

## **Buddhist Philosophy: A Study of Buddha Images for Perpetuating Buddhism in Isan Society**

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**Abstract: Problem statement:** Buddha image is a symbol which built for representing the Buddha. At present, the majority of people always misinterpret and misevaluate the real value of Buddha image. As a matter of fact, Buddha image enhances social solidarity and social networks of Northeast-Thai people. Appreciating value of Buddha image is necessary for next generation so a study of Buddhist Philosophy towards Buddha images and current problems concerning interpretation and evaluation is a serious study. This research aimed at investigating a body of knowledge of Buddhist Philosophy towards Buddha image and current problems concerning interpretation and evaluation of Buddha image according to Buddhist Philosophy. **Approach:** Research areas were Ubon Ratchathani Province, Yasothon Province and Maha Sarakham Province. A sample of 116 people consisted of a group of key informants, a group of casual informants and a group of general informants. Research instruments were an observation, a survey, an interview and a focus group interview. Research data were examined by means of a triangulation technique and research results were presented by means of a descriptive analysis. **Results:** Buddha images reflect Buddhist philosophy towards 7 postures of the Buddha, they are a Buddha image in a posture of overcoming temptations (Pang Mara Wichai), in a posture of sitting under the protection of the hood of the mythical serpent (Pang Nak Prok), in a posture of sitting in meditation (Pang Samati), in a posture of giving a sermon (Pang Prathan Porn), in a posture of sitting with an aureole around the body (Pang Ruean Kaew) and in a posture of displaying the Twin Miracles (Pang Yamok Patihan). A main current problem is people are more interested in the miracle power of Buddha image than the practice according to Buddhist Philosophy which conceals in it. **Conclusion/Recommendation:** Research result reveals the value of Buddhist Philosophy which conceals in Buddha image and point to the usefulness of Buddhist Philosophy for daily life and perpetuation of Buddhism in Isan society (Northeast society of Thailand).

**Key words:** Buddhist philosophy, Buddha image, miracle power, triangulation technique

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Buddha image is a type of Thai-sculpture. It is a symbolic figure which represents the Buddha, the exalted founder of Buddhism. In order to create a symbolic figure of the Buddha for people's worship Buddha image is created into several processes; for example carving out of a stone, carving out of a log, molding of metal, molding of clay, painting on cloth or wall (Saising, 2004). Creating Buddha image in the northeast of Thailand relates to the history of creating Buddha image in Laos; in the past, northeast of Thailand was a part of the Lan Chang Kingdom of Laos and afterwards it was under the authority of the Thai Kingdom so some details of Buddha image had been influenced by Thonburi and Rattanakosin art. In the

latter 19th century, western countries colonized Asian countries as colonies so some right parts of the Maekhong River of Laos became the parts under the authority of the Thai State, that resulted from the territorial exchange between the Thai State and the French State. Thus the Lan Chang Buddha images have spread in Northeast Thailand since then (Lohpetcharat, 2003).

Buddha image in Northeast Thailand influenced by Lan Chang art. They are a Pha Chao Yai In Plaeng at Wat Maha Wanaram, Ubon Ratchathani Province; a Pha Chao Ong Dam (Phra Buddha Samit Nira Rokha Khantarai) at Wat Khleng, Kalasin Province; a Phra Saeng at Wat Si Thep Pradittaram, Nakhon Phanom Province; a Pha Bang at Wat Trai Phum, Nakhon Phanom Province and a Phra Chao Ong Luang at Wat

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Si Mongkhon Tai, Mukdahan Province (Changphanitkun, 2002). During the lifetime of the Buddha, he did not require creating some things for representing himself and focused on teaching his adherents to conduct themselves in the right way (Dharma). Each person can understand Dharma in different ways so creating Buddha image for representing the Buddha is a way to encourage Buddhist adherents to understand Dharma easily because each posture of Buddha images represents Buddhist Philosophy or Buddhist doctrine and it is a reminder which reminds Buddhist adherents to do good things. The value of Buddha image depends on the appreciation in Buddhist doctrine or Buddhist philosophy of the creator and Buddhist adherents because it is not a general thing but it is an exalted thing.

