

## The Model of Explanations about Deities for the Modern Theravāda Buddhist Societies

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#### Abstract

This thesis is the sociological explanations about deities for the modern Theravāda Buddhist societies. This is a documentary study with the critical and analytical approaches. Three objectives are explained in this thesis: (1) to study the Brāhmaṇical deities in the Theravāda Buddhist societies; (2) to study the concept of deities in the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures; and (3) to study the analysis of deities from Theravāda Buddhist texts.

From the explanations of the first objective, the research findings for the modern Theravāda Buddhist societies are: first, they would be able to understand about the historic misconception of the deities; second, they would be able to understand about the true concept of deities in the Buddhist texts; third, they would be able to understand the modern belief in deities are partly wrong or totally wrong with the help of the explanations given in the thesis. Fourth, they would be able to generate the concept of deities within the human societies and environment of the pragmatical of our daily activities.

From the explanations of the second objective, the research findings for the modern Theravāda Buddhist societies are: first, they would be able to understand much better when they would cross that the Buddhist texts signify mainly three types of deities: conventional deities, deities by birth, and deities by purification; then second, they would be able to understand clearly the deities are actually referred to the various classes of human beings according to their actions: good or bad; third, they will be motivated by doing good actions and thereby would be able to live a happy life without any mental torment.

From the explanations of the third objective, the research findings for the modern Theravāda Buddhist societies are: first, they would be able to know how to become a noble person and performs the right rituals; second, they would be able to gain the economics and the other material benefits by applying the principles from Buddhism; third, they would be able to understand how the economics and the other materials things should be earned, that is they will earn in diligently and in skillfully; and fourth, they would be able to enjoy a happy life in the personal and the family and the greater societies.

**Keywords: Model / deities, modern / Theravāda Buddhist societies**

## Introduction

There have been elements of Brāhmaṇical beliefs in the context of contemporary Theravāda Buddhist societies. The way in which deities in Theravāda Buddhist texts have been understood is not how they are understood by contemporary modern Buddhists. Modern secondary literatures of historians and anthropologists prove, that the social-religious beliefs and practices of Theravāda Buddhist concerning deities are oriented on Brāhmaṇical beliefs. Melford E. Spiro , B. J. Terwiel , Donald K. Swearer , Rita Langer and Dilip Kumar Barua and Mitsuru Ando have revealed in their research hypotheses on Theravāda Buddhist beliefs and practices concerned with deities, to be of early Brāhmaṇical influence. The ordinary Theravāda Buddhists have been exposed to Brāhmaṇical ritual influences concerning deities from a very early time right up to present times. Well-learned and educated Buddhists scholars have all the while not made any effort to explain the true concept of deities in Theravāda Buddhism. Whatever information on the subject available are only very common assertions and implications made by some scholars and others. This study will offer to give a true understanding of the nature of deities in Theravāda Buddhist scriptures. In this research, three related and distinctive features need to be explained. These are:

- (1) The Brāhmaṇical deities in Theravāda Buddhist society
- (2) The concept of deities in Theravāda Buddhist scriptures
- (3) An analysis of deities in Theravāda Buddhist texts

The first issue is that Buddhists still do not know the reasons why Brāhmaṇical beliefs and practices concerning deities are observed in modern Theravāda Buddhist societies. It is, therefore, important to explain this clearly and to show clearly that Brāhmaṇical beliefs in deities and practices connected with it are not the true path to eliminate the problems humanity faces. Such beliefs and practices also do not lead to higher celestial rebirth or to achieve material benefits.

The second issue is: Theravāda Buddhists in general do not understand the true concept of deities in Theravāda Buddhist texts. This concept needs to be explained, which will show the wrong perception of the Brāhmaṇical deities.

The third objective is a pure sociological approach in which the Theravāda Buddhist scriptures are analyzed, focusing on socio-economic development.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To study Brāhmaṇical Deities in Theravāda Buddhist Society.
2. To study the Concept of Deities in Theravāda Buddhist Scriptures.
3. To study an Analysis of Deities from Theravāda Buddhist Texts.

## Statements of the Problems

1. What are the Brāhmaṇical deities in Theravāda Buddhist society?

2. What are the true concepts of deities in Theravāda Buddhist Scriptures?
3. What are the analyses of deities from Theravāda Buddhist Texts?

### **The Definitions of Terms Used in the Dissertation**

“Deva” is defined as following words: glowing, shining, radiating and illuminating.

“Sammuti deva” is defined as conventional deity referring to the kings, queens and princes of royal clans.

