



The Development and Impact of Buddhist Zen Schools to Vietnamese Society During Ly And Tran Dynasties

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Abstract

This paper presents the development of Buddhism during Ly and Tran dynasties as the golden age of Vietnam Buddhism through the establishment and development of Buddhist Zen schools such as Ty Ni Da Luu Chi Zen sect, Vo Ngon Thong Zen sect, Thao Duong Zen sect, and especially Truc Lam Zen sect. Under the contributions of Zen masters, the country as well as Buddhism developed in many aspects such as politics, culture, economy, education, etc., On the Buddhism side, at the beginning of the Phap Van Zen school belonged to Ty Ni Da Luu Chi Zen sect, Kien So Zen school belonged to Vo Ngon Thong Zen sect, and Thao Duong Zen school belonged to Thao Duong Zen sect, they were merged gradually into the unique Vietnamese Zen sect at that time called Truc Lam Zen sect.

Keywords: Development, Impact, Buddhist Zen schools, Ly Dynasty, Tran Dynasty

Introduction

Buddhist Zen schools is unique in the unusual emphasis that it places on meditation. Zen Buddhists generally believe that a Buddha nature resides within each person. There is no need, consequently, to seek enlightenment outside oneself. To disclose one's own Buddha-nature, one need only focuses one's attention inward, through the meditation techniques prescribed and/or perfected by a Zen master. Meditation enables the Zen practitioner to escape the cage of discursive thinking and to explode the conventional boundaries of ego consciousness. Therefore, the Vietnam Buddhist Zen schools during the 13th-14th century played a vital role in spreading the teachings of the Buddha to the people.

In referring to Buddhism in the Tran dynasty one needs to mention the Truc Lam (Bamboo Grove) Zen school. At the beginning of the 13th century, there were three major Zen schools were Phap Van, Kien So and Thao Duong. Additionally, they were merged gradually into one big school named the Truc Lam school under the strong influence of the two Buddhist scholars Tran Thai Tong and Tue Trung Thuong Si.

The Establishment and Development of Three Buddhist Zen Schools Before Truc Lam School.

1. Phap Van Zen School

In term of Phap Van Zen School, this school was founded by Indian Zen master Vinitaruci who was a southern Indian, belonging to the Brahmin caste, which was the intelligentsia in the Indian society. When he was a little boy, he travelled all over India and abroad to seek enlightenment and arrived in Truong An, a province of China. During his trip across India, master Vinitaruci had an occasion to reach northern India, where there had been a small country named Ujjyana and this became his second homeland. During his residence of six years in the Quang Chau province, Vinitaruci translated the two sutras such as Discourses of Monastery of Elephant Head and Discourses of Different Kamma. After that, Vinitaruci left Quang Chau and came to stay in the Phap Van temple in Vietnam in 580.¹

The philosophy of this school is manifested in Discourses of Monastery of Elephant Head. In this sutra, enlightenment means going beyond the three words, letters, and having

¹Le Manh That. (2006). **History of Buddhism in Vietnam**, (Vol. II) TPHCM: Ho Chi Minh Publishing House, p.535.

no bases or spaces. Language and intellectual knowledge are indirect tools and they are not the heart of Zen, thus all writings of the various Masters and patriarchs even the teachings of the Buddha are skillful means. Therefore, one should not depend upon them solely nor cling to them. The more important method of teaching in Zen is direct experience, direct looking into oneself to discover the Buddha nature and attain Buddhahood. This statement sounds similar to the Zen gatha of the Chinese Zen patriarch Bodhidharma:

A special transmission outside the scriptures
No dependence upon words and letters
Direct pointing at the mind of man
Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood.²

A remarkable features of the Phap Van Zen school was the combination of the Zen school with Pure Land Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism. As for the actuality of Pure Land Buddhism, Phap Hien, the second patriarch, arrived at the mount Tien Du in Bac Ninh province in order to establish the Zen center in 594. From the onwards, the followers of the school recited the Amitayurdhyana sutra and the Amitayus sutra. The Amitayus sutra records the previous life of the Amitabha Buddha and 48 of his vows while the Amitayurdhyana sutra primarily talks about 16 methods of contemplation associated with the Buddha Amitabha's realm along with the Bodhisattvas Avolokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, who is an important Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism.