**Purposes and objectives:** This research aimed at investigating a body of knowledge of Buddhist Philosophy towards Buddha image and current problems concerning interpretation and evaluation of Buddha image according to Buddhist Philosophy.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Population and sample:** A population was the people who lived in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Yasothon Province and Maha Sarakham Province. A sample of 116 people consisted of a group of key informants, a group of casual informants and a group of general informants.

**Instruments:** Research instruments were an observation, a survey, an interview and a focus group interview.

**Data analysis:** Research data were examined by means of a triangulation technique and research results were presented by means of a descriptive analysis.

#### **RESULTS**

The findings are as follows:

- In terms of a body of knowledge of Buddhist Philosophy towards Buddha image, it reveals that Buddha images in research areas reflect Buddhist philosophy towards 7 postures of the Buddha, they are a Buddha image in a postures of overcoming temptations (Pang Mara Wichai), in a posture of sitting under the protection of the hood of the mythical serpent (Pang Nak Prok), in a posture of sitting in meditation (Pang Samati), in a posture of

giving a sermon (Pang Prathan Tham), in a posture of giving a blessing (Pang Prathan Porn), in a posture of sitting with an aureole around the body (Pang Ruean Kaew) and in a posture of displaying the Twin Miracles (Pang Yamok Patihan). These posture are influenced by the philosophy of Theravada-Buddhism and Mahayana-Buddhism, including Dvaravati art, Cambodian art and Lan Chang art

- In terms of current problems concerning interpretation and evaluation of Buddha image according to Buddhist Philosophy, it reveals that general people are interested in the miracle power of Buddha image than the practice according to Buddhist philosophy which conceals in it. This wrong interpretation and evaluation results from both internal and external factors, internal factors are social value and social concept which depend on time and social context, external factors are an economic factor, a social factor, a political factor and others

#### **DISCUSSION**

A body of knowledge concerning Buddhist philosophy concealed in Buddha images in research areas reflects towards 7 postures of the Buddha. They are a Buddha image in a postures of overcoming temptations (Pang Mara Wichai) which is the popular posture of Buddha images, a Buddha image in a posture of sitting under the protection of the mythical serpent (Pang Nak Prok), a Buddha image in a posture of sitting in meditation (Pang Samati), a Buddha image in a posture of giving a sermon (Pang Prathan Tham), a Buddha image in a posture of giving a blessing (Pang Prathan Porn), a Buddha image in a posture of sitting with an aureole around the body (Pang Ruean Kaew) and a Buddha image in a posture of displaying the Twin Miracles (Pang Yamok Patihan). These postures are influenced by the philosophy of Theravada-Buddhism and Mahayana-Buddhism, including Dvaravati art, Cambodian art and Lan Chang art. This is congruent with the research result of Suksri *et al.* (2010), he studied about "The Buddha Images and Conservation and Adherence to Cultural Value in Northeast". It revealed that there were 5 models of the Buddha image art found in Isan: Sandstone Buddha images, baked-clay votive tablets, cast mortar Buddha images, bronze Buddha images and wooden Buddha images. They were in the Periods of Dvaravati, Lop Buri and Lan Chang. The Buddha images were popularly built in many different styles such as concentration style, double-miracle style, nagover-his-head style, blessing style,

world-opening style, relatives-stop style, dharma consideration style and others.

A main current problem is people are more interested in the miracle power of Buddha image than the practice according to Buddhist philosophy which conceal in it. This wrong interpretation and evaluation results from both internal and external factors, internal factors are social values and social concept which vary according to time and social context, external factors are an economic factor, a social factor, a political factor and others. This problem affects significantly the perpetuation of Buddhism in Isan society and it seriously needs the correct solution.

### **CONCLUSION**

The result of this research reveals the great value of Buddhist philosophy which conceals in Buddha images and a main current problem concerning interpretation and evaluation of Buddha image which affects significantly the perpetuation of Buddhism in Isan society.

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