“Uppatti deva” is defined as deity by birth on the basis of wholesome and unwholesome actions.

“Visuddhi deva” is defined as deity by purification. It is the purification of ill mentalities by knowledge and wisdom.

### **Review of the Related Literatures**

1. This book *Gods in Early Buddhism: A study in their social and mythological Milieu* as depicted in the Nikāyas of the Pāli Canon, deals with the advent of Ariyans of India, the social and religious conditions at the rise of Buddhism and the new nature of Buddhism with its gods. It discusses with Buddhist cosmology and with growth of gods in Buddhism, function of gods and reveals that gods in Buddhism are the products of cultural synthesis in India. This text analyzes about deities in ethnological feature. The ethnological feature and character of deities are referred in *Sagāthāvagga* of *Samyutta Nikāya*. Scholar like M. M. J. Marasinghe observed that the Yakkhas in the *Samyutta Nikāya* were the tribal peoples. According to him Yakkha Āḷavaka was a tribal chief of the Yakkhas inhabited at the time of the Buddha and the other Yakkhas such as, Indaka : Indaka’s question was a philosophical typed concerning of Buddhas rejection of physical body as soul, if it is so, then how we get this body etc. The Buddha’s reply was embryological process of development. For example, the Buddha said that: first Kalala takes birth, then Abbuda, then Pesī, and then Ghana. In Ghana the limbs, the head-hair, body-hair, and nails emerge. Sūciloma’s question was associated with ethico-psycho-philosophical revelation, and Mañibhadda’s question was about mental developemt. All these Yakkhas are represented their own ethnological character and they would have been at least respectable tribesmen, if not tribal chief. From the foregoing statements, it would be clear that the Yakkhas found in the *Samyutta Nikāya* were not mere tribesmen. They were mythologized in later textual interpretation in Buddhism.

2. This book *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* , surveys in cultural and religious matters of historical review of the Theravāda tradition. This text analyses on Theravāda Buddhism in Southeast Asia as a dynamic complex system of thought and practice imbedded in respective cultures, societies, and histories of Theravāda Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. Theravada Buddhism is the Buddha’s teachings which are found in *Tipiṭaka*: *Suttapiṭaka*, *Vinayapiṭaka* and *Abhidhammapiṭaka*. The Buddha’s teachings imbedded in these three baskets are remained in questions on the authentic historical documents. The Buddha’s teachings are oriented based on rational and scientific model or system, but Buddhists in different countries has been taught some Buddhist teachings are dynamic complex system of thought.

This complex system of thought includes the popular tradition, rituals, festivals, and rites of passage that Buddhists in South and Southeast Asian countries have been practiced as important aspects of Buddha's teachings. At the popular level, Buddhism absorbed local religious forms, symbols, and cults from its environment rooted from the Indus civilization and other levels of Indian prehistory which derived from Vedic traditions.

The Buddhist's rites of passages are of syncretic typed. "Syncretism" is a religious system of elements draw from different systems of religion; or it is used in the fusion of diverse religious beliefs and practices, or fusion of elements from various cultural sources to bring together and combine as harmoniously as possible diverse religious views. It helps us to better analyze a certain aspect of the mutual influence between religious traditions. In this respect, Drooger says: "It involves a process in which beliefs and practices from one religious current or world and life view are adopted by certain people in another religious current."

During the 19th Century various theories based on the scientific knowledge of the time were developed to explain the origin of religion. One of these theories was put forward by Sir Edward Tylor, who suggested: "The definition and the explanation of the origin of religion was animism." The term "animism" in Thai religion refers to the belief and practice relating to "spirits" (phi). According to Landon and LeMay: "animism in contemporary Thailand appears fragmentary, disorganized, and unsystematic." Thai Buddhist religion reflects Brāhmaṇistic elements. Tavivat Puntarigvivat states that the Brāhmaṇistic elements in Thai religion in the following: There are two main components of Brāhmaṇistic elements in Thai religion: "Court Brāhmaṇism and "Folk" Brāhmaṇism. The Court Brāhmaṇism is closely tied to royal institutions and the capital city. The Folk Brāhmaṇism is more widely diffused with people throughout the country. All these practices, however, would have been connected with the Vedic or Brāhmaṇical religious system and, therefore, do not have connection with Buddhism.

