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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ULLUMBANA CEREMONY ACCORDING TO VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST TRADITION

***Nguyen Thi Phuong Dung**

Researcher of Acharya Nagarjuna University, India

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ABSTRACT

In Pali literature, Pethavatthu in Khuddhaka Nikaya recorded story about venerable Sariputta and his mother in previous life. A story entitles Sariputta therā Matu Petivatthu Vannanna which notes the existence of Ghost realm with many suffer, pain and distress. One time Buddha was staying at Bamboo garden who retold this story. Sariputta was dwelling in the forest not far from Rajagaha. At that time a Peti as female ghost arised who wanted to meet venerable Sariputta. But Deva heaven rejected her to reach his abode. She begged them and spoke that she was his mother in the fifth past life. Final Sariputta saw her through out of loving meditation state. She was suffering with hungry, thirsty, no cloth, no home and expected his saving. Sariputta and Mahamoggallana (Sanskrit: Mahamaudgalyayana) went to the residence of king Bimbisara asked king for supporting. King Bimbisara built huts, water, food, fruit and all life necessary things to Sariputta. Afterthat he offered them to monks in four direction and transfer great credit to his mother. She received it and reborn in heaven as Devi. This story roots in India which inspires for establishment a nice tradition as known as Ullambana festival which appreciates about the filial piety conduct. It is the foundation duty of human being for parents. Ullambana ceremony is observed in many Buddhist countries as China, Japan, Korea, Viet Nam. In this article explains, analyses, discusses in limited area for Ullambana ceremony according to Vietnamese Buddhist tradition which will have some characteristics different with another Buddhist countries

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INTRODUCTION

In Pali literature, Pethavatthu in Khuddhaka Nikaya recorded story about venerable Sariputta and his mother in previous life. A story entitles Sariputta therā Matu Petivatthu Vannanna which notes the existence of Ghost realm with many suffer, pain and distress. One time Buddha was staying at Bamboo garden who retold this story. Sariputta was dwelling in the forest not far from Rajagaha. At that time a Peti as female ghost arised who wanted to meet venerable Sariputta. But Deva heaven rejected her to reach his abode. She begged them and spoke that she was his mother in the fifth past life. Final Sariputta saw her through out of loving meditation state. She was suffering with hungry, thirsty, no cloth, no home and expected his saving. Sariputta and Mahamoggallana (Sanskrit: Mahamaudgalyayana) went to the residence of king Bimbisara asked king for supporting. King Bimbisara built huts, water, food, fruit and all life necessary things to Sariputta. After that he offered them to monks in four direction and transfer great credit to his mother. She received it and reborn in heaven as Devi.

This story roots in India which inspires for establishment a nice tradition as known as Ullambana festival which appreciates about the filial piety conduct. It is the foundation duty of human being for parents. Ullambana ceremony is observed in many Buddhist countries as China, Japan, Korea, Viet Nam...In this article explains, analyses, discusses in limited area for Ullambana ceremony according to Vietnamese Buddhist tradition which will have some characteristics different with another Buddhist countries

The origin of Yulanpen festival: Yulanpen festival is also called ullumbana festival which is one the most important and biggest festival of Vietnamese Buddhist tradition. It takes place on 15th day of 7th month according moon calendar. However festival begins from 1st day to 30th of 7 month for preparing and joining in activities in temples. Yulanpen or wulanpen is Chinese word, Vietnam is known as Vu Lan Bôn. This term is derived from Sanskrit "Ullambana" means rescue a being who is hanging upside down or great suffering from hell. A being includes our parents, ancestors who passed away, so common peoples consider it as Ghost festival. Sometime yulanpen is understood as "Rice bowl" on Pravara day¹ or yulan bowl means a bowl with food in it which offer to

