

Role of the Flag-Post (Takhuntaing) a Symbolic Monument as the Buddhist Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

The Takhuntaing post can be seen across Myanmar as a Buddhist monument in the premises of pagodas and monasteries, and are made of stone, brick, cement or wood. The post can be seen from the distance and has served as an important monument in Buddhist culture. The erection of pillars as religious emblems can also be seen in other religious communities. The tradition of the Takhuntaing posts in Myanmar must have come together with that of the Buddhist temple. Buddhism has prospered across the boundaries of India. Together with the spread of Buddhism, the Buddhist symbols and art have also spread and influence the minds of the recipient people in the specific regions. Those remains in those countries are self-evident, and awaiting the further work of archaeologists. The purpose of this paper is to give the information that the Takhuntaing posts serve as both an effective signal of Buddhist buildings and as a symbol of cultural heritage in Buddhism in Myanmar. It takes the role of victory, impermanence of life-span and events of Buddha's life.

Keywords: Buddhist cultural heritage, Impermanence of life-span, Events of Gotama Buddha

Introduction

Myanmar is a land of pagodas since Buddhist edifices can be seen everywhere across the country from in the big cities to the small villages. The pleasant hillocks and riverbanks are usually with pagodas, big or small. To be seen along with the pagodas are the lofty Takhuntaing posts.

The Takhuntaing posts are intended to show the Buddhist pilgrims from the distance the presence of a Buddhist building. At the top of the post is a flag or banner or streamer which is called 'takhun' in Myanmar language and thus has endowed the post with the name 'takhuntaing' meaning 'staff or streamers'. Usually, the Takhuntaing posts have a girth of about 1.5 feet and a height of 40 feet. They are made of such materials as wood, cement and brick. Decoration with floral motifs may be added to the main post, including one of the figures of *hamsa* bird, *arahant*, *garuda* and *naga* on its top. The Buddhist devotees in Myanmar derived this tradition from India and posted the staff in the precincts of the religious buildings.

Etymologically, 'takhun' comes from 'tan + khun', the former meaning 'straight line' or staff and the latter 'soaring'. The origin of the word thus means 'the soaring post'.² Besides, in Myanmar "takhun" also means pennant; concerning the pennant in the ancient time, the flag were raised at the vehicles, trains and buildings to make them prominent and graceful which were called the pennant.

The Takhuntaing post means the pole hung by round pennants or flat pennants so that it could be seen from a distance which indirectly tells people that there are pagodas and stupas. It can be said that the pole is erected for the people to come and pay obeisance to the pagodas and stupas.

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² Myanmar Swesonekyan, Vol.5. 151. Kyawaungsanhta, Sayadaw.540.

Though there are various shapes of pennant; round pennant, flat pennant, steamers, etc, the pennants hung on the Takhuntaing post are rounded and elongated. They were woven with bamboo. The pennant which is made of bamboo was curved in a crook. A piece of paper or cloth was stuck on it and the some events of Gotama Buddha's life and the genuine word of the Buddha were written on it.¹ However, nowadays the Takhun Pennants that have to be hung on the Takhuntaing posts are rarely seen. Though the Takhuntaing in the ancient time were made of wood or bamboo, in these days they are made of brick or cement.

According to tradition, Takhuntaing is a memorial to a monk by the name of Piṇḍola fled by psychic-power up to get the sandal bowl on the long bamboo post erected by a rich man in Rājagaha.²

Materials and Methods

The Universities' Central Library has chiefly benefited the researcher with data that are collected from periodicals, encyclopedias (especially Encyclopedia Birmanica), the Buddhist scriptures, commentaries and sub-commentaries. Besides these, the researcher also had some interviews to get some in-depth concept of the Takhuntaing posts built in the Buddhist compounds.

