

## **DERIVATION OF POTTED BELLY OR FAT MONK IMAGES IN MYANMAR**

Saw Tun Lin \*

### **Abstract**

The image commonly called fat monk, which is typically different from any other Buddha images and is frequently found in the relics chamber of ancient religious monuments in Burma. It is always in cross-legged seated posture with the hands usually in Dhyāna Mudrā or supporting his large belly. Not like the ancient Buddha images found in Burma, he has no ūṛṇā or uṣṇīṣa. He usually has long ear lobes, mostly touching to the shoulder, and has smooth bowl-like head with hair ending at the nape of the neck, but the head sometimes covers with snail curl or shaven head. The most prominent feature of the fat monk image is his protuberance belly, which looks like an obese man. He is normally with bare torso, but it is occasionally found with a robe. He generally seats on the double lotus throne, sometimes on a plain base. The images are usually small in order to enshrine them into relic chamber, and are made of stone, terracotta, bronze, silver or bronze-gilt, sometimes coated with lacquer and gilded with gold. Scholars have been controversial over who this fat monk was, and why Buddhists venerated him together with Buddha images in Myanmar. There have been considerable disputes over the definitions of fat monk image such as, Mi Lo Fo' or Maitreya, Jambhala or Kubera, Gavampati, Moggallāna, and Saccakaparibajaka. Was it a Buddha or monk or divinity image, and what was his status in Buddhism of Myanmar?

### **Introduction**

The fat monk is distinctive for its exclusive use in relic chambers over a long period of time. However, the inconsistencies in the iconography have defied any certain identification of the image. In this essay, I will review the changing style and scholarly speculations about the image. In my conclusion, I summarize these and suggest that the diversity is part of the meaning. As objects of *htarpanar* or relic chambers, the fat monk served to add 'extra blessing' to the overall contents of the relic chambers. Comparison with present day relic chamber contents suggests a deliberate range of objects in various materials and style, were included to facilitate the success of the pagoda consecration. I will return to this theme in my conclusion.

---

\*. Assistant Lecturer, Department of Archaeology, University of Yangon

### Archaeological Findings

A number of fat monk images have been found throughout Myanmar from Pyu (c 200 BCE- 900 CE) period through the 9-13CE Bagan and onto the post Bagan period, 17<sup>th</sup> century. They stylistically not similar, except the protuberant belly. The iconographic variation of the image presumably shows the differences between one period and another. Generally, the fat monk images can be classified according to their styles. They are as follows - the image: without robe and with hair like wearing a thin helmet or shaven head, with a robe and long hair, and then wearing robe and curly clustered hair. These are the most typical types of the images so far discovered in Myanmar.



**Figure 1:** side view (left), front view of the Fat Monk image, Pyu period (middle), back view (right)

photo – Luce, 1970, Plate 90 a, b& c.

Stone figures of the fat monk image were found inside the relics chamber of Kyaik Dè-ap (Botahtaung) pagoda at Yangon (Fig-1). One was found in association with a four-faced golden Buddha image, a small stone stūpa, a laterite cone, and votive tablet written Pali credo, which dates about the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. The image is supposed to be the earliest fat monk image in Burma. Iconographically, he has long earlobes touching his shoulder, large pouting lips and big nose. As he is in meditative posture, the eyes are closed and the hands with long thumbs are touching each other under his potted

<sup>1</sup> Luce, Gordon H. 1969 & 1970. *Old Burma-Early Pagan*. Volumes I, II & III. Artibus Assiac. New York: J.J. Augustin, 1970, II, p.75

belly. He has bowl like head with a long hair ending at the back of his neck. There is a small hole perforated at the back, probably to enshrine relics. No evidence of a robe can be found.

Another type of figure (Fig-2), which was recovered from one of the relic chambers of the ruined pagoda at Bagan<sup>2</sup>, is relatively significant because of his square face and shaven head. Vague outlines on the throne indicated that he is seated on double lotus pedestal. No trace of the robe can be found on his torso.



**Figure 2:** Fat monk with shaven head  
photo – Luce, 1970, Plate 91 e.

Another stone image (Fig-3) found a village near Mandalay<sup>3</sup> is conventionally with a protruding belly and in crossed-leg position seated on double lotus throne. The significant feature is his long hair<sup>4</sup> like wearing a stocking cap or turban. Two lines on his neck and leg indicate that he is wearing a robe.

---

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, p.77

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p.76

<sup>4</sup> Most scholars identify a fat monk image with a shaven head.

A different type of fat monk figure gilded silver<sup>5</sup> (Fig-4) is in the Shwemawdaw pagoda museum at Bago<sup>6</sup>. The typical characteristic of this image is the clustered hair in conventional curl, which is different from the other image found in Burma. He is seated on the beautiful double-tier lotus throne<sup>7</sup> embossed with flower patterns and inserted jewels on it. He is wearing the monastic robe, which covers only the left shoulder. Although it is a potted belly image, its appearance is more similar to the image of the Chinese god of wealth.