***Corresponding author:** **Nguyen Thi Phuong Dung**,
Researcher of Acharya Nagarjuna University, India.

¹ Day of the end three months of raining retreat for Buddhist Order

Buddha and Order in last day of raining retreat. Some scholars considered that term Ullambana means also “Hanging down”. It describes the pitiable fate of those hanging upside down in the subterranean prison of hell. So rituals called “Feeding the hungry ghost of flaming mouth are performed during the festival to save deceased people from torments after death with offerings of food and wealth (often in paper or representational form) to succor them². According to Yulanpen sutra this explanation is not full meaning of term Ullambana. Because the first time Mulian brought rice bowl to help his mother but she can't accept it. Then Buddha taught him that he has to offer food to sangha to save his mother. It becomes important in Buddhist culture to appreciate the duties, repay to parent who born, nourish us on the world. The teachings about Yulanpen event is based on the discourse same title namely Yulanpen jing. It is considered translate early by an Indian monk from Sanskrit to Chinese language Dhammaraksa (265-311). It was also translated into many languages: Yulanpen jing (Chinese), urabon-kyō (Japanese), Vu Lan Bồn kinh (Vietnamese), the Buddha speaks Ullambana sutra (English) or the sutra of Yulan Bowls³ which is present following.

Thus I have heard, at one time, the Buddha dwelt at Shravarsti in the Garden of the Benefactor of Orphans and the Solitary. Mahamaudgalyayana had just obtained the six penetrations and wished to cross over his father and mother to repay their kindness for raising him. Thus, using his way eye, he regarded the world and saw that his deceased mother had been born among the hungry ghosts, having neither food nor drink, she was but skin and bones. Mahaudgalayana felt deep pity and sadness, filled a bowl with food and went to provide for his mother. She got the bowl, screened it with her left hand, and with her right hand made a fist of food. But, before it entered her mouth, it turned into burning coals which could not be eaten. Mahamaudgalyayana called out and wept sorrowfully, and hastened to return to the Buddha to set forth all of this. The Buddha said “your mother's offenses are deep and firmly rooted. You alone do not have enough power. Although your filial sounds move heaven and earth, the heaven spirits, the earth spirits, twisted demons, and those outside the way, Brahmans, and the four heavenly king gods, are also without sufficient strength. The awesome spiritual power of the assembled Sangha of the ten directions is necessary for the liberation to be attained.

I shall now speak a dharma of rescue, which causes all those in difficulty to leave worry and suffering, and to eradicate obstacles from offenses. The Buddha told Maudgalyayana: “The fifteenth day of the seventh month is the Pravara day for the assembled Sangha of the ten directions. For the sake of fathers and mothers of seven generations past, as well as for fathers and mothers of the present who are in distress, you should prepare an offering of clean basins full of hundreds of flavors and the five fruits, and other offerings of incense, oil, lamps, candles, beds, and bedding, all the best of the world, to the greatly virtuous assembled Sangha of the ten directions. On that day, all the holy assembly, whether in the mountains practicing dhyana samadhi, or obtaining the four fruits of the way, or walking beneath trees, or using the independence of the six penetrations, to teach and transform sound hearers and those enlightened to conditions.

Or provisionally manifesting as bhikshus when in fact they are great Bodhisattvas on the tenth ground—all complete in pure precepts and ocean like virtue of the holy way—should gather in a great assembly and all of like mind receive the pravara food. If one thus makes offerings to these Pravara Sangha, one's present father and mother, parents of seven generations, as well as the six kinds of close relatives, will escape from the three paths of sufferings. And at that time attain release. Their clothing and food will spontaneously appear. If the parents are still alive, they will have wealth and blessings for a hundred years. Parents of seven generations will be born in the heavens. Transformation born, they will independently enter the celestial flower light, and experience limitless bliss. At that time the Buddha commanded the assembled Sangha of the ten directions to recite mantras and vows for the sake of the donor's family, for parents of seven generations. After practicing dhyana concentration, they then may accept the food. When first receiving the basin, place it before the Buddha in the stupa. When the assembled sangha has finished the mantras and vows, then they may accept it. At that time the bhikshu Maudgalyayana and the assembly of great Bodhisattvas were all extremely delighted and the sorrowful sound of Maudgalyayana's crying ceased. At that time Maudgalyayana's mother obtained liberation from one kalpa of suffering as a hungry ghost. Maudgalyayana addressed the Buddha and said, “This disciple's parents have received the power of the merit and virtue of the triple jewel, because of the awesome spiritual power of the assembled Sangha.

