SAHASRA BUDDHA

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1

The only image permitted in Theravada temples is that of the historical Buddha, Gautama Sakyamuni. In Mahayana temples—indeed in the Himalayas, Tibet and Mongolia—besides the historical Buddha, designated simply Buddha (T. Sangyé) or Sakyamuni (T. Sakya Thüba), there would be many images ranging from Three to Thousand according to size and resources of temple or monastery concerned. Sahasra Buddha (T. Sangyé Tongka) was no doubt the ideal count by 9th century A.D. when Mahayana pantheon was sculptured and painted in Samye (Central Tibet) and Tun Huang (northern outpost of ancient Tibetan empire). Sanskrit-Tibetan Lexicon Mahāyānapiṭṭha (Circa 920 A.D.) attributes to the usage of Sahasra Buddha as the current in Bhadrañāla Sutra, now available only in Tibetan translation, the number recorded is 1000.

The figures are those of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, historical and legendary, besides the Goddesses. Figures of patrons and protectors of Dharma would be permissible in paintings and iconography as such persons had taken the Refuge in Dharma (T. Cho) and believers would admire them if not adore them as Bodhisattvas (T. Changchub Sonpa).

Since Dhammarāja (T. Chogyal) was Bodhisattva par-excellence and Asoka Maurya was the first and greatest Dhammaraja, Mahayana pantheon had a place of high honour for Asoka. Following the Indian tradition the first and greatest Chogyal of Tibet Songtsen Gampo was apotheosised. Mahayana was preached by Nagarjuna a contemporary of the Kushanas in North India and the Satavahanas in South India. This preaching by Nagarjuna was described by Mahayana believers as Second Turning of the Wheel of Law and Nagarjuna was in Mahayana tradition the Second Buddha. Nagarjuna and the Mahayana exponents like Aryadeva, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignaga and Dharmakirti were thus placed high in Mahayana pantheon. In Tibetan tradition Guru Padmasambhava, Atan Dzigar, Namkhen and Tibetan saints like Marpa and Tsongkha-pa were included in the pantheon and placed as high as Gautama Buddha or Nagarjuna. In fact a Guru like Padmasambhava or Tsongkha-pa would dominate the gallery of icons or the
portrayal of Buddhists and Bodhisattvas in mural or scroll paintings. In Mongolia, Ataas Dipankara is equated to Gauatama Buddha. In short for an ordinary believer or an average pilgrim the expression Sakaya Buddha (T. Sangay Tongla) was not exactly or approximately the name enumerated in a scripture like Bhadrakalpasutra (T. Dode Kalsang). The ordinary believer was as anxious to have a vision of Gauatama Buddha as of the Guru known to him. The average pilgrim would esteem the Guru nearer and dearer than the historical Buddha. An ancient Tibetan edage runs thus: "When there was no Guru the name of Buddha was not known even». This was not unlike the Hindu tradition of venerating the Guru as Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesvara.

Thousand is no doubt a notional figure which could be less finite and more infinite. In all animate beings, Semchen Thamoche, there would be Buddha potential, developing or developed. Whether well versed or not in Avatamaka Sutra (available in Tibetan translation), a Mahayana believer feels that "there is not even one living being that has not the wisdom of the Tathagata. It is only because of the vain thoughts and affections that all beings are not conscious of this".

II

The concept of multiple Buddha was not a Mahayana innovation. The concept is writ large in Pali, that is Hinayana Canon.

Gauatama Buddha did not claim to be first Enlightened One; on the other hand, he spoke of the previous Buddhas. Samyutto Nikaya records that Gauatama emphatically asserted that his path of Enlightenment was not new and that there were a number of Enlightened Ones before him. He said "I have discovered an ancient path, the Buddha of ancient times trod this path".


The six antecedent saints as precursors of Gauatama Buddha may not be all myth. Firm unimpeachable testimony about Kanaka Muni is borne by no less an authority than Aeseka Maha, The Minor Pillar Edict from Naga Steger records thus: "When king Divgradationya Prayadri had been anointed fourteen years, he enshrined the Stupa of the Buddha Kanakamana to the double (of its original size).