3. This book Indian Myth and Legend explains the popular beliefs and legends of the Hindus. This book also shows that the Hindus believe in many River's spirits. Among these River's spirits, 'Saraswatī' signifies the chief spirit of the waters. In the Vedas, Saraswatī is primarily a river, but is celebrated in the hymns both as a river and a deity. The Saraswatīriver was a boundary of Brahmāvartta, the home of the early Aryans, and was to them, in all likelihood, a sacred river, as the Ganges has long been to their descendants. As a river goddess, Saraswatī is lauded for the fertilizing and purifying the powers of her waters, and as the bestower of fertility, fatness and wealth.

Saraswati signifies the chief spirit of the waters. Therefore, there has been the belief regarding the spirits of water. In Thailand, the primary goddess of rice is called "Mae Phosop", who appears as a pregnant woman when the grains swell to maturity and who gives birth to the new crops. The Thai cultivators of wet rice address Mae Phosop, the maternal rice goddess: "O, Rice Goddess, come up into the rice bin. Do not go astray in the meadows and fields, for mice to bite you and birds to take you in their beaks. Go to the happy place to rear your children and grandchildren in prosperity. Come!"

4. This book Facets of Buddhist Thought: Collected Essays presents an account of Theravāda

Buddhism and embraces a wide variety of themes ranging from the birth of Buddhism to the Buddha's prophetic teachings regarding the future of mankind. This book discusses the background of early Buddhism; the significance of the Buddha's birthday; the Buddhist doctrines of karma and reincarnation; the Buddhist conception of truth, good and evil, Nibbāna, the individual, the universe and the material world; the Buddhist view of nature and destiny; Buddhism and the caste system; Buddhism and International law; and the contemporary relevance of the Buddha's teachings to the modern world.

5. This book *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* deals with the contemporary changes in the religious life of Sri Lankan Buddhists. Sinhala Buddhists have always belief and worship of gods and propitiation of demons, belief in and attempted manipulation of supernatural powers: things for which the Buddhist scriptures give no specific authority and which the actors themselves have generally considered to form no part of Buddhism, though perfectly compatible with it. This was the crucial distinction within the culture. Traditionally Sinhala Buddhism has been a system of belief and action with a distinctive ethos, integrated within a Buddhist framework that traces its history all the way back to the introduction of Buddhism into the island from the Indian mainland.

6. This book *Buddhist Thought & Ritual* examines some of the more significant rituals in the Buddhist tradition in general. The rituals concerning Theravāda tradition in particular, it discusses the significance of the ritual offerings to ancestors in Theravāda Buddhism" traces the history of the ancient practice in the Vedas and Brāhmaṅical literature of the period before the rise of Buddhism. But Buddhism distinguishes the Brāhmaṅical version in the moral and psychological character.

7. This book *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* focuses the study of how the Burmese (both lay people and monks) actually understand the practice of Buddhism because it is fascinating and ultimately revealing of how they have adopted the Buddhist ritual system. The author discusses a number of issues of the basic ceremonial observance in the Burmese Buddhist cultural and their customary regulation, a typical of fourteen customary regulations. For example the author explains during the death ceremony, a group of young men, friends and neighbours of the family play games such as *kāram* and drinking *arrak*. The coffin has to be taken out of the house at a particular astrologically powerful moment to prevent the spirit from returning to the house. Even the clockwise circumambulation around the grave was interpreted as confusing the spirit so that it will not find its way home. This for Thai and Burmese practices respectively. Interestingly, the same reason is given for the Hindu custom to bind together the two big toes after death occurred.

8. This book *Monks and Magic: An Analysis of Religious Ceremonies in Central Thailand* is broadly structured around the typical life-cycle of villagers within the Theravāda Buddhists in Thailand. This book deals with rituals associated with birth and childhood, adolescence, entering and leaving the monkhood, marriage, building a home, and old age and death. It should be noted though that the author's intention is not to provide a complete picture of religious life in the village. Instead, he focuses on the interface between Buddhism and the "magico-animistic" aspects of Thai religion. Or more accurately, it attempts to show the syncretism, the lack of distinction between these categories for the villagers he

studied. For this reason, he acknowledges, the study glosses over certain dimensions of religious life that does not directly involve the saṅgha or other aspects of the Buddhist institutions. It is syncretic because villagers do not make a sharp distinction between Buddhism and various kinds of “magical” practices on the other.

The above literature reviews are shown enormous in popular aspects of deities in metaphysical sense with exception of M. M. J. Marasinghe’s book “Gods in Early Buddhism” in which the author has explained the social and cultural milieu of deities focusing in early Buddhist periods. This book sounds a bit close to the social context of deities, but it also lacks to the direction of present dissertation is concerned, particularly in the sociological analysis of deities, focusing on socio-economical development in Theravāda Buddhist scriptures.

