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## ALTERED SPACE FOR A NEW ZEN IN VIETNAM

**Abstract:** Twentieth century events, with the Buddhist Revival (in response to colonialism), the war (and subsequent dispersal of the Vietnamese overseas), and Communist challenges, have brought about a renewed interest in Zen Buddhism in the twenty-first century. The southern Vietnamese monk, Thích Thanh Từ, has drawn on potent historical signifiers of Trần Nhân Tông and the only Vietnamese Zen lineage (Trúc Lâm) to create a new kind of Zen while simultaneously claiming identity with a nationalistic symbol from the past. In 1997 a local pagoda was taken over by Thích Thanh Từ's organisation and Zen missionaries from southern Vietnam have turned it into a major Zen centre on the outskirts of Hanoi. This paper will explore how they have created and transformed the northern Buddhist space into something entirely new, reflecting more Modernist/Western/Global visions of Buddhism than local Vietnamese Buddhist understandings.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

A new interest in Zen Buddhism has emerged in Vietnam, originating in the centre and south in the 1960s and, while stalling from 1975 until sometime in the mid-1990s, moving to northern Vietnam in the last decade. This neo-Zen harkens back to a golden age of Buddhism in Vietnam during the Lý and Trần dynasties (11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century) what is viewed as a purer and truer form of Buddhism. However, in its essence it is really a form of global Buddhism. It is influenced by the same ideas and pressures that have brought about transformations in what is commonly viewed as Western Buddhism, which was in turn influenced by the central tenets of the Buddhist reform movements that took place in Asia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. This paper is based on archival work and three months of ethnographic work done at a new Zen centre on the outskirts of Hanoi in 2011, and briefly before that for a few weeks in 2004–2005, this paper will look at how relatively new ideas of Buddhism, that originated in the Buddhist Re-

form Movement of the 1920s and '30s, has influenced the new spaces that are being created by one particular group. This group, called Trúc Lâm Thiền Tông, was founded by a southern Vietnamese monk named Thích Thanh Từ, who currently resides at the organisation's main monastery in Đà Lạt.

### 2. ZEN IN VIETNAM

I first encountered this group in 2004 on the outskirts of Hanoi, where they had constructed a large and modern meditation centre and monastery. Since then it has tripled or quadrupled in size, both physically and in the numbers of followers. It is remarkable for its very modern interpretation of Buddhism and for its innovative activities. While I will describe a few of the aspects that make it stand out as entirely different from Buddhism as it is more traditionally and commonly practiced in Hanoi, for now let me just say that the differences are stark. Nonetheless, as is



often the case, the group gets its legitimacy by claiming that it is closer to a purer form of Buddhism from the past that has in recent centuries been corrupted by ignorance and superstition.

While Zen has a long history in Vietnam, there has never been a tradition of continuous Zen schools, Zen lineages or Zen transmission. Cuong Tu Nguyen (1995; 1997) expresses scepticism that it has ever even had much of an influence on most Vietnamese lay or monastic Buddhists. Instead, he argues that the few extant writings on Zen in Vietnam from the medieval period represent a rhetorical expression of Vietnamese elite fascination with all things Chinese, and a concern with appearing equal to the Chinese by mimicking their Buddhist literary forms, particularly Ch'an transmission of the lamp texts. He bluntly states: "For the ordinary Vietnamese Buddhists, Zen was (and probably still is) merely 'a rumor from the monasteries'" (Nguyen 1997, 99). Despite this, Zen has been associated with the elite, attracting kings and scholars. It has been particularly linked with what is considered the golden era of Buddhism in Vietnam, during the Lý and Trần dynasties, before Confucianism took away its courtly influence.

The roots of the contemporary interest in Zen date back to the Buddhist Reform Movement that started in the 1920s in Vietnam, but earlier in other countries in Asia. The main centres of these international Asian reform movements were Sri Lanka, Japan and China. These revival movements, which became internationalized and connected to some degree, sought to claim legitimacy for Buddhism by identifying it as a 'world religion', as this category was constructed by the Western academy. This was done as part of a more comprehensive effort to gain legitimacy and to compete with Christian missionary incursions and hegemonic colonial power.