"And when he had been anointed (twenty) years, he came himself and worshipped this spot (and caused a stone pillar to be set up)" Eng. Tr. Hultsch.

The most celebrated among the precursors of Sakyamuni is Dipankara in Pali, Sanskrit as well as Tibetan traditions. In some reckoning Dipankara was the first Buddha and was the 24th predecessor of Buddha Sakyamuni. Obviously Dipankara was a figure of legendary past and could not be called
a Maitreya Buddha in the period when Nirmakaya concept was an established one.

If Dipankara was the greatest Tathagata before Gautama Buddha the concept of Tathagata itself is central to any discussion about the lineage of Buddhas or about the multiple Buddhas.

Tathagata would mean: (one) thus come or (one) thus come. In Hinayana tradition, that is, Pali literature the meaning of this epithet is not clear though it was used in Gautama Buddha’s life time, vide for example Mahayana Pitaka Sutta. The epithet was widely used later and it is widely used in Theravada countries today. Pali Nikayas suggest that the expression was pre-Buddhist and this suggestion is warranted if Gautama Buddha had at least six pre-cursors. In Mahayana tradition Tathagata (T. Deshin-shetkpa) meant one who was gone in the same way as his predecessors.

Whether called Tathagata or Buddha the number of such beings in Mahayana tradition would be infinite through all time, past present and future. The concept of thousands of Buddhas grew in the first four centuries A.D. that is, from Nagarjuna onwards. The numerous Buddhas in the mystic vision of Mahayana saints are one; the myriad emerge from and merge into the Sunya (void), the Absolute in the teachings of Gautama Buddha and Nagarjuna.

The doctrine of eternal and universal Buddha inspired the mystics’ quest for a Primordial Form of Adi Buddha. The quest began with a single form like Samantabhadra or Vajradhara and culminated into five forms designated Pancha Tathagatas or Pancha Sita in eighth century A.D. centuries later in the Himalayas the five were called Pancha Dhyanis Buddha. These are Vairochana or the Brilliant, Akshobhya or the Imperturbable, Ratnasambhava or the Jewelled, Amoghasiddhi or the Unfalling Success.

These Five are spiritual offspring of the Primordial Form and these Five have their emanations or reflexes. These Five and their emanations have their own Consorts. All these figures originating in the vision or meditation of the mystic saints along with the Mundane Buddhas constitute the Mahayana pantheon conventionally called Shastra Buddha or Thousand Buddhas. The pantheon thus has three tiers: the top tier is composed of the Five, the middle tier consists of further emanations or reflexes and the bottom tier is composed of the Historical Buddha and his pre-cursors and successors. For the believers the Three tiers are three Bodies: Dhammakaya or the Cosmic Body, Sambhogakaya or the Body of Bliss, and Nirmakaya or the Mundane Body.

III

The Mahayana concept of Three Bodies was a development of the earlier concept of Two Bodies, namely, that Gautama Buddha had a Dhammakaya and a Rupakaya. Dhammakaya stood for Dharma as Buddha’s real form and Rupakaya stood for Buddha’s mundane or transitory form. In Mahayana
Rupaksha came to be designated Nirmakasayas and an intermediate Body designated Semihogoksha emerged.

The Tripura are Dharmakshyas or Cosmic Body which is Absolute or Reality; Semihogoksha or Body of Bliss which in a personal manner blesses the believers; and Nirmakasayas or Mundane Body which appears on earth to teach Dharma.

The philosophy underlying the theology of Tripura (T. Ku-sum) is well expressed in the words of TRV Murti.

"As the Dharmaksha, Buddha fully realizes his identity with the Absolute (dharma, Eintet) and unity (samadhi) with all beings. It is the conscious with the Absolute that enables Buddha to intuit the Truth, which it is he sacred function to reveal to phenomenal beings. This is the fountain-source of his implicit strength which he concretizes in the finite sphere. The Semihogha Kaya is the concrete manifestation to himself (semihogha) and to the elect (paramesihogha) the power and splendour of god-head. In furtherance of the great resolve to succour all beings, Buddha incarnates himself from time to time in forms best calculated to achieve this end (nirvairaksha)." The Central Philosophy of Buddhism.

