CHAPTER V
SOME EMINENT MONKS OF
THE LY AND TRAN DYNASTIES

V. 1. Eminent Monks in Period of the Ly Dynasty

It was during the period of the Ly Dynasty in Vietnam that the winds of national spirit began to blow through Buddhism. A large number of Buddhist bonzes were active during this period who played an active role in the dissemination of Buddhism in Vietnam. One such important Buddhist monk was the great master Khuong Viet (who earlier was called Chan Luu) of Phat Da temple. Thuong Lac, a native of Cat Loi village was another Buddhist monk. As a boy he studied Confucianism. But when he grew up he turned to Buddhism. He went to Zen master Van Phong of Khai Quoc temple and received ordination from him. From then on he read widely the Buddhist scriptures, and plumbed the essential teachings of Zen. When he was in his forties, his fame made an impact on the royal court. Towards the end of his earthly life, Emperor Dinh Tien Hoang (968–979) summoned him for an audience and granted him the sobriquet, Khuong Viet Thai Tu (which means “the great mater who brings order to Viet”) of the Thuan Thien era (1011) of the Ly dynasty.

Under the Ly dynasty. King Ly Thai To (1010-1028) met the Zen master Da Bao and saw his unusual appearance. At the time the great master Khuong Da Bao came to study with him. After Da Bao attained the Dharma, he wandered far beyond the mundane world with only a pitcher as a bowl. Finally, he came to settle down at Kien So temple. When Ly Thai To ascended the throne, he often invited Da Bao to court to give him lessons in Zen. And he rewarded him which generous donations. Da Bao was even consulted about all court and political matters. There was a royal decree that ordered his temple rebuilt. Da Bao subsequently died but no one knows where or when. After the death of Master Da Bao Master Dinh Huong (?-1051) continued in his place. He was a native of Chu Minh and his family had practiced Buddhism for generations. At a tender age he followed Zen Master Da Bao of Kien So temple and served him for twenty-four years. Da Bao had more than one hundred disciples.
During the years of the Thong Thuy era of Ly Thai Tong (1034-1038), Zen master Thien Lao of Trung Minh temple on mount Thien Phuc in Tien Du studied with Da Bao of Kien So temple in his early years and comprehended the essence of mind. Then he moved to Tu Son and planted his staff there, the influence of his Zen grew stronger and stronger, and students came to train under him by the thousands. Once emperor Ly Thai Tong dispatched an envoy to bring Thien Lao to court to ask for his advice, but Thien Lao had already passed away. Under the Ly, pagodas were not only centers for bonzes and the population to practice their religion, but also places of cultural activity and celebration.

As mentioned above, many bonzes from this sect practiced mysticism as early as the Dinh Le dynasties and prolonged this practice until the Ly dynasty. The bonze Tu Dao Hanh from the same generation as Van Hanh was typical of this kind of practitioners. The biography of Dao Hanh relates a great many miraculous stories, for instance, he is said to have made genies work on his order, he handled the magical baton, and he was reborn after his death in the body of a newborn and so on. “The bonze often called snakes and wild animals to come and mount a guard around him. He burned his finger to bring about rain and cured diseases with holy water.

The bonze Minh Khong, a disciple of Dao Hanh, enjoyed a great reputation for having cured king Than Tong of a serious disease using magic. Master Thien Nham of the same generation as that of Minh Khong was also well-known as an adept of these practices. He knew by heart the book Tong Tri Da La Ni (Dhāraṇī). He presided over all the ceremonies in the country to pray for rain from heaven, the eradication of epidemics, and so on. Master Gioi Khong of the fifteenth generation was renowned for being able to daunt wild animals, command the spirits and had the ability to cure thousands of diseases in a day with holy water. The bronze Tri Thien, a disciple of the master Gioi Khong and recognized as a master by marshal To Hien Thanh, called tigers to come and kneel down in front of him on mount Tu Son.