2. Kien So Zen School

The second school of Zen influencing the general course of Vietnamese Buddhism is Kien So and the Master who found out this school was Vo Ngon Thong.³

²D.T Suzuki. (1996). **Zen Buddhism**, New Delhi: Aryan Books Internationalp, p.174.

³According to the Vietnamese genealogical history, Thien Uyen Tap Anh, Vo Ngon Thong originally came from Guangzhou, China and entered the Buddhist order at Shuanglinsi in Whuzhou. Because he was known for his ability to silently comprehend and realize the nature of things, his contemporaries called him "Wordless Realization". He is reputed to have studied under Huahai. In 820, Vo Ngon Thong came to Kien So monastery in northern Vietnam and took up residence there to practice meditation. He generally sat facing the wall, without uttering a word. A disciple, Cam Thanh, served him for many years and received the transmission of his full teaching. See Robert E. Buswell Jr., Donald S. Lopez Jr. (2013).**The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism**, Princeton, Princeton University Press, p.984.

Vo Ngon Thong was born in the Quang Chau province of China and surnamed Trĩnh. Since childhood he admired the Buddhist teaching and did not care about the worldly life. His character's peculiarity was to be of few words, calm and intelligence. Whatever he understood was deep and great, so the people at that time called him Vo Ngon Thong (one who is very rare to talk).

Afterwards one Zen visitor took him to learn the essence of Zen from Zen master Ma To. Unfortunately, Zen master Ma To had passed away before he arrived. For this reason, Vo Ngon Thong came and asked to be the disciple with the Zen master Bach Truong Hoai Hai . At that time a Bikkhu asked Bach Truong: "What is the immediate method of Mahāyāna Buddhism?" Bach Truong replied: "If the earth of the mind is not covered, the sun of the wisdom naturally illuminates the earth of the mind." Hearing this sentence, Vo Ngon Thong suddenly got enlightened. He returned to the province of Quang Chau, where Vo Ngon Thong was the abbot of the Hoa An temple. One day a person asked: "Are you a Zen master?" Vo Ngon Thong answered: "I have never learnt Zen at all." After a while, Master Vo Ngon Thong called the personal attendant. The latter replied: "Yes". Vo Ngon Thong points out a tree, saying nothing. One day Vo Ngon Thong called his disciple Nguong Son who was a novice: "Tich! Carry a chair for me!" After Nguong Son had carried a chair to the Vo Ngon Thong's position, he asked Nguong Son to move it to the old position. Nguong Son obeyed his words.⁴

In September of the year 820 Vo Ngon Thong came and dwelled in the Kien So temple in the Phu Dong village. In addition to meals, he enjoyed the joy of meditation, got used to turn his face towards a wall, and saying nothing. Spending many years and as such was not known by anybody. Only master Cam Thanh in that temple whole-heartedly looked after and respected him. Thanks to this intimate relationship, the master Cam Thanh received the Zen essence from him

One day he was in a healthy condition, taking a bath, changing clothes, and saying to Cam Thanh: In former times, my master was the master Nam Nhac Hoai Nhuong⁵, After teaching Cam Thanh this Zen verse, Vo Ngon Thong joined palms together and passed away.

⁴Le Manh That. (2005). **A Study of Collected Prominent of Zen Garden**, TPHCM: Institute of Vietnam Buddhist Research, p.234.

⁵Ibid., p.348.

Cam Thanh cremated his dead body, building a stupa to worship the relics in the Tien Du temple. In the year of 826 Vo Ngon Thong died at the age of 68.⁶

The Zen philosophy of the school is demonstrated in Vo Ngon Thong's words to his disciple Cam Thanh before his passing away: "Bodhidharma is said to have been spread rumours that my progenitor of Zen has derived from India. My progenitor (the Buddha) transmitted the eye dharma-storehouse that is called meditation. I think a so-called Zen school is based on the inherently pure nature. The Western heaven is this place and that place is western heaven too".⁷

