

Buddhism from India to Vietnam: A Study of Early Introduction

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1. Introduction

Vietnam is said to have a long history of civilization. However, throughout its over 4000 years existing as a sovereign country, Vietnam has had to suffer from a number of times of foreign domination, and numerous civil wars. As a consequence of wars, study of Vietnam's history in general, Buddhism in Vietnam in particular, has been subject to great hindrances due to the lack of specific historical materials. Therefore, the questions of when and how Buddhism was introduced in Vietnam have been shrouded in controversy among scholars. That is why there is no unanimity among scholars on the exact date for the advent of buddhism in Vietnam by them. Heretofore, most of scholars, those who studied the history of Vietnamese Buddhism based on the dialogue between Most Venerable Dam Thien and Emperor Wen of Sui (Yang Jian) on Buddhism in Giao Chau (the name of Vietnam under the time of the Chinese control) which was quoted by Thong Bien when he discussed with Empress Dowager Y Lan¹ in order to conclude that towards the 2nd century A.D. Buddhism was firmly established in Giao Chau, they also suggested that Buddhism was probably brought to Giao Chau in the later part of the 1st A.D.² However, according to Prof. Le Manh That, he based on the story of Nhat Da Trach in the *Linh Nam Trich Quai*³ (Strange Stories of Linh Nam) which talked about Chu Dong Tu, who was learnt the Buddha's teachings from Most Venerable Phat Quang (who lived on the mountain of Quynh Vien)⁴ to propose the time of introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam in the 3rd or 2nd century B.C.⁵ Therefore, the time of introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam is still a debated question. But, in my opinion, it is very safe to say that Buddhism was introduced in Vietnam around the beginning of Christian era, and it must have reach Vietnam before it reach China in the later part of the 1st century A.D.⁶ The investigations below will explain clearly for this opinion.

2. The Routes of Introduction

There have been some textual sources that bring to light the way of Buddhism coming to Vietnam from India. The *Thien Uyen Tap Anh* (An anthology of the famous monks in Vietnamese

Ch'an park), the oldest historical record of Vietnamese Buddhism, quoted Dam Thien's statements that: "The area of Jiaozhou (Giao Chau) has long been in communication with India. Early on, when the Buddha-Dharma came to China, and still had not been established, yet in Luy Lau more than twenty precious temples were built, more than five hundred monks were ordained, and fifteen volumes of scriptures were translated. Because of this prior connection, there were already monks and nuns like Mo Luo Qui Yu (Ma Ha Ky Vuc), Kang Senghui (Khuong Tang Hoi), Zhi Jiang Liang (Chi Cuong Luong) and Mou Bo (Mau Bac) there."⁷ Thus, Buddhism might have come to Vietnam directly from India before it reached China.

Besides, the following sources of information have brought by Nguyen Tai Thu and Nguyen Lang is very worthy of note. They can help us to understand clearer routes of introducing Buddhism to Vietnamese people.

As we have known, Vietnam as one of the five countries of Indochina (Burma, Siam, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam) had relation with India and China by land and sea routes begun in quite early time.⁸ In other words, there were sea and land routes connecting India-Vietnam-China. Vietnam in such a location has node it a prime Centre for trade with India. According to scholar Nguyen Lang, at the beginning or Christian era, there were commercial exchanges between India and Middle East, as well as between India and Arabs, and Mediterranean countries. The traders of those countries needed gold, pearl, ivory, silk, sandal wood and perfumes. And in order to have enough merchandise for trading, Indian merchants had to buy them (or to exchange them) from the Far-East-Asian countries such as China, Japan and lands of Southeast Asia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam. They used to go to Giao Chau by boat during the season of South Western monsoon, and used to come back home in the season of North Western monsoon of the following years. They must, therefore, have had a long stay in Giao Chau, to study Chinese as well as Vietnamese language and to exchange goods. It means that Vietnam more or less might be influenced by Indian culture, art and religions (*Brahmanism* and Buddhism) brought by

them. In addition, during their long journeys, Indian sailors and traders often prayed for help from the *Buddha Dīpaṅkara* and *Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara* who were considered as the *Buddha* protecting seamen. So, they might invite some Buddhist monks to go with them to say prayers. This is way of introducing Buddhism in Vietnams through the sea routes.⁹

Obviously, the Indian merchants and Monks thus came to Vietnam by the sea routes. What was about overland routes? According to scholar Nguyen Tai Thu, there was a route connecting Mae Nam with the Mekong River, crossing Korat, Sitep and to the Cambodian Kingdom. This kingdom was probably founded by Indian immigrants before the Christian era.¹⁰ In the beginning of this era, Indian monks might have come to Laos, crossing Truong Son ranges to Vietnam at the beginning of Christian era.¹¹