The bronze Hue Sinh presented his point of view on this issue when he answered the query of King Ly Thai Tong through his gāthā as follows:
“Prajñā is just nihilism.
You are nothingness, so am I
Buddha in the past, the present and the future
Have the same principle of doctrine”.
Ly Thai Tong outlined his point of view on the Śūnyatā of the Nihilism of Mahāyāna: all doctrines are but nothingness.
The bonze Hue Sinh answered using the following gāthā:
“Things exist but do not exist.
Neither has nor has not
If one understand this
Then creatures are similar to Buddha
In the serene light of the moon of Laṅkāvatāra
The empty boat crosses the sea
The absence of nothingness” is the being
It is at this price that the Samadhi is an assimilated.

V.2. Eminent monks in period of the Tran Dynasty
Under the Tran dynasty Buddhist travelers moved across cultural barriers and brought Buddhist stories, images, texts, ideas, and practices from country to country. Many famous monks engaged in translation work. Buddhists from overseas collaborated with local people to introduce Buddhist beliefs and practices among them. Monks and lay followers pursued meditation practices. At this time Buddhist temples were built and images made, with patronage flowing into Buddhist projects, among the high and low alike, appeals for supernatural aid and blessing took on Buddhist coloration. In
brief, there was a blending of Buddhist outlooks and the multilayered local sense of piety and religiosity. Buddhism under the Tran is notable for the founding of Truc Lam sect and the dissolution of earlier sects. Truc Lam (Bamboo forest) sect was very well known at that time. In short, the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha led by Truc Lam formally was an ideal one. Truc Lam did his best during the last ten years of his life in this regard.

However, Master Tieu Dao is briefly recorded as having been a disciple of the scholar Ung Thuan. This may mean that Tieu Dao played an important role in the formation of the ideology of the Truc Lam sect. He was the guru of Tue Trung, an expert on Buddhism under the Tran. In the *Thuong Si Hanh Trang book*, King Tran Nhan Tong described the expert as follows: At less than 20 years of age, Tue Trung was already a fervent Buddhist; he studied Buddhism under the bonze Tieu Dao in Phuc Duong. Tue Trung had great respect for this master and was his most dedicated disciple. But as Tue Trung was a scholar practicing the Buddhist religion at home while Tieu Dao did so at Phuc Duong in the depths of the forest, where was Phuc Duong situated? Some historical documents describe Tieu Dao as a member of the generation based on mount Yen Tu.

The origins of the Truc Lam sect might go back as far as the generation of either Ung Thuan, Tuc Tu and Thong Thien, or the last generation of Vo Ngon Thong sect. As Tue Trung practiced Buddhism only at home, his disciple King Tran Nhan Tong, after entering the religion, settled on mount Yen Tu in order to practice it, which is why the Truc Lam sect was also called the Truc Lam Yen Tu sect. But before the arrival of Nhan Tong at Yen Tu, many bonze had successively, gone there to venerate the Buddha and played an important role in developing Buddhism under the Tran, long before the founding of the Truc Lam sect, their names are not known but a list left by the bonze Phuc Dien and included in the *Dai Nam Thien Uyen Ke Dang Luoc Luc*, published approximately in 1858, goes a follows:

1. Hien Quang.
2. Vien Chung
3 Dai Dang
4 Tieu Dao
5 Hue Tue
6 Dieu Ngü (or King Tran Nhan Tong)
7 Phap Loa
8 Huyen Quang
9 An Tam
10 Tinh Lu Phu Van
11 Vo Truoc
12 Quoc Nhat
13 Vien Minh
14 Dao Hue
15 Vien Ngo
16 Tong Tri
17 Tam Tang Khue Tham
18 Son Dang
19 Huong Son
20 Tri Dung
21 Tue Quang
22 Chau Tru
23 Vo Phien
The reliability of this list and the order given are doubtful. However, it does help to confirm the fact that the bonze Hien Quang was the founder of the Yen Tu branch, as assessed in the *Thien Uyen Tap Anh*.

