Trúc Lâm Buddhism in Vietnam

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Its History, Development, and Legacy

By

Laura Thuy-Loan Nguyen

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Photo courtesy of Venerable Thích Nhật Quang and Venerable Thích Đạt Ma Quang Tuệ.

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BCE	Before Common Era
CE	Common Era
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
ISKCON	International Society for Krishna Consciousness
NRM	New Religious Movement
US	United States
USA	United States of America

PREFACE

Intrigued by Thích Thanh Từ's meditation teaching style, I embarked on an investigation into his revival of Thiền Buddhism in the late twentieth-century Vietnamese Buddhist landscape, which for centuries has been predominated by Pure Land and Tantric Buddhist traditions. The thirteenth-century Vietnamese-branded Trúc Lâm Thiền sect, with an impressive track record of accomplished monastic and lay followers in both social and religious realms that claims as the origin of his revitalized sect, was another element that kept me motivated during my arduous doctoral dissertation research project. Throughout this project, one of the most difficult and time-consuming tasks was translating Thiền teachings and verses from Vietnamese into English. Since those documents are from the awakened masters, and I am still a learner in search of the Dharma Gates in my daily meditation practice, their meaning and intent as presented in the translation reflect my best effort. Wise words provided by some senior Trúc Lâm monastics during my visits to the sect's facilities assisted in enlightening my understanding.

This book represents a significant revision of my doctoral dissertation, and therefore I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Jane Naomi Iwamura. I would not have known where to begin without her help. Additionally, Dr. Lewis Lancaster, who has encouraged me without hesitation, recommended me to the PhD program and supported me as a member of my committee. I appreciate his guidance and constructive contributions. Last but not least is Dr. Jonathan H. X. Lee, who provided his time and direction in helping me reimagine my dissertation so I could publish it as a book. It was especially Dr. Lee who encouraged me with all his heart, and I will be forever grateful to him for believing in my work and for urging me to make this publication a reality.

I appreciate Dr. Iwamura, Dr. Lancaster, and Dr. Lee for making my experience in graduate school so positive and uplifting! Thank you for your attention and efforts in helping me achieve this enormous goal. You have helped make my dream come true! There is no way to ever repay you.

Much gratitude goes to the University of the West, the Lotus Scholarship, and the International Buddhist Education Foundation (IBEF) committee for

their constant support throughout these six years. Without their help, this program would not have been financially feasible for me. Anything I contribute to the study of Buddhism will always be partly due to their assistance. The school's librarians were extremely efficient in obtaining the books I needed, formatting my work, and exercising patience with me until I completed my dissertation.

I owe many thanks to the Trúc Lâm monastic system. Nine of their centers located in the United States and Vietnam hosted me for interviews, observation, and participation. They assisted as much as they could to make themselves accessible for me to best conduct my research. Their compassion and empathy saw me through difficult and frustrating moments. I consider myself fortunate to have been surrounded by so many encouraging people. The completion of my research is a result of meeting and knowing these wonderful people. I especially wish to thank the abbot and the secretary of Thường Chiếu (Trúc Lâm headquarters), the Venerables Thích Nhật Quang and Thích Đạt Ma Quang Tuệ, respectively, for granting me the right to use their beautiful photograph for the cover of this book. I would also like to thank the abbot of Trúc Lâm Bạch Mã, the Venerable Thích Tâm Hạnh, for his willing and helpful spirit throughout the process of cover selection.

I am grateful to the staff and editors at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their diligent work. To reiterate the magnitude of my appreciation, I am indebted to Dr. Lee for trusting in this venture and helping me achieve my academic aspiration.

Thank you to all my friends, who in their small ways helped make this project come together.

Finally, the biggest thanks go to my family, mainly my husband, Dr. Thuong Nguyen, and my lovely daughter, Kim Nguyen, for their assistance whenever I needed it. I could not have completed my dissertation and this book without their encouragement. My younger daughter, Jennifer Nguyen, would come home sometimes with a smile and ask, "Done, Mom?" I am so lucky to have a happy family who cares for each other.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam as early as the third or second century BCE[1] with the establishment of a Buddhist center in Giao Chỉ, an earlier name of the territory located in the Red River Delta region. The center prospered, with many famous Indian monks staying there to translate Buddhist sutras.[2] From the sixth to the thirteenth centuries, the three official Thiền (*Chan/Zen*, otherwise popularly referred to as "meditation") schools in Vietnam—the Vinītaruci (Tì ni đà Lưu-chi), Vô Ngôn Thông, and Thảo Đường schools—were established. In the thirteenth century, these three Thiền schools were then fused to form the Yên Tử sect, of which King-Monk Trần Nhân Tông was the sixth patriarch. To start a new era of Vietnamese Buddhism, he changed the sect's name to Trúc Lâm Yên Tử (or Trúc Lâm for short) and declared himself the founding patriarch. The Trần dynasty (1225–1400) marked the "one Buddhist sect" era.[3] The sect flourished under three patriarchs with many renowned Thiền masters. Unfortunately, the Trúc Lâm sect subsequently faded over the following centuries, and Thiền Buddhism in Vietnam for the most part disappeared.

