SAHASRA BUDDHA

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The only image permitted in Theravada temples is that of the historical Buddha, Gautama Sakyamuni. In Mahayana temples—in the Himayayas, Tibet and Mongolia—besides the historical Buddha designated simply Buddha (T. Samye) or Sakyamuni (T. Sakyap Thubtsa), there would be many images ranging from Three to Thousand according to size and resources of temple or monastery concerned. Sahasra Buddha (T. Sonam Tonga) was 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 Mahavyutpatti (Circa 920 A.D.) provides the usage of Sahasra Buddha as then current in Bhadraaka!a 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 do not lend to the usage of Sahasra Buddha as then current in Bhadraaka!a Sutra, now available only in Tibetan translation, the number recorded is 1000.

Since Dhammaraja (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 apostolised. Mahayana was preached by Nagarjuna a contemporary of the Kushanas in North India and the Sasanavas 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 Drepungpa and Tibetan saints like Marpa and Tsongkhapa were included in the pantheon and placed as high as Gautama Buddha or Nagarjuna. In fact a Guru like Padmasambhava or Tsongkhapa would dominate the gallery of icons or the

In Roman transliteration, doctrinal terms for Sanskrit and Tibetan words are omitted, except for quotes from other sources. Sanskrit words are spelt thus: Tathavas (for Tathagata), Asoka (for Asokas), Namasambhava (for Padmasambhava). Tibetan words are transliterated as pronounced thus: Lama (Blama), Songpa (for Song-tsepa) or Chogyal (for Chos-rgyal).
portrayal of Buddhists and Bodhisattvas in mural or scroll painting. In Mongolia Atias Dipankara is equated to Gautama Buddha. In short for an ordinary believer or an average pilgrim the expression Sahara Buddha (T. Sengay Tongpa) was not exactly or approximately the name enumerated in a scripture like Bhadrapala Sutra (T. Dode Kalang). The ordinary believer was as anxious to have a vision of Gautama 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 Maheshwar.

Thousand is no doubt a notional figure which could be less finite and more infinite. In all animate beings, Samchen Thamchoe, there would be Buddha potential, developing or developed. Whether well versed or not in Avatamsaka 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".

The concept of multiple Buddha was not a Mahayana innovation. The concept is writ large in Pali, that is Hinayana Canon. Gautama Buddha did not claim to be first Enlightened One; on the other hand he spoke of the previous Buddhas. Samyutta Nikaya records that Gautama 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 Buddhas of ancient times trod this path."

Seven Manusha Buddhas reported from Nepal, Tibet and Mongolia are: 1. Vipassity, 2. Sikkhin, 3. Veeraabhu, 4. Kravuchanda, 5. Kanaka Muni, 6. Kasaye and 7. Sakya Muni. Sanskrit Saddharma-pundarika as well as Pali Mahapadana Sutta list the same names. The six antecedent saints as precursors of Gautama Buddha may not be all myth. Firm unimpeachable testimony about Kanaka Muni is borne by no less an authority than Aksa Meura, The Minor Pillar Edict from Naga Stupa records thus: "When king Devandhariprve Preyadharin 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 Sakya Muni 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 Sakya Muni. Obviously Dipankara was a figure of legendary past and could not be called
a Manuśa Buddha in the period when Nīmaṇtakaśa concept was an established one.

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

Tathāgata would mean (very) thus gone 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 Mahāvīra Pūjita Sutta. The epithet was widely used later and it is widely used in Theravāda countries today. Pali Nikayas suggest that the expression was pre-Buddhist and this suggestion is warranted if Gautama Buddha had at least six predecessors. In Mahāyana tradition Tathāgata (T. Deśhin-shkepa) meant one who was gone in the same way as his predecessors.

Whether called Tathāgata or Buddha the number of such beings in Mahāyana 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 Nagārjuna onwards. The numerous Buddhas in the mystic vision of Mahāyana saints are one; they myriad emerge from and merge into the Sunya (void), the Absolute in the teachings of Gautama Buddha and Nagārjuna.

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 Samantabhūda or Vajradhara and culminated into five forms designated Pancha Tathāgatas or Pancha Sūtras in eighth century A.D. centuries later in the Himalayas the five were called Pancha Dhyāni Buddhas. These are Vairochana or the Brilliant, Akṣobhya or the Imperturbable, Ratnasambhava or the Jewel born, Amitabha or the Infinite Light and Amoghasiddhi or the Unfailing Successor.

These five are spiritual offspring of the Primordial Form and these Five have their emanations or refuges. 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 Mahāyana pantheon. Conventionally called Śahāra Buddha or Thousands Buddhas. The pantheon thus has three tiers: the top tier is composed of the Five, the middle tier consists of further emanations or refuges and the bottom tier is composed of the Historical Buddhas and his predecessors and successors. For the believers the three tiers are three Bodies: Dhamakaya or the Cosmic Body, Sambhogakaya or the Body of Bliss, and Nirmakaya or the Mundane Body.