The forms of the Five Thagates, lines or Buddhas and their emanations are also the different forms of the historical Buddhas are more relevant than their underlying philosophy in this account of the Mahayana Pantheon. The Five Buddhas represent or embody the five cosmic elements as the Five in totality are identical with the cosmos or universe. The five elements are Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space with Consciousness as the all pervasive overall element. The colour and forms of the Five Buddhas are given thus in Sadana Mala. The lines (viceuous ones) are Varocara, Reksasambhava, Aamatisha, Amoghasiddhi and Akrobyha. Their colours are white, yellow, red, green and blue and they exhibit the bodhayangi (teaching), Varada (boon), Dhyana (meditation), Abhaya (protection) and Bhupesna (earth touching) pose of hands respectively. Eng. tr. Bhattacharya.

If the Five Buddhas are portrayed on one canvas Varocara is in centre with Akrobyha in west, Reksasambhava in south, Aamatisha in west, and Amoghasiddhi in north. Their respective consorts are Vaidehikavati, Lohana, Manasi, Pandana and Tara. Their respective emanations are Samantabhadra, Varajpani, Ratnapani, Avadadevee and Vasupani.

Since Dharmaksha (T. Chokla) is the Absolute, its form is Surya and for the mystic a Kapali (skull) is the best Rupa for meditation. For other believers, one of the five primordial Buddhas—Varocara (T. Nampor Nangdog), Akrobyha (T. Miruka), Reksasambhava (T. Rinchen Yugu), Aamatisha (T. Opatn) and Amoghasiddhi (T. Donya Dubja)—is the sacred illustration of Dharmaksha. The symbols, pose of hands, or mode of sitting of a figure make the icon familiar.
The Sambhokakaya (T. Longchho Zogki) are emanations from the five primordial Buddhas in their different forms. The number of such emanations by ninth century as recorded in Mahavyutpatti was ninetytwo. In Nippanavyogavali a work of eleventh century the Bodhisattvas recognized as Sambhokakaya are fortyeight. Whatever was the final number-forty eight, ninety two or more—all the four sects of Tibet agree in counting a set of eight as topmost. These are Manjusri (T. Jampelyang), Vajrapani (T. Chana Dorje), Avalokiteshvara (T. Chenrezig), Kshitigarbha (T. Sayi Nyingpo), Sarvanivaranivarakambhi (T. Depathamched Namphesheldha), Akasagarbha (T. Mekhre Nyingpo), Maitreya (T. Jampa) and Samantabhadra (T. Kunlu Sangpo) This is in conformity with the pre-ninth century Indian tradition.

The Sambhogakakaya icons are, in the believer’s esteem, far more concrete than the Dharmaakaya figures. The believers adore the Sambhogakakaya Bodhisattvas as personal god-heads and experience in prayer and meditation no distance or impersonal quality as with the Sunyata (T. Tongpenyi). Manjusri the embodiment of Knowledge (Prajna/Sherab) was in the beginning the first or topmost. Later, sometime after sixth century, Avalokiteshvara the embodiment of Compassion (Karuna/Ningpo) came to occupy the top position among the celestial Bodhisattvas and finally emerged as the head of the entire Mahayana pantheon.

These celestial Bodhisattvas have their distinctive symbols and respective Consorts. They are depicted in various forms. Avalokiteshvara has two popular forms: one four handed and other eleven headed. A total of one hundred and eight forms of Avalokiteshvara are found in Nepal. Manjusri has no less than a dozen forms. Two forms of Manjusri are famous: one with Sword of Knowledge in right hand and Book of Knowledge in left hand and the other with two Wheels of Law in his hands and riding the Lion of Knowledge in blue colour.

Tara is Consort of Avalokiteshvara while Pratishtharama is Consort of Manjusri. The Consort goddesses have also variant forms. Tara for example has a set of twenty one forms. Green Tara may be depicted in eight forms. The Consort deities need a separate notice. Here it is necessary to state that these feminine deities constitute the essential part of the esoteric mystic pantheon. Icons of Yukasiddha (T. Yab Yum) depicting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the embrace of their consorts, must be mentioned here as part and parcel of Sahasra Buddha, this theme of Yukasiddha also needs separate notice.

