

THE CURRENT ISSUE OF PRACTICING TRUC LAM YEN TU BUDDHIST RITUALS

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism is one of the worlds' largest religions. It serves as the path and the truth to let people achieve enlightenment and escape the cycle of sufferings in life. Buddha is the master of enlightenment who helps people on the path towards the state of complete enlightenment (nirvana) and truths. Given that, core values of Buddhism are the practice to reach enlightenment and escape the suffering cycle. Buddhist rituals are the way to facilitate the practice and bring sentient beings closer to the religion. The meaning of Buddhist rituals is extremely broad, including behaviors, attitude, belief, culture, and chanting etiquette. It can be seen that Buddhism in general and Truc Lam Buddhism in particular always have distinctive ways of executing rituals. It is a must to search and contemplate to understand deep hidden levels of meanings.

Keywords: Buddhist Rituals, Truc Lam Yen Tu.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect, the cradle of Vietnamese Buddhism

Buddhism originated in India around 2600 years ago when Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama achieved the state of enlightenment and was known as a Buddha, which means "awakened one". After many years of arduous practice to find the answer to the question "How can people escape from suffering, birth and death?".

Over the past millennia, Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam around the first century BC. It entered our nation's history and became a close part of Vietnamese history and nation for many generations. It has been the national religion in some glamorous periods of time, but there have also been down times.

Buddhist monk Thich Duc Nghiep once affirmed, "With peaceful means to spread Buddhism, no drop of blood will flow nor a single tear will fall because Buddhism is the Middle Way. This idea is harmonious, non-dogmatic, non-extreme, non-violent for integrating and adapting to countries and peoples around the world. Besides, Buddhism also transcends all political ideologies, all discrimination of skin color, race, and class. Those are outstanding and immortal points in the history of world religion."¹

Before Buddhism was spread into Vietnam, it already had an intimate relationship with Vietnamese culture and ideology. Then Buddhism was localized to blend into the history of Vietnam and co-exist with the nation, creating the ¹unique features of Vietnamese Buddhism. However, it was not until the appearance of the Truc Lam Zen sect, of which Emperor Tran Nhan Tong was the first founder in the 13th century, that Vietnamese Buddhism officially had its own sect, theoretical foundation, and religious practice with its own mindset in which religion and life are inseparable.

¹ Thich Duc Nghiep. (1995). *Vietnamese Buddhism* (p.6). Ho Chi Minh Buddhist Sangha. BE.2539.

Looking back on the history of Buddhism in Vietnam, it is clear that prior to the existence of Truc Lam Yen Tu, all Buddhist sects in Vietnam were founded by foreigners, but until the reign of Emperor Tran Nhan Tong, Buddhism is no longer Indian Buddhism in Vietnam, nor Chinese Buddhism in Vietnam, but officially Vietnamese Buddhism. The turning point in the official localization of Buddhism was marked with the birth of the Truc Lam Zen sect in the sacred mountain Yen Tu (now located in Uong Bi City, Quang Ninh province).

“The birth of the Truc Lam Zen sect marked the end of the period of Vietnamese Buddhist sects established by foreigners, demonstrating that Buddhism truly took root in Vietnam and it was welcomed and developed by contemporary Vietnamese people. From Yen Tu, the Truc Lam Zen sect has spread throughout the country and blended into the values of Vietnamese culture, which is maintained from generation to generation.”²

Nearly a thousand years ago, in August 1299, Emperor Tran Nhan Tong moved from Thien Truong palace to Yen Tu mountain as a Buddhist monk with the religious name Huong Van Dai Dau Da to practice asceticism, marking the establishment of the Truc Lam Yen Tu sect. Since then, this Zen sect has flourished with three outstanding Zen patriarchs such as Nhan Tong, Phap Loa, and Huyen Quang. They are collectively known as Truc Lam Tam To. With the founding of the Truc Lam Zen sect, Emperor Tran Nhan Tong unified the previously existing Zen sects and the entire Buddhist Sangha of the Tran Dynasty.

The formation of the Truc Lam Zen sect is the flexible and creative application of Buddhist theories in both arguments and practice, thereby forming the unique lifestyle of Vietnamese people during the Ly Tran Dynasty as well as the idea of entering life and religion which are closely related to each other.

The Buddhist spirit of entering into life in the Tran Dynasty comes from the teachings of a National Master to Emperor Tran Nhan Tong that "There is no Buddha in the mountain, Buddha resides in the heart. If the mind is silent and understanding, that is the real Buddha. Now, if Your Majesty becomes enlightened, you will immediately become a Buddha without seeking it from the outside." This point of view comes from the fact that people only need to "be quiet and know", Buddha is right inside them. Everyone can become a Buddha, regardless of whether they are monks or laypeople, men or women. The idea of "living honestly, living kindly" has actively influenced the entire history of Dai Viet Buddhist ideology, which still holds true to this day.

