
CULTURE

**TUỆ TRUNG THƯỢNG SĨ AND TRÚC LÂM BUDDHISM OF TRẦN DYNASTY
(13TH-14TH CENTURY)**

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Summary

This article aims to research on the role of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ in Vietnamese Buddhism in the period XIII-XIV (the time of Trúc Lâm Buddhism). The questions addressed in this study are: Was Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ the person who created the ideological foundation for Vietnamese Buddhism in the 13th - 14th centuries? Why did he have such power? Which aspects of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 13th - 14th centuries were influenced by his thoughts? Using analysis and synthesis methods, the author has identified that Vietnamese Buddhism in the period XIII-XIV was colored by Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's teachings and practice methods. Furthermore, to fully understand, the author has consulted many existing historical and Buddhist documents. The findings show that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ had a crucial role in the spiritual and ideological aspects of the orientation of Trúc Lâm Buddhism even the fact that he did not take a particular part in directly participating in building and administering the Buddhist system.

Key words: Vietnamese Buddhism, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, enlightened laymen, Zen Buddhism...

Introduction

Buddhism has been present in Vietnam for more than 2000 years, and was the most influential religion in the history of Vietnamese feudal dynasties in all aspects from culture, education to economics and politics. This was the period of rule of the Trần Dynasty (1225-1400), one of the dynasties with the most achievements in Vietnamese history, especially in terms of military and culture. Continuing from the previous dynasty (Lý dynasty: 1009 - 1125), the Trần Dynasty also chose to integrate the three main religions at that time Buddhism - Confucianism - Taoism in its national governance policy, and chose Buddhism as the dominant religion (Thích nữ Diệu Nhật, 2023). Therefore, during this period, the influence of Buddhist ideas on the economy, politics, military, education... of the Trần Dynasty was extremely great. In addition to the exams on the three teachings, the Trần Dynasty officially made Buddhist teachings a separate subject of examination called "Bách Liên Khoa" (also known as The Lotus Studies) (Mai Thị Thơm, 2024, p367). The kings and mandarins all became Buddhists and became strong supporters of Buddhism. The event of First Patriarch Trúc Lâm organized the Bodhisattva's mind ordination for King Trần Anh Tông and the mandarins in the royal court showed that Buddhism had become a support in the ideology of the Trần Dynasty government. One of the things that made Buddhism flourish and succeed under the Trần Dynasty was the fact that the First Patriarch of Trúc Lâm¹ (king Trần Nhân

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¹ First Patriarch Trúc Lâm is also known as Trúc Lâm Đại Sĩ. Before becoming a monk, he was king Trần Nhân Tông - the third king of the Trần Dynasty.

Tông) unified three Zen sects: Vinitaruci, Vô Ngôn Thông, Thảo Đường². Established the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử meditation sect, opening the first period of Buddhist unification in Vietnam. And the person who had great contributions in creating the foundation for the birth of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử zen sect was Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ - he was the teacher who enlightened king Trần Nhân Tông as to meditation (Thích Thanh Từ, 1999, p.103). Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ was one of the most intelligent zen scholars of Trần Dynasty Buddhism. He was not only a deeply enlightened zen practitioner, but also a philosopher, poet, thinker and military strategist. He was among the generals repelling the Yuan-Mongol³ invaders in the Trần campaigns (in 1285 and 1288). His thoughts "*Vạn pháp chi tâm tức Phật tâm*" (The mind of all dharmas is the Buddha's mind) and "*Hòa quang đồng trần*" (Mixing light with the worldly world) laid the foundation for the thought of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử zen sect in particular, and the spirit of studying Buddhism of all kings and officials, and Buddhists of the Trần Dynasty in general. The role and contribution of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ to Buddhism in the 13th and 14th centuries was extremely great, from which Vietnamese Buddhism marked a glorious period in its long history.

Brief biography of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (1230-1291)

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (his real name was Trần Tung), was the eldest son of An Sinh Vương Trần Liễu, and the elder brother of the Queen Nguyen Thanh Thien Cam. He was from Túc Mặc, Thiên Trường district, now Ninh Bình province. After his father's death, he was given the title Hưng Ninh Vương by King Trần Thái Tông.