The above positions are obviously reasonable enough to come to the conclusion that Indian Buddhism might be introduced to Vietnam directly without any Chinese intermediary. In other words, Buddhism reached Vietnam directly from India and Central Asia by maritime and land routes before traveling to China in the early centuries. However, in the wake of Chinese expansion into Southeast Asia, Chinese culture was introduced in Vietnam. And then, there were Chinese Monks who followed Indian Monks to propagate Buddhism in Vietnam. That is why some sources believed that Buddhism had entered Vietnam from China.

3. The First Buddhist Monks in Vietnam

At that time, the term “Ho” had been used to refer to the foreigners in Giao Chau including merchants and priests. It could also imply either Indian or Central Asians. The historical materials recorded that there were at least five Buddhist monks, who came Giao Chau to propagate the Buddha-Dharma in the beginning of first millennium. They were Ksudra (Khau Da La), Mou Bo (Mau Bac), Kalasivi (Chi Cuong Luong Tiep), Mahajivaka (Ma Ha Ky Vuc), Kang Senghui (Khuong Tang Hoi).¹²

3.1. Ksudra

Ksudra came to Giao Chau in the end of 2nd century (189 A.D.) to preach Buddhism.¹³ He was an Indian of the *Brahma* caste. The activities of this Indian priest in Giao Chau was recorded in the *Co Chau Phap Van Phat Ban Hanh Ngu Luc*,¹⁴ and “Story of Man Nuong”¹⁵ in the *Linh Nam Chich Quai*, saying that he was a mystic, could perform miracles. By the Tu Dinh’s request, he stayed in Giao Chau. Tu Dinh and his daughter - Man Nuong worshipped him as a living Buddha, became the disciples of Ksudra and learned from him the wisdom of the Buddha.¹⁶

3.2. Mahajivaka

The *Co Chau Phap Van Phat Ban Hanh Ngu Luc* told that toward the end of the Chinese Emperor Linh of Han (189 A.D) Mahajivaka and Ksudra came to Giao Chau, where was ruled by the Chinese Commander of Si Nhiiep. However, Ksudra accepted the invitation of Tu Dinh whereas Mahajivaka rebuffed to stay at the residence of Tu Dinh.

Tran Van Giap believed that Mahajivaka came to Giao Chau in about 294 A.D. and left for India in about 306 A.D.¹⁷ A Chinese scholar, Huihao in his work *The Biography of Eminent Monks* argued that there was an Indian Monks named Jivaka departed from India, went to Funan and thence he continued to Giao Chau, Quāng Chāu along the coast in the end of the reign of Emperor Hui of Jin (290-306), after that he came to Luoyang, doing many unusual things and cured for many sick men including the Commander of Nam Duong - Dang Vinh Van, and then he traveled to Ha Nam, Truong An, final he returned to India.¹⁸ And, the Chinese historical book *A History of Buddha and The Patriarchs through the Ages*¹⁹ recorded that: “In the fourth year of the Yongping era (Huidi, 294 A.D.), an Indian monk named Mahajivaka arrived in Luoyang.”²⁰

From the historical evidence above, we learn that there is a difference of hundreds of years between the texts when it comes the date of Mahajivaka. We have no objection in the case if he was a mystic, could perform cabbala and hold on his living of hundreds of years. But, if there were two people named Mahajivaka, then they would have to be distinguished carefully.

3.3. Mou Bo

According to Prof. Le Manh That, Mau Bo was a Chinese, who came to Giao Chau with his mother as refugees of the Three Kingdoms war which took place after the passing away of Chinese Emperor Ling-Ti (about 189 A.D.). He was born about 160 A.D. In 186 A.D. he returned to the homeland (Thuong Ngo) for marriage. He had been Taoist and Confucian before his arriving in Giao Chau where he began to study deeply on Buddhism and converted to Buddhist.²¹

It was at Luy Lau (a Buddhist center of Giao Chau), he wrote *Ly Hoac Luan*²² in 198 A.D., the first Buddhist treatise written in Chinese in response to the reactions toward Buddhism of Chinese Taoist or Confucians who took refuge in Giao Chau. He also passed away in Giao Chau in about 230 A.D.²³

3.4. Kalasivi

Kalasivi belonged to the Scythia, a tribe lived in the north-west region of India.²⁴ It is impossible to state the exact time he got to Giao Chau but his translation of some sutras in the prefecture could

confirm his long stay there. Among his works was the translation of the *Saddharmasamadhi-sutrā* in Giao Chau in 225 or 226 A.D. with the help of a Vietnamese monk - Dao Thanh.²⁵ However, the translation was lost.

