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Rising Buddhism in Vietnam

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Rising Buddhism in Vietnam

SIT Vietnam: Culture and Development Fall 2009
By H. Rebecca Lockwood
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Dedication

Without the help and support of the following people this project would not have been possible. I would first like to thank my Academic Director, Cô Thành, for your incredible understanding of Vietnam, boundless network, and your dedication to each of your student's success. I would also like to express my gratitude to the venerable monk Thich Tinh Thiên. Thank you for generously spending hours sharing your knowledge and understanding of Zen with me. I would also like to thank the venerable monk from Yen Tu, Thich Duc Vien, for recognizing an earnest fellow student. Thank you for the immediate kindness and compassion you gave unreservedly.

I would also like to thank the several translators that made this possible. Without your willingness, patience, and understanding of Vietnamese, English, and Buddhism; I would have been very lost. Deepest thanks to Cô Thành, Viet Ha/Vivian, and Nguyễn Văn

Tuyển, for agreeing to patiently translate for me.

And finally, to Sandy, for signing me into your class three years ago and for persistently pressing me to continue my search for understanding, patience, and a certain aptitude for assertion. I am eternally grateful.

“This ISP is written in the spirit of trying to better understand the differences and similarities of some of the world's religions, in this case, Vietnamese Zen Buddhism. May we all have the wisdom and understanding to see them as equal, the compassion to accept the differences, and the strength to each find our own path. In the name of your God and mine.”

“I would like to pass on my own experiences to younger generations and to those who are seeking their own spiritual paths. I would suggest that one should “shop around” (using an American idiom) all world religions with his or her *critical thinking* before making a final decision regarding which religious entities to embrace. I believe that the Buddha preached the same when he told his audience, “Anyone, who blindly trusts my teaching and does not understand what it is, is the one who blasphemes me.””

Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu ¹

Abstract:

¹ In Search of Truth: Three Crucial Questions. Pg. 6

The religion in Vietnam has come to a turning point. Buddhism has been revived and the people of this country are taking interest in this renewed Buddhism. I visited several of the revitalized Truc Lam Zen monasteries and discussed with monks their current practices. I also read an article that addresses this new phenomenon in Vietnam and criticizes its origination. I interviewed two laity about their experiences and opinions about the rising Buddhism in Vietnam today. I found that there are several factors contributing to this new attraction, particularly in the younger generation. I concluded with agreeing with my last two interviewees that as long as the people of Vietnam are content with their newfound spirituality, its origin is of little consequence.

Methodology:

The basic methodology for this project was visiting and discussing basic Zen philosophy with well-practiced monks at either the Sung Phuc Thien Vien monastery or the Truc Lam Yen Tu monastery. Interviews would typically last several hours, spending entire days at the monastery. During these interviews I opted to not formally ask questions. Instead I wanted to hear what the monks thought was most important for me to know. In this way they explained to me the philosophies of Zen Buddhism and how to practice it both formally and informally i.e. monk or laity. The monks were also kind enough to lend me several books written by Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu to read and to better understand Zen. I spent several days at the Sung Phuc Thien Vien monastery. After the discussions were over I would help the nuns and other lay women prepare meals for the monastery. In this way I was able to observe how they interacted with one another and how they approached their work.

I have also chosen to address an article written by Alexander Soucy, *Nationalism, Globalism and the Re-establishment of the Truc Lam Thien Buddhist Sect in Northern Vietnam*. He discusses the revitalization of Zen Buddhism in Vietnam and provides some interesting theories as to why this has occurred. His article is incredibly critical of his theories such as Western influence and figures like Thich Nhat Hanh. He claims that the Zen Buddhism that is being practiced now is not authentically Vietnamese.

I held two interviews outside of the monasteries, one with Hanoi University professor and Zen practitioner of twenty years, Douglas Jardine, and one with Nguyen Phuoc, a member of a Buddhist youth group. These interviews provided contemporary laity views of Buddhism in Vietnam.

The limitations to this project were of course time, translation, and a lack of laity interviews. The amount of time allotted for this research project is realistically three weeks. The information gathered in that time frame is minimal and therefore greatly subjective. Another fundamental hindrance to this project is my inability to speak Vietnamese and therefore led to relying on translators that hopefully understood the subject matter. The third limitation was a lack of laity interviews. I would have liked to have interviewed other members of the Buddhist youth group and understand their personal motivations for joining.

Introduction/Purpose:

This project began as a general interest in Zen Buddhism. In order to satisfy this desire I came to Vietnam to see my college studies in practice. I visited several different Truc Lam (Bamboo Forest) Zen monasteries such as Yen Tu, Sung Phuc, and the Truc Lam monastery in Da Lat. While visiting these monasteries I was accompanied by one of three translators, our Academic Director Co Thanh, Viet Ha, or Nguyen. During these visits the Venerable monks that I talked with spent hours telling me about Zen Buddhism. They discussed both its philosophy and practice. My intention was to merely better understand Zen Buddhism and to witness it practiced. My understanding of Zen had come from books written by Master Thay Thich Nhat Hanh and other books about introductory Buddhism such as *What the Buddha Taught* by Rapula and *The Foundation of Buddhism* by Rupert Gethin. When visiting the monastery I was given several books written by Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu, the father of the revived Truc Lam sect in Vietnam.