As a profound, elegant and leisurely demeanor, from childhood, with brilliant and pure dignity, Tuệ Trung treasured the Door of Emptiness early on. He had the opportunity to consult with Zen Master Tiêu Dao at Phuoc Duong Monastery, grasped the core of Zen tradition and wholeheartedly worshiped Tiêu Dao as his Teacher. When governing Hong Lo (now Hai Duong province), he was among the generals repelling the Yuan-Mongol invaders in the Trần campaigns (in 1285 and 1288). After the war, he was promoted to the position of Captain Guarding the Thái Bình maritime channel. Not long after, he retired to Tịnh Bang Hamlet (Hải Phòng province) which was lately renamed Vạn Niên Village, took the name Tuệ Trung and established the hermitage Dưỡng Chân Trang to meditate and practice.

Everyday, Thượng Sĩ took pleasure in meditation, not in fame and fortune. "*Mixing light with the worldly world*", he never opposed anything, so he often flourished the seeds of the Dharma, taught beginners. For whom came to ask for advice, he taught the essential to obtain tranquility of mind. In 1291, he manifested little sick, laid in the auspicious position and passed away peacefully at the Dưỡng Chân Trang at the age of 61.

1. Contribution of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ in the formation of Trúc Lâm Zen sect

1.1. The role of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ towards the First Patriarch Trần Nhân Tông

Trúc Lâm zen sect was founded by king Trần Nhân Tông after he became a monk and attained enlightenment. Since he was still a crown prince, his father, king Trần Thánh Tông,

² These are the three earliest zen lineages present in Vietnam, started with the Vinitaruci zen lineage was born at the end of the 6th century, followed by the Vô Ngôn Thông zen lineage appeared in the 9th century and finally the Thảo Đường zen lineage in the 11th century. However, the founders of the three zen lineages were all zen masters from India and China.

³ Yuan-Mongol Army: The origin of this army is the Mongol army, also known as the Mongol Empire. The Mongol Empire emerged when the Mongol and Turkic tribes of historical Mongolia were united under the leadership of Genghis Khan. The Mongol army captured and conquered most of the Eurasian continent in 100 years. This is called the invincible army, they occupied all of China, Korea, Burma, Persia, southern part of Russia, West Asian countries and reached as far as Eastern Europe. After Genghis Khan died, his grandson Kublai Khan took over the throne. In 1271, Kublai Khan issued an edict to establish the country, changing the name of Mongolia to Dai Yuan. Therefore, the Đại Việt people called this empire: Yuan - Mongol.

allowed him to study with the country's most outstanding teachers, including Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ. Tuệ Trung was responsible for instructing Trần Nhân Tông in Zen teachings. And thanks to Tuệ Trung's extremely skillful teachings and principles, Trần Nhân Tông had enough opportunity to enlighten the essence of zen. For Trần Nhân Tông, Tuệ Trung was the person who had the deepest influence on his thoughts and was also the teacher he respected the most (Thích Thanh Từ, 1997, p.63-64).

Prince Trần Khâm had his first enlightenment through a question and answer session about sin, fortune and karma with Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ. According to Tran T.M. Trang's assessment [22] (page 254): This enlightenment enabled Trần Nhân Tông to overcome attachment to conceptual distinctions and external forms, attaining a profound insight into the true nature of precepts and the law of cause and effect. Therefore, later, the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm expanded the precepts and organized a ceremony to transmit the Bodhisattva's mind precepts to king Trần Anh Tông and the royal princes and mandarins in the royal court. The important thing is that the precepts that the king and his mandarins received here are the Mind precepts⁴, which are part of the precepts' nature and not the precepts' form. Thanks to such expansion of the precepts, the king and his mandarins could both practice Buddhism and still be able to govern the country, conduct military and political affairs... without any obstacles or problems. In the history of Buddhism, only transmitting the precepts' nature without the precepts' form is extremely rare. This is considered a special innovation in the propagation of Buddhism by the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm. At the same time, it is also one of the reasons why the spirit of The socially engaged Bodhisattva during the Trần Dynasty was developed strongly.

King Trần Nhân Tông's second enlightenment was when he asked Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ about "the main task of a Zen practitioner". Tuệ Trung replied: "Reversing our gaze away from externals and looking inside ourself is our principal duty". After listening, the king clearly understood the method of practice. Although there was only a short dialogue, this spirit followed King Trần Nhân Tông throughout his life. Because "self-reflection" is the gateway to Buddhism for all practitioners. This is both a duty and a method for cultivation.