The Vietnamese, for their part, were trying to cope with French colonial domination and pressure from Christian missionaries, and Buddhism became one of the fronts of national cultural re-imagining that came about as resistance to French hegemony. In 1932 Trần Văn Giáp, a French trained Vietnamese scholar, wrote about the history of early Vietnamese Buddhism, basing his work on a 'rediscovered' text called the *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*. Virtually every description of Buddhism in Vietnam from that point to today has been a reproduction of Trần Văn Giáp's work (Nguyen 1997, 22). It has strongly influenced not only academic descriptions of Buddhism in Vietnam (mostly by Vietnamese scholars), but has

also been taken up by the Buddhist institution as a self-description. The Vietnamese interest in Zen picked up steam in South Vietnam during the 1960s, influenced by translations of D.T. Suzuki's writings.

In 1997–1998 when I was doing my doctoral fieldwork in Hanoi, and when I lived there from 1999 until 2001 I never encountered any hints of Zen, other than in the form of academic rhetoric. Architecturally, the pagodas of Vietnam lack meditation halls – a feature that could be said to be essential for a Zen monastery. Nor did I ever see anyone, or hear of anyone, who practiced meditation. One old man who took a leadership role at a local pagoda in Hanoi once said to me that there was no one in northern Vietnam – monastic or lay – who knew how to meditate, and this was confirmed by every monk I met in the north. While there are books on meditation in the bookstores, it was problematic to describe Vietnam as having much to do with Zen. Instead the Buddhist practice revolved around devotionism – usually labelled as Pure Land Buddhism, and the main practice was chanting sutras (Malarney 1999). Further, most participants – largely old women – speak of their practices as being communal rather than individual, positively affecting the lives of their entire families. In doing so they denied or redefined doctrinal interpretations of karma.<sup>1</sup>

However, by 2004 I started to encounter Vietnamese Buddhists in Hanoi practicing Zen. Old women who I knew to formerly recite sutras, were now going to the Zen centre mentioned earlier, and practicing meditation in a meditation hall. Though it is notably couched in historical tropes of Vietnam's Zen Buddhist legacy, their practice resembles an internationalized version of Zen Buddhism that would be at home in Montreal or Berlin.

### 3. TRÚC LÂM NEO-ZEN

This neo-Zen group was founded by a southern monk named Thích Thanh Từ, who started to set up in the 1970s in southern Vietnam. Since then, he has opened monasteries and nunneries throughout Vietnam, several in the United States and Australia, and one in Canada. He has purposefully called his organisation Trúc Lâm Zen, evoking the name of the only Zen school supposedly founded in Vietnam.

The Trúc Lâm School has, since the 1930s, particular symbolic capital because it is at once Zen and also Vietnamese. For this reason Trúc

<sup>1</sup> See Soucy 2012 for more on this.



Lâm has often been evoked as the pinnacle of Vietnamese Buddhism. However, it needs to be recognised that this is essentially an invented tradition, despite – or perhaps because of – its systematic evocation of a Vietnamese Zen past in a way that resembles the marketing strategy of 'branding'.

In inventing this new Zen tradition, Thích Thanh Từ has adopted much of the ideology of the reform Buddhists. This means that, ironically, the interpretations of Buddhism, the architecture and iconography of its spaces and the forms of activities that are enacted in these spaces, have much more in common with what would be called 'Global Buddhism' than the local Buddhism that is still practiced by a majority of Buddhists in Vietnam. There is not enough time here for me to discuss all of these aspects, so let me stick to just two key interpretive difference in the approach that is taken by Trúc Lâm: the prevalence of the historical Buddha as a central unifying figure, and the de-naturalisation of Buddhism, by which I mean that there is a notable de-emphasis on the impact of the supernatural on people's lives.

#### 4. PHYSICAL LAYOUT

The newly constructed Sùng Phúc is enormous, relative to the usual size of pagodas and Buddhist compounds in northern Vietnam. Even Quán Sứ Pagoda, the political centre of the only official Buddhist organisation in Vietnam, the Vietnamese Buddhist Association, is only a fraction of the size of Sùng Phúc. The main meditation hall towers over the surrounding roofs of the village in which it is located. It is attached to another set of buildings directly behind it, and the two buildings together dominate the compound. They are built of concrete, but are in an architectural style that is more generically Asian than specifically Vietnamese.



*Quốc ngữ inscription on the front gate of Thiền Viện Sùng Phúc;*

The way that Sùng Phúc is constructed and laid out, and the statuary and iconography that are featured in the monastery's spaces are important. They are purposefully indicative of a particular approach to Buddhism. When seen in juxtaposition with the local forms of Buddhist architecture and iconography the changes show a concerted effort to make a distinction between their practice and the practices of other Buddhists both in the region and in the Vietnamese Buddhist community, nationally and internationally.