The Truc Lam Zen sect has entered life with the nation in the cause of national development. This not only created the identity of the Dai Viet Zen sect but also had a strong impact on the country's political, cultural, and social life.

1.2 The current situation of practicing Buddhist rituals in Truc Lam Yen Tu

Scientist Albert Einstein once said, “The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description.”³ Therefore, since being introduced to Vietnam, Buddhism has soon taken root in this land.

² Anh. L., & Khanh, D. (2013). *Truc Lam Zen Sect - The establishment of Vietnamese Buddhism*. <https://vov.vn/van-hoa-giai-tri/thien-phai-truc-lam-su-ra-doi-cua-phat-giao-viet-nam-294798.vov> (dated 28/11/2023)

³ Thich Nhat Tu & Thich Duc Thien. (2022). *The culture of Vietnamese Buddhism* (p.504). Religion Publishing House.

In the mind of every Vietnamese person, Buddhism plays a very important role in spiritual life and one of the religious activities is rituals. It can be clear that Buddhist rituals play a significant role in the process of shaping the nation's culture in general and Buddhist culture in particular. In addition, Buddhist rituals also have a crucial role in propagating the Dharma and spreading Buddhist teachings to the national community through ritual forms, guiding people to build a happy life.

Vietnamese Buddhist rituals in general and Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhist ones in particular have a wide range of rituals and activities with the aim of spreading Buddhist teachings. Therefore, when it comes to rituals, there are various aspects of organizational forms in religious activities, including not only chanting but also the rituals and rules of a monk or lay person. Each ritual contributes to the unique cultural characteristics of Vietnamese Buddhist rituals.

Rituals means standards and rules; the coming-of-age and marriage also means Liji (Classic of Rites). Furthermore, rituals are specific rules in funerals and ancestral rites as well as ways of walking, standing, and speaking. Rituals can also refer to offerings, which are gifts given to someone at the appropriate time.

Rituals have many meanings, but from a religious perspective, rituals are understood as ceremonials and chanting with worship beliefs. Rituals are often accompanied by music because music will enhance the solemnity of the ceremony.

Thus, Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhist rituals in particular and Buddhism in general are the forms and contents expressed in all Buddhist activities from the lifestyle of the meditation practice, the arrangement of the Buddhist Sangha to the way of communication and behaviors among monks or between monastics and lay people. Monks must have standard qualities, stay disciplined, and maintain pure precepts through diligent practice, which is expressed dignifiedly for everyone to pay respect to. In Quy Son Canh Sach, article number 12 writes: "The figure must be poised, the spirit must be leisurely", meaning that the figure must be mature and the behavior must be noble and leisurely.

In the novice monk's rule, it is written: "A person who has a majestic and mature appearance and shows dignified reverence and virtue, that is a ritual of a monk."⁴

Buddhist rituals are also ceremonials, tones, and sentences flexibly applied to perform rituals at the appropriate time and place. Therefore, Buddhist rituals cover various aspects of a religious organization, including: ritual music, ritual chant, musical instruments, etiquette, worshiping, Buddhist ceremonial clothes, Buddhist ceremonies, etc. Thus, Buddhist rituals are general concepts related to most Buddhist activities.

The Rituals of Truc Lam Buddhist Sect during the Tran Dynasty include:

The first is the repentance rituals throughout the divisions of a day. Many pagodas perform a daily six-division repentance ritual based on the Repentance Throughout the Six Divisions of the Day compiled by Tran Thai Tong. The book presents a repentance ritual divided into six divisions, each one takes a specific period of time. Tran Thai Tong first composed it for his own use. Then he circulated among Buddhists. Each session lasts about 20 minutes. Repentance doesn't refer to not apologizing to Buddha, but refining and awakening oneself. In the six repentance rituals, the repentance is not as necessary; instead, awakening and diligence are highly required.

The second is the Buddhist rituals of passing down Dharma to Phap Loa, the second patriarch of the Truc Lam sect. At the end of his life, Tran Nhan Tong, the first patriarch of the

⁴ Thich Hanh Tru. (1985), *The novice monks' rules* (p.164). International Buddhist Academy.

Truc Lam Zen sect, wrote a letter and handed down Dharma to Phap Loa. Phap Loa was officially commissioned to succeed the abbot of Sieu Loai Pagoda as the second patriarch. The Buddhist conference was witnessed by Emperor Tran Anh Tong.

