

## RULES IN A ZEN MONASTERY IN VIETNAM OF EARLY XVIII<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

*Lê Mạnh Thát*

*Vice Rector,*

*Vietnam Buddhist University*

*in Ho Chi Minh City*

A Buddhist life starts with mindfulness and ends up also with mindfulness. Because of this, when Buddhism is introduced to any country, mindfulness would be the first lesson that the master teaches his disciples. That's why early Buddhist materials still extant in Vietnam mostly related to mindfulness in one way and another. We have the case of Khuong Tang Hoi (?-280), the first Zen master writing a commentary *Annapanasati sutra* where he described the method of mindfulness practiced by the Vietnamese Buddhists of his time.

This method usually called *Dharmagate of six wonders* (Lục diệu pháp môn) begins with counting the breath (sổ), then following it (tùy), then concentrating on the tip of the nose (chỉ), contemplating our physical body (quán), then returning all the thinking to the mind (hoàn) and finally attaining a perfectly clean mind (tịnh). This method promises that if people practice it successfully then they will see the Buddha in person themselves.<sup>1</sup> By the middle of the V<sup>th</sup> century C.E., Vietnamese Buddhists began to raise the question of why we couldn't see the Buddha when we practicing Buddhism by the method of Dharmagate of six wonders as Khuong Tang Hoi promised. The discussion, which we now can read through the six letters still extend in the Chinese Tripitaka of Taisho edition,<sup>2</sup> is carried out between Vietnamese King Lý Miếu (?420-?480) and two Vietnamese monks Đạo Cao and Pháp Minh. This prepared the ground for the appearance of Bodhidharma's theory of mindfulness which was propagated in Vietnam by Vinitaruci (?-594). This theory identifies the Buddha with our mind. So, to see the Buddha is to see our own mind. Therefore, to practice mindfulness is to process our own mind (*biện tâm*). King Trần Thái Tông (1218-1277), Zen master, Vietnamese national hero, has put. Mindfulness has a long history in Vietnam. But a few decades ago, when Thich Nhat Hanh's method of Mindfulness became popular among the Westerners, people start to seriously study and translate mindfulness materials from Vietnam. And there's a trend of thought, saying that the existence of mindfulness history in Vietnam is just a rumor.<sup>3</sup> This trend occurred because in present days, if we visit any Zen temples in Vietnam, we will see the monks in these temples not only practice mindfulness, but also recite the name of the Buddha Amitabha of the Pure land school and the Suragama dharani of the Vajrayana. This syncretic practice of mindfulness leads people to wonder whether there exist a real school of mindfulness. Now that Thich Nhat Hanh's method of mindfulness gains such a popularity the world over, therefore, we will not waste our time discussing if it is right to affirm such a

---

<sup>1</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Tổng tập văn học Phật giáo Việt Nam 2*, Tp.HCM: NXB. Tp.HCM, 2001, pp.307-309.

<sup>2</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Lịch sử Phật giáo Việt Nam 1*, Tp.HCM: NXB. Tp.HCM, 2006, pp.423-628.

<sup>3</sup> Cuong Tu Nguyen, Rethinking Vietnamese Buddhist History: Is the *Thiền uyển tập anh* a "Transmission of the Lamp" text? in *Essays into Vietnamese Pasts*, K.W. Taylor và John K. Whitmore edited, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995, p.108.

trend of thought. Instead, we will concentrate on looking for materials related to the organization of mindfulness hall in the olden day Vietnam and *Quy ước thiền đường* (Rules for a Mindfulness Hall) written by Zen master Minh Giác Kỳ Phương (1682-1744) is a typical example for our study of the life of mindfulness practitioners in a Buddhist temple in Vietnam.

#### 1. On the manuscript:

We discovered the work in a manuscript copied down in the year 1804 by Zen master Toàn Thê Linh Nguyên (1765-1844). After finishing copying, he offered the manuscript to the Thập Tháp Di Đà temple where the author, Minh Giác Kỳ Phương, was its second abbot. The whole manuscript is written on sandalwood paper, of the size 20x30. It consists of 17 folios, each folio has two pages, each page has seven lines, each line has from 17 to 20 characters written in Chinese style from left to right and from upper part down. The characters are clearly written in square manner, so we can read easily. Among these 17 folios, the first 8 belongs to *Quy ước thiền đường*. The remaining 9 folios are pertaining to *Thiền đường chung bảng chỉ tịnh thường tắc* (Regular Rules for Bell and Wooden Board Announcing the Resting in a Mindfulness Hall) and *Đại chúng bố-tát tụng luật thế đầu quy cũ thường tắc* (Regular Rules for the Mahasangha to do Uposatha, to recite the Pratimoksa, to shave the heads). In these three works, we find many additions and corrections. The origin stems from the existing of other manuscripts. On folio 1a, 2a and 2b, we find mentioning of other text (tha bản). Therefore, Linh Nguyên when copying down *Thiền đường chung bảng chỉ tịnh thường tắc*, has in his hand other manuscript for his reference to add some words or phrases, sometimes he crossed out some words or phrases and replaced them with new ones. Interestingly enough, when doing these additions and corrections, in order to make sure that these are his and not of later hand, we see on folio b his own seal Linh Nguyên stamps on the borderline of upper margins and the text above the line 4 and 5. The seal with his stamps on the title of the book *Quy ước thiền đường* in red ink. Thus, the manuscript contains three different works, i.e., *Quy ước thiền đường*, *Thiền đường chung bảng chỉ tịnh thường tắc* and *Đại chúng bố-tát tụng luật thế đầu quy cũ thường tắc*. This is a precious manuscript still extent which would not only give us a view on the Buddhist life in Vietnam of XVIII<sup>th</sup> and XIX<sup>th</sup> centuries in general, but also the practice in mindfulness in a Buddhist Zen temple of that period in particular.