The difference between Sùng Phúc and regular pagodas in Hanoi are clear from before entering the compound, and not just because the imposing size of its central buildings. The front gate also is notably different in that the couplets on the pillars are written in *quốc ngữ* – contemporary Vietnamese writing based on the Roman alphabet – rather than in Chinese characters, as is the norm for most pagodas and other religious sites in Vietnam. This same substitution of *quốc ngữ* for Chinese characters is also present at Quán Sứ Pagoda, and points to connections with reformist ideas that emerged early in the twentieth century. As David Marr has argued, the adoption of *quốc ngữ* over Chinese characters was part of the effort to modernize Vietnam as part of the overall struggle against French colonialism (Marr 1971, 183, 214–215; 1981, 33, 137, 150).

#### *Lecture Hall*

In the front section of the main hall, on the ground floor is what is called the Lecture Hall (Giảng Đường), which also contains an altar with a statue of the baby Buddha as well two photographs. The first, in the front and centre of the altar is the founder of Sùng Phúc, named Thích Thông Giác. The second is the teacher of the current abbot of Sùng Phúc, Thích Thiện Hoa. Along the upper walls around the room are tiles with paintings from the history of Ch'an Buddhism in China. As this room is primarily used for pedagogical rather than ritual purposes, there are rows of tables and chairs, with capacity to seat perhaps 100 people.

What is unusual about the Lecture Hall is the dual role that it plays as a place where lessons are given as well as providing an altar to pay respects to the monastic ancestors. In regular pagodas in the north there is always a room where the pagoda ancestor's are worship, called a *nhà tổ*. The corresponding room in regular pagodas is generally small and single purpose. While incense is lit daily at the ancestor altar and offerings of fruit and flowers made, there is usually little other ritual activity in this room, except on the annual ancestor day (Lễ Giỗ Tổ). In some pagodas the guest





reception area, comprised of a table and benches or chairs, is located in front of the altar. This setup reflects the arrangement found in traditional houses, in which the reception area – the most prestigious and important part of the house – is located in front of the ancestor altar. Therefore, it is a significant divergence that the room that holds the altar for the pagoda's ancestors is also the one given over as a classroom, and is dominated by a table placed in front left of the altar, where the monastic lecturer sits; with his back to the altar and facing the rows of tables and chairs where lay and monastic students sit to listen to the lectures.

### *Ancestor Hall*

Even more unusual is what is called the 'Ancestor Hall' (Tổ Đường). This room is situated on the second floor of the building behind the Main Shrine, where ancestor shrines are often located in some pagodas in northern Vietnam (including, for example, Quán Sứ Pagoda). It is an expansive space and is therefore the room where most activities take place, including meditation and public lectures. The main focal point of the room is the 'ancestor altar'. However, the meaning of this is somewhat different than usual: while the photographs of the immediate monastic ancestors are located in the Lecture Hall, the altar in this hall is dedicated to Bodhidharma (Bồ Đề Đạt Ma), the mythic figure who introduced Zen to China, and the patriarchs of the Trúc Lâm school, being Emperor Trần Nhân Tông (called Trúc Lâm Đầu Đà), Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang (together called the 'Three Ancestors of Trúc Lâm' – Tam Tổ Trúc Lâm.) Thus, at Sùng Phúc the stress is put on the founding figures at the expense of the pagoda ancestors, who are instead relegated to the Lecture Hall, which is smaller, darker, lower, and usually closed to visitors.



*"Ancestors in Ancestor Hall of Sùng Phúc, with Bodhidharma in the back and the three patriarchs of Trúc Lâm Zen (from the Trần dynasty) in the front.*