1.2. Creating the ideological foundation for the birth of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử zen sect

Research on Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ has many perspectives: History, philosophy, Zen thought... In which research on his Zen thought mainly focuses on analyzing fundamental thoughts such as: not stuck on either side, non-attachment, "*Hòa quang đồng trần*". These are primarily independent analyses of individual aspects of Tuệ Trung's thought, without elucidating the interrelations between his Zen ideas and those that emerged before and after his time. Therefore, in this article, the author focuses on assessing the influence and relationship between Tuệ Trung's "*Hòa quang đồng trần*" ideology with Trần Thái Tông's "*Phật tại tâm*" ideology (the mind means Buddha) and Patriarch Trúc Lâm's "*Cư trần lạc đạo*" ideology (living in this worldly life but still being enjoyed with Buddhist spiritual path). From there, the process of formation and development of the Engaged Buddhism spirit of the Trần Dynasty is clarified.

The core ideology of Trúc Lâm Buddhism is "*Phật tại tâm*" and "*Cư trần lạc đạo*". The idea of "*Phật tại tâm*" originated from the teachings of National master Phu Van⁵ to king Trần

⁴ Is the common precept of Mahayana Buddhism. It focuses on preventing evil and unrighteousness in the mind. Also called "Nhất tâm giới", "Đạt-ma nhất tâm giới". It is the precept that gathers all precepts into one's own mind to contemplate and practice. (Phật Quang Dictionary, p. 959)

⁵ National teacher Phù Vân: was zen master Đạo Viên, honored by King Trần Thái Tông as a national teacher. He was the first teacher to guide the path of zen practice for king Trần Thái Tông.

Thái Tông (the first king of the Trần Dynasty): "*There is no Buddha in the mountain, Buddha is in the mind. If Your Majesty is enlightened to that, you will immediately become a Buddha without having to search hard outside.*" (Thích Thanh Từ, 2023, p.18). Later on, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ further developed and expounded this idea through the statement: "*Vạn pháp chi tâm tức Phật tâm*" (The mind of all dharmas is the Buddha's mind). Here, Tuệ Trung has expanded from the scope of Buddha being in the mind of each individual to the Buddha - mind being in the minds of all living beings, that is, even inanimate species such as grass, trees, rocks and soil have the Buddha - mind. This shows his great compassion for all things, his love is not limited by space or time, overcoming differences in species, luxury and lowliness, etc. Therefore, this spirit of his was quickly accepted by the entire people of Đại Việt, and was chosen by the Trần Dynasty as the common spirit of the nation, the motto of Trúc Lâm Buddhism at that time.

The idea of "*Cư trần lạc đạo*" was promoted by the First patriarch of Trúc Lâm. But this idea was developed by the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm from the spirit of "*Hòa quang đồng trần*" (mixing light with the worldly world) that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ had previously proposed. Tuệ Trung's thought of "*Hòa quang đồng trần*" is also a manifestation of the inheritance of the previous Patriarchs' Engaged Buddhism's spirit, and also the inheritance of the ideology of the Avatamsaka Sutra. In his works, Tuệ Trung always emphasized the attitude of "living in this worldly life but still being enjoyed with Buddhist spiritual path" and was not afraid to devote himself to life to bring the light of Buddhism to all living beings, even if to save sentient beings he may be willing to be reborn as a donkey or a horse:

With the golden light shimmering on eyelashes,

I stride into the dust realm,

playfully at times jump into a horse's womb in a northern village,

and at times enter a donkey's fetus at an eastern house. (Nguyen Giac (ed), 2010)

Thus, the entire core ideology of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử zen sect proposed by the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm was inherited and developed on the basis of the ideology of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ. Part of the reason is because the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm was a Dharma-enlightened disciple of Thượng Sĩ, so inheriting his Master's thoughts was inevitable. On the other hand, all the zen ideas that Tuệ Trung proposed were extremely suitable for the development path of Vietnamese Buddhism in particular and Đại Việt country at that time in general. For a small country, with a still young dynasty, in the stage of stability and development, an idea of Buddhism in the world, the theme of living a liberated life right in every activity of present life is a spiritual orientation that is very suitable for kings and officials and each individual citizen. Tuệ Trung's thoughts direct people towards a life of collective enlightenment instead of just worrying about themselves. Therefore, when accepting that idea, each individual will see the close connection between themselves and the community, from which the strength of great national solidarity is built and increasingly penetrated into the minds of every person of Dai Viet, becoming the moral foundation of Trúc Lâm Buddhism in the 13th - 14th centuries, and also the moral foundation of the entire Trần people. That created the strength of solidarity and mutual love of the people of the Trần Dynasty, becoming the collective strength for a small country to win three times against the powerful Yuan-Mongol invaders.

