

On the Form of Existence of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam

Hoang Trong So

Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies, Vol. 13, December 1999

On the Form of Existence of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam

Hoang Trong So

While the study of Theravāda Buddhism is increasing more and more in the world, little is known and very few books have been written about Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism, even in Vietnamese.⁽¹⁾

Theravāda Buddhism was officially introduced into Vietnam from Cambodia in 1939 by an overseas Vietnamese monk living in Cambodia named Hộ Tông (*Vamsarakkhita*, 護宗) and his colleagues. He taught at the Bửu Quang temple (*Ratanaramsyārāma*, 寶光寺), which is considered the first Theravāda Buddhist temple in Vietnam.⁽²⁾ There are two kinds of Theravāda Buddhism in my country; Vietnamese and Khmer. The form of existence of the latter is the embodiment of Campuchian Theravāda Buddhism. In this paper I will focus entirely on Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism. Founded and developing in a Mahāyāna Buddhist country like Vietnam, Vietnamese Theravāda has experienced many problems of adaptation such as the dominant cultural environment and traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Based on the most recent report of the Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha, among the total of 28,787 of monks and nuns and 14,048 Buddhist temples all over Vietnam, the Theravāda monks number 7,687 with 469 temples.⁽³⁾ However, the amount of Theravāda monks who are actually of Vietnamese nationality is only 1/5 of that number and all the others are Khmer Theravāda monks. Compared to the other Theravāda Buddhist countries, the way of practice and lifestyle of the Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhists is the same, but it still has a purely national color of its own and outstanding characteristics of its form of existence.

Here I will discuss some of the ways in which Theravāda has had to change and adapt to in the Vietnamese context, while many fundamental principles and distinctive features have continued much as they are found in other Theravāda Buddhist societies. What makes Theravāda distinctive from Mahāyāna are: wearing yellow robes in daily life as well as in recitation of sūtras, taking one meal a day, reciting the Pāli scriptures, going for alms, etc.

In contrast to such clearly distinctive features, I will focus on such areas of change and adaptation as induction rituals, the training and education for novices and monks, and finally on important festivals and ceremonies, both national and more specifically Theravāda.

Induction: Way of Practice

In Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand, etc. the countries where Theravāda Buddhism is considered the national religion, there are two stages of practice, that is to say, *sāmaṇera* (novice) and *bhikkhu*. According to the tradition still practiced today, all young boys and men between the age of 7–15 should once in their lives become a *pabbajita* (one who goes out from home and undertakes the holy life). An auspicious day is always chosen in the period of *vassa* (winter residence) to celebrate the *sāmaṇera* ceremony at the temple.⁽⁴⁾ They need not practice for a period of time before becoming *sāmaṇera*. However, the case in Vietnam is different. Another first stage which is called the practice as a *điêu* (beginning practitioner)⁽⁵⁾ is included. Not everyone but only those who vow to go out from the home and undertake the holy life forever through the permission of his parents and the acceptance of the temple's abbot, regardless of their age are allowed. Then after being ordained Five Precepts, he must practice one or two years or more as a *điêu*. This is a regulated rule and a difference from the other Theravāda Buddhist countries.

A second difference is that when celebrating the *pabbajjā* ceremony, the *điêu* will shave his head, not completely but leave part of the hair. The reason

is that after becoming a *pabbajita* for a long or short time, he may return to the worldly life. The remaining hair is considered as a symbol of the chance for those who cannot endure the practice. Furthermore, a newcomer, who enters the holy life, at first has remaining afflictions (*kilesa*, 煩惱) and craving (*taṇhā*, 渴愛), which are symbolized in the remaining hair. This style is also used for both Mahāyāna and Mendicant *điêu*, male and female.

A third difference is that in Burma and Sri Lanka, as a boy he must during his lifetime go forth from his worldly home and receive the Ten Precepts of a *sāmaṇera*. He will be sent to train and get accustomed to the temple's life for a period of time. Normally, on the day of his ordination there will be a parade to the temple. The boy, who is between the age of 7–15, will be adorned with royal clothes, riding a horse with a golden canopy covered above, accompanied by his relatives.⁽⁶⁾ This is a very important ceremony that cannot be seen in Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism.