Findings

Kinds of the Takhuntaing posts and their areas of occurrence

In the history of Indian architecture, the prototypes of Takhuntaing posts known as 'stambha' in Sanskrit ('thamba' in Pāli and 'Lat' in Hindi) could be seen in Asokan Period. According to scholars of Indian architectural history, the tradition of such pillars as religious edifices started in Egypt and Persia, and later spread to India. The highest peak in the popularity of these pillars saw during the reign of King Asoka in the dynasty of Mauryan kings (3rd Century BC). From Mauryan Period to date in India, the pillars fall into three broad categories:³ (1) The first type should be called the Asokanstambha (dhamma thamba) type which bears inscriptions of King Asoka. (2) The plain pillars with no inscriptions belong to the second type. (3) The pillars of the third type bear inscriptions that are the records of the individual donors. In spite of the different natures of these three types, no remarkable difference exists in their architecture.

The Takhuntaing posts can be found in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sumatra and Java. King Asoka built such pillars in the places where significant events related to the Buddha's life took place. In his twentieth year of ruling over the country, King Asoka put up a pillar in Lumbini bearing the inscribed statement that the Buddha had been born here in that particular place. In some other places, too, the king built the pillars either to show that the place had similar links with the Buddha's life-events, or to propagate the Buddha's teachings by means of inscription. The same ideology based on the tradition of the Takhuntaing has now permeated all other Buddhist countries.

Symbolic Idea of the Figures on Top of the Takhuntaing Post

At the top of the Takhuntaing post are usually seen one of such figures as the Wheel of Law, the lion, the elephant, the horse, the bull, the hamsa bird and the garuda. On some posts,

¹. Myanmar Swesonekyan, Vol.5. 151.

². Vinaya Pāli, Vol.IV, 246.

³. Lwinyee, Maung (*Vijjā/Sippam*), 138.

three lions sitting back to back against each other may be seen, an example of which still serves part of the national emblem of India. According to the experts in archaeology, these figures indicate the influence of the Vedic literature. For example, the horse is the symbol of the sun for the worshippers of the Sun deity while the bull represents the Sky deity. Moreover, the figures of the elephant, the horse, the bull and the lion stand for the directions of the east, the south, the west and the north, respectively.

For the Buddhists, these four figures are taken from the events of the Gotama Buddha's Chronicle: (1) The elephant representing the birth of the Buddha: the Bodhisatta's mother dreamt of a white elephant coming into her womb at the conception of the Bodhisatta. (2) The horse representing the renunciation of the Buddha: the royal steed Kanthaka took the Bodhisatta out of the palace to the forest to seek the truth. (3) The lion representing the enlightenment of the Buddha: the Buddha is said to have the attributes of the lion king in many places of the Tipitaka. (4) The bull representing the demise of the Buddha.

No wonder, the Asokan pillars are regarded as belonging to Buddhist culture by the scholars of Indian architecture since these pillars were erected in the places related to the birth, enlightenment and the first sermon of the Buddha, and in such holy places as Bharhut, Sanchi and other pilgrimage sites in Amaravati.¹

The Takhuntaing Posts of Mahāyānism, Hinduism, and Jainism

The erection of pillars as religious emblems can also be seen in other religious communities. In Jainism, such pillars are light and used as torch-towers to pay homage to Mahavira's four statues at the same time. In Hinduism, they place the figures of Hanuman or Garuda the vehicle of Vishnu. The Shivaites seat the triple fork or trisula of Shiva at the pillar. In Mahāyānic Buddhist countries like Tibet, Nepal and Mongolia, the precincts of the religious buildings usually have such pillars with Avalokiteśvara's six-syllable mantra called Chaakkhara Vijjāmantra: 'Oum̐ manipaddhame hum!' at their top.²

The Takhuntaing Posts in Myanmar

The tradition of the Takhuntaing posts in Myanmar must have come together with that of the Buddhist pagodas; the pagodas of Śrīkṣetra and Bagan would have possessed such pillars when they were first built. Notwithstanding, wood and brick which are the common non-durable materials of Myanmar pillars must have left none of their trace through the severe weather of the times, thus letting us see the existence of only new pillars in their places.