According to the Zen master Vo Ngon Thong, the origin of Zen was not in India. This was a virtually new idea of Zen at that time. In that case, we may ask from where Zen commenced. Vo Ngon Thong showed that this country (Vietnam) is the origin of Zen. Making such a statement implies that Zen springs from a pure nature of each individual. Human beings, wherever they stay and whenever they live they possess that pure nature. For this reason, everywhere there are human beings and such places therefore are the origin of Zen. Because what is Zen if it is not looking for that pure nature which means searching for the Buddha nature or the potential of enlightenment. Therefore, Vietnam could be the Buddha's land, the land of enlightenment. The Buddha's land has not only been in India. From what we have analyzed above, saying that the origin of Zen being in India is "truly a false rumour", since the Buddha land has constantly been Vietnam and has sprung from this place.

In summarizing we can say the Zen philosophy of this school is typical for the Mahayana teaching which says that the Buddha nature exists everywhere. The difference between the Mahayana teaching of the Buddha nature in general and this school's philosophy of Zen is just only the style of presentation.

The Kien So school did not put emphasis on Vajrayāna, but Vajrayana's impact on this school is also rather important. The influence is clearly manifested through Masters Minh Khong, Giac Hai. The master Minh Khong is said to have treated an incurable disease of Emperor Ly Nhan Tong that all the best doctors at that time could not do. Emperor Ly Nhan Tong is said to have admired Giac Hai for his miraculous power.⁸ And Master Giac Hai performed plenty of miraculous things, including conquering wild beasts.

⁶Ibid., p.95

⁷Le Manh That. (2006). **History of Buddhism in Vietnam**, (Vol. II), (TPHCM: Ho Chi Minh Publishing House, p.242.

⁸Ibid., p.323.

Over four hundred years, like other Vietnamese schools, the Phap Van school masters like *Sangha Raja Khuong Viet* and the National master *Thong Bien* made a lot of contributions to the Vietnamese people as diplomatic and political advisors to Emperors.

3. Thao Duong Zen School

The Thao Duong Zen School This is the third Zen school in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism. The school was created in a very difficult background. The founder of the Thao Duong School had an interesting biography. He was a prisoner monk who was detained and taken to Vietnam by Emperor Ly Thanh Tong from the Champa capital during the war between Vietnam and Champa one day in 1069. Afterwards Emperor Ly Thanh Tong assigned Thao Duong to assist the Vietnamese royal head monk (僧录) as a servant. This monk wrote a book, which was a collection of sayings of the Buddha and Zen masters, which one day was on a table out on a visit. Thao Duong read the text and made corrections in the text. The head monk unexpectedly saw this and being surprised about his servant and supporting what he saw spoke about it to Emperor Ly Thanh Tong. Emperor Ly Thanh Tong recognized Thao Duong's talent and appointed him as the national master.⁹

The highlight of the school was during the reign of the three emperors Ly Thanh Tong, Ly Anh Tong, and Ly Cao Tong. Some of the masters were court officials such as Ngo Ich, Pham Dang, Nguyen Thuc and one of them, a layman, named Ngo Xa. Half of the eighteen masters of the school were laymen. This suggests that the position and influence of Buddhism at that time was gradually handed over from the monastic type to a lay structure. Buddhist monks no longer played an important role in spreading and teaching. Buddhist monks and laypeople shared the responsibility for spreading Buddhism.

Spreading Buddhism is not only the duty of monks, but also that of laypeople. Buddhist monks not only made religious ceremonies such as teaching Dharmas and translating Buddhist scriptures, but also took part in social activities. In general, Buddhists at that time regardless of being monastic or lay followers worked together to build a powerful and rich nation. Thus, it is possible to say that Buddhism of the time might be called secularized Buddhism. The Zen philosophy of the school very much influenced Vietnamese Buddhism in the Tran dynasty in the 13th century with the so-called engaged Buddhism known under name of Taking Delight in Religion While Dwelling in the Worldly Life (居塵樂道, Cu Tran Lac Dao).

⁹Le Manh That. (2006). **History of Buddhism in Vietnam**, (Vol. III), (TPHCM: Ho Chi Minh Publishing House, p.58.

The following lines are the generations of the Thao Duong Zen school:¹⁰

The founder: the monastic Zen master Thao Duong in the Khai Quoc temple in the Ha Noi capital.