Nirmanakaya (T. Tulku) or Manasha Buddha par-excellence is Gautama Sokyo Muni, the historical Buddha as distinct from a legendary Buddha or a Buddha of meditation. When Buddhism came to be recorded in stone, wood or plastic medium Gautama Buddha and his six precursors, described earlier, were depicted as Seven Moral Buddhas. Meanwhile Mahayana
teachers like Nagarjuna came to be recognized as Manuhas Buddha. Later in Tibet and Mongolia, Buddha Sakyamuni was adopted as Dharmakaya after his Mahaparinirvana and the saints or teachers like Nagarjuna, Padmasambhava and Atisa would be cited as Nirmalakaya. Following the Indian tradition Tibetan saints like Marpa of Kongkhyap would be depicted as iconic forms of Manuhas Buddha. The first Tulkus (Nirmalakaya) to be recognized in Tibet were Chosnyin Sonam Gyampo and his scholar minister Thamsamkhye the Chogyau was recognized as incarnation of Chenrezi (Avalokiteshvara) and the minister was recognized as incarnation of Jamyangyond (Manjusri). The Tibetan custom of recognizing incarnations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas of meditation among the believers in Tibet was confirmed according to tradition by Atisa who was in Tibet (1042-1054).

Gautama Buddha may be depicted in various forms with varying modes of sitting, varying poses of hands, with one or more extraordinary marks like the Ushnisa. The Bodhisattvas or Bodhisattvas who came after Gautama Buddha were depicted with symbols or objects connected with their lives and teachings. Thus Nagarjuna is depicted usually as receiving the book of Minduniverses from the Naga princess, Padmasambhava with the Yaje (Dome) or Thunderbolt in his right hand and a Kapala crakka in his left hand and Dipankara Atisa with a metal statue (T. Chorten) or his right hand and a wicker basket containing scriptures on his left. The Tulkus or incarnations in Tibet and Mongolia were rarely numerous and a good number of such Tulkus would also be accommodated in the pantheon depicted in murals or sculptures. All these figures can be identified by the symbols peculiar to them.

If a temple has only Three Images, the set may be of the Buddhas of Past, Present and Future, that is, Dipankara, Sakyamuni and Maitreya, or of Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmalakaya. In Nepal Three Images representing Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are common is use.

IV
Western visitors to the Himalayan monasteries often enquire about the comparative numerical superiority between Puranic Hindu and Mahayana Buddhist Pantheons. It is indeed a moot question which is the answer categorically. Both Hindu and Mahayana deities passed through phenomenal proliferation for centuries. Finds of new deities or new variants of the deities are reported from time to time. A few years ago an Indian archaeologist reported the find of Avalokiteshvara with twelve hands. Why and how numerous deities entered into the Mahayana Pantheon may be seen from the point of view of Tantra. In the words of the leading scholar in the field, Benoy Tosh Bhattacharyya, the process may be described thus:

The individual soul is known in Buddhism as the bodhisattva or bodhicitta, while the infinity of the universal Soul is called Sunya. When they combine in the state of the highest meditation and concentration, an artificial condition, in a way akin to deep sleep, is brought about, and the deity appears in the mind sky in flashes and sparks. The nature of the bodhicitta...
being finite, it is not possible to realize the Infinite in its entirety, that is to say, the result of the mystic experience of the bodhisattva also remains finite. And as the object for which the worshipper sits in meditation is different in different cases, the deity visualized also becomes different. It is the bhavana (desire) of the worshipper, which is the nature of psychic force that results in the infinite energy, giving rise to different manifestations according to the nature of reaction. The nature of this reaction is still indistinguishable variety, and thus the resultant deity also appears in an infinite variety of forms, and this is the chief reason why we find large number of gods and goddesses in the pantheons of both the Buddhists and the Hindus.” *The Cultural Heritage of India, Volume I, Ch. Mahayana Pantheon.*