After visiting several monasteries I have seen that, in essence, what I have read about Zen Buddhism is actually practiced. As I continued to read the books given to me and after meeting with Douglas Jardin, a Zen practitioner of twenty years, I was questioned as to how Vietnam really applied to what I was researching. What had I really learned that was dependent on my being in Vietnam and not the United States?

During my prior three weeks in Hanoi I had also visited what was seemingly a youth group meeting at one of the local monasteries, which was hugely curious to me. Why was there a group of young people coming to a monastery to learn about Buddhist ethics and teachings? I then remembered an article I had read and facilitated at the beginning of our program by Alexander Soucy. The article criticizes the revival of Zen Buddhism in Vietnam and its claim to be the truest representation of 'Vietnamese' Buddhism, as

suggested by monks such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Thich Thanh Tu. The article also discusses the role and influence that Zen Buddhism in United States has affected the religion's country of origin.

Recognizing the rebirth of Zen Buddhism in Vietnam and its somewhat questionable origin, I decided to refocus this paper on the possible reasons as to why Zen Buddhism is being revived in its own country. In Vietnam there are plenty of ritualistic activities and prayers happening by devout laity, but no teaching of Buddhist doctrine or philosophy. I believe that the revival has much to do with the desire to bring back a more monastic-philosophical practicing Buddhism. I also believe that the younger generation's interest in religion, specifically Buddhism, is a reaction to a secular-materialistic-developing country and a hunger for an involved spirituality. This paper further explores these intuitions.

Encounters with Monks and their modern day Truc Lam practice:

“Any person can come to this religion at any time- any age.”² Looking at me and then pointing to himself, the monk started telling me about a poem written by the first patriarch of the Truc Lam Zen School. Truc Lam literally means ‘Bamboo forest or grove.’ The first patriarch, King Tran Nhan Tong, relinquished his throne to his son and left to find clarity of mind. He went to a bamboo forest and spent several days until his mind had settled and he could see clearly. This poem is highly revered among the monks and nuns of Yen Tu. This poem explains Truc Lam Zen in four simple lines.

The monk continued talking about the poem and its meaning with saying that in order to see Buddha, one must not look in the monasteries or to the mountains. One must look inside one’s self. The Buddha is inside of everyone, already there, waiting to be seen. If it is inside of you, then why would you look in the mountains to find it? In order to realize the Buddha nature inside of us, we must “practice with full mindfulness”.³

He continued explaining the poem saying that the second line talks about simplicity. “We do not need the most comfortable beds or delicious food. We just need a place to sleep and enough food to sustain us.”⁴ He continued by saying that everything is decided by our mindfulness. If we choose to be happy, then we will be happy. Very simple. The third line is about jewels and treasures and where to find them. If we have all the riches of the world inside of us, why try to adorn ourselves with worldly-materialistic ‘jewels.’ In essence, if we have Buddha-nature inside of us already, why would we look outwards to find it?

² Interview with venerable monk Thich Duc Vien

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

The poem concludes with impressing the importance of meditation. It is the fastest way to clear the mind, and the most effective way to have complete control over your mind. “When our mind is clear, we can see, you can see reality; can see people for who they really are, you can see their true selves.”⁵ The objective of realizing your Buddha-nature is to *see things as they really are*.

The monks and nuns of Yen Tu must remember this poem and keep it in their hearts always. This poem teaches the most basic understandings of Buddhism. First, that it is accessible and available to anyone who is interested and willing to devote their time and energy. Second, to realize that you do not need luxury to survive; be content with only what you need. “We eat to live, but we do not live to eat.”⁶ Third, to further realize that you already have everything you will ever need. You already have what you are fruitlessly searching for. Stop searching, looking under rocks and behind trees, look at yourself, try and see your Buddha-nature. And fourth, to practice meditation in order to control your mind, understand its functions, and realize what it is and what it is not.

The venerable monk continued to talk about seeing things as they are and realizing that everything changes. Nothing is permanent. “With an earnest observation, it is true that life is forever changing. But facing a truth, one can react either negatively or positively, depending on his or her point of view.” We have complete control over our feelings and perceptions.

This concept was one of the first relayed to me by Venerable monk Thich Tien Thien of the Sung Phuc monastery. He said the Buddha teaches that we have complete control over our mind. In this way we will see things as they really are. Buddhism teaches that

⁵ Interview with venerable monk Thich Duc Vien

⁶Ibid

everything is impermanent, nothing is constant. Because we believe that everything is permanent we meet everything with resistance. It is a constant battle, but once we discontinue our belief in this illusion we will no longer suffer as we do. Our thoughts and emotions can be incredibly powerful and if we let them, can influence us greatly. However, our thoughts and emotions are not ‘real’ in the sense that they are not everlasting; they are transient. Thus, we should not invest so heavily in them; we should not attach ourselves to our thoughts and emotions. “A dewdrop is so beautiful, especially under the early morning sun. But it won’t last long. And certainly nobody is going to cry when a dewdrop liquefies; because that *is* the way *it is*.”⁷

In our daily life there are generally three things that occupy our thoughts, a job or position, prestige and money, and relationships. Our mind never lets go of these thoughts. They circulate in and out. We worry about finding a job and making enough money or being in a good relationship, and once we have those things, we worry about keeping them safe and losing them. The problem is the constant state worrying. If we loosen our attachment to these things and accept that someday we will lose our job, money, and significant other—whatever the circumstances are, our experience with losing them will supposedly be much easier.