The first generation: Emperor Ly Thanh Tong, monastic Zen master Bat Nha in the Tu Quang Phuc Thanh, monastic Zen master Truong Canh, lay Zen master Ngo Xa, and monastic Zen master Long Chuong.

The second generation: Government official-lay Zen master Tham Chinh, monastic Zen master Hoang Minh, Vinh Hung, monastic Zen master Khong Lo in the Nghiem Quang temple, monastic Zen masters Hai Thanh and Dinh Giac.

The third generation: Government official-lay Zen master Do Vu, monastic Zen masters Pham Am and An La, Emperor Ly Anh Tong, monastic Zen master Do Do.

The fourth generation: monastic Zen masters Truong Tam Tang and Chan Huyen, government official-lay Zen master Do Thuong.

The fifth generation: monastic Zen master Hai Tinh, Emperor Ly Cao Tong, two government officials-lay Zen masters Nguyen Thuc and Pham Dang.

The Origin and Development of The Truc Lam Zen School

1. Foundation of The Truc Lam Zen School

In referring to Buddhism in the Tran dynasty (13th century) one needs to mention the Truc Lam (Bamboo Grove) Zen school. At the beginning of the 13th century, the three major Zen schools were Phap Van, Vo Ngon Thong and Thao Duong. However, they merged gradually into one big school named the Yen Tu. Under the strong influence of Buddhist thinkers Tran Thai Tong and Tue Trung Thuong Sy, the merger of these three schools led to the Yen Tu Zen School's development into the Zen Truc Lam School; the only Zen school in the Tran dynasty. This period was considered the age of the Mono-school Buddhism.¹¹

According to several historical accounts,¹² there were in total 23 patriarchs in the tradition of the Yen Tu School. King Tran Nhan Tong was the sixth patriarch. Shortly after

¹⁰Ibid., p.65.

¹¹Nguyen Lang. (2000). **History of Buddhism in Vietnam**. Hà Nội: Literature Publishing House, p.205.

¹²Ngo Thoi Nhiem. (1992). **Meditation in Tran dynasty**, TPHCM: Institute of Vietnam Buddhist Research, p.397.

being ordained as a Buddhist monk, he renamed Truc Lam School and thereby becoming the first patriarch of the Truc Lam School, but he still considered himself to be the sixth patriarch of the Yen Tu School.

2. Philosophy of The Truc Lam Zen School

The spirit of entering into the life of the Truc Lam school is mentioned in detail in the work Cu Tran Lac Dao (Taking Delight in Religion While Dwelling in the Worldly life, 居塵樂道). It is the Zen philosophy of the Truc Lam school. What is the philosophy of Taking Delight in Religion While Dwelling in the Worldly life? The characteristic of the philosophy is engaged Buddhism or Buddhism that has been established to serve for the benefit of the people.

Therefore, the philosophy of “Taking Delight in Religion while dwelling in the Worldly life” set forth by Tran Nhan Tong was compatible with the social and historical background at that time. According to my personal opinion, Buddhism needs to make a local adaptation to each new culture it encounters. Buddhism accommodates itself to indigenous religions and philosophies before it is accepted locally. In fact, the mentioned-above philosophy was suitable for the Vietnamese culture in the days of Tran Nhan Tong. Analyzing the work “Taking Delight in Religion While Dwelling in the World” will give us a general view of the Truc Lam School.

Taking Delight in Religion While Dwelling in the World was a long verse of the first patriarch Tran Nhan Tong, which included 10 sections. This long verse demonstrates the Zen philosophy of Tran Nhan Tong. His Zen philosophy is summarized in the four lines of the verse:¹³

Let's take delight in religion in whatever condition we may live
 Let's eat when hungry and sleep when tired,
 The gem lies within ourselves, so let's give up searching elsewhere,
 When our mind is detached from the surroundings, there is no question of
 concentration.