3.5. Kang Senghui

In the *Khuong Tang Hoi Toan Tap*, Prof. Le Manh That suggested a point of view that Kang Senghui was born in Giao Chau. He was literally called "Sogdian Buddhist Priest Hui" because of his origin in Sogdian in Central Asia. His father migrated to Giao Chau and settled there as merchant. At the beginning of the third century when he was ten, his parents died, he was then ordained as a Buddhist monk. He was a Buddhist scholar who studied both classical learning of Sanskrit and Chinese. In Giao Chau, he translated the *Luc Do Tap Kinh* and *Cuu Tap Thi Du Kinh*.²⁶ After a period of missionary in Giao Chau, he continued to Jiang Dong of China to propagate Buddhism due to it was said Buddhism had not yet reached. He lived in China during twenty five years and constructed so many Buddhist stupas and temples. Among them was the famous temple Kien So (Nankin). He passed away in 280 A.D. under the Jin Dynasty.²⁷

4. The Characteristics of Buddhism in Vietnam at Its Early Time

When the Indians merchants and Buddhist priests temporarily stayed at Luy Lau, Giao Chau in the first centuries C.E., they were not missionaries. They just followed their Buddhist beliefs. They took the Three Refuges, believed in the Three Jewels, and took the Five Precepts. They conformed the law of causes and consequences. They donated foods, clothes, shelters to priests as the "best land for merit seeds". The Buddhist texts they prayed could be some sutras about that law along with the narration of Buddha's previous lives.²⁸

To the populace in that early time, Buddhism was much simpler.

Buddha was literally called "But". "But" appeared in most of legends and folklore. "But" are always on the side of the mass. "But" would have the law of consequences punished the cruelty and supported the good-but-unhappy people.²⁹ Mou-Po defined the Buddha in his work, *Ly Hoac Luan* as follows: "Buddha was the primary ancestor of behavior and morality (Dao and Duc) and primitive source of wisdom (than-minh). Buddha means Enlightenment (Giac). He can mysteriously be transformed into different appearances or styles. He can be either young or old, big or small, visible or invisible. He remained intact if touched by fire, polluted mud or stabled by knife."³⁰

Dharma could be known as the powers of Buddha to help those in need. The story of Man

Nuong, Ksudra's disciple, who performed miraculous powers to make rain for peasants' crop, was an example. Also, *Dharma* could be easily summed up in the recitation of the Three Jewels: "*Buddharm saranam gacchami. Dharma saramnam gacchami. Sangham saranam gacchami.*"³¹ At that time, in Giao Chau appeared the translation of the *Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* as the first Buddha's treatise translated in Giao Chau. Besides, the theory of no-self (*anatman*) presented and was stated that: The people's souls cannot be destroyed but their body can. Their bodies can be compared with the stems and leaves of plants whereas their souls, the seeds of the plants. The stems and leaves were germinated, then they should fade. But it is not because of that fading that the plant seeds are annihilated.

The *Sangha* could be known as the image of ascetic priests in yellow robes who lives on donation of Buddhist followers. The story of Chu Dong Tu and Tien Dung could be an illustration of a native monk in Giao Chau.³² The *Sutra of Forty-two Chapters* referred to the *Sangha* and aimed at the monks' regulations as follows: "The monks ordained in order to eliminate their attachment and desire, find out the origin of *Dharma*, penetrate the True Self, attained the deep true of Buddha's teaching and get enlightened."³³

In conclusion, the characteristics of Buddhism in Vietnam at its early time did not bear the complex doctrines. To the lay persons, *Buddha* means mercy and compassion. *Buddha* was always on the side of the populace with magical powers to help the poor, the unhappy, and the exploited. The concepts of causes and results, the transmigration and *karma* were introduced and warmly welcomed. They appreciated the practice of donation to the priests and the poor with the hope of living happily in then next *kalpa* (existence). The popular people loved the good and hated the bad. Also, they were afraid of doing bad things. These lay the foundation for the populace beliefs, the national tradition and life style during the next twenty one centuries later and become the main theme for the popular and academic literature, for instance, the story of Tam Cam (like the story of Cinderella in the West), and the Tale of Kim-Van-Kieu.