2. Contribution of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ in the interpretation of Buddhist thought

2.1. Tuệ Trung is considered as the first person to introduce the concept of "identity" (or "sameness") in Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy

The concept of "identity" (or "sameness") that Vietnamese philosophy is currently referring to is understood as the concept of determining "this self" (*ātman*). For Tuệ Trung, the concept of "identity" according to him is "*bản thể như nhiên tự không tịch*" (Identity is natural still and void) (Viện Văn học, 1977, p.272), it is the innocent, empty, eternal essence, neither exists nor disappears. Or in another passage, he said "*bản thể như như chỉ tự nhiên*" (Original identity is suchness - just suchness in nature) (Ibid. 272). It means that identity is just that, always available to heaven and earth, never lost or born, it is the place where all things are born and is also the place where all things return. In addition, Tuệ Trung also gives many other terms to refer to the essence such as: nature, true nature, Buddha nature, mind, dharmakāya... and he emphasizes that these are just concepts of identity, not identity itself (Nguyễn Hùng Hậu, 2022, p.12). It can be seen that Tuệ Trung's concept of identity is something that language cannot describe. Everything comes from identity and returns to identity, identity is the origin, the starting point. According to him, if you don't find this point, you will forever be immersed in the river of delusion and the sea of suffering: "*Mãi vui nếu chẳng tìm ra gốc, nghìn thuở lương duyên chẳng đến đâu*" (If you're too busy having fun, if you don't find the root, thousands of good fate will never come to you.) (Ibid. 12).

2.2. Promoting the spirit of fearlessness, not being afraid of life and death

In his work *Tuệ Trung, Scholar - Master - Poet*, Nguyễn Duy Hinh asserts that Tuệ Trung's thoughts came from his failure to satisfy his desire for fame and wealth, and from there he realized that life was like a dream and riches as mere illusions, so he lived a life of seclusion and freedom (Nguyễn Duy Hinh, 1998, p.163). However, the author believes that Nguyen Duy Hinh's opinion is somewhat negative. Because through the work "At ease with birth and death", it can be seen that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ is not worried about life and death (fearless spirit), he even advises everyone to "enjoy" life and death. Such a spirit cannot exist in a person whose heart still contains dissatisfaction and boredom with the times.

In Buddhism, fearlessness is one of the states achieved when Bodhisattvas and Saints enlighten the truth about the nature of all phenomena. Fearlessness is understood as the absence of fear or madness in any situation or any object, even when life is threatened. Therefore, for a person who has thoroughly understood the emptiness of self and the emptiness of dharma like Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ is no exception. This spirit is clearly expressed from his life to his compositions. In one of his compositions, he declared: "At ease with birth and death" (Thích Thanh Từ, 1997, p.316):

Originally emptiness – birth and death in nature are void

Illusionary manifestation – this unreal body is being gone

...

The unenlightened persons erroneously fear of birth and death;

The enlightened have fully insight, and live at ease. (Nguyen Giang (ed), 2010)

Here he explains that fear and suffering are both born from ignorance. Because we do not understand the true nature of our own body and mind. If each person understands the empty nature of body and mind, and knows that all dharmas are only false, all fears and insecurities will automatically disappear. Furthermore, Tuệ Trung is described as an extremely free-spirited person, he is not attached to any rules, laws or appearances of life. In his work "*A song of crazy freedom*", he narrated that:

"When hungry, I eat the rice given from ten directions. When tired, I sleep at unfamiliar places." (Nguyen Giang (ed), 2010)

