



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

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## A Brief Survey on the Development of Vietnamese Buddhism in Historical Perspective

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It can be said that from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century the thought of *Dhyana* of Mahayana Buddhism was formed. Kang Seng Hui and Kalasivi were those who laid its foundation. Kang Seng Hui bore two translations of Buddhist Texts: *Satparamita Sannipata Sutra* which focused on six-paramitas and consecutive stages of meditation as a means of self-liberation from the viewpoint of Mahayana, and *Anapana Sutra* which aimed at the practice of regulating the breaths to purify the mind. Besides, Kalasivi also translated the *Saddharmasamardhi Sutra* which talked about a kind of meditation called "lotus meditation" and the concept of *dharma*, transcendence and selfness. The inconcept of *Dhyana* there was marked by insights of mind, the original source of all actions and karma, by true self and *anatma*. We cannot find any document that revealed the appreciation or reactions of Buddhist followers about Master Kang Seng Hui and Kalasivi's contribution. But it was clear that though nascent, Buddhism in Vietnam came to a turning point in its history of development in the third century. Luy Lau may well have become the stepping point for further expansion of Mahayana Buddhism into the southern part of China in the middle of the century in which Master Fang Sengflui was the pioneer.

In the fourth and fifth century, Buddhism in Giao Chau was still affected by the formers. In this period, there were two famous monks were Dharmadeva (an Indian) and his disciple, Hue Thang (a nation of Giao Chau), who disseminated the Mahayana in Buddhist center of Binh Thanh before the arrival of Bodhidharma.

The sixth century was considered as the beginning for the era of independence in Giao Chau. It was marked by the establishing of the State of Van Xuan with its first king Ly Nam De. Soon after his accession, the King constructed a new temple named Khai Quoc. Buddhism in Vietnam now began the blossom with the appearance of Master Vinitaruci of Indian origin. He came from China to Vietnam, stayed at Phap Van temple, or Dau temple. During the time staying in Vietnam, Master Vinitaruci established the Vinitaruci Sect, the first Zen sect in Vietnam from 580 to 1216. The *Tam An* of the Vinitaruci was inherited through 19 generations by 28 ancestors. The sect was deeply inclined to Tantrism. Its ideology was originated from that of *Mahayana Pranja*, the *Avatamsaka-sutra*, and the San-Lun by Nagarjuna. It advocates to emphasize on the transfusion and reception of the *tam an*, not though the study of Buddhist scriptures. The monks of the sect did not detach themselves from the worldly life. On the contrary, most of them were well-equipped with the mastery of geomancy, prophecies and supernatural powers to enter life to help the government and the people of the time. Also, it was influenced by Vietnamese national identity. It reflexes both mental activities of Buddhism and the practical simple and poor living condition of the grass-roots. Those influences lasted for many century later. The sect contributed to Vietnam many talented monks who dedicated their whole life in the development of both Buddhism and the construction of the country from the early independence era until the 13<sup>th</sup> century (580-1216).

A disciple of, Phap Hien who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> century had to built a Buddhist school to preach *Dharma* to 300 Buddhists. After that, the Vinitaruci sect was continued by these Masters as Hue Nghiem, Thanh Bien, other two unknown named, Long Tuyen, Dinh Khong

and so on.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, after exactly 140 years of the birth of the Vinitaruci sect, the second major Buddhist sect came into being in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism. The introduction of the new sect was as silent as the idiosyncrasy of the master. So it was called Vo Ngon Thong. Master Vo Ngon Thong transmitted *Tam Phap* to Lap Duc. The shortcuts-to-enlightenment theory was based upon the concept of the foundation of *Alaya* which is the original nature of all *dharma*s. Master Vo Ngon Thong said: "All the *dharma*-s come from the Alaya... If the *dharma* essence is achieved, everything originated from the Alaya is Buddhahood." The Vo Ngon Thong sect was continued in 17 generations with the total number of eighty-one masters who were direct inheritors of the Dharma essence from their immediate venerable-teachers. It began in 820 and ended in 1221. According to some other authors, there were about fifteen generations and forty inheritors. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century, historians believed that Buddhism now was in the period of non-competitive prosperity. Buddhism was widely spread among the people. Confucianism was introduced into the country during the earliest period of Chinese rule, but there had been no prominent Confucian during the ten centuries whereas most of the intelligentsia were Buddhist priests. They were erudite scholars of the Vinitaruci and the Vo Ngon Thong sects. Their expertise was not only in culture and academics but also in politics and military studies. They, therefore, were highly esteemed and well-treated by the kings of the Dinh, and Lê dynasties.