To the ordained monks, the *Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters* was translated primarily to help them. In their view, the *Buddha* was the Enlightened One who teaches the way to enter vo-vi (*nirvana*). The *Dharma* was the Buddha's teaching about transience, and the way of controlling themselves to attain vo-vi which was quite different from that of Taoism. The *Sangha* were clearly delineated by the yellow robe, abandoning secular life, going for the aim, and taking the 250 precepts.³⁴

However, the two works of the time did not mention the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path which are the main doctrine of Buddhism.

The other characteristics of Buddhism at its first time was the spirituality of religious harmony. As mentioned above, the main Buddhist concepts were well-fitted with the populace beliefs in Giao Chau then. Therefore, it was easily propagated among the common people. But it was strongly resisted by staunch disciples of Taoism and Confucianism who were the Chinese rulers. Fortunately, due to the flexibility and non-oppressiveness of Taoism and Confucianism, together with the Buddhists who had a good command of the opposing doctrines, Buddhism of the time gradually prevailed over the hindrances. Mou Bo was the first example. Thanks to his penetration of the two above theories, he could use their religious terms in his works and discussions to construe the new beliefs effectively.

5. Conclusion

As the studying above, we now can come to the conclusion that Buddhism was transmitted from India into Vietnam in the first century by both sea and land routes and by Indian or Central Asia priests. Buddhism in Vietnam was directly originated from India, not primarily from China as many scholars have viewed it and Luy Lau was the first center of Buddhism in Vietnam. This conclusion has been based upon the following facts.

Firstly, all the contributors to the introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam were Indians or the natives of Scythia and Sogdiana in Central Asia. There was absolutely no Chinese trace in the translation of the sutras in Giao Chau. Mau Bo was a special case.

Secondly, the facts that Mou Bo studied Buddhism in Giao Chau and later converted into Buddhist, that in his work *Ly Hoac Luan* he complained the moral decline of the Sangha members in Giao Chau and that Kang Senghui took the precepts of a Buddhist monk in Giao Chau are all eloquent evidence. It states that Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha were in the prefecture a long time. That emergence could have been in the first century or before.

Thirdly, we know that Buddhism was imported into China in 67 A.D., but it was only in the north of the country. Because of the immense territory, and uncertain means of communication and transportation, it slowly expanded towards the south. Therefore, in the middle of the third century, Master Kang Senghui traveled to Jiang Dong to establish the foundation for Buddhism there. Kien So was the first temple in the region under Dong Ngo dynasty. Now it is in Nankin.

The last reason was that in all legends or fairy tales of Vietnam from primitive history, we find the

word “But”, the short form of “Buddha”. They do not use the Chinese term “Fo” of Chinese. The word “But” derived certainly from the Indian word “Buddha”.

¹ See Nguyen Lang, *Viet Nam Phat Giao Su Luan* (Essays on Vietnamese Buddhist History), vol. I, Hanoi: Van Hoc Publishing House, 1994: 39-45.

² Thich Mat The, *Viet Nam Phat Giao Su Luoc* (Short History of Buddhism in Vietnam), <http://thuvienhoasen.org/p58a8464/chuong-v-thoi-dai-phat-giao-du-nhap-phat-giao-doi-bac-thuoc-43-544>, accessed on 09/08/2016; Tran Van Giap, *Phat Giao Viet Nam: Tu Khoi Nguyen Den The Ky XIII* (Buddhism in Vietnam: From the Origins to the 13th Century A.D.), translated from the French, *Le Bouddhisme en Annam: Des Origines Au XIII^e Siecle*, by Tue Sy, Saigon: Van Hanh University, 1968: 56.

³ It was composed by Tran The Phap and revised by Vu Quynh in 1493.

⁴ The story tells that: “Dong Tu and his wife Tien Dung had established trading streets and commercial exchanges with foreigners. One day Dong Tu left his island with some foreign businessmen. Their ship landed at the foot of a mountain to take on fresh water. Dong Tu met an Indian bonze on the mountain called Quynh Vien. The monk taught him Buddhism. Then he stayed on the mountain to learn Buddhism. He gave all his gold to his friend to conduct his business and told them to pick him up on the way home. When Dong Tu left his master for home, the monk gave him a stick and hat made of leaves, saying that it could perform miracles. Once back his native district, Dong Tu communicated the Buddha’s teachings to his wife Tien Dung. Thereafter, the couple gave up their occupation as traders and went to look for masters to learn the Way (*Dharma*)...”

⁵ Le Manh That, *Lich Su Phat Giao Viet Nam* (History of Buddhism in Vietnam), vol. I, Hochiminh: Hochiminh Publishing House, 2003: 19-31.