And this spirit was later promoted by the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm into the spirit: "*Cư trần lạc đạo*" which became the spirit of the entire country of the Trần Dynasty, and until today (21st century), this spirit continues to be inherited and promoted by the Vietnamese government and Buddhism. Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's fearless and heroic spirit was not only expressed in his declaration, but it was also demonstrated by him in his own life, especially the moment he was near death:

Thượng Sĩ lay on a wooden bed in the middle of an empty house in the auspicious position, closing his eyes and passing away. The servants and concubines in the house cried loudly. Thượng Sĩ opened his eyes and sat up, took mouthwash to wash his hands, and then lightly scolded: '*Life and death are normal, we should not be sad and regretful, disturbing our true nature*'. Having finished speaking, he peacefully passed away. (Thích Thanh Từ, 1997, p.64)

The image of his passing away is gentle and carefree, but it is an extraordinary internal force that overcomes the torment of the four great farewells as well as the turmoil in the mind. And the five kings of the Trần Dynasty also had such "fearlessness" in the face of life and death. Before Tuệ Trung were kings Trần Thái Tông and Trần Thánh Tông, followed by kings Trần Nhân Tông, Trần Anh Tông and Trần Minh Tông. All of them passed away in peace and self-control. This image has influenced the army and people of the whole country, creating a Dai Viet with an indomitable, tenacious spirit, not afraid of life or death, most clearly demonstrated in the three victories over the Yuan-Mongol invaders.

2.3. Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's zen ideology is a guideline for those who are practicing

+*The ideology of "Looking inside yourself is a core duty" (It's mean: reflect inwardly to see the essence of yourself)*

The two Buddhists who are considered to have had the greatest influence on early Vietnamese Buddhism are Mâu Tử⁶ and Khương Tăng Hội (?-280)⁷. Among them, Khương Tăng Hội has been proven by many researchers such as Nguyễn Lang, Nguyễn Tài Thư... to be the First Patriarch of Vietnamese Zen. The Zen method that Khương Tăng Hội taught in Giao Châu was An Ban Zen, based on the An Ban Thủ Ý Sutra. Therefore, right from the early stages, Vietnamese Buddhism bore the mark of Zen. In the 13th - 14th centuries, zen Buddhism became a method of reform for monks as well as kings, mandarins, and people of the Trần Dynasty. Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ was one of the earliest lay practitioners from the Trần royal family to practice and attain profound enlightenment in Zen Buddhism. That's why many people, both monks and lay people, came to consult and learn meditation with him. In the book *Record of the words of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ*, king Trần Nhân Tông recorded that:

He lived the life of a lay practitioner, mixed with common people, planted the seeds of dharma, and helped the learners. Those who came to ask for his dharma advice were all shown the profound meaning, and given some useful ways to calm the mind. His responses, however, were unique, flexible and different. (Nguyen Giang (ed), 2010)

It can be seen that, although Thượng Sĩ was a lay person, his qualities were that of a Zen master. He was the representative of the Bodhisattva spirit who was always devoted to saving sentient beings. As Trần Khắc Chung⁸ wrote in the conclusion of *Record of the words of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ*:

⁶ Mâu Tử's real name was Mâu Bác, a Hán Chinese from Thương Ngô, determined to have been born around 165 - 170.

⁷ Khương Tăng Hội: Both parents were from Khương Cư (present-day India). He was born, raised and became a monk in Giao Châu.

⁸ Trần Khắc Chung (1247 - 1330): Real name is Đỗ Khắc Chung, was a political figure and high-ranking official of the Trần Dynasty.

Thượng Sĩ was a Lay Bodhisattva, reviving the Buddha's family style, initiating the saying, leading post-learners to the transcendent light, the Trần Nhân Tông king was truly accomplished here. (Thích Thanh Từ, 1997, p.537)

The first meditation method that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ taught to King Trần Nhân Tông when he was still crown prince was: *"Reflect inwardly to see the essence of yourself. Don't follow other ways."* It was through this that the prince had his first zen enlightenment. And this is also the core practice policy of Buddhism. In the history of Buddha's life, a story was recorded:

Once the Buddha was at Uruvela, Magadha. When he finished eating quietly, he sat beneath a shady tree to meditate. Suddenly thirty young men ran to ask him if he had seen a girl running by. She was the maid they took with them when they went to the forest to play. But she took advantage of an opening to steal all their money and escape. After listening, the Buddha gently asked the young men: *"Tell me, friends, is it better in this moment to find the young woman or to find your own selves?"* Buddha's question made thirty young men surprised and thinking. Then one of the young men answered: *"Respected Teacher, perhaps we should try to find ourselves first."* (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2011, p. 191-192).