Apart from these four types of images, there is another type of image, which can also be considered as the fat monk. The different style of fat monk image (fig-5) has recently been found near Yangon, the ancient Mon area. The face and left side of the lower part of image was damaged, but it can be clearly seen other part of the body. The image is shown here seated on plain pedestal. He has a smooth round head and probably has a long hair because of the thin helmet, which looks like the image of the Bagan period. The drapery is blanketed his body rather than wearing a monastic robe. The figure is seated in crossed-leg position, one on another. The distinctive feature of this image is the hand position, which is not similar to the other image; the right hand covering his protuberance belly and the left hand touching his chest.



**Figure 3:** Front view of the long hair fat monk wearing robe (left) and back view (right)

photo – Luce, 1970, Plate 91 c & d.

<sup>5</sup> It is supposed that some images are lacquered and gilded later for the purpose of reuse them.

<sup>6</sup> Luce, 1970, II, p.77

<sup>7</sup> Luce (ibid) suggests that the date of the throne is not contemporary with the image.

Duroiselle<sup>8</sup> found one interesting image of the potted belly statue, which is seated back to back with Ganesha image, near Bagan. He is sitting in meditative position, and his right hand closing his eyes and right hand closing the mouth (Fig-6) while Ganesha is also close his eyes. The protruding belly indicates that this image is likely to be a fat monk image. This kind of image ('the arahat closing all the doors [Dvāra] of his body') is very common in Thailand, and he is called 'Phra Gawam': 'Phra Pit Ta'<sup>9</sup> and 'Phra Pit Ta Maha Ut'<sup>10</sup> (Fig-7). Big sized image of Phra Gawam (Gavam [pati]) is rarely found in Thailand although small statues and amulets are the object of worship today<sup>11</sup>. Phra Pit Ta means "covering the six roots of sensations: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and desire to free from human desire and passion"<sup>12</sup>.

Lagirarde believes that Phra Gawam, Kaccāyana and Gavampati of Mon are identical to the mysterious fat monk image of Myanmar<sup>13</sup>. However, the recent discovery of potted belly image (Fig-5) has different hand posture from figure-6 and Phra Gawam image of Thailand. It is also hard to deduce that the image attached to the Hindu god Ganesha is the fat monk or Gavampati. These figures are, nevertheless, closely related. If these are the fat monk images, why they have different hand posture, and what is the purpose of these images are still in questions.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) 1929-30*, edited by Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahnī. 1935. Delhi: Manager of Publications, p.158

<sup>9</sup> It is also spelled as 'PhraPidta'.

<sup>10</sup> Lagirarde, Francois. 2005. "From the Mon-Myanmar Cult of Gavampati to the Thai Cult of Kaccāyana: more questions about the Fat Monk". In *Myanmar Historical Commission Conference Proceedings*. Part 2. 12-14 January 2005. pp.125-35. Yangon, p.126

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> <http://luckybobi520.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/knowing-phra-pidta-definition-of-phra.html>, (accessed on 9 January 2016)

<sup>13</sup> Lagirarde, 2005, pp.152-154



**Figure 4:** Fat monk with clustered hair and seat on elaborated throne  
Photo – Luce, 1970, Plate 91 h.



**Figure 5:** Fat monk image with different hand Posture

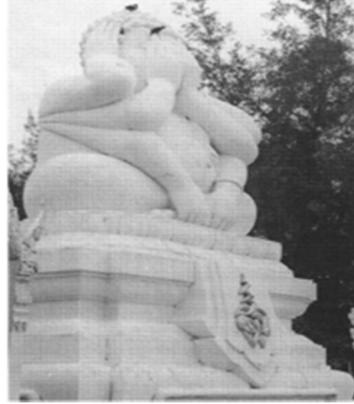
Photo: Courtesy of Win Naingphoto: Luce, 1970, Plate 89 g.



**Figure 6:**Potted belly image back to back with Ganesha image

The stories of Maha Kachai of the Shan, the Chinese god of wealth, and Sangkachai or Kaccāyana of the Thai are almost similar to each other. In Thailand, one can clearly identify the images between Kaccāyana, and

Chinese laughing monk Qici or Budai (Maitreya)<sup>14</sup> although they both have been occasionally installed in Buddhist monastery<sup>15</sup>.



**Figure 7:**Phra Gawam closing his six roots of sensations, Entrance of Wat Nerancharama in Cha-am  
photo: Lagirarde, 2003, p.153



**Figure 8 & 9:** 13<sup>th</sup> century Buddha image of Bagan (left) and naked Fat Monk image, probably 13<sup>th</sup> century, Bagan  
Photo: Hudson, 2011, p.11

<sup>14</sup> Qici or Budai is similar to Maha Kachai of the Shan.