The great master Hien Quang whose family name was Le Thuan, was a native of Thang Long, a disciple of Thuong Chieu, and a bonze of the twelfth generation of the Vo Ngon Thong sect, according to the *Thien Uyen Tap Anh* Hien Quang, belonged not to the thirteenth but to the fourteenth generation of this sect. In fact, his master was Thong Chieu. “When he was eleven years old, Master Thuong Chieu of Luc To temple saw him. Took him in, and ordained him as a disciple. He was unusually bright in his studies, reading tens of thousands of word every day. Within less than ten years he became versed in the three learning’s. As for the essential massage of Zen, he had not yet discovered it when Thuong Chieu passed away.”¹ Master Hien Quang was obliged to continue his studies under the guidance of the bronze Tri Thong then the bronze Phap Gioi at Uyen Trung. He returned afterwards to Yen Tu to pursue his calling as a bonze and died there in 1220.

According to the *Thien Uyen Tap Anh*, Hien Quang was buried by his disciple Dao Vien, but in the list left by Phuc Dien, it was Vien Chung who succeeded Hien Quang. It is possible that Dao Vien and Vien Chung were one and the same person. In his preface to a guide to the Thien (Zen) sect, King Tran Nhan Tong affirmed that on his arrival at Yen Tu to become a bonze, he met the bonze superior Truc Lam there. This superior bonze could therefore only have been Dao Vien or Vien Chung.

The bonze Phuc Dien, successor to Vien Chung in Yen Tu, was the bonze Dai Dang. Regarding the latter, the *Luoc Dan Thien Phai (A Produced Abstract of the Zen Sect)* reveals that at the time of Ung Thuan and Tran Thai Tong, a Chinese bonze, Thien phong of a Lam Te sect in Phuc Kien, came to Vietnam to preach Buddhist doctrine to the bonze Dai Dang. He was at the same time the disciple of Vien Chung in Yen Tu and of Thien Phong.

As mentioned above, Tieu Dao was the master of Tue Trung and the latter, the master of Nhan Tong. But in the list left by Phuc Dien, the bonze Tieu Dao had another successor according to the customs at Yen Tu in the person of the bonze Hue Tue. Unfortunately there is no information available about Hue Tue. Thus on arrival in Yen Tu, Tran Nhan Tong brought together for the second time the Yen Tu and Thang Long branches of the Vo Ngon Thong sect. These sects had been divided since Thuong Chieu during the last years of the Ly dynasty and the beginning of the Tran. The famous book of the Tran dynasty was the *Khoa Hu Luc* (book on the practice of emptiness).

Tran Nhan Tong (1218-1277) (real name Tran Canh) ascended the throne at the age of eight. When he was 18 years of age, his uncle Tran Thu Do who in fact wielded power at the time, forced him to relinquish his wife and marry the wife of his brother Tran Lieu. Most unhappy at this forced marriage, Thai Tong secretly left the capital and went to mount Yen Tu to become a bonze but Thu Do succeeded in finding him and made him return to the throne in 1236.

Thai Tong from then on took to studying Buddhism. Ten year later. He completed the book *Thien Tong Chi Nam* and afterwards wrote several other Buddhist works. Five of his books were as follows:

1. *Thien Tong Chi Nam* (Guide to the Thien Tong sect.)
2. *Luc Thoi Sam Hoi khoa Nhi* (Rites for confession of six times).
3. *Kim Cuong Tam Muoi Kinh chu giai* (notes on the Diamond Sūtra)

Now only the preface of the Thien Tong Chi Nam, the first book by Thai Tong, has survived but it is also included in the Khoa Hu Luc.

Thereafter appeared Tue Trung Thuong Si, a great Buddhist of the Tran Trung era, 1230-1291). He was the eldest son of Tran Lieu alias An Sinh Vuong (prince An
Sinh). The latter was the eldest brother of Tran Quoc Tuan (also known by the title of Hung Dao Vuong). Tue Trung had the honorific title of Hung Ninh Vuong, and made great contribution to the two wars of resistance fought by Vietnam against Yuan invaders (in 1285 and 1288). Tue Trung became a holy man without entering a pagoda but had a vast knowledge of Buddhism. He was a disciple of the bonze Tieu Dao and the master of Tran Nhan Tong. Tue Trung’s Buddhist thought is reflected in his texts and is particularly included in full in his work Tue Trung Thuong Si Ngu Luc. This book is in our parts:

1. Part 1, contains four gāthās and fourteen incantations expounding Buddhist thought by mean of dialogues between Tue Trung and his disciple.