The monk continued the conversation by transitioning into the concept of emptiness, interdependent origination and the law of causation. These are essentially three different ways of saying the same thing. The underlying concept is that there is no ‘self’. There is nothing that exists in the world without the assistance and/dependence of something else. Everything that is something is made up of nothing. Take my person for example. The

⁷ In Search of the Truth or Three Crucial Questions During My Lifetime Practice, by Thich Thanh Tu. Pg. 10

monk said my name is Becca, but I am not Becca. It is a name, a label that someone gave me to differentiate ‘me’ from other things. So if I am not my name, what am I? My skin, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, internal organs, hair, my thoughts, my emotions? No. I am not one of those things. The thing that is Becca exists only when all of those things are brought together. Further, Becca exists because of the sun, trees, ocean, and earth. Without those things, Becca would not exist either. The existence of Becca depends on the existence of everything else in the world. This is the concept of emptiness. I am empty of a self, and therefore I am full of everything. This is also the concept of interdependent origination. Everything has originated from everything else. It is also the law of causation. “Through his meditation, Buddha observed that a *thing does not exist independently by itself*. Every existence is a combination. Without such a composition, nothing actually exists. *To be is to be under the formation of causes and conditions.*”⁸

This is not an easy concept to understand. I am sitting here talking to a monk. I can see him; he is there. But he is nothing. He is made of several nothings and has therefore become another empty something. In my Buddhism class we read a book by Rupert Gethin, *Buddhism*. The chapter on ‘no self’ ended with a quote from a monk. I found then that it explained this concept ideally, and I still do. “Yet the idea of his own existence in the subtle form of the ‘the conceit “I am”’ clings to the aggregates as a faint smell of dirt might still cling to washed clothes.”⁹ It is like saying to yourself, “I know that you are made of nothing, but you are here in front of me. I am looking and see a nothing, but the nothing has made a something.” It is the idea of something being nothing. You have to

⁸ Thich Thanh Tu, 14

⁹ Gethin, 162

realize that you are a something in order to realize that your something is really a compilation of nothings.

For the aspect of emptiness, impermanence, and selflessness, the *Heart of Pranja Sutra* expresses them clearly: "...Sariputra, you should realize that the *reality is not different* from the *emptiness*; the emptiness *is not different from* the reality. In fact, reality *is* emptiness; the emptiness *is* reality. So is the perception, the feeling, the thinking and the consciousness. Sariputra, it means that *all realities are non-forms*. They are neither created, nor destroyed; neither contaminated nor immaculate, neither augmented nor diminished.”¹⁰

It should be made clear that this concept goes beyond our ability to conceptualize; it goes beyond the realm of articulation. To better explain this, let us turn to another ancient religion. “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.” So begins the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu. Thus, if you can explain this concept of nothingness, the idea of enlightenment, you are talking about a false enlightenment. Just as if one were to say, “I am an enlightened being.” S/he is not truly enlightened. It is talking about non-duality. We cannot talk without duality; language limits us in this way. If you say that I am an enlightened being rather than a non-enlightened being that is still thinking dualistically.

“This color may appear awful to you, but may be a favorite of mine. A certain building appears to be a chateau to someone, but to another may be considered a crude hut. With the Bodhi-mind, one is no longer remained in that dualistic world of confused values. Then there would be gone those days of *wrong feelings, incorrect perception, improper*

¹⁰ Thich Thanh Tu, 19

thinking, and bewildered consciousness. The Bodhi-mind is now enlightened and enables one to transcend him or herself into the world of non-duality—the world of Wisdom and Compassion.”¹¹

Zen teaches that the fastest way to find this realization is through meditation. The venerable monk Thich Tinh Thiên spent an afternoon teaching me how to properly meditate. First is learning how to properly sit. There are two positions, the half lotus and the full lotus. The half lotus is when you place one foot on the opposite leg's thigh and tuck the other foot under the other leg. The full lotus has both feet resting on both thighs. This position takes time and practice; you need to build this flexibility. Once you have found a comfortable position, whichever leg is on top, place that hand—left or right—on top of that leg. Then rest the other hand on top, making sure the fingers are overlapping and the thumbs are gently touching each other. The most important thing to remember about your sitting position is your posture. You want your back to be straight and relaxed. To check this, there should be a straight line from your eyes following your nose, to your navel, to your hands. This is to ensure that your spine is straight. Your eyes should then rest three hand-widths in front of you. This way you will not strain your neck. Your body should be relaxed. Once you are in position breathe in and out three cleansing breaths. Every inhalation you are breathing in pure cleansing air. Every time you exhale you are releasing and letting go of all the negative feelings and impurities in your body.