<sup>15</sup> Lagirarde, Francois. 2003. "Devotional Diversification in the Thai Monastery: the Worship of the Fat Monk", in the Buddhist Monasterh: *a cross cultural survey*, pp.149-268, P. Pichard et F. Lagirarde, eds. Paris, EFEO (Etudes the matiques 12), p.152

With regard to the role of fat monk, a sandstone image (Fig-9) was discovered amongst the ruins of the Sutaung Pyi (wish fulfilling stūpa) pagoda in Bagan. It is found together with two Buddha images of different period, a small miniature bronze stūpa and two reliquaries containing relics<sup>16</sup>. These all are supposed to be objects of the former relic chamber of the ruined pagoda. In comparison with the early 13<sup>th</sup> century Buddha image (Fig-8) found in this ruin, the facial expression and long earlobes of fat monk image are exactly same. These two images were no doubt created in the same period. Stūpas usually enshrine with relics, Buddha image, plates or books inscribed canonical texts, and objects related to Three Jewels (Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha). In this case of the discovery of potted belly image together with the enshrinement objects, he could be regarded as the Buddha or the monk representing for the whole Sangha community. The status of fat monk image later changed into or regarded as the Buddha (Fig-10) can be seen at Myeik in the Lower Myanmar. It has been renovated and turned into Buddha holding a begging bowl. It is noted that sometimes changing the role of status by renovating the image can be seen.



**Figure 10** : Fat monk image worshipped as the Buddha  
Courtesy of Naing Soe

<sup>16</sup> Hudson, Bob. 2011. "Revealed in the Ruins: Buddha Images and Reliquaries from a Bagan Pagoda". TAASA Review, *Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia* 20 (1): pp.10-11

### ‘Mi Lo Fo’ or ‘Maitreya’

The first interpretation was made by Taw SeinKo<sup>17</sup> in his article in his article ‘Chinese Antiquities at Pagan (Bagan)’ that the images<sup>18</sup> (fat monk) discovered from the relic chamber of the Sittana pagoda built by Zeyatheinka (1204-27 AD) (Fig-11) and Shwesandaw pagoda built by Anawrahta (1010-1052 AD) are the image of ‘Mi Lo Fo (Fwo)’ or Maitreya<sup>19</sup> (Fig-12), ‘the laughing Buddha’ who is usually illustrated with a smiling face and prominence belly. He believed that the cult of fat monk image in Burma was derived from the Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. According to the Chinese belief, they generally worship Mi Lo Fo for ‘wealth’ and ‘happiness’. Moreover, he can fulfill those who believe strongly with children, as one of the most prominent forms of Mi Lo Fo is ‘five children surrounding him’. In the Chinese art, the image of Mi Lo Fo is normally depicted with a fat pleasantly laughing figure with protruding abdomen in a seating posture, and with a large bag next to him<sup>20</sup>.

There is no trace of a large bag beside the fat monk images found in Burma, and almost all the figures are in Dhyāna Mudrā and sometimes his hand supporting the large belly<sup>21</sup>. According to Stadtner, it is noted that there is no temple, which was only devoted to Maitreya in Burma and he was remarkable from the Bagan period to the 19<sup>th</sup> century but no longer venerated nowadays<sup>22</sup>. However, the Burmese believe in concept of the future Buddha,

<sup>17</sup> Taw Sein Ko. 1911. “Chinese Antiquities at Pagan”. *Journal of the Burmese Research Society*. pp.1-6 , Vol.1. Part II, p.1

<sup>18</sup> This fat monk statue probably is the oldest one found together with the datable votive tablet inscribed Pali texts, dating from about 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century AD (Luce, 1969, I, pp. 206-7).

<sup>19</sup> Mi Lo Fo is also known as Ajita, and is equal position with the other popular Bodhisattvas in Mahayana Buddhism such as, Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, Samanthabhadra, and etc (Ming, 1985, p.132).

<sup>20</sup> Ming Kuan. 1985. *Popular Deities of Chinese Buddhism*. Malaysia: Kuan Yin Contemplative Order, p.132

<sup>21</sup> One image of the fat monk found in Bagan is closing his eyes and mouth with his hands. It will be discussed later.

<sup>22</sup> (a) Stadtner Donald M. 2013. *Ancient Pagan, Buddhist Plain of Merit*. Thailand: River Book, p.35

(b) There is pentagonal stūpa in Bagan to honor the past four Buddhas and the future Buddha Maitreya. None of the Buddha images in the five shrines attached to this stūpa looks like the fat monk image.

Maitreya but no worship of his image, pagoda and vihara solely dedicated to him in Myanmar, except the Chinese people (Mahayana) cult of Maitreya.



**Figure 11:** Sand stone statuette of fat monk



**Figure 12:** Mi Lo Fo or Maitreya Buddha, China  
photo: Ming, 1985, p.135

Nonetheless, the practice of this Chinese god of wealth can still be found at Kentung, which is a town in Shan state, Myanmar and is also a border town near the trade route between China and Thailand. The Shan call him Maha Kachai. Legendarily, he was a follower of the Buddha, and extremely handsome. Because of his beauty, women ignored even Buddha when contributing their offerings. To escape from the attention of women, he turned himself into fat and ugly<sup>23</sup>. The story of Maha Kachai is closely similar to the fat monk called Sangkachai of Thailand. It will be more discussed later.