Next, other rituals, especially the afternoon and evening chanting rituals, known as two daily practice sessions, are performed by Buddhist monks in many pagodas. The content of the morning sutras includes Surangama Sutra, Great Compassion Mantra, As You Will Jewel Wheel King Dharani, Disaster Eradicating Auspicious Spirit Mantra, Meritorious Virtue Jeweled Mountain Spirit Mantra, Cundi spirit mantra, Medicine Master's True Words for Anointing the Crown, Kuan Yin Efficacious Response True Words, True Words of Seven Buddhas for Eradicating Offences, Amitabha Pure Land Rebirth Mantra, Good Goddess Mantra, Heart Sutra, Sakyamuni Buddha Recitation, Paying homage to the Buddhas, and Buddhist Dedication. The afternoon session embraces chanting and reciting the sutras, such as Sutra of the Buddha's Teaching On Amitabha, Amitabha Pure Land Rebirth Mantra, Eighty-eight Buddhas Great Repentance Text, The Ritual Donating Food to Hungry Ghosts, Heart Sutra, The Buddha Speaks of Amitabha Sutra, Paying homage to the Buddhas, Dedication to the World of Ultimate Bliss, and Three Refuges.

Nowadays, rituals of the Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhist sect have inherited and preserved fine values. Besides, with the development in accordance with reality, Buddhist rituals have become increasingly integrated with humans with the existence of "entering the world". This is one of the distinctive features of Vietnamese Buddhist generally and Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhist Zen sect particularly.

Annually, Yen Tu Festival takes place from the 10th of the first lunar month to the end of March, which lasts for 3 spring months. This is a time for tourists to isolate themselves from the outside world and make a pilgrimage to the majestic nature of Buddha's Land.

Shortly before the beginning of Yen Tu festival, the Provincial Vietnam Buddhist Sangha will conduct a ritual that opens the forest in Yen Tu. Next, to pray the festival takes place peacefully and nicely, the Buddhist monks and local people will perform rituals, such as offering incense, chanting sutras, worshiping Heaven and Earth, the Buddha and Mountain Spirit.

On the morning of the 10th at Truc Lam Yen Tu Cultural Center, Buddhist practitioners will perform a ritual to pray for luck, peace and prosperity of the country and people. After that, the delegates will take turns stamping the sacred sign on the Yen Tu seal. In addition, the ceremony also has other interesting activities, such as ringing bells, sounding the drums, and giving blessings at the start of the year.

After the end of the opening ceremony, the pilgrimage to Buddha will begin in each line, moving towards the peak of Yen Tu mountain in turn.

In general, the ritual content is divided into two parts: ceremonials and ritual music. Ceremonial means the ritual text or content while ritual music is special music used for ritual.

According to Buddhist monk Thich Hue Thong, "Buddhist rituals are a way to artistically transform the thought of enlightenment and liberation. With the musical ritual, specifically the chants, everything harmonizes with the sounds of spirits, Buddhism handbells, and elegant sound of wooden fish and bell, with melodious rhythms that easily enter into the hearts of human beings. Because of this, respectful listeners can still clearly sense Buddhism's great liberation idea."⁵

⁵ Thich Nhat Tu & Thich Duc Thien. (2022). The culture of Vietnamese Buddhism (p.514). Religion Publishing House

2. SOME SOLUTIONS TO PROMOTE POSITIVE ELEMENTS IN PRACTICING BUDDHIST RITUALS OF TRUC LAM YEN TU ZEN SECT NOWADAYS

Firstly, it is necessary to build a healthy Buddhist cultural space which closely sticks to the philosophy of the Middle Way attached to life with religion. Cultivating a Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhist cultural space aims to help the philosophy and thoughts of the Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhism Zen sect endure forever in the hearts of sentient beings.

Secondly, it is essential to notice the relationship between the past and the future in the process of building, renovating and preserving cultural places. People should preserve tangible cultural values and conserve Buddhism rituals that have existed in the nation's history over thousands of years. The main purpose is to effectively exploit cultural values and spread to the community, which is viewed as an important condition for "propagating the Dharma" in the present and the future.

Thirdly, it is critical to improve capacity, virtue, and promote the methods of practice and religion of Truc Lam's three ancestors. This is considered the core of practicing rituals in Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhism Zen Sect. As a Buddhist disciple, understanding the precepts and Buddhist rituals to avoid distorting the beautiful values in practicing Buddhist rituals is clearly crucial.

Fourthly, each Buddhist monk must always be aware that rituals are only a means to guide the human beings into the religion. When humans have entered the religion, Buddhist monks must teach humans how to practice to achieve peace and liberation. That is the ultimate goal of those who practice the ritual, not profit. Only then will Buddhism be more accessible to sentient beings.

Fifthly, each Buddhist monk needs to study and practice to clearly understand the meaning of the ritual content before performing the ritual. Only then will the propagation of Dharma accomplish many benefits.

3. CONCLUSION

Practicing Buddhist rituals in general and Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhist ones in particular are one of the indispensable things in cultivating and spreading ideas, guiding people to good values and the end of suffering, bringing people to peace. Over thousands of years, practicing the Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhist Zen sect rituals still keeps its full value and shows strong vitality in the minds and emotions as well as the life of the Vietnamese people. Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhism Zen sect is Vietnamese Buddhism, of the Vietnamese people. It will be endless with the country. In the current stage, the perseverance, conservation and promotion of the good values in the practice of Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhist Zen sect rituals are an extremely urgent requirement, expressing the traditions and ethics of the Vietnamese people.

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