If in the future the Buddha's disciples practice filiality by offering up the Ullambana basins, will they be able to cross over their present fathers and mothers as well as those of seven generations past?” The Buddha replied “good indeed, I am happy you asked that question. I just wanted to speak about that and now you have also asked about it. Good man, if bhikshus, bhikshunis, kings, crown princess, great ministers, great officials, cabinet members, the hundreds of officers, and the tens of thousands of citizens wish to practice compassionate filial conduct, for the sake of the parents who bore them, as well as for the sake of fathers and mothers of seven lives past, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the day of the buddhas' delight, the day of the Sangha's Pravara, they all should place hundreds of flavors of foods in the Ullambana basins, and offer them to the Pravara Sangha of the ten directions. They should vow to cause the length of life of the present father and mother to reach a hundred years without illness, without sufferings, afflictions, or worries, and also vow to cause seven generations of fathers and mothers to leave the sufferings of the hungry ghosts, to be born among men and gods, and to have blessings and bliss without limit. The Buddha told all the good men and good women, “those disciples of the Buddha who cultivate filial conduct should in thought after thought, constantly recall their present fathers and mothers when making offerings, as well as the fathers and mothers of seven lives past. Every year, on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, they should always, out of filial compassion, recall their parents who bore them and those of seven lives past, and for their sakes perform the offering of the Ullambana basin to the Buddha and the Sangha and thus repay the loving kindness of the parents who raised and nourished them. All Buddhas' disciples should respectfully receive this dharma.” This sutra may be composed in China and this culture also began from China then it spreaded outside countries as Japan, Korea and Vietnam. Beside Yulan festival also based on sutra Baoen Fengpen jing (the Buddha speaks

² Yulanpen festival and Chinese Ancestor worship, Guang Xing, p 123
https://www.academia.edu/3484955/Ullambana_Festival_and_Chinese_Ancest_or_worship

about the deep kindness of parents and difficulty in repaying it). Two main sources to know about it and then there were many variations and appeared in many forms which are called bianwen (transformation tales) as story following: Mulian (Chinese name) was called Radish (Luobu) or Turnip. His mother's name was Liu Qingti⁴. He had a deep faith to Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha but his mother did not believe in three Gems. When he went to trade in another place told with his mother should offer food, necessary needs to monks. When he left home but madame Liu did not follow her son's advice. After long time Radish returned home, his mother told lie "I did as you told me, I donated monks and so brought blessing to us". Because of this reason after dead she falls in to hell with many suffering. According to Mulian legend: "Daily Liu Qingti Slaughtered animals to make offering to ghost and spirits. Whenever the Three Honored Ones came her house for alms, she utterly humiliated them"⁵. Because of her evil actions she dropped in hell. One day Radish renounced his house became a monk with powerful of magic as known as Maudgalyayana. He looked for his parent. His father lived in heaven with many pleasures but his mother was reborn as a hungry ghost. He tried to send food to his mother. But she can't accept it while was suffering of hungry and thirsty. Mulian asked Buddha to help her. Buddha taught him on the fifteenth day of the seventh month when monks finished rain retreat. In this day should prepare food to offer to monks and transfer good deeds to his mother. His mother reborn as black dog and then reborn again in heaven. These stories explain reasons which Maudgalyayana's mother drops underworld. But story in Mulian legend described clearer his mother's sins. Special stories are same aim to convey message about filial piety to our parents. So Ullambana is founded in early time 5-6 AD and preserve to now. Because of different area, weather it takes place earlier on the fifteenth day of seventh month of Chinese calendar. From the night of fourteenth day the all monks convene in Buddha hall. They light lamps, offer incenses flowers, recite sutras and observe Pravarana (self indulgence). Senior monk knees down face to face with another senior one who point out these faults to each other. If one commits he will confess his mistakes to purify his action, verbal and mind. Then junior monks go together and receive the Pravarana too. All monks have to be present in this day without fail