#### 2. On the author:

Among these three works, *Quy ước thiền đường* is clearly written down as authored by Minh Giác Kỳ Phương. As for *Thiền đường chung bảng chỉ tịnh thường tắc* and *Đại chúng bố-tát tụng luật thế đầu quy cũ thường tắc*, the authorship is not shown. But we could also attribute to Minh Giác Kỳ Phương. The reason lies in the tradition of copying books of the Từ Quang temple where Linh Nguyên succeeded his master Pháp Chuyên Luật Truyền Diệu Nghiêm (1738-1801) to be its abbot. This tradition usually copies down the series of works of one author and have them bound together in one volume without indicating their authorships. We have the typical case of Linh Nguyên's younger Dharma brother Toàn Nhật Quang Đài (1757-1834). So, we could consider Minh Giác Kỳ Phương as author of these two works. Minh Giác Kỳ Phương is a great disciple of Siêu Bạch Hoán Bích (1635-1715). He traveled and worked with him in many areas in propagate, to set up new Lin-chi mindfulness temples in Central and Southern Vietnam. At one time, he was the abbot of Royal National temple Thiên Mụ in Huế (1725). His works still extent consist of *Kiệt hạ an cư thị chúng* (Rainy

season retreat admonitions) and *Đạo Nguyên thiền sư bi minh* (Dao Nguyen Zen master's Inscription), besides those three above mentioned books.

### 3. On the content:

*Quy ước thiền đường* divides the content into five main parts.

Part one is the introduction, where Minh Giác Kỳ Phương explains the necessity of putting the life in a mindfulness hall into regulations and set up the same time 40 rules for punishment, of which, the first one is related to those who are not seriously practice mindfulness and the second to those who does not follow the advices of the Order of mindfulness guide etc...

In part two, Minh Giác Kỳ Phương talks about the practice of ko-an.

Part three, he talks on the need to set up the rule of not living together and establishes 19 rules for those who live in a mindfulness temple. If they violate one of these rules, they will be not allowed to live in the Mahasangha of the Mindfulness hall. The first rule of this Part is related to those who “not respect Three Gems, are not pitiful to their parents.” The second rule is related to those who have wrong heretic views, deny the law of causality, do not accept the mindfulness hall restriction etc...

In part four, Minh Giác Kỳ Phương set up thirty four cases which can be punished if they are violated, of which the first one is related to not respecting the meditation hall regulations, and the second is related to the man on duty not reporting their faults, the third one is related to the man on duty not giving precise order ect...

The fifth part is concerned about establishing the rules not allowing anyone to stay in a meditation monastery when he or she violated them. These excommunicating rules consists of twenty-two in number. The interesting thing is that the first four of these twenty-two excommunicating rules are not identical in order with the first four Parajika articles of the Patimokha. According to Minh Giác Kỳ Phương, the first excommunicating rule is related to anyone who claims himself to have attained the sainthood. The other three are related to the “discussion of political matter,” “disparaging the master and the elder in the Sangha” and “criticizing your fellow practitioners.” These three rules are of interest to us because they show strong influence from the Chinese Buddhist monastic life during the era of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) where Buddhist monks were imprisoned for long years due to political reasons.

On the other two works, ie. *Thiền đường chung bảng chỉ tịnh thường tắc* and *Đại chúng bố-tát tụng luật thể đầu quy cũ thường tắc*, the first one is consisting of five pages (page 1a1-6a1), establishing a signal system regulating the life in a mindfulness monastery through striking the bell and the wooden board. The second work, ie. *Đại chúng bố-tát tụng luật thể đầu quy cũ thường tắc*, is concerned about the way of carrying out the Uposatha, the recitation of Pratimoksa and the shaving of the heads. According to this work, the head shaving occurs in the morning of the fourteenth day. For the Uposatha, it is interesting to know that they mainly recite the ten precepts and twenty four conducts of a sramanerika and then recite the Brahmajalavinaya for those who have Bodhisattva vows. This means that they did not recite the Pratimoksa articles for those who have the Bhikkhu ordination. This indicates the traditional zen view both in China and Vietnam that the mindfulness practitioner has no obligation to uphold the Pratimoksa as a main tenet of a Buddhist life for those who get out of the household chores. Some of them even went so far as to declare that they would set up their own precepts of Vinaya which later on known as a *pure regulation by Baizhang*.

Baizhang here is famous Baizhang Huihai (720-814AD). Baizhang's view of Vinaya here is very interesting on account of his determination of Vinaya as a normal set of regulations which any organization would put into effect for its existence. In any way, the appearance of *Quy ước thiền đường* is typical lay embodiment of Baizhang Huihai's view of the Vinaya. Actually, after time of Minh Giác Kỳ Phương, that means in the XVII and XVIII century of Vietnam, there are various views of the Vinaya. Some even went so far as to say that one needs to have three refuges and five precepts to be a monk or a nun in a Buddhist temple.<sup>4</sup>

With the discovery of *Quy ước thiền đường*, it gives us many inside into the mindfulness practices in Vietnam of the XVII and XVIII century. First of all, it completely rejects some erroneous view put out by some that there is no such a thing as mindfulness practice, it is just a "rumor." Secondly, *Quy ước thiền đường* shows us how a mindfulness training is carried out in a monastic life. That is it gives us very detailed view of a mindfulness practitioner up to his activities each day and what kind of regulations he should observe for his mindfulness practice to be fruitful. And lastly, it indicates that mindfulness plays a very important role in Buddhist life in Vietnam of the olden day as still plays the same role in nowadays Buddhist life which typical master like Thích Nhất Hạnh.

---

<sup>4</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *A complete work of Như Trừng Lâm Giác*, Manuscript, 1982.