### **Methodology of the Study**

This is a documentary research. The process of research methodology is divided into four steps.

1. Collecting data from the primary sources of the Tipiṭaka.
2. Collecting data from the secondary sources of relevant books, encyclopaedias and dictionaries.
3. The data will be studied in analytical and critical approaches.
4. Conclusion and Suggestions

### **Expected Benefit of the Study**

1. Knowing Brāhmaṇical deities in Theravāda Buddhist Society.
2. Knowing concept of deities in Theravāda Buddhist scriptures.
3. Knowing an analysis of deities from Theravāda Buddhist Texts.
4. Getting the body of knowledge pertaining sociological analysis of deities focusing on socio-economical development in Theravāda Buddhist scriptures.

### **Discussions**

The discussion topics would include how divinities actually appear in “modern Theravada Buddhist societies”, because veneration of divinities is a parallel system of worship in Thailand alongside traditional Theravada worship. To remove this aspect of worship would have a very great impact on modern Buddhism in Thailand. It is not enough for the author to imply that this parallel system is not necessary and can be eliminated by giving more emphasis on Buddhist scriptures and correct teaching. There is much to discuss here, and the author seems not to be aware of it. This proposal is about to explain the true concept of deities in Buddhist scriptures on sociological dimension focused socio-economics development. The divinities in modern Theravada Buddhist societies have been appeared through many intercultural and mutual exchanges with Brāhmaṇical and Buddhist traditions. Buddhist traditions, however, could not win over the popular cultic beliefs and practices of Brāhmaṇism. Majority of

Buddhists have been the tendency and inclination toward the popular belief cults from pre-history Buddhism to our modern times. The divinities in the sense of popular and mystical aspects, during the Buddha's time could not dominate so strongly and what socio-religious history tell us about this is the Buddha who assisted to eliminate the root causes of divinities by proclaiming the true doctrinal principles and many peoples from different religious faiths were seen enlightened from grass root of unethicalized and demoralized system of thought.

The Buddha was not interested in any discussion related to the divinities in the metaphysical speculation. In Buddhist scriptures show that many people were disappointed or perplexed on the divinities in supernaturalism. Therefore, some persons were directly approached to the Buddha to know the actual divinities in supernaturalism. It is clearly stated in Saṅgāra and Doṇa discourses. The divinities in supernaturalism were promulgated by Brahmins long before Buddhism arose in India. Such promulgation of divinities in popular aspects was the aim to accumulate the material benefits from the wealthy families and such promulgation even had been attempted at the time of Buddhism arose in India, but such metaphysically introduction of divinities in different societies could not progress because of the Buddha's authority and power. Sacrifice was the main tool from which Brahmins would have been seized the other peoples' valuable properties. The main issue regarding sacrifice the animal killing in the large scale was involved. However, Buddhist scriptures inform us that any sacrifice was prepared to any place could not perform because of Buddha's directly intervention. The Buddha's main concerned was the involvement of animal killing, otherwise if animal killing was not involved, the Buddha would seem approved any sacrifice, but must have been according to the rules and regulations of any custom. However, according to the Buddhist sacrificial system is spiritual development can be attained which would help to eradicate the human suffering and therefore, would have been credited praiseworthy in societies.

Such Brāhmaṇical sacrifice, however, periodically has been changed, because of the radical changes of geo-political, social and religious conditions under the modernization and scientific evolution. Consumerism has been important aspect of changing sacrificial ritual, when economics has been dominated in societies. In modern Theravada Buddhists' different cultural milieus are not seen in strictly prohibited sense. Modern ways of veneration of Brāhmaṇical divinities is a parallel system of worship in Thailand and other South and Southeast Asian countries alongside traditional Theravada worship. If Theravada Buddhists understand the actual concept of divinities taught by the Buddha which is available in Buddhist scriptures would be able to gradually extinction of Brāhmaṇical divinities, thereby, it would have a very great impact on modern Buddhism in Thailand and other countries. Theravada Buddhist scriptures show that any person approaches the Buddha to discuss about divinities on blind belief system, then the Buddha tactically turns him back in the topics of sociological matters. In pre-Buddhist ages, the societies had been suffered painfully in sufficient material productions. Societies had never freedom to produce sustainability of material productions. During the Buddha's time, the societies had achieved freedom to cultivate by direct appeal of the Buddha's teachings. Cities and populaces had been increased

rapidly at the Buddha's time providing societies in proper guidance with principles of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha gave enough teachings on how to cultivate material possessions rightly and to become wealthy and uses material wealth properly. The Buddha's teachings in societies are founded on economical based and, therefore, Buddha's teachings did not promulgate strict rules and regulations like the rules and regulations made for the monastic community.