2. Part 2, presents 40 poems.

3. Part 3, contains seven funeral orations written posthumously for Tue Trung by his disciple including Nhan Tong and Phap Loa.

4. Part 4, contains the Thuong Si Hanh Trang. Probably written by Nhan Tong, and a conclusion written by Do Khac Chung. Included in the Thuong Si Hang Trang are also six other gāthās by Tue Trung.

Master Tue Trung rejected the vegetation regime and the Tri Gioi (śīla). He also bravely condemned the Tri Gioi and the Nhan Nhuc (kṣanti: humility) which were two important points of the Hanh Luc Do (six cardinal virtues) of Buddhism. In his view, to live in conformity with the law will help one to be fearless of the law and find freedom.

The above mention monks were the prominent and famous monks and great Buddhists under the Tran Dynasty. There were also many other monks about whose life nothing is known.

V. 3. Contribution of the Ly and Tran Periods to Vietnamese Buddhism

In Vietnam, there are not any enormous, impressive Buddhist architectures as seen in India, China, Thailand, etc. However, from the early centuries of the Christian era,
pagodas and Stūpas have been established in various areas of Vietnam. These have played an important role in the propagation of the dharma and the unification of the Vietnamese people. With the passage of time, a large number of pagodas have become part of the national history. Different museums now preserve numerous great masterpieces of successive generations of artists from all over the country. Some pagodas are associated with a great deal of legends and myths. Others have a historical relationship with patriarch-founders, whose virtue, benevolence and talent have been engraved into the mind of Buddhist laity. A lot of famous pagodas were in turn established. They are Dau Pagoda (or Phap Van) Dau Pagoda (or Thanh Dao), Tuong Pagoda (or Phi Tuong), Dan Pagoda (or Phuong Quang) and Keo Pagoda (or Tung and Keo Pagoda (or Trung Nghiem).

After the Bach Dang river triumph in 938 CE, Vietnam entered the era of independence and development. It was in the early stage of the Vietnamese independent feudalist administration that Buddhism has grown rapidly. The Buddhist centers such as Luy Lau, Kien so spread their influence throughout the country, as a result, many Pagoda were constructed. Only in Co Phap district are Hoa numerous pagodas such as Kien Duong, Pagoda in Hoa Lam village, Thieu Chung and Lu To Pagoda in Dich bang village, Song Lam pagoda in Phu Ninh village, Cam Ung Pagoda on mount Tam Son. Other Buddhist centers also came into existence, among those is Dai La (called Thang Long in the Ly dynasty) where King Ly Nam De had Khai Quoc Pagoda built in the sixth century (later it was renamed Tran Quoc Pagoda). Then, most venerable Khuong Viet, (his worldly name was Ngo Chan Luu) head of the Sangha in the Dinh dynasty, enlarged the pagoda and made it the center of Buddhism propagation. Hoa Lu, another center, located in the Line Mountains, the former capital of the Dinh Le dynasties also attracted the Buddhist laymen. A pillar on which a Buddhist scripture was carved in Nhat Tru Pagoda, being built in roughly 995, was discovered recently.

Under the Ly dynasty (1010-1225), Confucianism gradually developed but Buddhism got to its climax. All the king of the Ly dynasty venerated and worshipped Buddhism. King Ly Thai Tong was the seventh patriarch of the Wu Yu Tung Ch’an sect. King Ly Thanh Tong was the first patriarch of the T Sao T’ang Ch’an sect. Some
greatly reputable ch’an masters were offered the honorable title of “the national
teacher.” In this category came the ch’an master Minh Thong (1099-1174), Vien
Thong (1080-1151) the head of the saṃgha. Ch’an masters Van Hanh. Da Bao was
invited to participate in the meetings of the royal court by the king himself. During the
Ly dynasty, ch’an Mater Tsao T’ang (of Khai Quoc Pagoda) founded the Tsao T’ang
ch’an sect of which king Ly Thanh Tong, king Ly Anh Tong, Ch’an master Bat Nha,
Khong Lo were members.

