Abstract

Critical Evaluation of the Nature of Vietnamese Buddhism under the Ly and Tran Dynasties

Researcher: Phung Thanh Vu
Supervisor: Dr. Shalini Singhal

In the Vietnamese Buddhist history, Buddhism had a deep ideological influence the people and made great contribution to the national culture.

As to when Buddhism made its advent into Vietnam and when and how it spread into different parts of Vietnam is a debatable question among the scholar. Many scholars believe that Buddhism came from China; the reason is that, China is a big neighbor and Vietnam was influenced strongly by Chinese politics and as well as culture through many centuries. However, in reality that does not appear to be correct. As a matter of fact, Buddhism came to Vietnam directly from India.

In the past, Vietnam was very much like an intersection between India and China. It is for this very reason that Vietnam was called the Indo-China or Indochinese Peninsula by the French. Vietnam forms a bridge between two largest countries and most ancient Civilizations in Asia: India and China, and has thus been strongly influenced by these two cultures.

At that time, contact between Vietnam and India was established quite early by means of both maritime and routes. Indo-China and India are peninsulas and people made trips from India to China or vice-versa. (WHY DID THEY MAKE TRIPS BACK AND FORTH?) During these travels the two countries had to cross Vietnam, which was a good opportunity for them to stop to get some rest and food. It was in the backdrop of this that Vietnam happened to be a good place for the purposes of temporarily halting by foreign business people as well as Buddhist monks.
During the third century BCE, after King Aśoka organized the third Council-a Conference to Collect the Dharma- at Pāliputra, (the present-day Patna, capital of the Indian state of Bihar), he sent nine Buddhist monks’ delegates to foreign lands. These monks went from Afghanistan to Mediterranean country to teach the Dharma. One of the groups of these monks lead by Sona and Uttara went to Burma and then to Indo-china, including Vietnam. On the basis of this evidence, we may surmise that Buddhism came to Vietnam as early as third century BCE i.e., even before China.

When Buddhism was newly introduction to East China in Chiang Tung or Shan Tung-Giang dong, twenty Buddhist temples with more than five hundred monks, with fifteen translations of Buddhist Scriptures had been present in Luy Lau-Giao Chau already. Thus, Buddhism had entered Giao Chau before reaching Chiang Tung city of East China.

This thesis is an attempt to outline the findings and observations on a fairly detailed and critical level in terms of the Vietnamese Buddhism under The Ly and Tran dynasties. This thesis shall also cover details of crucial matters including the history, geography, ethics, philosophy and culture of Vietnamese Buddhism.

The thesis consists of six chapters including the Introduction and Conclusion.

The First Chapter explains as to how Buddhism was introduced into Vietnam. Around the first century CE Buddhism appears to have gradually spread into major parts of Vietnam and among the people. In fact, it was around this time that Buddhism began to become an institutionalized religion in Vietnam.

The Second Chapter covers the period of prosperity of Buddhism under the Ngo-Dinh and Le dynasties. In this chapter, an attempt has also been made to highlight the remarkable consequences and legacy of the Bach Dang victory in 938 CE which put an end to the period of Chinese domination. The war was led by Ngo Quyen which helped Vietnam to become an independent country.
The Third Chapter examines the importance of Buddhism under the Ly dynasty. In this chapter, we have discussed about the founder of the Ly dynasty. The person who began the Ly Dynasty was Ly Cong Uan, also known as Ly Thai To, which was his imperial name. Ly was the first Vietnamese dynasty. The first century of Ly was marked by warfare with China and the two kingdoms to the south, Chenla (also known as Chan Lap) and Champa. After these threats were dealt with successfully, the second century of Ly’s rule was relatively peaceful. This enabled the Ly Emperors to establish a Buddhist ruling tradition closely related to the other East Asian Buddhist kingdoms of that period. At the same time, Buddhism, in an increasingly Vietnamese form, associated with magic, spirits, and medicine, grew in popularity with the people.

The Fourth Chapter deals with Buddhism under Tran Thai Tong or Tran Canh, the founder of the Tran Dynasty. At that time, the practices of Vietnamese Buddhism had a deep ideological influence on people. Tran Nhan Tong, the king had great grace, power, and intelligence comparable to a saint. When King Tran Nhan Tong decided to become a monk, he built Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen School named after the Truc Lam Yen Tu Mountain. It is one of the most famous Vietnamese Buddhist Zen temples in the country. The king is also known as the first patriarch of the Truc Lam Yen Tu sect.

The fifth chapter describes the eminent monks of Vietnam in the period of the Ly and Tran dynasties. The great and famous masters of the Ly dynasty are the Khuong Viet, Da Bao, Dinh Huong, Van Hanh, and Minh Khong. Under the Tran dynasty, Buddhism traveled across cultural barriers and brought Buddhist stories, images, texts, ideas, and practices throughout the country to the people. Many famous Buddhist monks engaged in translational work, for example, Master Hien Quang, Vien Chung, Dai Dang, and Tieu Dao. All these masters were in direct communion with the people and made immense contribution to the national culture. This has been amply described in the famous book, the *Thien Uyen Tap Anh* (The best selection from the Ch’an Garden). In this book, the biographies as well as
philosophy of eminent Zen monks from the Dinh dynasty (968-980) through the Le (980-1009) and Ly (1010-1225) up to the Tran dynasty (1225-1400) have been given.

The Sixth Chapter forms the concluding part of the thesis. Thus, in this chapter, besides the summary of the previous chapter, some discussions as well as reflections on the Vietnamese Buddhism have been given. Buddhism has been there in Vietnam now for almost two thousand years and during this entire history, Buddhism in the Ly and Tran’s dynasty was flourished most prosperously. During this period, the kings used government funds for the construction of Buddhist pagodas. Vietnamese Buddhists also brought peace to their country. Buddhism during Ly and Tran’s dynasty can actually be called the most compassionate one in the Vietnamese national history. Buddhism is a peaceful religion, which survives for the sake of the peoples’ happiness. It is for this reason that that Buddhism needs the support of the Vietnamese government because Buddhism and Vietnamese nation work as complimentary to each other.