In the late twentieth century, Trúc Lâm reemerged as a popular movement, calling for a restoration of the thirteenth-century, Vietnamese-branded Thiền meditation in Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism. This book, *Trúc Lâm Buddhism in Vietnam: Its History, Development, and Legacy*, traces developments in Trúc Lâm from the thirteenth century (considered the Golden Age in Vietnamese Buddhist history) to the late twentieth century. It documents the transformation and preservation of Trúc Lâm, a meditation Buddhist tradition in a country that, according to Nguyễn Lang, for many centuries was dominated by Pure Land and Tantric Buddhism.[4] The central pillar of this late twentieth-century revival was Thích Thanh Từ, a well-known Pure Land monk. Thích Thanh Từ's active propagation of Thiền Buddhist teachings and practices subsequently shifted the effort toward revitalizing Thiền. Unfortunately, the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, cut his effort short due to the new government's laws and regulations. Currently, the sect reflects aspects of a "modernist religion" that attracts practitioners, both domestically in Vietnam and globally the world over. Despite its success, Trúc Lâm remains under pressure from its Pure Land and Tantric Buddhist competitors in Vietnam.

The Trúc Lâm Thiền sect represented a growing Buddhist movement in late twentieth-century Vietnam. By 2001 the sect's strong growth was highlighted by new monasteries filled with hundreds of monks and nuns in Vietnam and was a prominent feature of Buddhism in the West.[5] This book deconstructs the tenets and revised foundations of the revitalized Trúc Lâm sect to respond to the following three questions:

1. What is the recorded Trúc Lâm lineage from its thirteenth-century establishment and the sect's history up to the time of Thích Thanh Từ?
2. How did Thích Thanh Từ incorporate, reference, and reinterpret this recorded lineage and history? And what elements are novel to his presentation of the new Trúc Lâm?
3. How do monastics and laypeople from within the new Trúc Lâm articulate the origins of their sect and Trúc Lâm's current views on meditation?

These questions are addressed in the chapters that follow.

Thích Thanh Từ's original lineage, the revived Trúc Lâm doctrine and practice, and the popularity of his movement suggest two areas worth exploring. First, he studied, taught, and served Buddhism in the Pure Land tradition for over a decade before deciding to leave on his own to focus on meditation. After discerning the Way, Thích Thanh Từ formed his interpretation of Buddhism and chose to revive the Trúc Lâm Thiền lineage.

Second, this new interpretation of Trúc Lâm seemed to be an imprecise reflection of the sect's origins.[6] As an example, while Tantric mantras and sutras became more prominent in the sect's daily practice following the death of Trần Nhân Tông, Thích Thanh Từ de-emphasized these practices in the revitalized sect and promoted meditation instead. There is a strong emphasis on the individual, meditation practice, and globalized Buddhist ideas that emerged from the Buddhist reform movement.

Leading scholars of Buddhism suggest that contemporary Buddhists had to reconstruct their teachings in response to Western modernity, which de-emphasized ritual elements and characterized mythology and devotional practices as "superstitious" while at the same time promoting meditation.[7] Questions remain, however, concerning the specific ways in which the new Trúc Lâm, led by Thích Thanh Từ, reconstructed the sect's original doctrine and practice. This book examines that doctrine and practice. It presents the Trúc Lâm movement's twentieth-century interpretation of Buddhism as a

response to the forces of modernity and globalization and as a creative reformulation of the sect's earliest forms of cultivation.

The rise of Buddhist modernism in an increasingly globalized world resulted in the development of new Buddhist movements in the late twentieth century and into the new millennium. A distinctive feature of many of these new religious movements is the way in which they selectively reference traditional lineage structures or canonical texts to legitimize their existence, while at the same time disrupting traditional forms of authority to appeal to a contemporary and transnational audience.

This book analyzes, through published primary sources, the foundations and interpretation of Buddhism within the revitalized Trúc Lâm sect in Vietnam. Information collected from face-to-face interviews conducted with monastics and lay insiders paints a clearer picture of the movement's doctrine and practice. Thích Thanh Từ's biography, which includes a recounting of the sect's origins, is also brought into the conversation with the history and recorded lineage of the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect.

This detailed analysis of Trúc Lâm's history and development provides deeper insight into an influential and growing movement within Vietnam's long-standing engagement with Thiền Buddhism. It also sheds light on how this new Buddhist movement negotiated its traditional roots, Western views of religious practice, and the needs and interests of its practitioners, while simultaneously constructing new lines of authority in its quest to propagate the Buddha Dharma in Vietnam and beyond.