### *Main Shrine*

The Main Shrine (called the Đại Hùng Đáo Điện, or The Great Palace), is also significantly different from the main shrines of regular pagodas in northern Vietnam. Normally, altars are crowded with members of the Buddhist pantheon, especially images of the historical Buddha, Thích Ca Mâu Ni Phật, Amitābha Buddha (A Di Đà Phật), Maitreya Buddha (Di Lạc Phật) and bodhisattvas such as Guanyin Bodhisattva (Quan Thế Âm Bồ Tát) and Kṣitigarbha (Địa Tạng), and they may sometimes also hold statues that are not Buddhist, strictly speaking, such as the Ten Kings of Hell, various goddesses or deified heroes, or even Hindu gods (e.g. a central feature of Dầu Pagoda is the god Shiva). The main shrine at Sùng Phúc, however, is dedicated almost solely to the Historical Buddha, with a large golden statue of him in the centre. To his right is a white marble statue of Mañjuśrī (Văn Thù Sư Lợi), a bodhisattva representing transcendental wisdom and personifying meditation, and Samantabhadra (Phổ Hiền Bồ Tát), who is a bodhisattva associated with Buddhist practice and meditation. The accent on the historical Buddha is further displayed by bas relief panels painted gold and brown and hung around the upper walls surrounding the hall, depicting important scenes in the life of the Buddha. One scene that stands out as not usually being present in portrayals of the life of the Buddha is a scene showing the Buddha's flower sermon. This is taken from a Zen myth in which the Buddha holds up a flower and only his disciple, Kāśyapa, understand the significance of the Buddha's action. The story, probably invented by Chinese Ch'an Buddhists, is used to show the importance of direct experience rather than using the rational mind, ritual or scholasticism to gain enlightenment, and also displays the power of mind-to-mind transmission. This display of the life of the Buddha is not common in pagodas of the north, with Quán Sứ Pagoda – the centre of the Buddhist Revival movement in the first half of the twentieth century – being the only other one that I know. I have never seen a depiction of the flower episode anywhere in Vietnam except in Trúc Lâm centres.

The floor above the Ancestor Altar is the Meditation Hall (Thiền Đường). The main altar of this large room has a large brownish gold statue of the historical Buddha seated in meditation with hands folded on his lap and holding a stupa. Behind the statue, on the wall, is a bas relief of the Bodhi tree under which he reached enlightenment through meditation. On a stand in front of the altar is a small wooden statue of Maitreya (Di Lạc) with children climbing over him. The most



notable aspect of this room is the large glass case in front of the main altar, in the centre of the room, containing small glass stupas, each holding supposed relics of various Buddhist saints and of the historical Buddha.

## 5. EMPHASIS ON THE HISTORICAL BUDDHA

There are two aspects of the way that these spaces have been restructured that are worthy of note here. The first is that the Historical Buddha has been elevated above all other buddhas and bodhisattvas, particularly A Di Đà and Quan Âm. The importance of the historical Buddha is relatively recent, stemming from reform movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Judith Snodgrass (2009) argues that much of the emphasis on the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, was produced by the works of a missionary to Ceylon named Reverend Robert Spence Hardy. Hardy's purpose in doing research and writing about Buddhism was solely to show Buddhism to be inadequate as a religion, but in doing so he produced a narrative of the Buddha that did not exist before in any single place. Consequently, scholars like T.W. Rhys Davids looked to Hardy's material because it provided a framework that made Buddhism more easily understood to Western scholars and the public, who were looking for something that resembled Christianity. In fact, Buddhism never placed so much emphasis on the historical Buddha, but instead viewed him as one of many buddhas in a cyclical process, and as a result did not place great stress on his hagiography. The image of the Buddha gaining enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree did not exist as a central symbol of the Buddhist religion. However, once in place, this image has become a unifying symbol of a global Buddhism that transcends the various traditions. As Donald Lopez writes, "Yet what we regard as Buddhism today, especially the common portrayal of the Buddhism of the Buddha, is in fact a creation of modern Buddhism" (Lopez 2002, x). In Vietnam, the stress on the historical Buddha was present from the beginning of the Reform Movement in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Recounting a total

story of the Buddha's life was a central feature of most of the early Buddhist journals associated with the Reform Movement. For example, the major journal published from Saigon, called *Từ-Bi Âm* (The Voice of Compassion), featured a serial biography of Śākyamuni called "Lược Truyện Phật Thích-Ca-Mâu-Ni (Sakya Muni)" [Biographical Sketches of Śākyamuni Buddha] (*Từ-Bi Âm* 1932, 28–38). The first installment featured the story of the Buddha's birth and included pictures of Queen Maya's dream of the white elephant and the visit to the king by the seer Asita, who recognized the thirty-two auspicious markings of a Buddha and predicting Siddhārtha's destiny as either a great king or supreme religious leader. The story took thirty one issues, ending in April 1933. Similarly, *Viên Âm*, published in Huế, included an explanation of the story of the Buddha in its very first issue, called "Sự Tích Đức Phật Thích-Ca-Mâu-Ni (Cakya Mouni)" (*Viên Âm* 1933). In *Viên Âm* the Buddha's story was serialized over 16 issues, ending in August 1935. The main Buddhist magazine published in the north, *Đuốc-Tuê*, did not start printing a story of the Buddha until somewhat later, in issue 16 (Nguyễn-Trọng-Thuật 1936, 7–13), and it was not serialized and was much shorter.<sup>2</sup>