About the imagery of the deities Hindu and Mahayana concepts are not identical. The Puranic Hindur view was that the Devas were actually present on this earth in the ancient past and that the Devas gradually left this earth as not worthy for their stay and were merged in the ether. A concise notice from the Puranic text *Vigyaneshvarasahasra* was made by S. Banerjee thus:

> "The *Vigyaneshvarasahasra* tells us that the gods were worshipped in their visible forms, not images, in the Saiva yuga, in the Pada and Dvapara yugas, worship was done both in their visible forms and in their images. In the Braj yuga they were worshipped in the house and in the dvrgas in the forest in the Kali yuga, however, the practice of building houses of gods (i.e. temples) in town was begun. The environment of the gods (i.e. their images) should be done in land suitable for such purpose, which should be donated according to the rules followed in gifts of lands." *The Development of Hindu Iconography.*

In Mahayana, the image or forms of the deities were as in the vision or meditation of the Mahasiddha (master mystic). The artist, whether from the clergy or from the laity had to draw or depict the image to the satisfaction of the mystic. The mystic process of visualization of the deity is described in *Avayavayur Sangada* thus:

> "The form of the deity is an expression of the samsara. Such expressions are by nature non-existent. Whatever there is as expression, it must be samsara in essence."

"From the right perception of samsara proceeds the germ-syllable from the germ-syllable proceeds the conception of an icon, and from the icon, the external representations. The whole process therefore is one of dependent origination." *Bhar Tr. Bhaskharrya.*

It may be noted that in prayer or meditation, as in painting or sculpture, Gautama Buddha’s basic teaching of Pratitya-Samutpada (?) (Tendal) was the inspiration to realize excellence. Modern aesthetics may or may not appreciate this process but must listen to the believer’s word if sentimental, grotesque forms are to be understood. A free translation of an ancient saying quoted by the believers may be made: "One who perceives the Cause and Effect nexus perceives the Truth. One who surpasses the Truth perceives the Buddha."
(1) देवानंदिनेन पियादासिन लाविन चौद्दसौकासिनितेन
बुधस कोनाकमनस शूवे कुत्रित्वं विठ्ठते
....सामिसितेन च अतन आभार सहीयते.
.... पापिते
अिषोकः अनुशासनः सिमािथ समा

(2) गुस्त्रेव गुस्विनिनुः गुस्त्रेवो सिमाबः
गुस्त्रे व पर च ब्राह्म तस्मे श्री गुरूः नामः

(3) देवानंदिनेन
सत्यायुथे देवराणो प्रत्यायुथापनं - वेद मापायोः
प्रत्यायुथा प्रतिमासुः च तत्तापितेतायुथे योहेङ
दापरे करणे - करी च देवायतनानामभिनेिगरूषुः
समासुः, भुमिठि विधायत प्रतिमासुः
कायोः, देवायतेऽपायमुः

(4) विषुवनेतर
स्पृहिनं देवायताकारव निस्महेवः: स्वभावतः
यथा यथा भेवत्र स्पृहि: स तथा यथा यथात्तलिकः

शह्यतावाधितो बीजे देवायतोः प्रजायते
विशेषे - च चाविन्यासोः समासवर्षः प्रतीत्वः
अद्वयविन्यसः

12
(5) जिनेवै वैशालीरत्नसम्भव: स्वः च। अभिभावमोक्षसिद्धार्थमोक्षसिद्ध प्रकटित:

भर्ष्यो परमेषा सितः पीतो स्नः हस्तमेववकीः।
बोधिधारकी वरदी ध्यानं बुद्धा अभ्यस्मुपर्यो ॥

(6) साधनमश्च

स: प्रतित्तसमुपत्ते पन्तति स: धर्मं पन्तति।
स: धर्मं पन्तति स: शुद्धं पन्तति ॥

शुद्धवर्धन्म
TUNG SHA
Thirtyfive Buddhas who receive confession
TSHOG ZHING
Assembly of Buddhas: Tsongkhapa in centre
SIPA'I KHORLO
Wheel of Life depicting six worlds of existence.