A central principle of this book is examining the revival of a forgotten Buddhist sect and providing a history of the first Vietnamese-branded Thiền sect. To fully understand the main role of practice in the development of a revival Thiền Buddhism, the research reviews the entirety of the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect from its origin. To follow the history and the evolution of the sect, the book is divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1 discusses a remarkable phenomenon in Thiền Buddhism and in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism - the fast-growing revival of the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect in the twentieth century led by monk Thích Thanh Từ, who left his Pure Land origin and discerned the Way through Thiền. Through primary sources in existing literature, the chapter examines the early twentieth-century Buddhism revitalization efforts, the development of Thích Thanh Từ's movement in the late twentieth century, and how the revitalized Trúc Lâm sect incorporated and interpreted the doctrine and

practice championed by its ancient roots. Chapter 2 addresses the research question concerning the recorded lineage and history as well as the original doctrine of the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect from its thirteenth-century establishment, with emphasis on its first three patriarchs before the sect faded away. Chapter 3 examines the understanding of today's Trúc Lâm followers regarding the doctrine and practice of the sect's ancient roots as well as its contemporary interpretation. This information was collected through face-to-face interviews with present-day monastic and lay followers using the research methodology described in the chapter. The data from the interviews were analyzed along with data from direct observations mainly of the artifacts displayed at contemporary Trúc Lâm facilities. Chapter 4 reviews the contemporary state of research on the influence the forces of modernity and globalization have had on religion as well as the new religious movement born out of such forces. This movement includes the emergence of the Buddhist Modernism phenomenon that appears to have influenced the teachings and practices of the revitalized Trúc Lâm sect in the late twentieth century.

Finally, Chapter 5 synthesizes and triangulates the data provided in the previous chapters to validate the contemporary findings on how Thích Thanh Từ incorporated, referenced, and reinterpreted the sect's original doctrine and practice. The chapter also focuses on the second part of the research question about which of Thích Thanh Từ's elements are novel to his presentation of the new Trúc Lâm and the extent to which each of the reinterpreted elements was influenced by the forces of modernity and globalization. This chapter therefore offers a closer look at the elements of Buddhist Modernism incorporated into the current Trúc Lâm movement that appeal to a contemporary and transnational audience.

Notes

[1] Jonathan H. X. Lee et al., *Asian American Religious Cultures* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2015).
[2] Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
[3] Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận* [Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism] (Hà Nội: Văn Học, 1994), 171: "Đời Trần có thể được gọi là thời đại Phật Giáo Nhất Tông, tức là thời đại của một phái Phật Giáo Duy Nhất."
[4] Nguyễn Lang.
[5] Alexander Soucy, "Nationalism, Globalism and the Re-Establishment of the Trúc Lâm Thiền Buddhist Sect in Northern Vietnam," in *Modernity and Re-Enchantment:*

Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam, ed. Philip Taylor (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 340–70.

[6] Alexander Soucy, "Contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism," in *Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 177–95.

[7] David L. McMahan, "Buddhist Modernism," Oxford Bibliographies, 2016, http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393521/obo-9780195393521-0041.xml.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY OF THÍCH THANH TỪ'S MOVEMENT

In late twentieth-century Vietnam, the Trúc Lâm Thiền sect represented a growing Buddhist faction. The movement was established by Thích Thanh Từ, and under his tutelage, it experienced robust growth. But who is Thích Thanh Từ? Where did he come from? How and why did he choose to revive the Trúc Lâm sect? Are the current practices of the Trúc Lâm sect the same as the original thirteenth-century version of Trúc Lâm, from the days of its founder, Trần Nhân Tông? What has changed? This chapter explores Thích Thanh Từ's original lineage as well as the context of Vietnamese Buddhism in the twentieth century, including an investigation of the establishment of the newly revitalized Trúc Lâm Thiền sect.

After repeatedly seeking help from his Pure Land teachers whose advice did not help his cultivation deadlock, Thích Thanh Từ resigned from all the positions he had been serving, leaving behind his original lineage of thirteen years to become a "mountain monk" seeking emancipation through meditation. Upon finding his Way after a months-long retreat, Thích Thanh Từ started a new chapter of Thiền Buddhism in Vietnam. The event marked the revival of Thiền Buddhism, which until that point had been misunderstood, practiced incorrectly, or forgotten for centuries, even by the Vietnamese monastic community.

In 1971 Thích Thanh Từ established his first monastery and instituted a three-year Thiền session to restore the Vietnamese Thiền's meditation practice. The session acted as a magnet, attracting a good number of supporters and followers. Unfortunately, the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975, cut his effort short. Thích Thanh Từ's persistence in spreading the sublime spiritual practice resulted in additional monasteries popping up in 1994 when Thích Thanh Từ officially merged his organization with the Trúc Lâm lineage and revived the sect. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the new Trúc Lâm had become a large international Buddhist sect with hundreds of monks and nuns.

This chapter documents Thích Thanh Từ's reconstruction of the original thirteenth-century Trúc Lâm teachings, with the doctrines and practices based on a combination of the three Chan patriarchs—Huìkě (Huệ Khả), Hui-neng (Huệ Năng), and the founder of Trúc Lâm, Trần Nhân Tông. It reviews the variables that inform the effort to revitalize the Trúc Lâm sect and argues that the movement was the concerted and sustained attempt to achieve success in spreading Buddhism in Vietnam.