This story is considered Buddha's first teaching about the way to finding oneself. Through his own experience, Buddha realized that enlightenment must be found within each person, not in any external factors. Inheriting Buddha's thoughts, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ renewed it by giving a short, concise statement: *"Looking inside yourself is a core duty"*. From there, create a slogan for students to easily remember and practice.

+ *Directing people to reclaim their Buddha nature:*

Zen Buddhism practice aims at achieving the true nature of all things, which means receiving the Buddha nature available within oneself. The ultimate goal of practice in Zen Buddhism is to achieve Buddhahood, and to achieve Buddhahood, there must first be Buddha's cause. For zen Buddhism: Buddha nature is the cause to become Buddha, and it's also Buddhahood. Therefore, what a meditator needs to do throughout his or her life is to clarify that Buddha nature until it is completely perfect. However, this is a job that requires a persistent, meticulous and long-term study process. Because it's been so long, it's possible that during the process of studying, practitioners can get lost and their will will be shaken. To encourage and remind practitioners, Tuệ Trung highlighted the spirit of "the mind means Buddha", meditation is present in all human activities:

If you want to find the mind, stop searching outward.

The nature of the mind is naturally still and void.

....

Walk in Zen, sit in Zen, then you will see the lotus blooming in fire.

When your will becomes weak, just strengthen it.

When your place is peaceful and suitable, just stay there. (Nguyen Giang (ed), 2010)

+ *The spirit of disengage: not stuck on either side and not stuck in knowledge or words:*

One of the most outstanding features of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's zen thought is his strong spirit of disengage. For him, in order to return to live with his own Buddha nature, to be able to *"hòa quang đồng trần"*, the most important thing is not to be stuck in any form or viewpoint. This is also the throughout direction of Zen Buddhism. The worldly world lives its

life in duality: day – night, gain – loss, white – black, suffering – happiness... Therefore, it is impossible to find the absolute on this earth. Neither the normal objects nor our thinking and reasoning can escape from a dualistic perspective. These logical minds need to be based on comparison, evaluation as a foundation, a refuge, from which to build collective or individual judgments and opinions. This is the nature of impermanent mind. Practicing meditation and achieving Prajñāparamita helps us overcome the cognitive limits of the impermanent mind and return to the identity of equality and formlessness which transcends ordinary logical thinking. Tuệ Trung is truly Lay Bodhisattvas with great compassion for sentient beings. He consoled and advised everyone to return to their own homeland:

Existence arises from emptiness, interconnecting with emptiness.

Existence and existence, emptiness and emptiness – all are the same.

Affliction and bodhi originally don't differ from each other.

True suchness and false thoughts all are emptiness.

Your body is like a fake scene; and karma, like its shadow.

Your mind is like the wind; and nature of the mind, like grass 'bong' flying about in the wind.

Don't ask about death, birth, devil and Buddha.

All stars point to the north, and all rivers flow to the east. (Nguyen Giang (ed), 2010)

The tenet of Zen Buddhism after the time of Bodhidharma is “A special transmission outside the scriptures; Not founded upon words and letters; By pointing directly to [one's] mind; It lets one see into [one's own true] nature and [thus] attain Buddhahood” (Dumoulin, Heinrich; Heisig, James; Knitter, Paul F, 2005, p.85). Bodhidharma's words have caused much debate in both the religious and academic circles. So, did Bodhidharma deny the entire system of teachings left by the Buddha? The answer is No! Because Zen Buddhism is appropriate for each identity, each condition, each situation, each ideology. Therefore, to understand the meaning of Zen, we need to bring it back to its very situation in which it appeared: A Zen saying must be placed correctly on the time, situation and object to which it talks about, otherwise it can be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or even has a completely opposite meaning.

The time Patriarch Bodhidharma went to China, the practice of meditation existed but had not yet developed. The blooming side is the learning, chanting and reciting the sutras and treatises. The monks took the studying and discussing the Buddha's teaching as their career, pursued the words in scriptures, then preached and argued fascinatingly. They mistakenly thought that understanding was the place to attain enlightenment, then got lost in the forest of teachings and forgot to practice the Dharma within themselves, forgot the way to go home.