From what is said in the four above sentences, it is evident of Master Tran Nhan Tong's point of view, Buddhism is a way of Life without any distinction between a secular

¹³Le Manh That. (2006). *A Complete Work of Tran Nhan Tong*, TPHCM: Institute of Vietnam Buddhist Research., p.364.

life and a monastic life. For what does Buddhism mean if it is not merely a process in quest of the truth? And being the truth, it surely does not lie within Buddhist teachings but exists in the heart of life.¹⁴

Zen Buddhism of the Truc Lam School was very much influenced by Chinese meditation. The first, Tran Nhan Tong's lectures of meditation were often Zen dialogues of master-disciple. A student raised a question to which the master would accordingly give his answer. At times, the master answered his student by gazing at, shouting at or striking¹⁵ a student. Because of the style of Zen teaching, a master's answers appear not to be corresponding to a student's questions. Answers could only be grasped by insiders (students involves a dialogue) only.

The aim of striking and shouting is to awaken the inherent potential of enlightenment in each student. On the other hand, they also imply that the ultimate truth or enlightenment can not be expressed by words and languages. The second patriarch Phap Loa usually expounded the greatest work of Ch'an in China The Blue Cliff Records (碧巖錄, Bich Nham Luc). The Blue Cliff Records is a collection of 100 of the best Koan dialogues in Chinese meditation¹⁶. Therefore, the practice of Koan meditation must play an important role in the technique of the Truc Lam School.

Impact of The Truc Lam Zen School on Vietnamese Society

1. Impact of The Truc Lam Zen School to Politic

In the work the True Record of Three Patriarchs, we cannot deny the great influence on the political life of the court, at that time, particularly in the case of the first patriarch Tran Nhan Tong. In the year of 1294 the emperor Tran Nhan Tong handed over the imperial throne to his son Tran Anh Tong and made up his mind to be ordained as a Buddhist monk. However, when he already had become a monk, Tran Nhan Tong kept on taking actions for the sake of the country and he was often consulted by officials for crucial decisions of the court, too.¹⁷ This is proved by the following events:

¹⁴Ibid., p.237

¹⁵Chan Nguyen. (1999). **Buddhist Dictionary**. Hue: Thuan Hoa Publising House, p. 230.

¹⁶Chan Nguyen, op. cit., p.57.

¹⁷Le Manh That. **op. cit.**, p.165.

In the year of 1295 the Emperor-father Tran Nhan Tong received a Mongolian delegation headed by Lihsin and Chiao T'ai-teng to debate withdrawal of troops and the end of wars. After the Mongolian delegation's departure, the government officials Tran Khac Dung and Pham Thao, by the Emperor-father Tran Nhan Tong's order, went to the Mongolian court with his letter of request for the Chinese Buddhist Canon

The Emperor-father Tran Nhan Tong made a journey to Champa in on March of 1301. On this journey, Tran Nhan Tong promised to marry his daughter, the princess the Cham King Che Man, to the Champa king in return for the two districts O and Ly of the Kingdom of Champa to be annexed to the map of Vietnam. The Champa king accepted the proposal of marriage. The two districts O and Ly then became a well-known area under the name of Thuan Hoa, and was the imperial capital of a unified Vietnam for more than one hundred years.

As a result, the annexation of the districts O and Ly to Vietnam was peacefully accomplished. Indeed, the Zen master and Emperor-father Tran Nhan Tong's peaceful diplomatic policy actually brought about unexpectedly great achievements in politics and the security of Vietnam.¹⁸ The remarkable point is that never before in the history of Vietnam or any other country has a Buddhist monk been capable of extending his country's boundaries.

2. Impact of The Truc Lam Zen School to Culture

In the field of culture, two greatly significant developments occurred in Vietnamese culture during the reign of the Tran Nhan Tong. The first is the usage of the Vietnamese language together with Chinese as official scripts of the imperial court. The second is that the Emperor Tran Nhan Tong himself founded a new line of development of the Truc Lam Zen School holding that the way to enlightenment may be cultivated peacefully right in a worldly life.¹⁹

In addition, the Emperor-father and Zen master Tran Nhan Tong himself also had writings in Vietnamese that have been completely preserved so far. These writings are *Taking Delight in Religion While Dwelling in the Worldly Life* and *Songs of the Realization of the Way*. Both of which are the oldest writings still preserved in the history of Vietnamese literature. Indeed, the reason why these two works have been able to be preserved and respected by the Vietnamese people is their intrinsic value.