Twentieth-Century Buddhism in Vietnam

Since Buddhism arrived in Vietnam, it has been deeply rooted in the hearts of the Vietnamese people. Buddhism's development is often associated with the destiny of the country through many historical periods.[1] Furthermore, Buddhism always played a significant role in the country's political and cultural life, especially the Lý (1009–1225) and Trần (1225–1400) dynasties.[2] Toward the end of the Trần dynasty, Buddhism entered a period of decline. The downturn began when the country's rulers shifted their belief to Confucianism and Taoism, and consequently Buddhism was no longer the leading influence in the country's social and political development.[3] Some scholars have suggested that the destruction and confiscation of pagodas and Buddhist sacred writings in Vietnam during the fifteenth-century Chinese occupation period also contributed to the decline.[4] Another major contributing factor in the decline was Hồ Quý Ly's order in 1396 to discharge apprentice monks and compel monks under forty years of age to give up their tonsure, which ended the thirteenth-century period of Buddhism's brilliance.[5]

Early Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Buddhism

Most contemporary Buddhists in Vietnam, both monks and laypeople, followed the tradition of obeying Theravada disciplines, reciting the mantra, learning mudra, practicing meditation, and chanting the Buddha's name without any conflict between these practices.[6] Moreover, the activities depicted as the morning rituals in most pagodas in Vietnam included recitations of the Shurangama mantra, the Great Compassion mantra, and the Heart sutra; the evening included recitations of the Amitābha sutra and all passages associated with Tantra (Mật Tông), Chan (Thiền), and Pure Land (Tịnh Độ).[7]

The decline of Buddhism since the end of the Trần dynasty caused a gradual loss of Buddhist scriptural knowledge and understanding among its

followers, including its monastic community.[8] As a result, Đoàn Trung Còn (also known as Reverand Thích Hồng Tại) suggests, since the learned were few, it was rare to find monks who understood the significance of the scriptures they were reciting or who refused invitations to conduct paid ceremonial services.[9] Agreeing with Nguyễn Lang, who argues that contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism had more shamans than monks,[10] Thích Nhất Hạnh depicts the image of Vietnamese Buddhism in the twentieth century in his writing *Engaged Buddhism* (*Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời*) as follows:

> For nearly a hundred years, the image of Buddhism in the eyes of Vietnamese intellectuals has been associated with gloomy temples housing mixed displays of worship, or monks known for income-generating sutra chanting and funeral services.[11]

By the twentieth century, Vietnamese Buddhism had dwindled drastically compared to its fast growth during the Golden Age. Looking at contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism from a different perspective, Thích Mật Thể voices this concern:

> Is this the time the Vietnamese Buddhism spirit vanishes for good? Way of life in temples throughout the country looks more like a typical household, possessing no sign of association with a religious organization. Monks live there but choose to be ignorant and forgetful, purposefully shielding themselves of their genuine obligation as Buddhist ordained monastics.[12]

Even worse, according to Thích Thanh Từ, many Thiền monastics rejected meditation in the practice of Buddhism.[13]

To some scholars, blaming just the outsiders—such as the rise in popularity of Confucianism and Taoism and policies during the periods of Chinese and French colonization— for the dramatic decline of Vietnamese Buddhism as seen in the twentieth century might not be fair. Thích Nhất Hạnh questions whether the inability of Vietnamese Buddhism to adapt to social and technological advancement introduced by the West further contributed to such decline.[14] Evidence suggests some validity in this adaptation issue. While Latin-Vietnamese (also known as Quốc Ngữ or Việt Ngữ) had been taught and used before 1906 at more than ten schools in and around the Hà Nội area,[15] young monks in Buddhist monasteries were still forced to learn only Chinese until the 1930s.[16]

Early Twentieth-Century Buddhist Restoration Movement

After centuries of decline, the shame of the corrupt image of the Buddhist religion led to a desire for a rebirth of Lý Trần Buddhism's Golden Age, in which Buddhist monks in Vietnam were the most learned and influential persons in Vietnam's religious, political, and social landscape.[17] Contemporary Buddhist leaders spoke of restoring Buddhism to its "rightful place in society."[18] Inspired in large part by the popularity of the Buddhist revival movement established by monk Taixu (Thái Hư) in in China,[19] the 1920s–1950s Buddhist restoration movement in Vietnam attempted to rebuild a generation of learned monks to recapture the glory of Buddhism's Golden Age.[20] Initiated by a widely respected monk, Khánh Hòa (1877–1947) of Bến Tre province, who together with monk Khánh Anh and a few other respected monks in the Mekong Delta, the movement founded the Lục Hòa Alliance (Lục Hòa Liên Hiệp) in 1923 at Long Hòa temple in Trà Vinh, South Vietnam.[21] Aided by modern print technology, the movement dedicated its efforts to the translation of Buddhist scriptures as well as the dissemination of explicatory Buddhist texts while calling for nationwide reform of the education and training system of the *sangha*.[22] Its main purpose was to modernize and systemize sangha education and temple administration.[23]

After four years of extensive travel across Vietnam looking for like-minded monks to promote ideas of reviving Buddhism, the alliance accomplished nothing toward its first objective of forming a nationwide association.[24] Monk Thiện Chiếu, who had become acquainted with Khánh Hòa around 1926 and was already renowned as a young, talented, and energetic monk who was also familiar with Taixu's progress in China, was dispatched to Hà Nội to connect with North Vietnam's interested parties in 1927, but the trip was unsuccessful.[25] The old model of thinking seemed to still dominate. Trí Hải, a young northern monk, began to explore ways of implementing Taixu's ideas then, but was met with resistance from sangha seniors and temporarily kept the seed of reform within his Quán Sứ temple in Hanoi.[26] Most sangha seniors felt more comfortable with the existing "traditional" Buddhist writings and systems than having to learn the new modernized approach introduced by reformers like Taixu or Thiện Chiếu.[27]