Most of the great Pagodas and Stūpas in the Ly Dynasty were built primarily
by the kings’ and mandarins’ money; especially they were often built in mountainous
region or in beautiful landscapes. In and out of Thang Long citadel, pagodas were
constructed, even in the ethnic-tribe areas, e.g. Bao Ninh, Sung Phuc Pagoda (1107),
in Yen Nguyen–Chiem Hoa district, where lived the Tay ethnic people.

In the Tran dynasty, Buddhism developed in accordance with Confucianism.
The previous ch’an sects were still in progress when King Tran Nhan Tong, the
founder of the Truc Lam ch’an sect. reunified the Buddhist saṃgha of the Tran
dynasty. The first king of the Tran dynasty, Thai Tong Tran Canh was entirely
absorbed in studying Buddhism. He was the author of the famous Buddhist books
such as Thien Tong Chi Nam, Khoa Hu Loc. His contribution was the consolidation
of the three religions Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, carrying on the tradition
of the Wu Yun T’ung ch’an sect and receiving the theory of the Lin chi ch’an sect.
King Nhan Tong Tran Kham, the hero of the two wars against the Yuan aggressors
(1285-1287), also understood Buddhism well. In 1293, he handed down the crown to
his heir king Anh Tong. He then entered monkshood in mount Yen Tu in 1299 with
the Buddhist name “Huong Van Dai Dau Da Truc Lam Dai Si.’ As a monk, he went
everywhere on teaching Buddhism throughout the country and once went to the
Champa kingdom.

The two successive patriarchs of the Truc Lam ch’an set were most venerable
Phap Loa and Huyen Quang who, under the auspice of the feudalist aristocrats, had a
lot of pagodas and stūpas constructed of which the great Bao An and Quyen Lam
pagodas were a symbol. In the late thirteenth century, from King Nhan Tong’s time to
most Ven. Phap Loa’s *Tripitaka* (the three baskets) were printed after they had been brought from China (in the Yuan dynasty). More than 5,000 volumes were printed in 1319 and conserved in Quynh Lam Pagoda.

The above mentioned facts show the importance of role of the pagodas and Stūpas in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese Buddhist history of 2,000 years is replete with examples of the influence of the pagodas and Stūpas on the thought and culture of Vietnam. The Vietnamese proverbial land belongs to the king, pagodas to the village, and sceneries to Buddha. Reflects consciousness of the closeness between pagodas with the spiritual life of countryside people has a habit of making merry on the occasion of newly built house. The pagoda does, too. Moreover, every occasion of inauguration and rebuilding of a stūpa, carrying of a Buddhist statue for worship or a graving festival ceremony has a special significance in the Vietnamese society. And this is a long striding custom. For example, in the Ly dynasty in 1118, the king permitted the opening of the “Thien Phat” festival in order to inaugurate Thang Nghiem--Khanh Tho Pagoda. In 1121 the ceremony of the inauguration of the Bao Thien Pagoda was celebrated. A year after the opening ceremony of Sung Thien Dien Linh stūpa in Doi Son was held. In 1040, the King held the armatures, 1,000 Buddhist paintings and over 10,000 Buddhist pennons.

Upgrading pagoda’s roofs, three-entrance gates, decorating ornamental plants and enriching Buddhist worshipping objects have made pagodas more beautiful and solemn. That is considered the heart’s self-desires of monks, nuns and laymen. Especially, some people in upper class and high-ranking position in the feudalist administration also made very respectful activities. In the Ly Tran dynasties, kings and mandarins left their home to enter monk hood life, studied Buddhism, founded new Ch’an sect and propagated Dharma. Some of them donated their own treasures to build pagodas. Their actions set an example to the successors, even when Buddhism was not the national religion any longer, as in the case of the Le Trinh Dynasties and the Nguyen Dynasty.