They were mostly from the lower class. They shared the difficulties of the nationalistic leaders of the time, thus, they all dedicated themselves to the protection and development of the nascent independence of the country that had been for a millennium under Chinese domination. King Le Dai Hanh (981-1005) was vigorously supported by the three outstanding masters, Phap Thuan (914-990) and Van Hanh (?- 1018) of the Vinitaruci and Khuong Viet (933-1011) of the Vo Ngon Thong. Masters Phap Thuan and Van Hanh worked as political advisors. Van Hanh later produced the *gatha*, prophecies, in a political campaign to help Ly Cong Uan enthrone and established the Later Ly dynasty. Master Khuong Viet supported both King Dinh Tien Hoang and eê Dai Hanh. Their contribution to the country was so great that in 971, King Dinh Tien Hoang categorized the Buddhist priest ranks for the first time in the history of Vietnam Buddhism. He officially acknowledged Buddhist spirituality as the counseling principles for interior affairs of the country. He offered Ngo Chan Luu of the Vinitaruci sect the rank of *Sangharaja*, the Buddhist Unifier, and the title of *Khuong Viet Thai Su*, the Great Teacher for Correcting and Sustaining Viet. He also offered Venerable Tru ng Ma Ni the title of *Tang Luc Dao Si*, the Buddhist Priest Overseer and Venerable Dang Huyen Quang *Sung Chan Uy Nghi*, the Noble and Upright Majesty. Besides Luy Lau, new Buddhist centers emerged in the area. Hoa Lu, the capital town of the Dinh and Early Le dynasties was another important Buddhist center in the same century. The development of Buddhism in the 10<sup>th</sup> century foretells the expansion of this religion in the next four centuries.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Buddhist sect of Thao Duong attended. The new sect focussed on the intelligentsia and literature activities. The

Buddhist traditional beliefs among the populace, thus, were neglected. As a result, its impacts were not strong enough to form independent monastic activities and traditions to compete with the other two sects. Nonetheless, the tendency of intellectual Zen and Buddhist poetry was admired by the teachers of the Vô Ngôn Thông and the Vinitaruci sects of the time. According to the *Thien Uyen Tap Anh*, the Thao Duong sect lasted in six generations with nineteen patriarches. Ten of them were monks of whom were the three priests of the Vinitaruci sect, Masters Bat Nha, Khong Lo, and Dinh Giac. The other nine were the three kings and six mandarins of the Ly and Tran dynasties. However, the dates, biographies and transmission poems were not recorded.

Vietnamese Buddhism reached to its glory under the Ly and Tran dynasties. The Ly dynasty was on the reign for 215 years (the century of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>) with eight kings who was all deeply imbued with Buddhism. During the length of 215 years of the dynasty, there were 21 priests of the Vinitaruci sect, 33 of the Vo Ngon Thong, 19 of the Thao Duong sect who directly or indirectly dedicated themselves to the construction of the country in different ranges. The priests's role now was as the spiritual guides. National and cultural Buddhism was gloriously developed in all walks of life in such a long time. The compassionate and humane Ly dynasty brilliantly put it in its culmination for the first time in history. Its peak was maintained by the subsequent dynasty, the Tran.

Buddhism in the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries was in the Tran dynasty period, 1225-1413. In early 13th century, the three sects of Vinitaruci, Vo Ngon Thong and Thao Duong were gradually associated into one by the profound influences of King Tran Thai Tong and Tue Trung Thuong Si. This confluence motivated the great growth of the Yen Tu sect which was later modified into the Truc Lam sect (the Bamboo Grove sect), the only Buddhist sect under the Tran dynasty. Therefore, 188 years of the dynasty were considered the age of mono-sect Buddhism in the history of Buddhism in Vietnam.

The priest who contributed to the sect integration the most was Master Thuong Chieu (?-1203) of the 12<sup>th</sup> generation of the Vo Ngon Thong sect. Also, he was the bridge-maker between the Ly and the Tran dynasties.