As reported by Nguyễn Lang in *Chronicle of Vietnamese Buddhism (Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận)*, not giving up the revival effort, but realizing that their scope of work needed narrowing, Khánh Hòa and supporters, comprised of both ordained and lay notables, founded the Saigon-based Cochinchina Association for Buddhist Studies (*Hội Nam Kỳ Nghiên Cứu*

Phật Học) in 1930, which established the periodical The Voice of Compassion *(Từ Bi Âm)* and published its first issue in January 1932 in Quốc Ngữ. Seeing the progress in the south, respected monks and lay notables in the other two regions rapidly established their own regional Buddhist associations. In the central region, monk Giác Tiên and supporters formed the Huế-based An Nam Association for Buddhist Studies (*Hội An Nam Phật Học*) in 1932; in the north, monk Trí Hải and local notables started the Hà Nội-based Tonkin Buddhist Association (*Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ*) in 1934. In the south, monk Khánh Hòa established in 1934 the Lưỡng Xuyên Association for Buddhist Studies (*Hội Lưỡng Xuyên Phật Học*) when Cochinchina could not progress under the administrative lead of lay notable Trần Nguyên Chấn.[28]

Gaining momentum from its success at the beginning of the 1930s, this movement continued to improve the decades-old image of Buddhism in Vietnam for another decade or so. Various periodicals and books on Buddhism began to appear in Quốc Ngữ during the period. Each region established its own Quốc Ngữ periodical, such as Viên Âm (central, 1933), Đuốc Tuệ (north, 1935) and Duy Tâm (south, 1935),[29] in addition to Từ Bi Âm (south, 1932). Besides learned monastics, these publications attracted a few learned laypeople, including university professors and students who were contributors as well as practitioners in their study of Buddhism. Non-monastic contributors included the following notables: Trần Trọng Kim, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, Trần Văn Giáp, Lê Dư, Nguyễn Hữu Tiến, Nguyễn Can Mộng, Dương Bá Trạc, Bùi Kỷ, Nguyễn Trọng Thuật, Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, Nguyễn Quang Oánh, Nguyễn Văn Tố, Lê Toại, Nguyễn Đỗ Mục, Trần Lê Nhân, Vũ Như Trác, Lê Đình Thám, and Nguyễn Huy Xương.[30] A few Buddhist sutras and documents translated from Chinese or new Buddhist books being written in Quốc Ngữ during this period included Ưu Bà Tắc Giới, Quán Vô Lượng Thọ Phật, Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh, Khóa Hư Lục, Kinh Di Giáo, Kinh Di Đà, Kinh Tứ Thập Nhị Chương, Hán Việt Tự Điển, and Phật Học Giáo Khoa.[31]

New institutions for Buddhist studies, such as Tây Thiên, Kim Sơn, Báo Quốc, Lưỡng Xuyên, and Liên Hải, were established across all three regions, with faculty of widely respected monastics facilitating learning opportunities for younger generations of monks and nuns.[32] Even though these institutions contributed a number of graduates during the period—around five hundred, with ten percent of those considered excellent—they barely made a dent in the overpopulated Vietnamese ordained population.[33] However, as Nguyễn Lang further notes, it was this small group of excellent

graduates that had a significant influence on the country's 1945–1975 social and political landscape.

1963 Buddhist Uprising

A major Buddhist upheaval began in May 1963 in South Vietnam under Ngô Đình Diệm's regime. A nationwide demonstration erupted when there was news that Vietnamese security forces had killed eight young people in Huế marching in response to Diệm's ban of the Buddhist flag in recognition of Buddha's birthday.[34] The demonstrations culminated on June 11, 1963, with Thích Quảng Đức setting himself on fire in the middle of a busy street in Saigon. The photo of the monk's self-immolation earned photographer Malcolm Browne a Pulitzer Prize as it circulated widely around the world.[35] A few other subsequent monastics' self-immolations only further intensified the movement. The upheaval played a critical role socially and politically not only in South Vietnam but internationally and ultimately led to the demise of Diệm's power and influence.[36]

Another major Buddhist movement in the twentieth century was the Trúc Lâm movement in the latter part of the century led by Thích Thanh Từ, which is the subject and focus of the following sections.

Late Twentieth-Century Buddhist Restoration Movement

At first, Thích Thanh Từ's efforts were aimed at restoring Thiền Buddhism in Vietnam after decades of decline and misunderstanding by the general public. Upon experiencing success with the initial effort, Thích Thanh Từ merged his organization into the Trúc Lâm lineage and turned his focus toward reviving the sect.