Almost every pagoda in Myanmar possesses the Takhuntaing post with the figure of hamsa-bird, arahant, garuda, naga, htee (umbrella) or a little pagoda at the top. The Takhuntaing pillar of a certain kind has an iron loop that helps move the pillar itself.³ The figure of an arahant usually takes the form of Ven. Piṇḍola fetching the sandal bowl of the rich man from Rājagaha, and the figure of heretics and their disciples. At the base of the pillars, King Sakka may be seen with his harp or thunderbolt or conch or with clasped hands in añjalī mudrā.

¹. Takkatho Panyar Padesa Sasung, Vol. X, Section IV, 84-86. Lwin Yi, Maung (*Vijjā/Sippaṃ*), 139.

². *Dīghanikāya Mahāvagga Pāli*, 116. Lwin Yi, Maung (*Vijjā/Sippaṃ*), 142.

³. Myanmar Swesonekyan, Vol.5. 150.

The Idea of the Statute of Haṃsa-bird rested on the Top of Takhuntaing

The commonest figure at the top of Takhuntaing is the hamsa bird. It is believed that this figure relates to the Bodhisatta's former birth as a *haṃsā* bird narrated in *Javana-haṃsa Jātaka*, *Terasakanipāṭa* of the 550 Birth-Stories of the Bodhisatta.¹ The Bodhisatta was the King *Haṃsa* named Javana. He lived with his two younger brothers at the Cittakūṭa Mountain being guarded by 90000 (ninety thousand) *haṃsa*. One day, the two younger brothers asked the permission from their brother as they wanted to compete their swift skills with the sun. Their brother didn't allow them to compete as he was aware that his younger brothers would get in trouble on the way. However, without paying heed to his words, the two younger brothers went to the top of the Yugandhara Mountain to wait for the sun to compete. Then as soon as the sun rose, they flew together. On the way the youngest *haṃsa*' wings caught fire due to the flaming heat. On hearing that news, the king *haṃsa* flew speedily and saved his youngest brother. After that he sent him to the Cittakūṭa Mountain. At noon, he also sent the younger brother who couldn't continue to fly to the Cittakūṭa Mountain.

Next, the king hamsa himself flew competing the sun in order to test his momentum. But, when he realized that it was useless, he stopped flying. Then, he flew towards Bārāṇasī. At that moment, the shadow of the *haṃsa* covered the whole Bārāṇasī. The King of Bārāṇasī asked the *haṃsa* about that strange news. Then, the *haṃsa* said that he flew together with the sun. So, when the king told him he wanted to see the *haṃsa*'s impetus, together competing the sun, the *haṃsa* invited 4 archers whose impetus was the same as the sun's and he made them stand back to back and shot an arrow each with momentum towards 4 directions. At that moment, the *haṃsa* who wore a sleigh bell (jingle) bell caught hold of the 4 arrows with swiftness. Then, he laid those arrows near the archers. After that, he perched at the tip of the Takhuntaing posts. The act that the *haṃsa* did was so swift his act was heard. However, the king asked him whether there was the velocity faster than this impetus. The *haṃsa* bird in question had the power to fly as fast as the sunlight. But when King Brahmadata showed his admiration for him, the latter replied that death or decay is faster than him, and urged the king to do good deeds.² To remember this Gotama Buddha's teaching of impermanent nature of mind and matter, the figure of a *haṃsa* bird is future placed on to the Takhuntaing pillar.³

Some Takhuntaing posts have the figures of *naga* and *garuda* together carved at the top. Soe Naing (Mandalay) says in his book, ‘]]qkawmif;jynfhjrwfpGmbk&m;ordkif;}}’ and Mone Taing Pin Sayadaw says in his books “okH;ykHwefcsLusrf;ESifh oHk;ykHtdwfaxmifhusrf;” that these figures relate to the *Mahāsamaya Sutta* (the Sermon of the Great Occasion) which attracted the two animals together and befriended each other.⁴

The Idea of the Venerable Piṅḍola Thera

¹. *Nidāna Saṃyutta Nikāya Pāli*, 456, *Aṭṭhakathā*, 207. *Jātaka Pāli*, Vol. I, 260. *Jātaka Aṭṭhakathā*, Vol.IV, 212.