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

### **Conclusion**

This thesis has been written on the sociological perspective in documentary research in critical and analytical methodological framework. The first objective has shown the historical and modern problems of deities in Theravāda Buddhist societies. It has also shown that the deities are being practiced in Theravāda Buddhist societies are Brāhmaṇical deities, such as many rituals in Theravāda Buddhist societies are associated with Brāhmaṇical rituals. In this connection, it has provided Buddhist scriptural explanations of the true Buddhist rituals which have never associated with Brāhmaṇical rituals. The second objective has dealt with understanding about the deities in Theravāda Buddhist text. It has shown that the deities are of three types, such as: the conventional deities, the deities by birth, and the deities by purification. The Buddhist scriptural evidences have referred the conventional deities to the kings, queens and princes as the highest social order in any specific social group along with different classes of people. These social groups, according to their actions (kamma) will be born in different states of happy and unhappy. From these social groups, the Buddha is born when the people are lost the virtuous quality and instead appear the spiritual unrest and the philosophical fermentation. The Buddha teaches the true ideas of Dhamma to the people both in theory and practice. The Buddha establishes the noble fourfold social and religious orders. These fourfold noble orders are called the deities by purification. The third objective has shown as the liberative part in the societies. It has explained about socio-economics conditions during the Buddha's time and how the Buddha supported the people with his teachings for becoming wealthy and shares the wealth of other peoples. Under Buddha's authority, Brāhmins had lost majority of the people support. Therefore, during the Buddha's time, India became prosperous and the people received a better way of life. The societies were developed both materially and spiritually by practicing of the true ideas of the Dhamma.

### **Suggestions**

Observationally, in the modern vicissitudes of Theravāda Buddhist societies, ordinary Buddhists are likely confused about the deities explained in the Buddhist texts. The majority of the ordinary Buddhists still believe in supernatural agencies in the sense of Brāhmaṇism which there is no place to put in Buddhism. This problem was common to all human races in ancient times before the Buddha arose. This problem is still seen in common to believe to the many of the religions and societies. Particularly to the Buddhists, such common problem of the belief in supernatural deities is one step further advance than



other theistic religious faiths. The modern Buddhists are confused in the sense that there has not been explained to them clearly about the deities in the Buddhist texts because of by passing to have given such misconception of supreme deities introduced by the Brāhmins for gaining material welfare by absorbing labour and properties from the kings, merchants, ministers and common folks. Therefore, in Indian context, the deities originated from the economic and materials grounded policy. For example, the sacrifice has been the ultimate objective of the Brāhmins before Buddhism arose in India and this ultimate objective is still in operation. Only misconception of deities from the Vedic and later Brāhmaṇical root caused the entire religions and societies demoralized in ancient India. At the time of the Buddha's alive, the misconception has been uprooted and the religions and societies would understand the right concept of the deities and therefore, many of them were enlightened by the following of the Buddha's teachings. After the Buddha's passing away, again the more dangerous situation emerged in the whole Indian subcontinent and beyond to introduce again such misconception of supernaturalism in the religions and the societies in the name of sacrifices even stronger than before, from time to time till today. Therefore, it is suggested that it is better for the Buddhists to concentrate to any Buddhist development activities, such as to give donation in building Buddhist affairs rather than putting the money and other sacrificial materials in the Brāhmaṇical ritual shrines. If they are afflicted with various problems of materials and mental, in these cases, if they are caused to go to take religious advice, they should go to the Buddhist shrines or temples or meditation centres for getting proper advice according to the Buddha's teachings, in order to get right understanding to eliminate suffering. Thereby, they would be much better in the development of human quality for peace and happiness in personal and social life and even there is chance to attain Nibbāna. As the Buddha in many occasions had remarked that the people did not understand about the deities. The way the ordinary people understood the deities which were not in accord with his teachings. The problems are facing in the modern Theravāda Buddhist societies are because of the wrong beliefs in the names of the deities in accordance with the Brāhmaṇical religious thoughts. Therefore, the second objective was designed to give a true model of understanding about deities in the modern Theravāda Buddhist societies. If the Buddhists understand this model of explanation, they will be able to lead a good social life and therefore this thesis will become a very essential part of their lives. From the above recommendations, the following two important subjects can be carried out for the future researches:

- (1) The Theravāda Buddhist Social Ideology about Deities
- (2) The Theravāda Buddhist Intelligent Theory about Deities

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