The Mahāyana concept of Three Bodies was a development of the earlier concept of Two Bodies, namely, that Gautama Buddha had a Dhamakaya and a Rupakaya. Dhamakaya stood for Dharma as Buddha's real form and Rupakaya stood for Buddha's mundane or transitory form. In Mahāyana
Rupakaya came to be designated Nirmanakaya and an intermediate Body designated Sambhogakaya emerged.

The Trikaya are: Dharmakaya or Cosmic Body which is Absolute or Reality; Sambhogakaya or Body of Bliss which in a personal manner blesses the believers; and Nirmanakaya or Mundane Body which appears on earth to teach Dharma.

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

"As the Dhammakaya, Buddha fully realizes his identity with the Absolute (dharmat, Eintsetzung) and unity (samadhi) with all beings. It is the consciousness 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 concretes in the finite sphere. The Sambhoga Kaya is the concrete manifestation to himself (avasamhoga) and to the elect (paramamshingho) the power and splendor 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 (nimittakka).

"The Central Philosophy of Buddhism.

The forms of the Five Tathagatas, lines or Buddhas and their emanations as also the different forms of the historical Buddha 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 SādhanāMalā: The lines (vicious ones) are Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amoghasiddhi and Akshobhya. Their colours are white, yellow, red, green and blue and they exhibit the Bodhrangül (teaching), Varada (boon), Dhyāna (meditation), Abhayā (protection) and Bhūspaṇa (earth touching) pose of hands respectively." Engr. tr. Bhattacharyya.

If the Five Buddhas are portrayed in one carya Vairocana is in centre with Akshobhya in west, Ratnasambhava in southe, Amoghasiddhi in north. Their respective consorts are Vajradhatūvati, Lochana, Manasū, Pandara and Tara. Their respective emanations are Samantabhadra, Vajrapāṇi, Ratnapāṇi, Arūḍhaksetra and Vajrapāṇi.

Since Dharmakaya (T. Chok), is the Absolute, its form is Sunya and for the mystic a Kapal (skull) is the best Rupa for meditation. For other believers, one of the five primordial Buddhas—Vairocana (T. Nampor Nanggad), Akshobhya (T. Minrūpa), Ratnasambhava (T. Rinchen Thugs), Amoghasiddhi (T. Opopel) and Amoghasiddhi (T. Donya Dupjap)—is the sacred illustration of Dharmakaya. The symbol, pose of hands, or mode of sitting of a figure make the icon familiar.
The Sambhokakaya (T. Longchho Zogku) are emanations from the five primordial Buddhas in their different forms. The number of such emanations by ninth century as recorded in Mahavaspati was ninetytwo. In Nispannayogavali a work of eleventh century the Bodhisattvas recognized as Sambhokakayas are fortyeight. Whatever was the final number-forty eight, ninetytwo or more—all the four sects of Tibet agree in counting a set of eight as topmost. These are Manjushri (T. Jampelyang), Vajraspati (T. Chana Dorje), Avalokiteshvara (T. Chenrezig), Kalingartha (T. Sayi Ningpo), Sarvanivaranikambha (T. Dapebamched Namstenpa), Akasagartha (T. Nembho Ningpo), Maitreya (T. Lampe) and Samantabhadra (T. Kuntu Sanpo) This is in conformity with the pre-ninth century Indian tradition.

The Sambhokakaya icons are, in the believer’s esteem, far more concrete than the Dhamakaya figures. The believers adore the Sambhokakaya Bodhisattvas as personal god-heads and experience in prayer and meditation no distance or impersonal quality as with the Sunyata (T. Tongpenyi). Manjushri the embodiment of Knowledge (Prajna/Shambh) was in the beginning the first or topmost. Later, sometime after sixth century, Avalokiteshvaran 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. Avalokiteshvaran has two popular forms: one four handed and other eleven headed. A total of one hundred and eight forms of Avalokiteshvaran are found in Nepal. Manjushri has no less than a dozen forms. Two forms of Manjushri 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 Avalokiteshvaran while Pratibhaaramiti is Consort of Manjushri. 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 Yogamadhi (T. Yab Yum) depicting Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the embrace of their consorts, must be mentioned here as part and parcel of Sakha Buddha; this theme of Yogamadihita also needs separate notice.