You are now ready to begin meditation. As a beginner, start by counting your breath in one, out two. Continue this until reach the number ten and repeat. The purpose of this is to allow you to be aware of your mind and its focus. If you notice yourself counting past ten you know you are no longer fully focused. When this happens do not become

¹¹ Thich Thanh Tu, 20

frustrated or flustered. Simply recognize that you lost count, and restart. Continue this for the entire meditation period. Once the bell rings signifying the end of the session you begin the slow release. You start by moving your neck forwards and backwards, followed by the rubbing of your hands together and pressing them on your eyes, you then rub your arms, legs, and back and continue until your body is no longer sore.

After you have mastered this concentration technique you can continue without having to count your breath. Instead you simply watch your breath, watch the feeling of it coming in and out of your nostrils. Eventually you realize that you need to breathe in order to live; you must both inhale and exhale. By realizing this, you may also realize how temporary your body is. After years of training you learn that the thoughts that arise throughout the day and during meditation are not real; they are not you. They belong to 'you' in a way that they cannot belong to me, but they are not 'you.' In other words, I am picturing my house right now, somewhere you have never been. This image and the thoughts and feelings that come with it belong to me alone and cannot be shared with anyone else. However, that does not make them 'real.' You are the 'knowing' whatever it is that knows and recognizes your thoughts as thoughts and fleeting. You are not the thought, but the knower.

The point of meditation is to better equip ourselves with the proper means of deep introspection. How could anyone expect to know the truth about anything without first knowing themselves? Each of us sees the world through our own lens. Should we not first become familiar with the lens through which we are seeing? Once we understand how we are seeing things we can begin to understand what the true nature of things are. This becomes possible when we can discern between what things are and how we perceive

them. How we perceive them may not be their true nature. The first patriarch of the Truc Lam sect had such a realization and wrote this poem:

“At a young age, I was not cognizant of Nothingness
 Each spring came, my heart was filled with joy
 But today, I discover the true identity of spring
 Sitting on the meditation bed, I watch the rose petals falling.”

Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu helps interpret the poem by saying, “The third line says that today, he discovers the truth about spring. In other words, he discovers the true identity of himself. Once he discovers it, sitting on the meditation bed, he is able to look at the rose petals falling with a tamed mind.”¹² This is crucial to understanding Zen and Buddhism in general. The point here is not to lose his joy for spring, but no longer be upset by its changing. The point is to lose its dual form of joy and replace it with a non-dualistic form of joy, contentment. Further, it is only after he understands himself that he understands the nature of ‘spring.’ But really, there is no difference between him and spring. In order to understand everything else, one must first understand one’s self.

The most important message emphasized by the monks is to see things as they really are and that the most efficient way to do this is through meditation. The Zen tradition specifically emphasizes an individualistic approach to Buddhism. Meditation is an incredibly personal journey and only the person participating has control over its progress. Zen discourages praying to the Buddha or Bodhisattvas. Praying to the Buddha for good fortune is “rubbish.”¹³ One should come to the pagoda or monastery to remember the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha himself reminded his followers that at

¹² Thich Thanh Tu, 31

¹³ Interview with venerable monk Thich Duc Vien

some point during their journey they would have to let go of everything, including the Buddha.

Literature Review: Alexander Soucy:

This ideology and practice is becoming increasingly more popular in Vietnam and around the world. Buddhism, as with several other religions, has had its fluctuations in popular practice. Vietnam in particular is in the midst of a transition and reintroduction to Zen Buddhism. This rebirth of sorts has not gone unnoticed. One such scholar who has taken particular interest is Alexander Soucy. He contributed an article to Philip Taylor's book, *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam*. Soucy's article discusses and questions the validity of the Truc Lam Zen (Thiền) sect of Buddhism and its claim of best representing "Vietnamese Buddhism."¹⁴ He begins to suggest that the Western interest in Buddhism has played a large role in its revival in its countries of origin, such as Vietnam.

"Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: 'In the history of Vietnamese Buddhism (Zen) is by far the most important sect (1967, p. 4).'"¹⁵ Soucy continues by quoting Thich Nhat Hanh again claiming that Zen is in fact a minority in Vietnam and that it is (or was) rather difficult to find a qualified Zen master in any given village. He continues by saying that the most popularly practiced Buddhism in Vietnam is typically Pure Land, a sect of Mahayana Buddhism alongside some basic Zen practices. "This form of Buddhism (Pure Land) claims that in the remote region of the West, it is under the supervision of the Buddha

¹⁴ Soucy, Alexander, 343

¹⁵ Ibid, 344

Amitabha. Only by reciting this name over and over again would one be received into the land thereafter.”¹⁶

While Thich Nhat Hanh states that Zen is the most important sect, he does not say that it is the majority. It has been said that Zen is the core of Buddhism, the most pure and simple example of the Buddha’s teachings. “The principle of the Buddha’s teachings is to return to ourselves and observe.”¹⁷ This is also the core of Zen. It is perhaps for this reason that Thich Nhat Hanh says that Zen is the most important. The lack of majority does not necessarily “undermine” Zen’s importance as Soucy seems to think. It should be well noted that ‘returning to ourselves and observing’ is the core of Buddhism in general, whatever the sect whether it be Zen, Tibetan, Mahayana, or Theravada. It is each sect’s manifestation of this concept that differs. It does not make any of them right or wrong.