⁶ According to Chinese Historians, Buddhism was officially recognized in China about 67 A.D. (See Lewis Hodus, “The Entrance of Buddhism into China” in *Buddhism and Buddhists in China, USA*: Sheba Blake Publishing, 2015.)

⁷ Nguyen Tu Cuong, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thien Uyen Tap Anh*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997: 129.

⁸ G. Coedes, *The Making of South East Asia*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966: 50.

⁹ Nguyen Lang, *Viet Nam Phat Giao Su Luan* (Essays on Vietnamese Buddhist History), vol. I, Hanoi: Van Hoc Publishing House, 1994: 23-25; Nguyen Tai Thu (et al.), *History of Vietnamese*

Buddhism, Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1992: 4-7.

¹⁰ G. Coedes, *The Making of South East Asia*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966: 57.

¹¹ Nguyen Tai Thu, *History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, Hanoi, 1992: 10.

¹² Le Manh That, *Op. Cit.*: 432.

¹³ *Ibid.*: 157.

¹⁴ This work and *Thien Uyen Tap Anh* are said to be the same author as Zen Master Kim Son, may be composed in 1322. (*Ibid.*: 142-3.)

¹⁵ See Le Manh That, *Op. Cit.*: 149-151 for detail of this story.

¹⁶ Cf. *The Histories of Buddha and the Patriarchs: From Phap Van to Co Chau*.

¹⁷ Tran Van Giap, *Op. Cit.*: 56.

¹⁸ See T.50, No. 2059 (*Kao Seng Ch'uan*), fol. 388a17-c05 for the biography of this monk. Or, consider to Nguyen Tai Thu (ed.), *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, USA: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008: 26 for the activities of this monk in China.

¹⁹ T. 49, No. 2036 (*Fo Tsu Li Tai Tung Tsai*).

²⁰ Quoted by Nguyen Tai Thu (ed.), *Op. Cit.*: 25.

²¹ Le Manh That, *Op. Cit.*: 243.

²² See Le Manh That, *Op. Cit.*: 294-8; Nguyen Tai Thu, *Op. Cit.*: 33-5 for the detail of this work.

²³ *Ibid.*: 294.

²⁴ *Ibid.*: 417.

²⁵ Nguyen Tai Thu, *Op. Cit.*: 41.

²⁶ Le Manh That, *Op. Cit.*: 204, 209.

²⁷ Nguyen Tai Thu, *Op. Cit.*: 36.

²⁸ Nguyen Lang, *Op. Cit.*: 49-50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 54.

³⁰ Le Manh That, *Nghien Cuu ve Mau Tu*, Saigon: Van Hanh University, 1982: 510.

³¹ Nguyen Lang, *Op. Cit.*: 54.

³² See more in Nguyen Lang, *Op. Cit.*: 55-6.

³³ *Ibid.*: 76.

³⁴ *Ibid.*: 75.

7. Tran Van Giap, *Phat Giao Viet Nam: Tu Khoi Nguyen Den The Ky XIII* (Buddhism in Vietnam: From the Origins to the 13th Century A.D.), translated from the French, *Le Bouddhisme en Annam: Des Origines Au XIII^e Siecle*, by Tue Sy, Saigon: Van Hanh University, 1968.

8. Lewis Hodus, *Buddhism and Buddhists in China*, USA: Sheba Blake Publishing, 2015.

9. Nguyen Tu Cuong, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thien Uyen Tap Anh*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

10. G. Coedes, *The Making of South East Asia*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966.

11. Nguyen Tai Thu (et al.), *History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, Hanoi, 1992.

12. Le Manh That, *Nghien Cuu ve Mau Tu*, Saigon: Van Hanh University, 1982.

13. Upendra Thakur, *Some Aspects of Asia History and Culture*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1986.

Abbreviation and Bibliography

1. T. *The Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*
2. T. 49, No. 2036. J. Takakusu (ed.) *et al.*, Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai, 1989.
3. T. 50, No. 2059. J. Takakusu (ed.) *et al.*, Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai, 1990.
4. Le Manh That, *Khuong Tang Hoi Toan Tap I*, Saigon: Van Hanh University, 1975.
5. Nguyen Lang, *Viet Nam Phat Giao Su Luan* (Essays on Vietnamese Buddhist History), vol. I, Hanoi: Van Hoc Publishing House, 1994.
6. Thich Mat The, *Viet Nam Phat Giao Su Luoc* (Short History of Buddhism in Vietnam).