The rituals in Ullambana: On the 15th day of 7th month is main ceremony of Ullambana. It is took place both in monastery, house hold and street ceremony. In house peoples prepare many food, fruit, robe, drinking, candle to offer to deceased parent and ancestor. They also offer food for wandering spirits (ghost) at courtyard or on street as their compassion to wandering souls believe in avoiding evil actions from ghost. This custom is really influenced from Taoist by Buddhist. According to ancient Chinese tradition they also burn paper money, cloth, house etc send to them wish their parents, ancestors in past can use them in another realm. In Viet Nam monks suggest to give up this custom. Instead lay people should do charity, help poor peoples, orphan child to send their parents. In temple ceremony is held by Buddhist monks and supporting of Buddhist followers. According to Buddha speaks about Ullambana sutra, mother of

Maudgalyayana committed deep faults which he got power psychic but could not save his mother from hell. But there was only a path to rescue her. Buddha taught him on the Pravarana day monks from ten directions assembled in full. He should prepare an offering of clean basins full of hundreds of flavors and the five fruits, and other offerings of incense, oil, lamps, candles, beds, and bedding, all the best of the world, to the greatly virtuous assembled Sangha⁶. Offering to monks maybe save and liberate one's parents, closed relatives from suffering from hell. If they are still alive who also got many benefits. Is there a doubt why offering to monks can save one escape distress?. Because of Monks practice religious spiritual as no killing, no stealing, no telling lie etc...and always observe, cultivate wisdom, teach people overcome suffering, desire, hatred...they are considered holy priests like as Dalailama 14 who can help many people remove suffer. In Jainism also says that offering food to monks is the best donation because they also consider as preserver Jainism. Beside before Mother of Maudgalyayana was stingy, angry. Her son offering changed her mind became generous, loving kindness. Therefore she was immediately escape hell reborn in heaven. Hell and heaven root in our mind. When mind is angry, worry, hatred that means at that time we live in hell. In contrary when our mind fulfills of love, sympathy that means we reborn in heaven. At this time lays person prepare to present gift to Sangha. After chanting sutra, practicing dhyana concentration, they may accept the food. The first receiving the basin, place it before the Buddha. When the assembled sangha has finished the mantras and vows, then they may accept it⁷.

One of major attraction of Ullambana in Vietnam is Roses engagement program (Vietnamese language: lễ cài hoa hồng). The flowers come to temple to participate Rose engagement after finished Pravarana ceremony. Every one pin a rose in front of chest for each other with different colour. This ceremony is brought out by Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh in 1962. He said that one day on the way went to book store with his friend in Ginza, Tokyo, Japan. Sudden there was a Japanese student who took from her handbag a white flower and pinned it in front of his chest. He was surprised about this custom. Then he knew that it was Mother's day because of his mother died, so she pinned white flower for him. If your mother is alive that you are pinned with red rose, you should be proud of this. In contrary you are pinned with white rose that means your mother passed away. This is biggest loose, suffer in your life. At that time he realized that this was nice custom which can apply for Ullambana ceremony in Viet Nam. Though Rose engagement custom began in Japan and Western countries however there are many changes in Vietnam Mahayana Buddhism. Rose engagement reminds us about filial conduct to parents. In this day appreciates not only nourishment of mother but also nourishment of Father and we have to take care them immediately now. Don't let them die we carry many kind of food, drinking ...offer them on altar which is so late

The meaning and value morality of ullambana

The filial duty to parents: Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi or common ones are born by their parents, without them we are not present on the world. Baoen fengpen jing describes the greatest kindness of parent, mother' loving for their child from

⁴ Guo, Qitao 2005. Ritual Opera and Mercantile Lineage: The Confucian Transformation of Popular Culture in late imperial Huizhou, Stanford, California, pp 94-96