### ‘Jambhala’ or ‘Kubera’

Duroiselle and Ray<sup>24</sup> identify this image as Jambhala or Kubera, the God of wealth, who is the “Lord of Yakshas”, and/or is also the important

<sup>23</sup> Enriquez, C.M. 1918. *A Burmese Loneliness, A Tale of Travel in Burma, The Southern Shan State and Keng Tung*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, pp.16-17

<sup>24</sup> Duroiselle Charles (Edited). 1960. *Epigraphia Birmanica, Being Lithic and Other Inscriptions of Burma*. Archaeological Survey of Burma (ASB), Vol.1, Part II. Rangoon: Union of Burma, p.16 and Ray Niharranjan. 2002. *Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma*. Reprint version. Thailand: Orchid Press, p.54

Tibetan deities. The figure of Jambhala or the Buddhist Kubera is usually illustrated with ‘pot-bellied’ and notable for wearing rich ornament. Moreover, he holds a lemon (Jambhara) in the right hand and a “mongoose (nakula) vomiting jewels” in his right hand (Fig-13)<sup>25</sup>. The image of Kubera (Fig-14) in the Curzon Museum of Archaeology at Mathura in India (it is now called the Government Museum) is typically represented with protruding abdomen, which is fasten with a scarf, and he is in Rajalila Asana, left knee raised and right leg in meditative position<sup>26</sup>. Although both hands are missing, it is supposed that the left hand hanging loosely over the left knee, and the right hand probably leaning on the ground are the usual position of Hindu deities. He wears big earrings and a heavy garland hooping his neck. The hair on his head looks like a snail curl, and small knot supposed to be the end of long hair is above the large abdomen. His torso is completely bare, but he wears a short garment in his lower part.



**Figure 13:** Jambhala or Buddhist Kubera

Photo: Majupurias & Kumar, 2006, p.166



**Figure14:** Kubera, Lord of the Yakshas, Mathura<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Majupurias T.C. & Kumar R.(Majupria). 2006. *Gods, Goddesses & Religious Symbols of Hinduism, Buddhism & Tantrism [Including Tibetan Deities]*. India: Chandaroshana, pp.166 & 252

<sup>26</sup> Agrawala Vasudeva.S. 1933. *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Curzon Museum of Archaeology Muttra*, Allahabad, p.25

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.panoramio.com/photo\\_explorer#view=photo&position=3602&withphoto id = 26467368&order=date\\_desc&user=3196599](http://www.panoramio.com/photo_explorer#view=photo&position=3602&withphoto id = 26467368&order=date_desc&user=3196599), (accessed on 28th, Dec, 2015)

There are some differences between the fat monk images of Burma and Kubera of India. All images found in Myanmar are in Padâmasana or cross-legged posture, and none of the images wears jewelry or ornaments. Most are in Samadhi mudra or meditative posture, but different hand posture can be found occasionally. The potted belly images in Burma are more similar to a monk<sup>28</sup> or a Buddhist hermit than a mythical deity as they are sometimes shaven head or sometimes with long hair. It is not also identical to the Tibetan Buddhist Kubera as no lemon or mongoose can be found in the hand of potted belly image of Myanmar.

One interesting thing about Kubera is that 'he bowed before Sakyamuni Buddha'<sup>29</sup>. Most of the fat monk images are found in the relics chamber, and together with the relics and image of the Buddha. Supposedly, the role of the potted belly image may be one of the disciples before the Buddha or Bodhisattva. The fact that Kubera is a popular deity is, however, difficult to clearly link the derivation of the cult of fat monk in Myanmar. Moreover, no literary account is mentioned the worship of Kubera in Myanmar.

### **'Gavampati'**

Another identification of the fat monk image was raised by U Mya and Luce<sup>30</sup> that the image is Gavampati, who is 'the patron saint of the Mon'<sup>31</sup>. There is no literary account to prove that Gavampati is grossly fat, but there are several factors to be considered that he is a monk, and also some inscriptions and legendary account mentioned that he was revered in lower Myanmar (Mon), Pyu period and also in Bagan. Most of the local scholars suggest that Gavampati, the saint of Mon and the fat monk image found in Myanmar are identical to each other despite the lack of evidence to prove that Gavampati is grossly overweight. Therefore, the historical sources and

---

<sup>28</sup> Luce (1969, I, p.207) said that "since Jambhala was not a monk, that origin is also difficult to maintain."

<sup>29</sup> Majupurias & Kumar, 2006, p.297

<sup>30</sup> Luce, 1969, I, p.208

<sup>31</sup> Duroiselle firstly made this assumption about the fat monk as Gavampati because the image was found together with Ganesha image. (A.S.I, 1929-30, P.158)

inscriptions on the role of Gavampati, and how important the cult of Gavampati in the ancient Myanmar need to be examined.