Nirmaksayas (T. Tulku) or Manasha Buddha par-excellence is Gautama Sakyamuni, 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 Manuha Buddha. Later in Tibet and Mongolia, Budsha Sakya Muni was adopted as Dharmakaya after the Mahaparinirvana and the sants or teachers like Nagarjuna, Padmasambhava and Atisa would be cited as Nimbasakya. Following the Indian tradition Tibetan saints like Marpa of Konchogspa would be depicted as iconic forms of Manuha Buddha. The first Tulku (Nimbasakya) to be recognized in Tibet were Chogyel Sonam Gampo and his scholar minister Thumes Sampho; the Chogyel was recognized as incarnation of Chenrezig (Avolokiteshvara) and the minister was recognized as incarnation of Jampalgyang (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 Ushnisha. The Buddhas or Bodhisattvas who came after Gautama Buddha were depicted in symbols or objects connected with their lives and teachings. Thus Nagarjuna is depicted usually as receiving the book of Pratimamropa from the Naga princess, Padmasambhava with the Vajra (Dome) or Thunderbolt in his right hand and a Kapala cranium in his left hand and Dipendaraka Atisa with a metal Stupa (T. Chorten) on his head and a vihara with a weaving basket containing scriptures on his left. The Tulku or incarnations in Tibet and Mongolia were fairly numerous and a good number of such Tulku 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, Dipendaraka, Sakya Muni and Maitreya, or of Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nimbasakya. In Nepal Three Images representing Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are common.

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 most question which is the answer categorically. Both Hindu and Mahayana deities passed through phenomenal proliferation for centuries. Many 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, Benga Tush Prastacharyya, the process may be described thus:

The individual soul is known in Buddhism as the bodhisattva or boedhicsa, while the infinite 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 bodhisattva...
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 bhūvah (desire) of the worshipper, which is the nature of psychic force that reacts on the infinite energy, giving rise to different manifestations according to the nature of reaction. The nature of this reaction is still indeterminate, but the result of this also appears in an infinite variety of forms, and this is the chief reason why we find a 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 in Hindu and Mahayana concepts are not identical. The Puranic Hindu view was that the Devas were actually present on this earth in the ancient past and that the Dvaras gradually left this earth as not worthy for their stay and were merged in the ether. A concise notice from the Puranic text Vaidyadharasamhita was made by R. Banerjee that:

"The Vaidyadharasamhita tells us that the gods were worshipped in their visible forms, not images, in the Sāyānu yuga, in the Treta and Dvapara yugas, worship was done both in their visible forms and in their images. In the Bhārata yuga they were worshipped in the house and in the dvāras in the forest in the Kali yuga, however, the practice of building houses of gods (i.e. temples) in town was begun. The enshrinement 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 land." The Development of Hindu Iconography.

In Mahayana, the images 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 Abhayasamudrāṃ 110.5:

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

"From the right perception of sānya proceeds the germ-syllable, from the germ-syllable proceeds the conception of an icon, and from the icon, its external representations. The whole process therefore is one of dependent origination." Bhag. Bhaisajyaguru.

It may be noted that in prayer or meditation as in painting or sculpture, Gautama Buddha’s basic teaching of Pratītya-Samutpāda (P. 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 aesthetic, grotesque forms are to be understood. A free translation of an ancient saying chanted by the believers may be made: ‘One who perceives the Cause and Effect nexus perceives the Truth. One who perceives the Truth perceives the Buddha.’
(1) 
देवानंदिन्ते पियदासिन्त लाजिन चौदससहस्मितेतन 
बुधस कोनाकमनस शुवे दुतिं वांडते 
....समितितन च अतन आभाश महीयते. 
.... पापिते 
अशोक, अनुशासन.निःशास्त्री समर 

(2) 
मुसरवथा गुरुविस्वरः। 
भुजर्व पर ब्राह्म तस्म श्री गुरुवे नाम:।।

(3) 
सत्ययुगे देवानं प्रत्यापायं - लेत्लापरयी: 
प्रत्यापुजा प्रतिमाम्बु च- ततापितेतापु योहे 
ढापं वारसे-कली - च देवास्तानिर्मितिनिर्माणगृही 
समार्थ्या, भूमिप्रमित्विविधीयदेवायत्तपरिपुष्टा 
काळाः, देवास्तायष्टश्चमुनि।।

(4) 
विषूद्धमेंतर 
स्मृतिः देवास्ताकार निमसिवावाः: स्वभवत:।।
यथा यथा भवेत्स्मृति: तथा भवेतमात्मात्मकः।।

शास्त्रावधिती बीजे केजाधिन्थ्र्य प्रजायस्ते। 
बिश्रे-च -शास्त्रविध्याः समस्ते प्रतीत्वजस्तू:।।
अद्वैतस्रोतः॥
(५)
जिने धैर्यसनी स्वातः स्वसम्भव स्वः च। अभितामोहिष्ठिक्षसाम्यस्थितिः प्रकृतितः।

वर्णी अभिलोकां सिद्धः पैती स्वं हरितम्रेकवाः।
वेदांकिकी वर्षो ह्यानं सुद्र अभवभूषणाः॥

साधनक्षेत्र
यः प्रतीत्वसमुचारः पन्यति स धर्मि पञ्चाति।
यः धर्मि पन्यति स शुद्धि पञ्चाति॥

शुभस्वरम्
TUNG SHA
Thirtyfive Buddhas who receive confession
GAUTAMA & OTHER BUDDHAS
including celestial Buddhas
Bodhisattvas and Master Exponents
TSHOG ZHING
Assembly of Buddhas: Tsongkhapa in centre
SIPA’I KHORLO
Wheel of Life depicting six worlds of existence.