After 1190, Master Thuong Chieu moved to Luc To, an ancient temple of the Vinitaruci sect where he preached the Buddha's teaching and collected important data to complete historical documents about Buddhism in Vietnam which became the *Thien Uyen Tap Anh* later. He advocated the enlightenment should be based upon the solid foundation of the alaya study or *Yogachara*. One among his prominent disciples was Master Huyen Quang (?-1220). He was the founder of the Yen Tu or Truc Lam sect. This sect was handed down through 23 patriarches in 23 generations. Among the most notable were King Truc Lam, the State Master, King Tran Thai Tong, Tue Trung Thuong Si, King Tran Nhan Tong, Master Phap Loa.

Instead of those influences in the religion, it was the unified Buddhist Church where the three different Buddhist sects mingled into the Truc Lam sect which used Buddhist terms, scripture recitation and the mixture of Buddhist literature and meditation practice as effective means for the final goal that prevailed in Vietnam. The Buddhist concept of congruity between worldly life and religious life was also espoused by the Truc Lam sect. Now Buddhism became a psychological factor that unified the whole people in national development and resists against foreign invaders.

In general, Buddhism in Vietnam reached its apogee for nearly 4 centuries during the independence period of the Ly and the Tran dynasties. It became not only the quintessence of national independence and culture, but also the core of the affinity between the popular masses and the courts.

However, it was also the time of the entrance of mystical

tendencies and heresies of Tibet and Central Asia that together with the disqualification of the Buddhist clergy in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century caused the decline of Buddhism into a superstitious religion. It provoked strong rejection from Confucians, and Confucianism gradually took the monopoly role in the later dynasties. This was the inception of Buddhist declination in the next centuries.

Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism in Vietnam was in declination. Though the number of temples and sangha members still increased and the roots of Buddhism got deeper and deeper into the popular heart, mind and beliefs, the intelligentsia were inclined to Confucianism and viewed it as model of national salvation and development after 1329 when there were no celebrated priests. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, only Luong The Vinh, and Master Chan Nguyen were heard of. What were the causes of the declination?

The primary reason was that the ordained priests increased, then the disqualified members were in greater member. Since the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the church could not manage its priests, so examinations were held by the government in order to exclude bad members.

Since the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Chinese felt worried when Vietnam developed a national culture that would certainly be followed by national independence and politics. In the early of 15<sup>th</sup> century the Ming carried out a policy of absolute assimilation of Vietnam into China. They confiscated and replaced all Buddhist works composed in the Tran and Ly by their own books on the three religions for Vietnamese readers. They wanted to teach Buddhism and Taoism in their Chinese style. Ironically, partly because of their discrimination against Buddhism, partly because of not appreciating the value of traditional culture, Vietnamese Confucians of the time believed that only the Confucian world and life outlook was right and they viewed the others as heresies. They neither understood the Ming's wicked conspiracy nor perceived the necessity of the protection of the compassionate, humane and congruous factors elements of Buddhism. Therefore, this was another cause of Buddhist decline.

Moreover, the Confucians misunderstood the equality of Buddhahood. They alleged that Buddhism underestimated the moral hierarchy of the 4 pivots in society: kings, subjects, fathers and children, and the values of humane morality, loyalty and piety. In their eyes, Buddhism was superstitious. Thus, they endeavored to reject the religion more than ever. In additional, the younger generations found that it was the predominance of Confucianism not the fading Buddhism could help them attain their ambition of glory and fame. So, they, of course, did not support the religion.

Finally, the Tran subsidy of Buddhism made the priests much more dependent on them. When the Tran kings lost their power, and could not assist them effectively, Buddhism could not help degrading.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism was marked by the renaissance of the Truc Lam sect and the reissuing of Buddhist works of the Ly and Tran dynasties. After one century and a half of enduring chaos and violence caused by civil wars, Confucian beliefs were rejected. People began to return to Buddhism to look for relief. It was concurrent with Chinese priests' arrivals in Vietnam. This motivated the reappearance of the Truc Lam sect and the republication of valuable Buddhist works between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, *Thien Uyen Tap Anh*, *Ke Dang Luc*, *Thanh Dang Luc*, *Khoa Hu Luc*, *Tam To Thuc Luc*. Also, the Lin-chi sect and the Tao Dong sect were revived. There were some notable masters during this century: Masters Chuyet Chuyet, Minh Hanh of China, Master Huong Hai of Vietnam. With such activities, Buddhism in Vietnam in those days could be considered the brilliant stars in the sky of miraculous *dharmas*. However, the stars, sparkling and flashing, were not able to be compared with the shining sun in the heydays of Buddhism between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

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