come to preside over the ceremony and his fireballs would be light first for the symbol of good luck.

## - Buddha-statue is omnipotent

With belief that Buddha-statue is omnipotent, it causes the various related rituals, such as.

- A) the ritual related to the rain
- B) the ritual concerning the rice that can reduce the misfortunes
- C) sweat of Buddha-statue
- D) crying of Buddha-statue

### A) The Rituals Related to the Rain

*Lān Nā* society is agrarian societies that rely on water for cultivation. *Lān Nā* people believe that some Buddha-statue can cause it to rain as needed. When there was a drought or rain did not fall in season, people will take



out Buddha-statue of the town or village to parade for pouring water on that, and then the rain will fall. Buddha-statue that causes rain, according to *Lān Nā* belief, is *Phrachaofonsaenha* or *Phrachaofon*. Some still believe that *Phrasingha* also can do the same.

### B) The Ritual Concerning the Rice That Can Reduce the Misfortunes



When people suffer from any kind of misfortune, they believe Buddha-statue can reduce or get it off. In order that, they would prepare row or cooked rice and many kinds of food, put them on the tray made of banana leaf, bring to the monastery, put it down in front of Buddha-statue, then invite the spiritual leader (*Pūjārñ*) to perform the ritual. The *Pūjārñ* would pray or cite the *Mantras* in order to reduce the misfortunes, and at the end of praying he would tie the hand of the patient and splash the holy water.

### C) Sweat of Buddha-statue



There is also some belief that if the Buddha-statue has sweat, it signifies that the bad things would be happen to the country or village. The ancient scriptures read that.

“All of disaster would be happen because of turbid water, hawks fly in the sky,.....sweat flows from Buddha-statue”.

## D) Crying of Buddha-stature



When the country is in turmoil or at war, when people suffered from adversity, the sacred and important Buddha-stature of the country will burst into tears, which called “*Phrachaohai*” (Buddha cry) as it happened in the year 2394 B.E. during the *Songkrān* festival, by which the Burmese people and Kula plunge into the country, people shocked and suspected that it may cause various disasters. At the time, they saw tears of Buddha-stature in *Wat Doi Suthep* flow, and tiered stupa missed the one side. These mean the bad things would happen.

## Conclusion

These rituals are common practiced both for general Buddha-statues and particular Buddha-stature. In the latter case, if we need the rain, we have to perform the ceremony to *Phrachaofonsaenhā* and for good luck, we will go to *Phrachaodanjai* and so on.

Although belief is a private matter, when it was instilled and practiced in wider cycle, it became a tradition; a practices of the people that has been kept on for a long time. As long as those beliefs and rituals are not harmful to individual and society, The practice will be continuous.

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### **Interview**

**Phrakru-anurakpariyattigun.** Watphapha, Sobmai district, Meahongsorn province.

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