The story of Gavampati is written in several versions in the Mon literary accounts and they are slightly different in details. Most of them are stated<sup>32</sup>that he is one of the followers of the Sakyamuni or a monk of the native Mon, who brought the Buddha's tooth relics to Thaton. Shorto<sup>33</sup>believes that the KalyaniSima (ordination hall) is the place called 'Gavampati image hall' to mark the point where the monk goes into the town according to the chronicle. The status of Gavampati in accordance with the Mon literature is the patron of the Mons and also the protector of the kingdom. However, no statues of potted belly have yet been discovered in and near Kalyani ordination hall.

According to the Glass Palace Chronicle<sup>34</sup>, the name Gavampati occurs three times in the history of Myanmar. The first Gavampati who consulted together with the mythical deities of Buddhism and Vedas such as, Rishi, Sakra, Naga, Garuda, Candī and Paramesura. They founded the Sriksetra city in compliance with the prophecy of the Buddha. Gavampati is the advisor of King Dwattabaung of Pyu<sup>35</sup>. Secondly, he is the consultant of King Pyusawhtiof Bagan<sup>36</sup>. The third one is the saint AshinGavampati of Mon, who the brought thirty-two tooth relics of the Buddha to Thaton, the ancient capital of Mon also known as Suvannabhumi<sup>37</sup>. The first two Gavampati seems to be a deity and the last one similar to the Mon monk of lower Myanmar.

The cult of Gavampati's image and his story was inscribed in some of the inscriptions in the Bagan period. In Shwezigon inscription, Buddha is smiling as he knows the future of the king who will rule in Bagan, and will

<sup>32</sup> Shorto, H. L. 1970. "The Gavampati Tradition in Burma" in *R.C. Majumdar Felicitation Volume*, ed. Himansu Bhusan Sarkar, pp.15-30, Calcutta, K.L. Mukhopadhyay, pp.16-19

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, pp.20-21

<sup>34</sup> The Glass Palace Chronicle (Hmanan Yazawin) is the chronicle of the kings of Burma, which was written by scholars designated by King Bagyidaw in 1829 AD.

<sup>35</sup> (a) PeMaung Tin & Luce. G.H (Trans). 1960 *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Printing, Rangoon University Press. p.14

(b)The similar passage is also stated in the Great Shwezigon inscription.

<sup>36</sup> Pe Maung Tin & Luce, 1960, p.42

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, p.79

support his religion. Ananda asks the reason why the Buddha smiled. Buddha answered that:

*“Ānan [Ananda], hereafter a sage named Bisnū (Vishnu), great in supernatural power, great in glory, possessing the five transcendental faculties, together with my son Gavampati (Gavampati) and King In [Indra], and Bissukarmmadewaput, and Katakarmmanāgarāja shall build a city called Sisīt (Sriksetra)”<sup>38</sup>.*

Gavampati mentioned in the inscription is one of the disciples of the Buddha. Moreover, the role of Gavampati as stated by the inscription is a narrator who explained king of Deva in Tāvātimsa heaven about the Buddha’s prophecy<sup>39</sup>.

All the literatures do not demonstrate the icon of the Gavampati’s characteristics although the Lettheshe inscription of King Anawrahta (1044-77) indicates the life-sized standing figure of Gavampati carved by the king<sup>40</sup>. No standing fat monk image has yet been found in Myanmar. The largest Gavampati image<sup>41</sup> discovered in Burma is also a sandstone statue of about 50cm (1.6 feet) high<sup>42</sup>.

In the inscription of the construction of a new palace for Kyanzittha (1084-1112), an image of Gavampati is set in a prayer hall of the new palace beside a golden Buddha image together with three sacred books of Buddhism such as, Vinaya, Sutta and Abhidhamma<sup>43</sup>. According to the inscription, Gavampati seems to represent for the whole monastic organization (Sangha) out of three jewels: Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

Another inscription recorded the donation to pagoda and monasteries in about 1239 AD stated “Gavampati temple and another on the occasion of the presenting of a Gavampati image to the *kuni* or Red Temple pagoda”<sup>44</sup>.

---

<sup>38</sup> Duroiselle, 1960, p.114

<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, pp.113-129

<sup>40</sup> Shorto, 1970, pp.21 & 24

<sup>41</sup> This image was restored and now display in the Bagan Archaeological Museum.