There are a number of other indications that the Buddha increasingly becomes central to the way Buddhism is constructed in Vietnam. Sometime in the mid-twentieth century monastics start to adopt the surname of the Buddha, 'Thích' (Śākya), as a preface to all monastic names. Though it is a practice peculiar to Vietnam, how it comes about is still a mystery to me. At around the same time, Buddhist publications start to be dated differently. We see in the earliest Buddhist magazines that the Western dating system is used (in fact, dates are written entirely in French). By the mid-1940s, however, publications start to be given a Buddhist date. Although I have not come across any explanation, it seems that this date represents the supposed year of the Buddha's birth, and therefore closely mimics the idea behind the Christian calendar.<sup>3</sup> It is also likely that what has become a major celebration for Buddhists around the world – the Buddha's Birthday (Wesak, or Phật Đản in Vietnamese) – also did not

<sup>2</sup> I am not sure why the northern reformers did not place as much prominence on the historical Buddha. The article itself follows the standard pattern, and lays out the life of the Buddha in nine stages. In issues previous to this one, other, somewhat briefer articles were dedicated to other buddhas and bodhisattvas: issue 1 features an article on A Di Đà (Amitābha) (*Đuốc-Tuê* 1935); issue 8 features an article on Quan Âm (Guanyin) (Đ.N.T. 1936a), and; issue 10 has a short essay that describes Địa Tạng (Kṣitigarbha) (Đ.N.T. 1936b). This does not mean that the historical Buddha was not placed

in a position of importance, but that a consolidated biographical narrative was not given until its second year of publication. In the second issue, however, there is a story of one of the arhants, called: "The Story of [Ma-Đấng-Già]" [*Truyện Ma-Đấng-Già*] (Chung 1935) and in issues 5-6 there is a transcription of a dharma talk given on the subject of the Buddha (Thanh-Đoan 1936).

<sup>3</sup> *Viên Âm* introduced the Buddhist year in issue 60, 1943 (Buddha year 2507).



exist at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> 1934 was the first year that Phật Đản was celebrated in Huế, as this speech by Nguyễn Khoa Tân, printed in *Viễn Âm* magazine, indicates:

*Nous pouvons affirmer sans jactance, mais sans risque d'erreur, que dans l'histoire du Bouddhisme en Annam, c'est pour la première fois qu'on enregistre une commémoration collective de la Naissance de Çakya Mouni [Śākyamuni]. Non pas que les bonzes aient négligé jusqu'ici de marquer, par des cérémonies, le retour d'une date qui leur est chère. Mais en Annam, aucune de ces cérémonies n'a réuni jusqu'ici, en des solennités publiques, tous les adeptes du Bouddha et donné une signification sociale à la solidarité de la grande famille bouddhique (Nguyễn Khoa Tân 1934, 61).<sup>5</sup>*

All of these examples illustrate how the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, became increasingly central to Buddhism in Vietnam.

The stress on the historical Buddha assists in the construction of Buddhism as a 'world religion' that is truly international, and modern in the sense that it conforms to a Western (i.e. Christian) view of religion. The reform movement, in attempting to construct Buddhism in this way, sought commonalities of different kinds of Buddhism. By and large this has led to the philosophical basics of Buddhism (especially as encoded in the Four Noble Truths) being accentuated; a stress on practice, especially meditation and moralistic practices (especially as encoded in the Noble Eightfold Path and the Five Precepts); and in key symbols of Buddhism (especially as encoded in the Three Jewels, or Three Refuges: The Buddha, The Dharma and the Sangha.) This process has resulted in an accentuation on the Buddha and his life and a corresponding de-emphasis on the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon, and especially a cleansing of non-Buddhist elements.