Thích Thanh Từ's Biography

According to his official biography, Thích Thanh Từ was born Trần Hữu Phước (also known as Trần Thanh Từ) on July 24, 1924, in Cần Thơ province (located in modern-day Vĩnh Long province, South Vietnam). Even though his family's religion was Cao Đài, an indigenous religion founded in twentieth-century Vietnam, he was described as having a natural predisposition for monasticism.[37] At nine years old, during a visit with his father to Sân Tiên temple on Ba Thê Mountain (Long Xuyên), he felt his heart melt upon hearing the bell amid the silence and spontaneously authored the following poem:

> Oh! How joyful the serenity of the mountain
> A peaceful place for everyone
> Awakened by the sound from wooden fish
> Heard the woe of life echoed in the bell tone[38]

On another occasion, when seeing tremendous suffering others endured through the many ups and downs of his early years, especially in the chaos of war, he uttered the wish, "If I cannot be a magic pill that saves all beings, at least I can be a tonic to lessen the suffering of people."[39]

His path to monasticism began to surface at age twenty-five when he was ordained by Master Thích Thiện Hoa, a well-respected Pure Land monk who headed the Institute for the Propagation of the Dharma (*Viện Trưởng Viện Hóa Đạo*), where he was given the ordained name of Thích Thanh Từ. Per the official record, after learning and practicing Pure Land for thirteen years, he served as one of the key administrators and lecturers in the Vietnamese Buddhist education system when his cultivation process faced a state of deadlock. After repeatedly seeking advice from his teachers, Master Thích Thiện Hoa and Great Master Thích Khánh Anh, he sought to find the answer for himself.[40] Thích Thanh Từ began his investigation, questioning even the sources of knowledge he had spent a lifetime learning from.

> While Sutras (Kinh) and Abhidharma sàstras (Luận) told me that Prince Siddhartha reached enlightenment through meditation, why did my Great Master and Master teach me Pure Land? This issue made me think hard.[41]

In *Three Critical Matters in My Monkhood Life (Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi)*, Thích Thanh Từ admits that his findings resulting from a thorough investigation into sutras and Abhidharma shastras critically helped him in pinpointing the cause of his cultivation stagnation. The Gautama Buddha spent forty-nine days under the Bodhi tree for the last states of meditation to reach enlightenment. The holy monks were awakened through meditation. All patriarchs, from Indian Mahākāśyapa to Chinese Hui-neng, as well as Vietnamese patriarchs from the seventh to the eighteenth centuries, meditated to become awakened and vigorously promoted meditation to become patriarchs.[42] Thích Thanh Từ was convinced by these findings to follow the path of Gautama Buddha, the holy monks, and the Indian, Chinese, and Vietnamese patriarchs in choosing meditation as his cultivation and propagation practice—knowing that his decision would disappoint his lineage and that the path of meditation would be a solitary one in contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism.[43]

As recorded in his official biography, in 1966, upon obtaining the consent from his master to move out to find his "true self," Thích Thanh Từ resigned from all the positions he was serving, seeking a different life and leaving behind his original lineage.[44] He then started his new life as a "mountain monk" by building himself a hut, naming it Pháp Lạc, on Tương Kỳ Mountain in Vũng Tàu province, and dedicated himself to the understanding of meditation and its cultivation.[45] On the full moon of April 1968, being resolute in his belief in meditation, he entered a closed retreat (also referred to as 'hut entering' or 'Nhập Thất,' seclusion for mind-cultivation) declaring that he would come out only when he became awakened.[46]

Upon finding his Way in July 1968, Thích Thanh Từ came out of the retreat a month later[47] and started a new chapter of Thiền Buddhism in Vietnam. This marks the beginning of the revival of Thiền Buddhism, which had been misunderstood, practiced incorrectly, or forgotten for centuries, even by the Vietnamese monastic community.[48]

The Revival of Thiền Buddhism

As reported in the *Yearbook for the 50th Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery (1966–2016)* (*Kỷ Yếu 50 năm Thiền Viện Chơn Không*), on the very mountain where Pháp Lạc hut was built, the new Chơn Không monastery was established in 1971 as the first brick of Thích Thanh Từ's Thiền restoration foundation.[49] Based on the *Yearbook*, the facility in 1971 housed ten students in his first Thiền session, which was a three-year program, and marked the beginning of a new era of Thiền Buddhism with emphasis on self-exploring meditation practice, in a land, as characterized by Nguyen Tu Cuong and A. W. Barber, predominated by Pure Land and Tantric traditions full of rituals and devotions relying on supernatural powers.[50] Upon the opening of the first Thiền session on April 8, 1971, Thích Thanh Từ declared the three-fold purpose of the monastery:

> First, to eradicate superstitions and the practice of Buddhism as purely theory learning: Chơn Không monastery is a place of practice with much less theory learning. Second, to provide a clear path of spiritual practice: The monastery is for dedicated spiritual practitioners, who will experience a sublime spiritual practice. Third, to restore the Vietnamese Thiền's meditation practice to its genuine tradition.[51]

To accomplish such difficult objectives, which first involved the hard task of eradicating practitioners' old habits of cultivation, Thích Thanh Từ enforced strict rules on the learners to help them in affirming their conviction.[52] One disciple recalled, for example, that when Thích Thanh Từ

learned that a Pure Land book had been circulated among learners, he requested the book be burned in front of the group. His explanation to the group was that he was not burning a Pure Land book but a book coming from the outside that interfered with their ability to fully focus on his teaching.[53]