The *điêu* must observe all the rules and discipline of the temple, always obey senior monks, not be lazy but diligent (*padhāna*, 精勤) in reciting sūtras, doing work, studying and memorizing sūtras regulated for a *điêu*. After one or two years or more, when the head priest sees that he is qualified to be a *sāmaṇera*, he will choose a good day to ordain him to be a *sāmaṇera*.

In Vietnam, the period of practicing as a *điêu* is taken seriously, because this is the first important step for him to go forth into the holy life. During this time, if he cannot endure the hardship and strictness of practice, then he himself can return to the worldly life. This is, in my opinion, a direct influence of the traditional way of practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Today, most of Theravāda *điêu*s are sent to public schools to attend worldly educational courses, and also to Buddhist schools as well. If they do not have the graduate certificate of the Buddhist Elementary School, they cannot advance to higher level of Buddhist studies.

Study: A Mixture Between Two Traditions

Formerly Theravāda monks attended either Buddhist school operated by their Saṅgha or inner classes of temple. From the day of our nation's unification, 1975, up to now, most monks have been sent to public schools to attend worldly educational courses, and also to Buddhist schools as well. Thus at Buddhist schools operated by the Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha of each region the Theravāda monks share the same course with the other sects, i.e. Mahāyāna and Mendicant. As we see in other Theravāda Buddhist countries that most monks only study the Pāli language, but the case of Vietnam it is different. In Vietnam, apart from the Pāli, Theravāda monks also study Chinese language and some Mahāyāna scriptures as well.

To make it clearer here, I will give an example of subjects of second year applied presently in the study program of four-year courses of the Vietnam Institute of Buddhist Studies (越南佛教學院) in Hochiminh City.⁽⁷⁾

On Buddhist subjects, they study *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Āgama Sūtra*, *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (金剛經, *Diamond Sūtra*), *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (法華經, *Lotus Sūtra*), *Vinaya Studies*, *Buddhāvataṃsakānāma-mahāvaiṇya-sūtra* (華嚴經), *Sūtra of Full Awakening* (圓覺經) and *Practical Meditation*; as well as non-Buddhist subjects such as *Psychology*, *Religious Studies*, *Aesthetics*, *English*, *Pāli*, *Chinese*, and *History of Vietnam*.⁽⁸⁾

Thus general thoughts and concepts about Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures such as *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtrā* (金剛經, *Diamond Sūtra*), *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (法華經, *Lotus Sūtra*), etc., are imbued in them and it is possible, I think, that a bridge of sympathy combining the two Buddhist schools has been built in Vietnam. That is an outstanding characteristic of Vietnam Buddhism in general and Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism in particular; and it represents the harmonious combination between the two different great traditions.

Beside studying and other facets of activities, even in the *upasampadā*

(higher ordination) ceremony held for monks and nuns, we can see the presence of superior Theravāda monks in the members of the Assembly of *Three Masters and Seven Eye-witnesses* (三師七証). Formerly each sect would often hold the ceremony separately with their own rites and ordination, but in Vietnam, when the unification of the three sects have been established, the ceremony of higher ordination is always held with their participation. Precept-receivers (戒子) are members of three sects, but because the *upasampadā* rite of each sect is different, the ordination is performed particularly in the same *sīma* (regulated boundary).⁽⁹⁾ Thus in the spirit of solidarity and harmony, all sects can work toward a common goal. This is an outstanding and unique characteristic of Vietnam Buddhism in general as well as Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism in particular which cannot be seen in any other Buddhist country.

Festivals and Ceremonies

Festivals are considered as important events which represent the particular essence of culture and tradition of each country where Buddhism exists. In Vietnam, along with the Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Theravāda Buddhism holds annual festivals on lunar days on the basis of two traditions, that is to say, its own and national traditions.