<sup>42</sup> Lagirarde, 2005, p.127

<sup>43</sup> Than Tun. 1956. *History of Buddhism in Burma A.D 1000-1300*. P.hd. Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of London, p.56

<sup>44</sup> Shorto, 1970, p.22

The last one mentions that two gold-painted images of Gavampati were installed together with the images of ‘the Lord Sāriputtrā’, and ‘the Lord Mokkalān (Moggallāna)’<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, three sets of robes were also presented<sup>46</sup>. Shorto suggested that the duplication of Gavampati probably had ‘some other function’<sup>47</sup>. Why did they donate only three robes for four images? From this donation of three robes in the inscriptions, it is no doubt that two robes out of three are for the two Arahats, Sāriputtrā and Mokkalān as they are the attendants of the Buddha. One of the two images of Gavampati is not included in the donation of robes. Therefore, it could be speculated that one image of Gavampati is naked or bare torso had a naked or bare torso and that this in turn could be linked to the bare torso of the fat monk images.

The main problem for the assumption of the fat monk identified as the saint Gavampati in the tradition of Mon or Burmese is that he is not grossly fat. Although one Burmese historical account mentioned similar story as Mon, the epigraphical evidence of Gavampati is completely different from the Gavampati’s story of Mon. Before many fat monk images were found in Myanmar, it is supposed that the image was imported from the east (China and Thailand)<sup>48</sup>. However, the origin of the fat monk image is still in question. Lagirarde<sup>49</sup> has an opinion that the fat monk is Gavampati of Mon, and also Kaccāyana or Sangkachai of Thailand. According to his assumption, the cult of Gavampati was originated in Myanmar and later diffused to Northern Thailand, Laos, Siam and Cambodia. He compared Gavampati with the Thai cult of Kaccāyana.

Having discussed the Mon-Burmese cult of Gavampati, it will now be moved onto an analysis of the cult of Kaccāyana in Thailand and the correlation between Kaccāyana and Gavampati. In Burma, the cult of fat monk image was practiced from about 7<sup>th</sup> century AD to 17<sup>th</sup> century AD, based on the available archaeological evidence. Although the worship of Gavampati ceased in Myanmar about 17<sup>th</sup> century, it has been continuously worshipped from the 7<sup>th</sup> century up to the present day by the Mons and those

---

<sup>45</sup> Lagirarde, 2005, p.129

<sup>46</sup> Shorto, 1970, p.22

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*

<sup>48</sup> Luce, 1969, I, p.207

<sup>49</sup> Lagirarde, 2005, pp.125-35

who were influenced by them from Thailand, Cambodia and Lao<sup>50</sup>. The fat monk in Thailand is known as Sangkachai (Sāṅkaccāyana) or Kaccāyana since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure15:** Kaccāyana or Sangkachai above other monks who are in veneration posture, Wat Khanikaphon, Bangkok

Photo: Lagirarde, 2003, p.151



**Figure16:** Fat monk installed above the Buddha image, Wat Saen Muang Ma, Chiang Kham,

Photo: Lagirarde, 2003, p.155

In Pali text, the Vientiane manuscript (GavampatiSutta) and the Siamese manuscript (Kaccāyana or Gavampatinibbāna)<sup>51</sup>, a monk known as Brahmaputta, who was the famous disciple of the Buddha, was extraordinarily handsome, and had a golden complexion. He transformed himself into an ugly dwarf and changed his name to Gavampati as the people, sometimes, mistook and confused him with the Buddha when he enters a village for food-collection<sup>52</sup>. Iconographically, Kaccāyana of the Thai and fat monk found throughout Myanmar are closely similar, but not to the Mon Gavampati.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid*, pp.129-30

<sup>51</sup> Different texts use to describe the same person in different names. They, however, do not give an explanation of “the conflation of Kaccāyana, Kaccāna, Mahākaccāyana and Gavampati” (Lagirarde, 2003, p.152)

<sup>52</sup> Lagirarde, 2005, pp.132-3 and Maung Paw. *Maha Kaccayana Maha Thera, Wish Fulfilling Arahant*. Compiled for the serene joy and emotion of the pious, A gift of Dhamma, PDF can be accessed on [http://acejaw.net/Buddha/Article/The%20Venerable %20Kaccaana.pdf](http://acejaw.net/Buddha/Article/The%20Venerable%20Kaccaana.pdf), p.6

The cult of Kaccāyana in Thai tradition has still survived and his image can be found in the Thai monasteries. Although his role is one of the disciples of the Buddha, the image of Kaccāyana is placed sometimes above the other monks or above the Buddhaimage or in special vihāra dedicated to him (Fig-15&16). Therefore, the status of the fat monk image in Thailand is complicated. If he is a monk, it should not be placed as equal as the Buddha or higher than the Buddha. Therefore, given the status of the fat monk in Thailand was unknown, is there reason to link to Mon and Burmese examples?