He continues by discussing an interview he had with a lay woman named Côt Tuyet. She explains her practices to him as being namely ritualistic and devotional. She would go twice a month to the local pagoda and make offerings. She would also make offerings at her home altar. She also said that she would make several offerings to various gods and goddesses for good luck and protection from bad luck. According the monks I spoke with, this is not what Buddhism teaches. If this is what is most commonly practiced, which it is or was; then it is no wonder that Thich Nhat Hanh claims that Zen is the most important or truest sect of Buddhism in Vietnam. “True” Buddhism was not being regularly practiced, according to Thich Nhat Hahn. However, this claim to the ‘true’ form of Buddhism is slightly disconcerting. There is no true form of any religion, despite each sect or denomination that claims to be so. I believe that religion is too personal and

¹⁶ Thich Thanh Tu, 26

¹⁷ Thich Thanh Tu, 26

individual to abide by any dogmatic doctrine. Buddhism from what I have studied and learned is typically the least dogmatic religion that I have encountered, so this claim of Zen being the truest and most pure is naturally disconcerting. I do think, however, that when Thich Nhat Hanh says “purest” he means the absence of superstition and belief in deities rather than the “best” form of Buddhism.

As Soucy continues his research in Northern Vietnam, he visits the Truc Lam Sung Phuc monastery. This is incredibly fortunate, as this is where I spent several days speaking with the monks and observing daily activity. He writes that he is astonished by the existence of this monastery and of its structure and buildings saying that it greatly resembles the Ch’an (Zen) monasteries in China.¹⁸ The other Truc Lam monasteries that I visited in Vietnam all greatly resemble each other in so far as they all have meditation halls, a building for eating, monk and nun quarters, and depending on the size of the monastery, libraries and guest houses.

One of his visits at the Sung Phuc monastery was during the monthly all day program that literally hundreds of laity attends. I also attended this monthly event. His description of the day is similar to what I experienced. In the morning there is about an hour or so of praying and chanting, followed by a lecture given by the head abbot of the monastery. This is then followed by a vegetarian lunch and an hour and half of rest. After the rest time there is an hour of meditation. During meditation one or two of the monks walk around with a large stick watching the practitioners to make sure no one falls asleep. I agree with Soucy’s observation that it was an unusual experience and truly incredible to witness.

¹⁸ Soucy, 348

Soucy then delves into the conversation about Buddhism coming to the West. He claims that the Western adaptation merely “accentuates meditation practices and seeks a ‘pure’ Buddhism untainted by culture-specific ‘superstitions.’”¹⁹ This statement has several layers. First, I have not visited many monasteries in my country, the United States, which for all intents and purposes I will associate with the West. However, the monasteries that I have visited did place importance on meditation, but not solely like Soucy is claiming. It was a more holistic approach to Buddhism that included the Buddha’s teaching of the four noble truths, eight fold path etc. Meditation was of course included in these monastic practices, just as the Buddha instructed. Second, each culture accepts practices and traditions of other cultures and adapts it to its own. Why does Soucy single out the ‘West’ as misrepresenting Buddhism? Perhaps countries like the United States are simply incorporating practices into their own culture. Finally, Soucy says that the West is looking for a more ‘pure’ form of Buddhism. The core of Buddhism, as with every religion, is the same regardless of where you live. It is the practices and rituals that condition the religion according to the country and culture in which it is being practiced. The religion itself does not change. Using Islam as an example; every Muslim believes, according to the Koran, that there is only one benevolent and merciful God. They are very clear about this. There are five pillars of Islam, believing in the one true God, Allah, is the first pillar, followed by praying five times a day, fast during Ramadan, be charitable to the poor, and finally the pilgrimage to the holy city, Mecca. These pillars do not change in regards to your location. It is merely the manifestation of them that differs.

¹⁹ Soucy, 349

Soucy's focus changes slightly to how the Western Buddhism is affecting Buddhism's countries of origin. He explores the differences between the new and revived Truc Lam school with the traditional practices of northern Vietnam. The monks that he met with told him that they followed the Truc Lam Zen school founded by former king of Vietnam, Tran Nhan Tong (1258- 1308). This school eventually died out with the third patriarch. Truc Lam is unique in that this form of Zen did not trickle down from China; it originated in Vietnam. However, after its descent, it was revived by Zen master Thich Thanh Tu. The renewed Truc Lam school is not however exactly the same as the original Truc Lam school. Thich Thanh Tu's intention was to recreate the spirit of the Truc Lam Zen, not necessarily replicate it. He actually admits in his own writings and on various websites that much of the recreation was of his own construction.²⁰

“I only combine three important key ideas from the historical Zen transmissions from China to Vietna. The first key idea is from patriarch Hue Kha, the second one is from patriarch Hue Nang, and the third one is from patriarch Truc Lam Dau Da. Putting together their discernment, enlightenment, and practice, I developed a unique Zen method for us to practice at our monasteries.”²¹