⁵ *ibid*, Pp97

⁶ Buddha speaks about Ullambana sutra, Buddhasutra.org

⁷ *ibid*

pregnant to mature adult. If a mother lives for a hundred years old who never finishes her worries for old her child eighty years old. That means her kindness, love is boundless. It never dissipates until her life is over. Buddha said "If there were a person who carries his father on his left shoulder and his mother on his right shoulder until his bones were ground to powder by their weight as they bore through to the marrow, and if that person were to circumambulate mount Sumeru for a hundred thousand kalpas until the blood that flowed out covered his ankles, that person would still not have repaid the deep kindness of his parents". "If there were a person who, during the period of a kalpa fraught with famine and starvation, sliced the flesh off his own body to feed his parents and did this as many times as there are dust motes as he passed through hundreds of thousands of kalpas, that person still would not have repaid the deep kindness of his parents"⁸. Therefore we can said kindness of parent is great, unconditioned which we are difficult to repay to them.

However they are not filial to parents. In home they leave early in morning and return until late at night. They never ask about their health or sleep well and rest peacefully. They become thief, drinking, gambling which make further distress of their parents. Furthermore when parents get old ages they let parents lonely, hungry and thirsty without any cares for them. So the main purpose of Ullambana ceremony which reminds to repay the kindness of parents or duty of sons to them when they both are alive or passed away. Special Vietnam Buddhism focuses on the response of sons forward parents still alive. They are advised that sons have to take care parents every day, asking their health, offering food, drinking, shelter for them. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh told that we take care parents not only as our common duties but also over duties which is called as "enjoying of take care". We look after them with heart like as enjoying good food without any counted. There is a difference between the piety conduct in Buddhism and other religions. Buddha taught we repay deep kindness for parent not only by supply to them with common materials as food, necessary things but also we have to help them cultivated spiritual. If they do bad karmas (action) we should advice parent to abstain it and develop good deeds which guide them to real happy life, inner peace. In Pali canon recorded Buddha is known as a greatest piety one because of himself guided his parent king Suddhodana, Mahamaya and adopt mother Mahapajapati Gotami got enlightenment. Addition, for deceased parents Buddha taught that we make offering to Triple gems, no damage animals for eating, practice giving and cultivate blessing to transfer to them. By the way propagate message of Buddha about filial piety to folk who need to know their duty

The filial duty to Guru: Ullambana is also known as Buddha's delight day which means Buddha was very happy. Because his disciples completed practicing of morality, concentration, wisdom after three month rain retreat (Vassa). According to Vietnamese Mahayana tradition juniors monks and lay Buddhists will visit and congratulate to senior monks who fulfilled raining retreat too and got higher spiritual. After that Great monks deliver speech to support for junior monks. It is nice tradition to repay to Guru (master) who support and teach for improving our religious spirit.

Conclusion

Ullambana or Yulanpen festival is a chance for Buddhist followers practice duties to parent and spiritual teachers. Following the teaching of Buddha Maudgalyayana rescued his mother from hell, on 15th day of 7th month per year Buddhist follower prepares food, drink, robe...to offer to monks which carry many benefit for parents and ancestors. If they are alive who will be happy, joy with good deed. If they died who may be receive our credit transfer to them to reborn in heaven. By the way this culture stressed that we have to take care parent both material and spiritual as: Food, water, necessary things and advice them remove bad deeds. Sometime this custom faces some shortcoming as burning fake money (Chinese: yuen bao), fake car, house...wish their relatives can use them in another realms after dead. Some people compare Ullambana with Halloween festival. However Ullambana is not much advertisement as Halloween. Ullambana does not have the atmosphere for party as Halloween. I think this compare is still not enough its meaning. Because of Ullambana festival is not only a simple ceremony for deceased person. It is an important ceremony to repay the nourishment of parent, master. Therefore in my opinion Ullambana should be become a national festival in Viet Nam which is not only for Buddhism but also for all people

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⁸ Baoen fengpen jing (The Sutra about the Deep Kindness of Parents and the Difficulty of repaying it), thuvienhoasen.org