¹⁸Ibid., p.180

¹⁹Ibid., p.7.

For the past three centuries, the “Taking Delight in Religion While Dwelling in the Worldly Life” and the “Songs of the Realization of the Way” have been widely published and studied. Tran Nhan Tong’s two poems have a huge amount of influence over not only Buddhism but also on national traditions. In short, Tran Nhan Tong opened a new period in the history of Vietnamese literature with these poems in which the national language played a major role.²⁰

Reading these letters, the first impression with readers is that the Emperor Tran Nhan Tong always held a consistent attitude towards the Mongolian invaders. He resolutely rejected any ideas of surrendering to enemies and defended the country’s rights. All of the Vietnamese, therefore, should read the twenty-two letters, in order to see how hard and tactfully the former Vietnamese court struggled against the Mongolian invaders with diplomatic strategies.

They represent the firm resolution not only of the Emperor- master Tran Nhan Tong, but also of the Vietnamese people as a whole to defend their country’s ownership. The resolution reveals that the Vietnamese people refused any compromise with invaders in any form. It is not surprising that the letters sent by the Emperor Nhan Tong to the Mongolian emperors occupy a definite place in the history of Vietnamese literature.

3. Impact of The Truc Lam Zen School to Education

The most remarkable feature of the educational impact of the Truc lam Zen school was obviously demonstrated in examination questions in the sixteen century. In the history of examinations in Vietnam, Truc Lam is the only Zen school whose doctrine was applied as a topic in the court Ph.D examination under the reign of early Le.²¹ For instance, in the examination held in the year of 1502, there were forty- seven questions in total. Fifteen questions had contains as follows: “What teachings were taught by Tran Nhan Tong and Huyen Quang qualifying them to eventually becoming the Patriarchs of the Truc Lam School?” It is evident that the Truc Lam Zen School had been widely studied and examined before this examination took place. Thus, the doctrine of the Truc Lam School became a major subject of the contemporary curriculum and actually received much attention by the Kings of the Early Le dynasty.

Another feature demonstrating the educational impact of the Truc Lam School is that transmitting the patriarchal office to Phap Loa. In the year of 1308 Master Tran Nhan

²⁰Ibid., p.180.

²¹Ibid., p.252.

Tong appointed his disciple Phap Loa to be the abbot of the Sieu Loai Temple on Mount Yen Tu, who would thus become the patriarch of the second generation of the Truc Lam School. Besides, in order to encourage the study of both Buddhist and non- Buddhist literature, the former transferred a hundred types of non- Buddhist books and the Chinese Buddhist Canon.²²

This fact reflects the educational view of Tran Nhan Tong and Buddhism in Vietnam. He expected Phap Loa to have enough Buddhist and non-Buddhist knowledge to fulfil his mission as an ideal Buddhist, but not as a narrow-minded successor who would not know anything but the practice of samādhi, expounding sūtras or some other monastic affairs. Such a type of ideal Buddhists must have possessed a good all- round education in which no knowledge would be viewed as absolutely foreign to the Buddhist teachings. The educational tradition of Vietnam has since then been that of a general education. Not studying non-Buddhist knowledge was seen to deny the Buddhist doctrines or even oppose Buddhism as Vietnamese historians groundlessly criticized later.²³

Conclusion

It is possible to say that the coming into existence of the Truc Lam School is the quintessence of Vietnamese Buddhism. The founder of the Truc Lam School has been the national hero who led the Vietnamese people to drive the invaders out of Vietnam's borders twice. After he became a Buddhist monk, he merged three Zen school into a bigger one named Truc Lam School. One very crucial thing is that he called for national unity as a Zen master and an Emperor. With him Truc Lam School is believed the golden age of Vietnamese Buddhism started. The Truc Lam School with its Zen philosophy of Taking Delight in Religion While Dwelling in the Worldly Life had a great impact on the cultural and political life of the Vietnamese people. This thought set forth by the Truc Lam School was appropriate for the social background at that time.

²²Ngo Thoi Nhiem, , **op. cit.**, p. 41.

²³Le Manh That. **op. cit.**, pp. 229-296.

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