While it is clear that this new form of Buddhism is more or less a compilation of others and in essence simply a reinterpretation and creation, it does not make it ‘un-Vietnamese’. It does in so far that it has not been practiced as long as other traditional practices of Vietnam. It does however still transmit core practices and concepts of Zen Buddhism. In a similar way, if one were to walk down the streets of Saigon s/he might see a Kentucky Fried Chicken. I think we can agree that KFC did not originate in Vietnam; however it is here now and has incorporated itself into the current Vietnamese

²⁰ Soucy, 352

²¹ Soucy, 352 (Thich Thanh Tu 1998 p.3)

culture. It is now a part of the Vietnamese culture. In this way, the new Truc Lam Zen School is also Vietnamese. It does not have to have originated from a particular country to be a part of that country's present culture.

Soucy continues to criticize Western's Buddhism as being "obsessed" with meditation making it incredibly different from the Buddhism that is practiced in Asia. He quotes Charles Prebish saying, "American converts treat Buddhism as if it were a onefold path, focusing on meditation and little, if anything else."²² I do not consider myself a 'convert', but the fact that I have been taught differently than this proves that Prebish's statement is not absolute.

Thich Thanh Tu greatly emphasizes meditation as the West seems to do. He claims that it is more authentic than other practices that are commonly practiced in Vietnam such as devotionism, ritual, or merit-making through offerings. It is foolish to say that one tradition is more authentic than another, but it is not foolish to observe the differences between two practices. In this case the practice of just devotionism lacks a great deal of Buddhist teaching, just as the practice of solely meditating equally lacks a great deal of Buddhist teachings. Devotionism lacks the individual introspection. Meditation lacks the inclusion of the outer community. Thich Thanh Tu writes in *Keys to Buddhism*, "He knew clearly how all things come into existence and are destroyed. This wisdom is called sarvatha or omniscience. Embodying this wisdom, he taught others how to become enlightened."²³ The embodiment of his wisdom, his enlightenment, was to *show and be an example* to others. Soucy and Prebish are correct in criticizing those who just meditate and do not continue further. One should first meditate, come to their own realization, but

²² Soucy, 353 (Prebish, 1999, p. 63)

²³ Thich Thanh Tu, *Keys to Buddhism*, p 14

then continue to live and help other people find peace also. It is the latter part of this statement that is most crucial, how he *embodies* the wisdom. The Gospel of Matthew also shares this view. If you have any hope of helping others, you must first help yourself. “Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ and behold, the log is in your own eye? “You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”²⁴

There is a new found appetite for a balance between these two practices. While Zen does emphasize meditation, it also emphasizes compassion and charity. There has been a surge of interest in Buddhism in Vietnam recently. Soucy’s article appears in Philip Taylor’s book which is titled, *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Vietnam*. The people of Vietnam are becoming re-enchanted. Soucy states that during the return of Thich Nhat Hanh it was clearly indicated how interested people were for his form of Buddhism. Soucy calls it a “globalized Buddhist Movement that diminishes the value of cultural particularities.”²⁵ This form of Zen remains neutral so that it can be adapted by several different cultures that can then mold it to their own particularities. “His (Thich Thanh Tu) primary goal is to renovate Vietnamese Zen Buddhism, and make it beneficial to all of us, regardless of our ethnicity.”²⁶

Asking lay practitioners Soucy finds several reasons as to why they have started their new practice. The first possibility he encounters is meditating for one’s health. He was actually advised by an acolyte at the Sung Phuc monastery to try practicing meditation as his life was clearly busy and stressful. Meditation would help alleviate some of his unnecessary stress and improve his health. I have heard a similar account from a lay

²⁴ Gospel of Matthew 7:4-5

²⁵ Soucy, 354

²⁶ Soucy, 364

woman at the Yen Tu monastery. She said that she was a farmer and worked very hard in the fields all day. At night she would meditate to clear her mind and calm herself after a hard day's work. She said that she feels better afterwards and that all she does is follow her breath.

Meditation is not sought after solely for its health benefits. It is also known for its higher spirituality. "It is considered to be a higher Buddhist path than the devotional Pure Land practices that the majority of people engage in."²⁷ A monk from the Sung Phuc monastery relayed to Soucy that meditation was not a better path, but a quicker one and better for those who are spiritual and committed enough to do so. This may seem elitist and have a sense of superiority, but when I read this paragraph I am reminded of a story the Buddha told. In the story there are children inside of a burning house. In order to lure them out of the house the Buddha tells them that there are toys outside. The point of this story is to know your audience. If you cannot have an in depth philosophical conversation with someone about the concept of emptiness, then you need to find another way to communicate. The Buddhism rising and continuing to thrive in Vietnam tries to address everyone. The Truc Lam Zen School has become available for those searching for a different spiritual experience. "What has changed in this case is that Zen practice—long accorded the cloak of orthodoxy—has been made available for those who have the time and inclination."²⁸

Soucy concludes his article saying that Zen as the core of Vietnamese Buddhism has been more or less a myth. He claims that its new found fame is largely due to overseas Vietnamese who have been introduced to figures like Thich Nhat Hanh and have

²⁷ Soucy, 357

²⁸ Soucy, 365

consequently brought it back to Vietnam. This progress has also been greatly aided by Thich Thanh Tu and the Truc Lam Zen School. Most of the available literature is about Zen Buddhism in Vietnam, however it is difficult to discern what was actually practiced centuries ago. What we can do is observe what is practiced now and hypothesize about why. I agree that devotional practices are seemingly the majority. However, the laity of the Truc Lam Zen School is growing. I am exploring some other possible reasons for the sudden interest in learning about and practicing Buddhism.