Thus, at Sùng Phúc we see that the Main Shrine is dedicated entirely to the historical Buddha, and the main statues portraying the Buddha in the gesture of the Flower Sermon, and the display of illustrations from the story of the Buddha's life in a way that always reminds me of stations of the cross. Along the top of the walls surrounding the room are large panels (perhaps three feet by six feet) portraying key events from

the life of the Buddha. In fact, the only iconography that does not directly relate to the historical Buddha are the statues of Mañjuśrī (Văn Thù Sư Lợi), and Samantabhadra (Phổ Hiền Bồ Tát), on either side of the main statue. Likewise, the main statue of the Meditation Hall portrays the historical Buddha, and his centrality is strikingly reiterated by the large collection of supposed Buddha relics that dominates the centre of the room.



*Statue of the historical Buddha and relics in the Meditation Hall of Sùng Phúc*

Other activities and practices further evoke the Buddha. Principal among these is the use of him as a form of greeting 'Mô Phật!', rather than the Pure Land Buddhist greeting of 'A Di Đà Phật!' that is the norm at regular Buddhist pagodas. Likewise, when people are gathered in a formal setting, they always evoke 'Nam Mô Phật Bốn Sư Thích Ca Mâu Ni' before they start to speak. The Buddha's name is chanted before lectures, before and after meals and at the beginning and end of the main penitence ritual. It is also worth noting that the order in which it is said is different than the norm, with the word for 'Buddha' (Phật) in the middle of the phrase rather than at the end. This word order is the invention of the Trúc Lâm organisation, used to further create distinction. Thích Thanh Từ's explanation for adopting this word order is as follows:

*As you remember, in Chinese language, the common noun is always located at the end of the sentence, while the uncommon noun is placed in front. "Bon Su Thich Ca Mau Ni" (Śākyamuni) is a unique noun and "Phat" (Buddha) is a common noun. For example, to introduce a venerable named "Chan Tam," should*

<sup>4</sup> Even today, the ritual calendars of local Buddhist pagodas in Hanoi do not stress Phật Đản as important. For example, the ritual calendar at Phúc Lộc Pagoda does not even mention the Buddha's birthday (Soucy 2012, 53).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Woodside claims that the first celebration in Huế was in 1935, describing a large public celebration, with

thousands of residence hanging out flags (which one I am not sure, since the world Buddhist flag would not be adopted until 1951) and attending ceremonies at Diệu Đế Pagoda (Woodside 1971, 48).





*you say "Venerable Chan Tam" or "Chan Tam Venerable?" If we used the second one, people will laugh at us. It's because "venerable" is the common noun and "Chan Tam" is the unique noun. In Vietnamese, we should say "Venerable Chan Tam." Thus, as Vietnamese, we should say it in Vietnamese language. Why do we have to follow the words, grammars, and everything that Chinese people have? Do we have the courage? (Thích Thanh Từ 2000, 59–60)*

For this reason, Thích Thanh Từ decided that his organisation would use the Vietnamese word order in order to not be a 'slave' to cultural and linguistic forms borrowed from China.

Taken as a whole, the way that the historical Buddha is accentuated at Sùng Phúc, and in the Trúc Lâm organisation as a whole is striking. Furthermore, this practice is a peculiarity of the emerging Global Buddhism, which has its roots in the pan-Asian Buddhist reform movements that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century and has been adopted by Western Buddhist practices.

## 6. RATIONAL BUDDHISM

Part of the process of re-creating Buddhism to fit into the category of 'religion' that had emerged in the West was the creation of orthodoxies which defined the boundaries of this 'new' entity. To say that Buddhism had taken on local characteristics and accretions over time and with its transmission from India to other countries in Asia (and eventually elsewhere), somewhat misses the point, though this is what reformers and modernists have claimed (Lopez 2002, xxxv). It does so because it presumes that there was an inner kernel or core of true and pure Buddhism that can be traced back to the Buddha and his original teachings. However, Buddhism at the time of the Buddha was not institutionalized or codified. Even with the institutionalization of Buddhism, it was not thought of in terms of orthodoxies until the nineteenth and twentieth century, when reformers started to define a core of Buddhism that would give it status as a world religion. In fact, there is no pure core of Buddhism, but it is precisely this construction that has taken place in the modern period and then projected back on all of Buddhist history.