I. Festivals

1. Festival of January 15th

This event occurs after the Vietnamese traditional Tet (New Year) with two meanings: in the memory of the day when the Buddha proclaimed the Māra that he would pass away three months later,⁽¹⁰⁾ the day when 1250 bhikkhus assembled to pay a visit to the Buddha before his great decease. It is on this day that especially in North and South Vietnam, the Mahāyāna Buddhists also often hold rituals at temples to pray for safety and

prosperity at the beginning of the new year. And it is also the time for Buddhists to go on pilgrimage to old and famous temples in Northern Vietnam.⁽¹¹⁾

2. Festival of April 15th

Apart from the meaning of memory of the Buddha's birthday which can be seen in solemn ceremony of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Theravāda Buddhists also hold an important festival with other two meanings: in memory of the days of the Bodhisatta's enlightenment and entering Nibbāna. The day after this day the Mahāyāna monks and nuns enter the summer retreat, but the Theravāda monks do that two months later.

3. Festival of June 15th

Different from the tradition of Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhism, the Theravāda Buddhist celebrate a solemn ceremony on this day in memory of the days of the Bodhisatta's descending from the Tusita Heaven, renunciation and turning the Dhamma Wheel. It is after this day Theravāda monks enter upon the *vassa* (rain-residence) for three months.

4. Kaṭhina-Offering Festival

After three months of diligent practice have finished, Theravāda monks hold a ceremony for ending the period of the vassa on the lunar 16th day of September which is called the *Invitation* (*pavāraṇā*, 自恣). On this occasion, Buddhist followers prepare the Kaṭhina robes and necessary supplements to offer to the monks, through which the followers believe that they will receive much more merit than by doing it on normal days.

II. Ceremonies

Beside the above-mentioned festivals, Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhists also celebrate other ceremonies as seen to be held in Mahāyāna temples.

These ceremonies, of course, play an important role in the lives of Vietnamese Theravāda monks as well as the followers.

1. The Tet Holiday

Influenced from Chinese tradition from the old days, the Vietnamese, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, celebrate a traditional festival for the lunar New Year which is called Tet. So do the Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhists to see the old year off and welcome a new prosperous year. It is on this day or on the eve of the new year the Buddhists always gather at temples to pray, offer money to monks as a symbol of wishing longevity and at the same time receive money from the monks as a symbol of good luck and best wishes in the new year.

Furthermore, the custom of picking up some flowers from the temple or lighting long incense sticks at the temple then bringing them back their own home is quite popular for Vietnamese Buddhists which can be seen in both Mahāyāna and Theravāda Buddhist temples in New Year days. Because it is believed that to bring back their own home holy things such as flowers or incense sticks is, as well, very lucky and happy for their lives during the following year.⁽¹²⁾

2. The Filial Piety Festival (盂蘭盆會, *Ullambana Festival*)

To perform the spirit of filial duty to their parents, all Vietnamese Buddhists have the tradition of holding an important festival on the lunar 15th day of July to express their filial respect to present parents, parents of many births as well as parents of seven previous generations. Different with Theravāda tradition, it is on this day when Mahāyāna monks and nuns have just finished their 3 strenuous months of summer retreat and celebrate the *Invitation (pavāraṇā, 自恣) Day*. The laity assembles at temples to recite sūtras, practicing meditation, listening to the Dhamma talks, etc. with their whole minds to transfer all merit earned from these good deeds to their own parents and the sentient beings.

All these Buddhist festivals are chances for Theravāda monks to cultivate the mode of *dhūta* (頭陀, scrupulous practice) by practicing meditation, debating Buddhist teachings over night without sleeping.⁽¹³⁾ Furthermore, they always take advantage of these occasions to ordain precepts to beginning practitioners as well as Buddhist followers. It is on these occasions that the laity can meet each other at temples, exchange Buddhist understandings and knowledge and spend much time with monks to cultivate and do Buddhist deeds.

Apart from traditional festivals such as the Festival of January 15th, Festival of April 15th or the Festival of June 15th, etc. as seen to be held in Theravāda Buddhist countries, Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhists show some borrowings from Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhism through festivals like the Filial Piety Day. Naturally the tradition of paying filial reward to parents can be seen in Theravāda Buddhism, but the form of expression through fixing a pink or white rose⁽¹⁴⁾ on upper clothes of Buddhist followers which is popular nowadays in Theravāda temples comes from the tradition of Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, instead of reciting the *Ullambanasūtra* (盂蘭盆經) or confessing all offences (*āpatti*, 罪過) with the aim at transferring the merit to their own parents like the Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhists do, the Theravāda Buddhists spend their most time at temples to practice meditation, listen to the Dhamma talks, etc. also with the same purpose.