Although the cult of Gavampati image is repeatedly mentioned in the inscriptions of the Bagan period, they did not state that he is deformity. No evidence to prove that the Mon worship of Gavampati until the 15<sup>th</sup> century<sup>53</sup>. Moreover, unrelated stories between Gavampati and Kaccāyana indicate that they are divergent from one another. The iconographical similarity of the fat monk in Myanmar and Kaccāyana in Thailand remains question, perhaps indicating copying from external models but in different eras and unrelated contexts

### ‘Moggallāna’

Duroiselle<sup>54</sup> later changed his opinion and maintained that he is Moggallāna, the left disciple of the Sākyamuni (also know as ‘a master of magic’). In *Māratajjaniya Sutta* (50) of *Majjhima Nikaya*<sup>55</sup>, the discourse on the rebuke to Māra, the Evil one, is therein stated that “[...] the venerable Moggallāna the Great was pacing up and down in the open. Now at that time Māra the Evil One, entering the venerable Moggallāna the Great’s belly, got into his stomach. [...] Now why is my belly heavy as if it were heaped full”. Therefore, Duroiselle deduce that the fat monk image is the depiction of Māra entering into the belly of Moggallāna.

<sup>53</sup> (Stadtner, 2013, p.40)

<sup>54</sup> *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) 1928-29*, edited by H. Hargreaves. 1933. Delhi: Manager of Publications, p.110-1

<sup>55</sup> *Māratajjaniya Sutta (50) of Majjhima Nikaya* translated from the Pali by Horner, I.B. 1954. The Pali Text Society. (accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2016), <http://obo.genaud.net/dhamma-vinaya/pts/mn/mn.050.horn.pts.htm>

Nevertheless, the image of Moggallāna is usually depicted with a normal human figure through sculptures and murals from the Bagan period to present day. The present of the fat monk image which are in bare torso and sometimes with long hair is also difficult to prove that he is Moggallāna, a great disciple of the Buddha. It is, therefore, suggested that fat monk images cannot be regarded as Moggallāna.

#### **‘Saccakaparibajaka’ or ‘Nirgrantha’ of Jina**

San Tha Aung<sup>56</sup>, on the other hand, states that the image is Saccakaparibajaka, who was a ‘Nirgrantha Jina ascetic’, with the evidence of the inscription written on the backside of the fat monk image(Fig-17) found in Arakan and translated as “Saccakaparibajaka (ji) na”. This is the only one image with the inscription found in Burma<sup>57</sup>. Moreover, San Tha Aung<sup>58</sup> also dated the image back to the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century in accordance with the paleographical deliberation of the Brahmi script. Singer<sup>59</sup> assumes that this inscription was probably incised in modern time by a later religious devotee. If the fat monk was Saccakaparibajaka of Jainism, it will be more complicated because most images were found in association with the Buddha image of Buddhism. The practice of Jainism was not also popular in Myanmar apart from some parts of Arakan. This identification of fat monk image is beyond the bounds of possibility.

---

<sup>56</sup> San Tha Aung. 1979. *The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan, An Eastern Border State Beyond Ancient India, East of Vanga and Samatata*. Rangoon: Ministry of Education, p.15

<sup>57</sup> The image is not in original condition as the possessor has recently renovated (San Tha Aung 1979, p.15)

<sup>58</sup> (ibid)

<sup>59</sup> Singer, Noel. F. 2008. *Vaishali and the Indianization of Arakan*. New Delhi: Navin Shahdara, p.28



**Figure 17 :** Fat monk image with Arakanese inscription on back  
Photo: San Than Aung 1979, Plate 9

It is a question whether the different stylistic features of the potted belly images represent for different characters or not. There are two possibilities out of many identifications of the Fat monk image. They are the Chinese god of wealth, who can also be regarded as Bodhisattva Maitreya, and the monk Kaccāyana of Thailand. Although the Pyu and Burmese of Bagan period predominantly followed the art, architecture and custom of Indian, the Chinese influence over Myanmar was obvious especially in Pyu and Bagan period. Therefore, the cult of fat monk image probably derived from China along with trade, the option noted above that the similarity of the Mon-Burmese fat monk and various images from Thailand. It could be accounted for through copying of foreign images. Another assumption for the origin of the fat monk image was local innovation. This links to the copying from external models resulting in a variety of local innovations.

In conclusion, it is argued that Gavampati of Mon and Kaccāyana of Thailand are not similar as the Burmese and Mon literary account of Gavampati is contrasting with Pali, Thai and Vientiane account of Kaccāyana. However, it is no doubt that Kaccāyanais identical to the Burmese fat monk image while we do not precisely know where the origin of the cult of potted belly image was. The iconographical changes of the fat monk image, from bare torso image to monk wearing a monastic robe, also indicate either changing or varied concepts in practice related to this image. At times, it may

have been akin to Gavampati in being a guardian deity with the fat monk's status at other times being one of the disciples of the Buddha. Moreover, the image has been turned into the Buddha image in some part of Myanmar as they do not know the status of this statue. Whether he was transformed into bodhisattva as a Chinese god of wealth is still a question. To return to my emphasis stated in the Introduction that a large number of the provenance of fat monk images have been recovered from relic chambers, I would like to conclude that the popularity of the fat monk lay in his transmutability. In other words, in one relic chamber the fat monk served one role and in another case a different one. Often we search for a single answer, like searching in English for the exact word. In Myanmar language, however, we usually use two or three words to explain a concept, and slight variations can show how one thing is just a bit different than the other. Maybe this was the case with the fat monk, favored for his flexibility but always bearing blessings and good fortune.