In the process of constructing a core Buddhist orthodoxy that could be shared by all forms of Buddhism and thereby unite them into a single entity – a world religion – commonalities were not only sought, but boundaries drawn. Local practices and beliefs that had been a part of the way that Buddhism had been practiced came to

be excluded as non-Buddhist. This happened very much at the level of elite reformers, but it has created a discourse which permeates the way Buddhism has been practiced everywhere. Curiously, nowhere has this new Buddhist orthodoxy been more heartily embraced than in the West. As Snodgrass writes: "The image of the Buddha seated in meditation beneath a tree provides the model for modern Buddhism's disproportionate emphasis on meditation... and the basis for a certain arrogance among some Western Buddhists who feel that the Buddhism of their practice is closer to Śākyamuni's teachings than that of traditional Asian practitioners" (Snodgrass 2009, 21). This tendency by western practitioners of Buddhism to see their practice as being stripped of ethnic cultural impurities and to be somehow ethnically neutral is, of course, a misapprehension. As Victor Hori points out, the Buddhism they are practicing is, rather, ethnically Western rather than non-ethnic or ethnically neutral (Hori 2010).

However, while the notion of returning to a pure Buddhism that resembles as close as possible the imagined original intent of the historical Buddha is central to Western Buddhist practices, this tendency was also a part of the Buddhist reform movements in Asia. Most usually, elements that were perceived as non-Buddhist were deemed 'superstition'. As part of a modernist discourse, they tended to be practices that most reflected a non-rationalist view of the world and involved belief and interaction with an imminent and intimately connected supernatural world. While these points can be made in a general way throughout Buddhist Asia, I will write particularly about the Vietnamese case. While Buddhist orthodoxies stressed self-reliance and the Buddha as an example rather than an active force, local practices and beliefs were centrally concerned with interactions, supplications and manipulations of these forces. Instances of this are pervasive. Some examples are: fortune telling and geomancy, whereby supernatural technologies seek to navigate time and space in such a way that positive influences are enhanced and negative ones avoided; interactions with spirits through possession rituals, in order to enlist their support for worldly endeavours; or engaging with the dead (ghosts and ancestors) to ensure protection from negative elements and promotion of positive ones, and also to ensure that the proximate dead (ancestors) received everything they required in the afterlife. Practices that deal with death, of course, were particularly the purview of Buddhism as it was, and is, traditionally practiced. Enlisting the help of non-Buddhist spirits through





possession rituals called *lên đồng* has also been, and continues to be, seen as connected to Buddhism.<sup>6</sup>

The practices mentioned above, and a host of others – like burning spirit money were targeted by Buddhist reformers in Vietnam in the first part of the twentieth century and excluded or de-emphasized as 'superstition' and 'backward practices'. For example, DeVido writes of Trí Hải, the main Buddhist reformer in the north:

*Trí Hải knew Chinese but realized many Buddhists, including the monastics, did not; some were illiterate and did not even understand what they were chanting, let alone the content of Buddhist doctrines. Trí Hải was concerned that Buddhists would only carry out "superstitious practices" (burning of paper ritual objects, spirit media [sic] activities and worship of local animal cults) and Buddhism would decline and die. Therefore there must be a revival and it needed a strategy and organisation. (DeVido 2007, 266)*

Concerns with 'non-Buddhist' practices were later taken up by the Buddhist institution as a whole and adopted into the new normative understanding of Buddhism. These views, based as they were on a modern, Western, rational outlook, were also more easily accepted by the new Communist state in the north, and several decades later in the south. Consequently, the contemporary state-sponsored Buddhism, as practiced at its central pagodas and propagated in widely circulated Vietnamese Buddhist magazines, largely follows the path set forward by the reformers of the early twentieth century.

At Sùng Phúc there is a concerted effort to avoid practice and discourage beliefs that are seen as superstitious. There is a complete absence of any religious aspects that are associated with what I have called elsewhere the Spirit Side (*bên thánh*) (Soucy 2012), such as a mother goddess shrine (*nhà mẫu*), which are standard for pagodas in northern Vietnam, or even of iconography of any gods or goddesses. In fact, the only non-Buddhist iconography at Sùng Phúc is located in the communal house which is on the grounds of the monastery, and a small statue of the Earth God (Ông Địa) placed under a bonsai tree near the guest reception room (which the abbot of Sùng Phúc insisted to me was only decoration, and not for worship). Another example is the banning of one of the most common practices at regular pagodas: making offerings of spirit

money and burning them afterwards to convey their essence up to the buddhas. This activity is entirely absent at Sùng Phúc, and there is no outdoor furnace in which to burn the money as there is at all other pagodas in the north.