Douglas Jardine:

After visiting the monasteries I decided it would be prudent to interview Douglas Jardine, a professor at the University of Hanoi, who has studied and practiced Zen Buddhism for twenty years. He has lived in Vietnam for four years now and has paid close attention to the progress of Zen Buddhism in Vietnam and the Vietnamese reaction to Buddhism in general. One of the first things he relayed to me was that he has also visited the bordering country of Laos. And while visiting made an interesting comparison saying that while both countries were 'Buddhist' countries Laos was a different more involved Buddhism. He described it as a community based religion rather than a materialistic one.

Buddhism is unique in that it is generally less dogmatic than almost any other religion. It relies on personal experience rather than doctrine. Doctrine holds importance and teaching, of course, but Buddhism relies on the subjective individual which cannot be restricted by doctrine. In this way we cannot say that devotionism or ritualism hold little to any value, this is not my intent. As I have made clear above, generalizations

usually do more harm than good. My intent is to show that there is a genuine search for a new depth happening in Vietnam.

Another example of this, provided by Douglas Jardine, was an experience he has while he was in India. India is the birthplace of Buddhism. During his time there many of his friends would come up to him with enthusiasm and give him this popular book called, *The Power of Now*, by Eckhart Tolle. For those of you who have read this book or others like it may be shocked that the people of India were so inspired by this book. It is in essence a boiled down-twelve step self-help book using the basic principles and concepts of Buddhism. Does it not seem odd that the people of India, the birthplace of Buddhism would need a book such as this? In my own opinion, I think the foundations Buddhism have been forgotten and are currently being re-found. I hold the same suspicion for Vietnam. I think Buddhism that involves more than devotional and ritual activities have been forgotten and are now being sought out by the spiritually hungry.

Vietnam is in a unique place with several aspects of their country and culture, not just religion. “Vietnamese Buddhism and the culture in general are at a genuine crossroads. They are still deciding how much spirituality they want or need in their lives.”²⁹ While it is honestly shocking that a book like *The Power of Now* would be widely respected and used in India, it is and has been apparently quite helpful. If this is the case who am I to criticize it? A similar situation is happening in Vietnam, which is the main argument of Soucy’s article. While Thich Nhat Hanh has greatly influenced the West, and a ‘Westernized’ Buddhism has come back to Vietnam; if it is helpful for the people of this country, why does it matter where it came from? These teachings originated in India and

²⁹ Interview with Douglas Jardine, Monday Nov. 29th 2009

spread Eastward hundreds of centuries ago. In some places they were lost and forgotten and now have been rediscovered all over the world—east and west.

Douglas Jardine has particularly noticed this in his students. In the four years that he has been teaching at Hanoi University he has experienced the spectrum of apathy to enthusiasm. His first year of students seemed to disinterested, concerned only with finding a decent job and making a lot of money. This seems to be a rather accurate reflection of Vietnam's surge of materialism. It is inescapable here. Vietnam seems to have been in a one-tracked mindset towards modernity and commercialism so much so that it has left some things behind. The coming generations are no longer satisfied with just making money and fitting into the new industrialized Vietnam. There is a new awareness coming about. His students are aware and care about things like the environment, their heritage, and religion.

Buddhist Youth Groups:

During my time in Hanoi I was also able to visit Chua Cot, another Buddhist pagoda. Every Sunday night there is a group of youth that come and discuss Buddhism with a monk. They have formed a “youth group” if you will, who want to better themselves as individuals and therefore better their society. In order to do this they ask a monk to come and lecture them about Buddhist teachings and ethics. To further discuss this in detail I talked with Nguyen Phuoc a member of the youth group. He said that the objective is to raise awareness of one's self and to acquire proper knowledge and morals before entering the realm of charming society.

Learning the basics of Buddhism will better prepare and equip them with the right attitudes about life so that they will not be so easily seduced by things such as greed or 'wrong thinking'. The youth that are participating are not exactly interested in becoming monks or nuns or even interested in becoming fully awakened, according to Phuoc. He says that the point of this group is to help engage those who are interested in Buddhism. He also said that the youth know little about Buddhism and therefore becoming monks or nuns would be too serious. This group offers an introduction to Buddhism that is catered towards a different audience, which is essentially what a youth group is. It is learning about serious things in an amusing and enjoyable way for youth.