². *Nidānvagga Saṃyutta Nikāya Pāli*, 456, *Aṭṭhakathā*, 207. *Jātaka Pāli*, Vol.I, 260, *Aṭṭhakathā*, Vol.IV, 212.

³. Tejaniya, Ashin (Tekkatho Tezalin), 104. Ashaetimeyinkyahmu poechachet 3th year, Vol.I, 122.

⁴. Monetaingpin Sayadaw, 57. Thaw Zin, U, 31.

Another image which can be seen at the top of Takhuntaing Post is a monk and alms-bowl. The Myanmar scholars relate this statue to the story of the Venerable Piṇḍola Thera which can be seen in the *Udāna Pāḷi Aṭṭhakathā, Mahābuddhavaṃsa, Sāratthadīpanī Tīka*.¹

In His sixth *vassa* (year) of Buddhahood, the Buddha was residing at Makuṭa Hill not far away from Rājagaha. A rich man in the city made a sandal wood bowl that he had found adrift in the river, and hung the bowl in the air about 80 cubits up from the ground. He also made a proclamation that anyone who was capable of fetching the bowl by means of levitation was entitled to its ownership and that he would regard him to be his perpetual religious mentor. Many ascetics in the city such as the pupils of heretics came and asked the rich man for the bowl, but in vain because they just received the words from him that if they were capable, they could fetch it by levitation. One morning afterwards, when the Venerable Moggallāna and the monks on their alms-round in the Rājagaha city, they heard the people's ill speech, so Ven. Moggallāna asked the Piṇḍola Thera to go there and command respect from the people by fetching the bowl. When the rich man saw that, he asked the monk to receive his donation of the bowl to him. It is believed therefore that the statue of a monk at the top of the Takhuntaing is connected with this story, and later the post is decorated at the base with the embellishments of heretics fighting with each other in a vain attempt to clamber the pole for the bowl.

The Idea of the Statues of Sakka and Four Great Guardian Spirits

If one studies the Takhuntaing post that are seen at the pagodas and stupas, there was pedestal of the throne at the bottom of the tall and straight statues of gods, Indras, Brahmās were usually curved by surrounding the pillar (central pole). There was not only a statue of *haṃsa* at the top of the pole, but also a statue of a mythical bird to have a melodious cry. Besides a garudha bird, spire-like and stupas were also curved there. In ancient times, it was regarded that only the statue of Sakka was curved, there was a complete feature and so the statue of the Sakka was essentially curved with profound meaning. In some regions, the base of the Takhuntaing post is surrounded by the postures of the Sakka of four styles:² (1) The posture of the Sakka holding a conch shell, (2) The posture of paying obeisance, (3) The posture of holding a weapon, thunderbolt (*varajin*), (4) holding a harp in his arms; etc. (1) Sakka blowing on the Vijayuttara conch to honour the enlightenment of the Buddha, (2) Sakka requesting the Buddha to give a sermon on 38 blessings, (3) In, the *Ambhaṭṭha Sutta* the *Sīlakkhandha Vagga*, Sakka threatening the life of the Brahmin Ambattha with his hammer-like weapon of thunderbolt (*Varajin*) when the latter denied his defeat to the Buddha in debates.³ (4) Sakka's messenger Pañcasikha god playing the harp to ask permission from the Buddha on his behalf.⁴

All these were recorded in the treaties written in verse by “Mone Taing Pin Sayadaw”. At the bottom of other Takhuntaing posts, statues of the four great statues were sculptured instead of erecting the statues of Sakka. All the statues sculptured in those places mean the great Guardian spirits and their celestial followers recorded the number of the people who keep Sabbath or not, those who keep five precepts or not, the people who look after their parents or not and the list was submitted to the *Sakka* by Mātali and then through the

¹. *Udāna Pāḷi*, 127, *Aṭṭhakathā*, 228. *Aṅguttara Nikāya Pāḷi*, Vol.I, 24. *Aṭṭhakathā*, 153.