To the surprise of many, Thích Thanh Từ's program at Chơn Không drew a great deal of interest from the public, especially considering the tough economic and social landscape of Vietnam at the time. In response to the tremendous demand for such teaching, Bát Nhã and Linh Quang monasteries were built in expectation of the second session, which began in 1974 with the accommodations to board twenty students in each of the three monasteries.[54] However, the final head count of those who showed up at the beginning of the session exceeded the boarding capacity of the facility:

> Chơn Không had 28 monks, the oldest being 45 years old and the youngest at 19 years old. … Linh Quang had 18 monks ranging in age from 20–30. ... Bát Nhã had 35 nuns, the oldest being 58 years old and the youngest being 15 years old. ... There were also 21 monks/nuns who lived in their huts around the area. ...
>
> Many more came just for the lectures, including some from the Mendicant Buddhist branch and a Catholic priest with the name of Father Thống, who was the Head of Catholic Convent Đan Viện from Phước Sơn, Thủ Đức.[55]

In the ceremonial speech on the opening day of the second session, Thích Thanh Từ stated that although the students from the first session had to move out to make room for the new students, meditation needed time and practice; consequently, those first-session students were encouraged to stay for an additional three years to cultivate or do whatever they deemed suitable.[56] He reported in the speech that the second session was more crowded than expected and that it was better to have quality over quantity, though he would deny no one since this session was to be his last. He also promised to build more monasteries to provide enough boarding for students to continue their meditation practice.

Unfortunately, the second session was cut short due to the fall of Saigon (otherwise referred to as the reunification of Vietnam's north and south regions after a decades-long civil war) on April 30, 1975. Up to 1981 Thích Thanh Từ continued to have a difficult time growing his meditation line. According to various memoirs shared in the *Yearbook for the 50th Anniversary of Chơn Không Monastery*, under the new government's regulations the communities at Chơn Không, Bát Nhã, and Linh Quang

monasteries had to be disbanded. Only a limited number of community members, including Thích Thanh Từ, were allowed in the newly established Thường Chiếu and Viên Chiếu monasteries on a large farm lot in Long Thành, Đồng Nai. At the new location, monastics spent more time on the "meditation farms" with hoes, shovels, and wheelbarrows making a living and building huts than in the meditation halls.[57] When the living conditions of the remaining students were considered relatively stable, the second session resumed at the new location but was again abruptly and completely stopped in the summer of 1976.[58]

According to a memoir featured in the *Yearbook*, Thích Thanh Từ was not allowed to open any more Thiền sessions, but he kept on preaching periodically on the days of repentance, and twice a month to the public at the Long Thành facility, which attracted a large crowd each time and more new people every day.[59] The memoir also reports that his teaching was conducted, according to demand, to groups of people of various sizes or even in casual encounters with his disciples and neighbors, which occurred more often during the summer retreats. Directing his teaching of Buddhism toward helping people resolve their issues in the face of conflicting challenges during this period of social unrest and change, Thích Thanh Từ was quite successful in calming people down and bringing back confidence, peace, and meaning to the lives of many.[60]

In 1979, according to a memoir in the *Yearbook*, Thích Thanh Từ's popularity rose to a new high during his visiting lecture series at Xá Lợi temple in Saigon, the headquarter of the Association of Buddhist Studies (Hội Phật Học).[61] These half-day lectures, held monthly during 1981, attracted a few thousand people, some from distant provinces and most of whom had to physically reserve their spaces the night before. They filled up Xá Lợi's main lecture hall and overflowed to the facility's upper level as well as into its yards and streets. The memoir further notes that accepting donations was a hard task for Thích Thanh Từ at the end of each lecture. The series was disruptively terminated when Thích Thanh Từ was halfway through the Lotus sutra.

On March 18, 1986 (according to the lunar calendar), the government's "clearance order" of Tương Kỳ Mountain was finally fully enforced; consequently, Thích Thanh Từ's movement to revive Thiền Buddhism switched its headquarters from the mountainous Chơn Không to the flat farm of Thường Chiếu to continue its efforts.[62] After almost a quarter of a century of continuous effort since leaving the mountainous Chơn Không, Thích Thanh Từ gradually and tirelessly built and shaped the Chiếu

monasteries in the Long Thành farmland to their more stable condition day by day—the same way he shaped his disciples.[63] Besides the establishment of Thường Chiếu and Viên Chiếu in 1975, the growing number of Chiếu monasteries included Huệ Chiếu, Linh Chiếu, and Phổ Chiếu nunneries, which were built during the 1979–1982 period and housed around twenty monastics each.[64] Liễu Đức, Chơn Chiếu, and Tịch Chiếu nunneries were added to Thích Thanh Từ's monastic community in Long Thành during 1986 and 1987 to accommodate the growing demand for his teaching and practice among women.[65] The addition of Tuệ Thông, Hương Hải, and many other Buddhist temples into the movement further strengthened Thích Thanh Từ's Thiền restoration effort.