Phuoc offered a new reason for the decline and growth of Buddhism. He suggests that the many wars Vietnam has had to face have greatly influenced religion. When the emperor was still in control of the government, everyone had to follow his religion, which was Buddhism. With the coming of Communism there was no official religion and therefore some or most of its practice was lost unless your family chose to continue. However, comparative religion of any kind is not taught in school, so the opportunities for the younger generations to be exposed to religions, including Buddhism, became increasingly less. Again, if your family practiced Buddhism and continues to do so, then you might have had exposure to it. In some cases, however, even if members of your family are practicing Buddhists, they may not bring you to the pagoda or monastery.

He made another great distinction between the north and the south. The north has always been more religiously affiliated than the south. It borders China, which has inevitably influenced the religion and many other aspects of Vietnam having occupied them for a thousand years. The emperor also lived in the north and since the people had

to follow his religion, it was more prevalent in the north. The roles have switched. While the south has become more modernized and apt to adapt western likenesses, it has also warmly received Thich Nhat Hanh. To my surprise I was told by Phuoc and Viet Ha, my interpreter, that the south was more religious than the north. I was told to come to the north since this is where Buddhism originated. The southern Buddhism has been revived and reminded of the roots and foundation of Buddhism and as a result has become more religiously involved whereas the north is still finding its way. Phuoc says that in the north the people do not understand Buddhism anymore. They worship some kind of supernatural entity that will bring them good fortune. The groups of youth that are searching for a deep understanding of Buddhism have not been satisfied with this form of "Buddhism." The very existence of these groups demonstrates this.

I continued to ask Phuoc about the motivation for the new interest in learning. He told me simply that the desire comes from within and that learning as a group is encouraging and supportive. It is easier to experience this learning with other people who can relate to each other. While each desire is individual, everyone has the desire to understand the fundamentals of Buddhism in order to live a better life in Vietnam. The individuals are not necessarily interested in becoming enlightened, which of course is the hopeful realization of a Buddhist practitioner.

Another reason for the formation of these groups is to combat the foreign influence that permeates Vietnam today. This is incredibly apparent in Saigon. There is so much foreign influence in the city that it is almost difficult at times to remember that I am in Vietnam. I feel like this is less obvious in Hanoi. It seems as though the northern city has in some way maintained more of its Vietnamese culture more carefully than the southern.

Ancestral worship and devotionism, as stated previously, has been widely practiced in all of Vietnam for centuries. For some reason religion, particularly Buddhism has fluctuated. Presently Vietnam is at a turning point in this fluctuation. The south being more apt to foreign influence has warmly received Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings. Phuoc says that the south is more flexible and more religious than the north. The north is becoming more religious with the spreading influence of the Truc Lam Zen schools and the youth groups all over the city starving for depth in their spirituality and thirst for living 'rightly' in a corrupt society.³⁰

A large part of this combating corrupt society is due to materialism. The youth are particularly influenced by this as they are typically the target audience of advertisements. The participants of these groups are those resistant and continually unsatisfied with materialism. The ideology of materialism is dissatisfaction; it thrives on people's gluttony. Materialism is empty of any satisfaction and once one is able to realize this, they are free from the bonds of corrupt society. The youth have chosen Buddhism to show them the way out of this grasp of greediness.

Conclusion:

The revitalization of Buddhism is a many faceted phenomenon. The rising interest and practice of Zen has greatly influenced all areas of Vietnam. The influences of Thich Nhat Hahn have been warmly received in the south just as the influences of Thich Thanh Tu have been received in northern and central Vietnam. The Truc Lam Zen monasteries all over Vietnam are growing. Yen Tu and Sung Phuc are both heavily visited by Buddhist

³⁰ Although Hanoi is more culturally intact than Saigon, that does not infer that Hanoi is also more religiously intact or that the culture is not corrupt.

laity. The basic concepts of Buddhism, such as emptiness and no-self are becoming more widely available and understood. The monks continually emphasized the importance of seeing things as they are and to live simply. This is not always an easy task for a country that is rising in new-found luxuries. For those who are not finding satisfaction in the ever dissatisfying materialism, many are turning to the basic practices of Zen Buddhism to help maintain a clear and pure mind.

While the origination and authenticity of Zen Buddhism in Vietnam is under constant scrutiny by academic scholars such as Alexander Soucy, the people of Vietnam do not seem resentful or resistant. Many Vietnamese continue to be satisfied and devout with their ancestral worship and present form of Buddhism, while others are in search for a different experience. If the experience they are looking for is satisfied by the newly revived Truc Lam sect, why be opposed to it? If the people are content and receiving the help and spirituality they are looking for, then its origination does not truly matter. Perhaps Soucy's real argument is the naming and labeling of things. It is unnecessary to discuss what is most Vietnamese or what the truest form of Buddhism is. All that matters is for the individual to be satisfied and content by whatever path they choose to take.

Everything Returns to Nothing
By Tue Trung

Following the nothingness appears the Reality,
Reality and Nothingness are thus in common.
Misery and Happiness not distinct originally,
Truth and Illusions are absolutely none.
The body is a fantasy, its karma a shade,
The mind a light wind, its nature a dandelion.
Stop asking about Buddha or devil, life and death,
All stars turn North, all streams to ocean.

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