Especially the Theravāda tradition of offering the Kathina robes influences deeply in Mahāyāna temples as seen in Hochiminh city. Normally Theravāda Buddhists perform this festival on the lunar 16th day of September by bringing the robes to the temple, walking around the Main Hall three rounds with the robes and suppliments in trays putting on their heads, reciting the praising verses as follows:

*“How imposing and virtuous is the robe,
The pure color of the samaṇas,
Who take the example of the Exalted One,*

*To widely propagate eighty-four thousand teachings.
 Today we the upāsakas and upāsikās
 Celebrate solemnly the Kathina festival
 And offer these robes with our heartfelt mind.
 We walk around the Buddha 3 rounds for praying with our same voices,
 When monks receive these with their joy,
 We can cultivate good seeds for the future.
 We vow to free from dust of afflictions
 And practice with diligence for the sake of enlightenment.
 We pray for the Buddhist teachings lasting forever
 And deeply imbueing to all kinds of beings in the world.
 Praying for all sentient beings
 To take refuge to the good path with their faithful mind,
 And to take the example of the Compassionate One,
 To renounce their worldly lives and wearing these robes to seat next to
 Him.”⁽¹⁵⁾*

After the recital of each sentence, there is a praying sentence that “*would the devas and mankind be joyful with the merit done by us today*” is loudly intoned and the followers reply three times with “*Sādhu!*” (How good is it!).

The competition of making the *anābhidosika-cīvara* (the robe which does not last overnight) and the tradition of bringing these robes walking around the Main Hall three times, which are characteristics of Burmese Theravāda Buddhism,⁽¹⁶⁾ have become deeply rooted in Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhist tradition.

The Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhists also prepare yellow robes for monks on the *Invitation (pavāraṇā, 自恣) Day*, July 15th, but the difference is that they do not bring the robes and suppliments walking three rounds like the Theravāda Buddhists do.

Furthermore, nowadays some Theravāda monks wear Vietnamese Mahāyāna clothes while going out to study at Buddhist schools. Therefore,

sometimes one cannot distinguish who is the Theravāda or Mahāyāna. The case is the same with the mode of practice of the *dhīḥ* of the two schools, who also wear Mahāyāna clothes.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed some areas of mutual interaction between the two great traditions, Mahāyāna and Theravāda, especially the influence of Mahāyāna on the Theravāda. In its period of existence in a Mahāyāna Buddhist country like Vietnam, it is true that Theravāda has had to interchange and inter-relate to exist without losing its fundamental identity. Some monks wear Mahāyāna clothes, but in reality they are Theravāda monks and vice versa.

Either at Buddhist conferences or at Buddhist schools or at *upasampadā* (higher ordination) ceremonies or in offering rites held at Theravāda as well as Mahāyāna Buddhist temples throughout Vietnam we can see the presence of monks of the two great schools sitting together. The mutual exchanges and sharings show us the close relationship, combination, and sympathy of the two traditions aiming at the same goal: for the sake of the existence and development of Buddhism. Therefore, this is a distinguished characteristic of Vietnam Buddhism in general and Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism which cannot be found in other Buddhist countries.

Nowadays, Theravāda superior monks have the tendency of Vietizing the Pāli language by translating Buddhist scriptures into Vietnamese to be able to propagate Theravāda Buddhist teachings to its followers as much as possible. Moreover, the Saṅgha is also trying its best to widen its activities to the North of Vietnam. Many efforts were made to propagate the Theravāda Buddhist teachings to this area but no successful results have been seen up to now, because Mahāyāna Buddhism is too deeply rooted in the Northern culture. The acceptance of the Theravāda way of thinking, its mode of practice as well as the Pāli language is a difficulty that the Saṅgha has to face

to when doing that. However, the interchange of Buddhist studies of the North and the South has been widely made from the day of our nation's liberation and the movement of studying the Theravāda Buddhist teachings as well as Pāli language is increasing more and more both in the world and in Vietnam; then, I hope that this is a good chance for the Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhist Saṅgha to perform its above-mentioned sacred mission.