### References

- Agrawala Vasudeva. S. (1933). *Handbook to the Sculptures in the Curzon Museum of Archaeology Muttra*, Allahabad.
- Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) 1928-29*, edited by H. Hargreaves. (1933). Delhi: Manager of Publications
- Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) 1929-30*, edited by Rai Bahadur Daya Ram Sahni. (1935). Delhi: Manager of Publications
- Aung Thaw. (1972) *.Historical Sites in Burma*, the Ministry of Union Culture: Government of the Union of Burma.
- Duroiselle Charles (Edited). (1960). *Epigraphia Birmanica, Being Lithic and Other Inscriptions of Burma*. Archaeological Survey of Burma (ASB), Vol.1, Part II. Rangoon: Union of Burma
- Enriquez, C.M. (1918). *A Burmese Loneliness, A Tale of Travel in Burma, The Southern Shan State and Keng Tung*. Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co
- Hudson, Bob. (2011). "Revealed in the Ruins: Buddha Images and Reliquaries from a Bagan Pagoda". *TAASA Review, Journal of the Asian Arts Society of Australia* 20 (1): pp.10-11
- Lagiarde, Francois. (2003). "Devotional Diversification in the Thai Monastery: the Worship of the Fat Monk", in the *Buddhist Monasterh: a cross cultural survey*, P.Pichardet F. Lagiarde, eds. Paris, EFEO (Etudes thematiques 12), pp.149-268.

- Lagirarde, Francois. (2005). "From the Mon-Myanmar Cult of Gavampati to the Thai Cult of Kaccāyana: more questions about the Fat Monk". In *Myanmar Historical Commission Conference Proceedings*. Part 2. 12-14 January 2005. pp.125-35. Yangon
- Luce, Gordon H. (1969 & 1970). *Old Burma-Early Pagan*. Volumes I, II & III. Artibus Assiac. New York: J.J. Augustin.
- Majupurias T.C. & Kumar R.(Majupria). (2006). *Gods, Goddesses & Religious Symbols of Hinduism, Buddhism & Tantrism [Including Tibetan Deities]*. India: Chandaroshana
- Māratajjaniya Sutta (50) of Majjhima Nikaya* translated from the Pali by Horner, I.B. (1954). The Pali Text Society. (accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2016), <http://obo.genaud.net/dhamma-vinaya/pts/mn/mn.050.horn.pts.htm>
- Maung Paw. *Maha Kaccayana Maha Thera, Wish Fulfilling Arahant*. Compiled for the serene joy and emotion of the pious, A gift of Dhamma, PDF can be accessed on <http://acejaw.net/Buddha/Article/The%20Venerable%20Kaccaana.pdf>
- Ming Kuan. (1985). *Popular Deities of Chinese Buddhism*. Malaysia: Kuan Yin Contemplative Order.
- Pe Maung Tin & Luce. G.H (Trans). (1960) *The Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Printing, Rangoon University Press.
- Ray, Nihar-Ranjan. (1946). *An Introduction of the study of Theravada Buddhism in Burma, Thailand*: Orchid Press
- Ray Niharranjan. (2002). *Sanskrit Buddhism in Burma*. Reprint version. Thailand: Orchid Press.
- San Tha Aung. (1979). *The Buddhist Art of Ancient Arakan, An Eastern Border State Beyond Ancient India, East of Vanga and Samatata*. Rangoon: Ministry of Education
- Shorto, H. L. (1970). "The Gavampati Tradition in Burma" in *R.C. Majumdar Felicitation Volume*, ed. Himansu Bhusan Sarkar, Calcutta, K.L. Mukhopadhyay. pp.15-30
- Singer, Noel.F. (2008). *Vaishali and the Indianization of Arakan*. New Delhi: Navin Shahdara.
- Stadtner Donald M. (2013). *Ancient Pagan, Buddhist Plain of Merit*. Thailand: River Book.
- Taw Sein Ko. (1911). "Chinese Antiquities at Pagan". *Journal of the Burmese Research Society*. Vol.1. Part II. pp.1-6
- Than Tun. (1956). *History of Buddhism in Burma A.D 1000-1300*. P.hd. Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of London.
- The Government Museum Mathura,  
[http://www.panoramio.com/photo\\_explorer#view=photo&position=3602&with\\_photo\\_id=26467368&order=date\\_desc&user=3196599](http://www.panoramio.com/photo_explorer#view=photo&position=3602&with_photo_id=26467368&order=date_desc&user=3196599), (accessed on 28th, Dec, 2015)
- <http://luckybobi520.blogspot.co.uk/2013/01/knowning-phra-pidta-definition-of-phra.html>, (accessed on 9 January 2016)