Zen Buddhism, as it is presented by the Trúc Lâm organisation, and at Sùng Phúc, is rationalized and de-supernaturalised. In contrast with Buddhism as it is generally practiced in the north, Trúc Lâm stresses the importance of individual action rather than divine assistance, and of comprehension. Until the last decade, efforts to educate lay Buddhists in the north have been somewhat limited. In 1997–1998, when I first started to do research in Hanoi, Buddhist lectures were only given at Quán Sứ Pagoda and Bà Đá Pagoda (the headquarters of the Hanoi Buddhist Association). While called 'lectures', they often involved reciting *vinaya* (monastic rules) rather than teaching, and most attendees were more interested in gaining merit from attendance than gaining knowledge from listening. They were always chanted in Sino-Vietnamese (Hán-Việt). Though they were written in quốc ngữ (the contemporary Romanized writing system), the words made it difficult for most practitioners to understand their meanings. By contrast, all of the sutras and rituals at Sùng Phúc use colloquial Vietnamese so that everyone can understand their contents. Furthermore, every opportunity is taken to give teachings on Buddhism through dharma talks, whether it is a Sunday program for youths or a mortuary ritual.

However, while rationalising Buddhist practice is a prominent feature of Sùng Phúc, there is also a distinctive de-supernaturalisation to the practices and teachings that are expounded there. The idea that the Buddha can assist in daily life, a belief common in other pagodas, is systematically refuted, as is the notion that people engage in reciprocal relationships with the supernatural. Thus, practices associated with *lộc* are entirely absent. There is no giving of offerings and receiving blessings in return. Instead, Trúc Lâm stresses individual effort and cultivation while diminishing the possibility for supernatural assistance. Thus, the centre lacks a furnace for burning spirit money and the 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of the lunar month, when most Buddhists make offerings at pagodas, is completely ignored. Iconography of spirits that is associated with supplication are resolutely excluded from the architecture. In fact the view of sacred time, whereby certain months,

<sup>6</sup> Particularly in northern Vietnam, local Buddhist pagodas usually have shrines dedicated to the mother goddesses (*mẫu*), and I have encountered one monk who acted not only

as a monk but also a spirit medium (*bà/ông đồng*). For more on the view that sees spirit mediumship as part (or at least complimentary) to Buddhist practice, see Soucy (2012, especially chapter 1).



days and times are seen as more supernaturally potent, does not figure into the activities at Sùng Phúc. Instead, the view is peculiarly modernist in its stress of individual striving and denial of supernatural reciprocity.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The architectural layout of Sùng Phúc, and the activities that take place there, say a great deal about the overall orientation of Sùng Phúc. First of all, they serve to set Sùng Phúc, and the Trúc Lâm organisation, aside as distinct from the regular form of Buddhism that is found throughout Vietnam. The prime distinction is made between Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, though this distinction is made with care. A more rigorous distinction is made between Zen, as the true Vietnamese Buddhism, and the practices of Buddhists most commonly found in pagodas, which Thích Thanh Từ and his followers characterize as completely erroneous:

*However, nowadays it's so pitiful as we have seen at many places and temples, people just have belief, not the wisdom. They believe that offering to the Buddha will gain his blessings and prostrating to him will return merits. Whatever they do, they rely on the Buddha for his blessings and protection. When they suffer with the disturbance of greed, hatred, and ignorance, they visit the temple and pray to the Buddha so that he could clear their afflictions. They [rely] on the Buddha for everything. They do not practice, but ask or pray to the Buddha for free giving. Do they practice wisdom or belief? If it's a belief, then there is no wisdom. And if it's not the wisdom then there's no enlightenment" (Thích Thanh Từ [Tu Tam Hoang] 2000, 32–33).*

This distinction between Trúc Lâm Thiền in Vietnam and regular Buddhism is brought about through a number of aspects that are unique to Trúc Lâm and Sùng Phúc. These aspects closely tie in with key elements of the Buddhist Reform movement, which in turn ties in with the globalization of Buddhism. These include: 1) an emphasis on the historical Buddha; 2) an attempt to purify Buddhism, or to bring it back to an imagined original core of Buddhism, which usually involves a cleansing of elements that are seen as cultural accretions and 'superstition'; 3) a rephrasing of Buddhism in a rationalist way that de-emphasizes supernatural elements; and, 4) a view of Buddhism as a practice that saturates all elements of one's life and becomes relevant to all ages, rather than being segmented on certain days and being a practice reserved for old people.

Consequently, there is a strong effort to include activities and events directed specifically towards children and youth. Finally, these elements are wrapped up and given legitimation by both universalizing and internationalizing Trúc Lâm, while at the same time accentuating the nationalistic elements.

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