Notes

- (1) Up to now only 2 Vietnamese books written on Theravāda Buddhism are known as *Lịch Sử Truyền Bá Phật Giáo Nguyên Thủy Tại Việt Nam (History of Propagation of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam, no date of publication)* by Nguyễn Tối Thiện and *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Nam Tông Việt Nam (History of Vietnam Theravāda Buddhism, graduate thesis, Vietnam Buddhist Institute in Hochiminh City, 1997)* by Bhikkhu Thiện Minh.
- (2) See Bhikkhu Thiện Minh: *Lịch Sử Phật Giáo Nam Tông Việt Nam (History of Vietnam Theravāda Buddhism)*. Graduate thesis, Vietnam Institute of Buddhist Studies in Hochiminh City, 1997, pp. 36, 37.
- (3) See The Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha: *Kỷ Yếu Đại Hội Đại Biểu Phật Giáo Toàn Quốc Lần Thứ IV (Bulletin of the Fourth Conference of All-nation Buddhist Representatives)*. Published by the Hochiminh City Publishing House, 1999, pp. 14, 15.
- (4) See Masataka Ikeda: *Biruma bukkyo (Burmese Buddhism)*. Hozokan, 1995, p. 139 (池田正隆, 『ビルマ佛教』, 法藏館).
- (5) The Vietnamese word *điều* is another way of pronunciation of *đạo* or *tao* (道) in Chinese, which means *path* or *way*. Thus a *điều* is a person who first enters the path of mind-practice.
- (6) See Masataka Ikeda: *Biruma bukkyo (Burmese Buddhism)*. Hozokan, 1995, p. 139 (池田正隆, 『ビルマ佛教』, 法藏館).
- (7) At present, there are 3 Institutes of Buddhist Studies in three main areas of Vietnam, one in Hanoi city (North), one in Hue city (Central) and one in Hochiminh city (South). In Central and Southern Buddhist Institutes there is the presence of Theravādin students, but in Northern Institute no Theravādin students are seen. The reason is that there are no Theravāda temples and monks in Northern Vietnam.
- (8) Based on the most recent study course of the Vietnam Buddhist Institute. Also see

- Report of Research Results : *A Synthetic Study Relating to Southern Theravāda Buddhism's Development and Mutual Interchange* by Egaku Mayeda. Arumu Publishing Co., 1994, pp. 7, 8 (研究成果報告書, 総合研究 A, 代表者: 森祖道, 『南方上座部仏教の展開と相互交流に関する総合的研究』, 平成 6 年).
- (9) See *The Vietnam Buddhist Saṅgha: Kỳ Yếu Đại Hội Đại Biểu Phật Giáo Toàn Quốc Lần Thứ IV (Bulletin of the Fourth Conference of All-nation Buddhist Representatives)*. Published by the Hochiminh City Publishing House, 1999, p. 15.
- (10) On reply to the request of Māra, the Buddha spoke thus: “Trouble not thyself, O Evil One! In no long time shall be the utter passing away of the Way-farer. At the end of three months from now the Way-farer shall pass utterly away.” (*Apposukko tvam pāpima hohi. Na ciram tathāgatassa parinibbānam bhavissati, ito tiṇṇam mānāsam accayena tathāgato parinibbāyissatī'ti.* [Udāna, *Jaccandhavaggo*, p. 64.]
- (11) See Vietnam Airline Inflight Magazine: *HERITAGE*, No. 34, January/February 1999, p. 24.
- (12) *Ibid.*, pp. 49–51.
- (13) Based on my recent research on February 16th, 1999.
- (14) The pink rose is a symbol of the fortune for those who have the existence of their parents in this world and the white rose as a symbol of misfortune for those who lost their parents. Besides at present there appears a kind of yellow rose which is utilised for fixing to monks and nuns representing a respect of the laity to their own masters on this day.
- (15) See Bửu Chơn: *Lễ Dâng Y Kathina (Kathina-Offering Festival)*, 1971, p. 12.
- (16) See Masataka Ikeda: *Biruma bukkyo (Burmese Buddhism)*. Hozokan, 1995, p. 176 (池田正隆, 『ビルマ佛教』, 法藏館).