Buddha's words are just like a finger pointing to the moon. Wise people rely on the finger to see the moon. The fool clings to the finger and loses the moon. The sayings of Zen masters come from their own realization, own enlightenment, not from learning or borrowing outside knowledge. At all times, in Buddhism, there have been scholars and the “syndrome” of attachment to words and sayings. In contrast, Zen masters who recognize the true nature of all phenomenon have gone beyond the confinement of discriminatory consciousness and always tried, with their “granny's heart”, to guide all beings not to go astray. Likewise, Tuệ Trung earnestly taught and did not hesitate to remind students to be wise and alert in learning the dharma:

You learners hesitate in front of so many directions.

Polishing a tile to make a mirror only wastes your time.

You should stop relying on other people's entrances.

A ray of spring light makes flowers blooming everywhere. (Nguyen Giang (ed), 2010)

Please mind that Tuệ Trung did not deny the importance of study, because Hearing - Contemplating – Practicing is the basic path in Buddhism. “Hearing” is learning with ears and eyes, “Contemplating” includes memorizing, reflecting and pondering the meaning. From this understanding, people have faith in the dharma to start to apply and “practice”. Hence, he emphasized that learning was only a part of the practice process, not to be mistaken as the entire practice process and not totally associated with the true enlightenment. It can be said that knowing medicine and taking medicine to cure the disease are two completely different things.

3. Contributions of Tuệ Trung Thuong in Buddhist literature during the Trần Dynasty

All of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's works are recorded in the book: *Record of the words of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ*. This is a book personally recorded by king Trần Nhân Tông and later edited and printed by Zen Master Pháp Loa (Second Patriarch of the Trúc Lâm Zen Sect). This proves that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's role in both Buddhism and the royal court is extremely great. In this work, 49 Zen poems by Tuệ Trung are recorded, along with his verse responses to his students and 13 koan studies. This is a specific genre of zen literature. In Vietnam, it only appears in the literature of the Trần Dynasty. According to preserved ancient bibliographies, in the Trần Dynasty there were only two authors who left behind works of this type: King Trần Thái Tông with ancient chants recorded in *Khóa Hư Lục* (Record of the way of freedom in practice) and Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ with ancient chants in *Record of the words of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ* (Thích Phước Đạt, 2010, p.17). Tuệ Trung's 49 Zen poems were composed by him in many genres such as: songs, poems, recitations, short metre, free poetry,...the content contains zen philosophy and nature. His compositions contributed to the diversity and richness of the Buddhist literary treasure of the 13th and 14th centuries.

Conclusion

In short, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ had many contributions in opening up Zen learning in the Trần Dynasty. Although there are many different opinions about the cause of the formation of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's Zen thoughts, in general, it is agreed that his thoughts laid the foundation for the spirit of Engaged Buddhism of the Trần Dynasty, especially the thoughts of "*Hòa quang đồng trần*" and "*Vạn pháp chi tâm tức Phật tâm*". He was the one who had the most profound influence on the Zen thought of King Trần Nhân Tông - later the First Patriarch of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen sect. Most of Trần Nhân Tông's core thoughts were developed from the thoughts that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ had previously oriented. In particular, the most prominent thought was the thought of "*Cư trần lạc đạo*" developed from the spirit of "*Hòa quang đồng trần*". On the other hand, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ played an important role in laying the foundation for the practice method of Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen sect with the principle of "Looking inside yourself is a core duty", the spirit of "not stuck on either side", non-attachment, "At ease with birth and death"... which contributed to promoting the Zen spirit in this period to become more and more prosperous. Although Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ was not directly involved in building and operating the Buddhist system, his thoughts contributed to providing direction for the guidelines and practice methods for Trúc Lâm Buddhism. At the same time, it had a lot of influence on the Trần Dynasty in fields such as philosophy, education, military and society. Through research on the role of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ in Vietnamese Buddhism and the Trần Dynasty, it has partly clarified why the 13th - 14th centuries were considered a period of prosperity the highest level of Vietnamese

Buddhism. Tuệ Trung's thoughts and works are to this day considered valuable tangible and intangible heritage of Vietnam.

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