Saṃyutta Nikāya Pāḷi, Vol.III, 196. *Saṃyutta Nikāya Pāḷi*, Vol.II, 328. *Aṭṭhakathā*, 38. *Thera Pāḷi*, 255. *Thera Aṭṭhakathā*, 385. *Apādāna Pāḷi*, Vol.I, 54. *Aṭṭhakathā*, Vol.I, 339. *Sārattha Tīkā*, Vol.III, 384.

². Myanmar Swesonekyan, Vol.5. p. 151.

³. *Dīghanikāya Pāḷi*, Vol.I, 89, *Aṭṭhakathā*, Vol.II, 179. *Majjhima Paṇṇāsa Pāḷi*, Vol.I, 294.

⁴. *Dīghanikāya Pāḷi*, Vol.II, 212, 213.

Pañcasikha and so, when people see these statues in their respective meaning and they seem to remind them of devoting the Three Ratanas, keeping precepts and looking after their parents.

Some people mistake the four statues of *Sakka*, worshipping the Buddha, holding a conch shell, holding a harp in their arms and holding a weapon for four guardian Spirits.

The Objectives and Benefits erecting of the Tagundaing Posts

The objectives of erecting the Takhuntaing posts are effective: to stand as a signal for the location of pagodas and religious edifices and a signal for a religiously significant place, to remind the pilgrims of the impending death of beings (as in the hamsa bird figure), and to promote inspiration through admiration for supernaturally powerful monks like the Venerable Piṇḍola.¹

The benefits of posting the Takhuntaings include: plenty of wealth, plenty of followers, access to pleasant music, a handsome good spouse as a marriage partner, the life of a Cakravartin (Universal Monarch), births in heavens for a number of times, entry into *Nirvāna* in the last life in a Buddha's presence.²

Discussions

Having its own traditional and cultural monuments since ancient times shows the greatness of Myanmar. Having the Takhuntaing post in the pagoda compound also stands as a long tradition of Buddhism.

Buddhism has prospered across the boundaries of India. It is especially noteworthy that since the Asokan Period of the Mauriya Dynasty, it has reached Greece and Turkey to the west of India, China and its environs to the east and north, Sri Lanka to the south, and Myanmar, Malaya archipelago and Indonesian islands to the southeast.³

Together with the spread of Buddhism, the Buddhist symbols and art have also spread and influenced the minds of the recipients in the specific regions. Those remains in those countries are self-evident, and awaiting the further work of archaeologists. In Myanmar, one can see such evidence in these main centres of Buddhism: Suvaṇṇabhūmi (Thaton) in Lower Myanmar, Śrīkṣtra in Central Myanmar and Vesāli in Rakhine region.

Conclusion

To sum up, all the growing areas of Buddhism, Mahāyana and Theravāda, including Myanmar, Thailand, Korea, Japan, China, Cambodia, Java and Sumatra have revived and improved their art and architecture on the grounds of Buddhist culture and art. Considering these things, the Takhuntaing posts will continue to exist as an effective signal of Buddhist buildings and a symbol of Buddhism. This paper intends to describe the significance of a Buddhist symbol Takhuntaing. It bears the significance of victory, peace, remarkable events 550 Jātakas records, impermanence of Life-span and merits.

¹. Monetaingpin Sayadaw, 55-59. Paññācakka, Ashin, 72,73.

². *Dīghanikāya Pāli*, 188, *Aṭṭhakathā*, 154. *Apādāna Pāli*, Vol.I, 81, 120. *Aṭṭhakathā*, Vol.II, 38. *Theraṭṭhakathā*, Vol.I, 396.

³. LwinYi, Maung (*Vijjā/Sippam*), 5. Humphreys, Christmas, 213.

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