

## On use of the term "deities" regarding Buddhist Statues

Dear Friend,

As a practicing Buddhist I think the term "deity" has to be used carefully in describing Buddhist figures (yes the word get used in Buddhist writings; but it is used in a very precise way that is not at all what is meant when the word is used in monotheistic religions - since essentially Buddhism is not a religion).

My concern was actually with the use of "deities" since that term has really different meanings for Buddhists and for followers of monotheistic paths. I have no problem with "images". Though actually the statues of the 88 Shrines are none of those things to me personally. Part of my path, having taken the bodhisattva vow, is experiencing all artistic expressions of Buddhas and bodhisattvas (statues, paintings, etc.) as living emanations of enlightened ones. That's why "cleaning" just begins to describe what I do when I do my cleaning meditation on Saturdays. And you already realize symbols are really important in Buddhism. When you are trying to express states of being and awareness that the Buddha has said are far beyond words, symbols provide a useful bridge. It's why I enjoy mandalas and thanka paintings so much. Incredibly rich symbols that can touch one deeply.

Since the Buddha was born a Hindu it is understandable that the spiritual path he and his students created incorporates some of that culture and religion. Buddhist literature has lots of mentions of devas. For Tibetans dakinis are called sky goddesses. Tibetans seem them in the clouds. I actually had a very specific concern about the use of the word deity.

As a Buddhist, the Buddha is not God to me, the Bodhisattvas are not gods. The Fudo Myo and the dakinis are not deities - they are emanations of enlightened ones, they are concentrated spiritual energy directed by enlightened ones. I am always a little concerned when some volunteers and visitors refer to the statues as "gods". The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were women and men, very human, who, through diligent practice, trust in the basic truth of the dharmadhatu, and total commitment to compassion for all sentient beings, became enlightened and keep returning to this world of samsara to free all beings from suffering. Wonderful beings yes, gods no.

So that's where I was coming from. The cultural and linguistic parts of "deity/deities" I get. Just want the message we share with the public to be clear. The difference between monotheism and Buddhism in my understanding is the Buddhas clear teaching that spiritual liberation is one's personal responsibility, and that one seeks this liberation for all beings, not just for oneself.