Aiming his movement at restoring Vietnamese Buddhism to its Lý Trần Golden Age, Thích Thanh Từ chose to revive Trần Nhân Tông's Trúc Lâm Thiền sect.[66]

The Revival of the Trúc Lâm Lineage

After naming the new monastery in Đà Lạt "Trúc Lâm" in 1993,[67] Thích Thanh Từ began the process of re-creating the Trúc Lâm spirit in Thiền Buddhism.[68] His argument for the decision was that for Vietnamese Buddhism to grow into a strong, sublime, and precious entity, Buddhists, monastics, and non-monastics needed to be developed to first see those values in Buddhism, which were best demonstrated by Vietnam's thirteenth-century Buddhism.[69] In his view, it was worthwhile to learn and seek guidance from that historical period not only on how to cultivate and spread Buddhism but also on how to contribute properly to contemporary Vietnam and its people.[70]

Some of the traditional Trúc Lâm values that Thích Thanh Từ admired and therefore attempted to revitalize included monastics associated with the most notable and socially worthy life; Buddhists, including monastics, not only exploring within to perceive their own Buddha Nature and spreading Buddhism as Buddhists, but also actively looking outward to engage themselves in the country's affairs as citizens of the territory; and Vietnamese Buddhism uniquely reflecting the Vietnamese culture and way of life.[71] Regarding the social image of monastics during the Golden Age, as Thích Nhất Hạnh describes it, despite being the most learned and greatly influential persons in the country's political and social landscape, monastics used their knowledge and skills not for personal gain but for serving others and country while pursuing their religious practice living a simple life in humble monastic facilities.[72] Trần Nhân Tông's monastic lifestyle was so

simple, captured in equally basic images ("eggplants and black bean sauce" and "no horse carriage, just walk for life"), that, according to Lê Mạnh Thát, no one could have ever imagined such a way of life for a hero of the recent victorious war and a talented king.[73] Thích Thanh Từ argued that there must be something notable about a monastic lifestyle that made it more worthy to live than that of a prince or a king with the utmost power, fame, and material richness; otherwise, why did Trần Nhân Tông leave the latter for the former?

Trúc Lâm Buddhists engaged themselves in the development of the country and the defense of its independence. Even though all three thirteenth-century Trần dynasty kings were deeply committed to Buddhist values, practicing to free themselves from the cycle of *samsara* (reincarnation and rebirth), at the same time they managed to put those personal tenets aside to fulfill their civic duties and leadership obligations to defend the independence and integrity of Vietnam.[74] As an example, although they believed in their hearts the Buddhist precept of not causing harm to others, these kings never shied away from engaging in battlefields to defend their Vietnam from foreign invasions. In all three Mongol invasions that century, they vigorously fought in defense neither as Buddhists nor in the name of Buddhism, but as citizens and country leaders obligated to act for the sovereignty of their borders and people.[75]

King Trần Nhân Tông started to Vietnamize the language used in the land by promoting the Sino-Vietnamese (Chữ Nôm)[76] as the official language of the court along with Chinese that had been officially used since ancient times.[77] Trần Nhân Tông published *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo* and *Đắc Thú Lâm Tuyền Thành Đạo Ca* using the Chữ Nôm language to set an example for the initiative.[78] According to Thích Thanh Từ, the king's defensive war efforts and the governmental mandate of the use of Chữ Nôm indicates that Trần Nhân Tông wanted Vietnam to be independent of China, not only politically and militarily but also culturally.[79]

Thích Thanh Từ's lifelong aspiration is to see not only an independent and stable Vietnam but also a uniquely Vietnamese Buddhism, not just an imitation of Chinese Buddhism.[80] Seeing that contemporary Buddhism in Vietnam was pitifully Chinese dependent, evidenced by the use of Chinese in daily chanting practice[81] and Buddhist texts still written in Chinese [82] and at the same time being impressed with Trần Nhân Tông's effort of Vietnamizing Buddhism,[83] Thích Thanh Từ directed his Thiền restoration movement toward the Vietnamese-branded Trúc Lâm:

> Among all Thiền sects in Vietnam, Trúc Lâm is the only Thiền sect founded by a Vietnamese person who happened to also be a king. The Vietnamese founding patriarch understood the best Vietnamese customs, habits, and aspirations, thus [it] was the best to understand the needs of Vietnamese Buddhists and effectively help them.[84]

Naming the new monastery in Đà Lạt "Trúc Lâm" to officialize his choice, Thích Thanh Từ changed his existing monastic regulations to force the use of Latin-Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ*)* in all rituals at his monasteries[85] and revitalized some thirteenth-century Trúc Lâm temples while continuing his text translation efforts to Quốc Ngữ.[86]

In 2002 Thích Thanh Từ rebuilt Lân (or Kỳ Lân) pagoda, which is also called Trúc Lâm Yên Tử monastery, in Quảng Ninh province in northern Vietnam[87] originally built in 1293 by King Trần Nhân Tông. Lân pagoda was one of the most significant temples in the system of Trúc Lâm Thiền, where its first three patriarchs, Trần Nhân Tông, Pháp Loa, and Huyền Quang, often came to deliver sermons. During French colonization, the temple was almost destroyed except for the tomb towers, the largest of which belonged to monk Chân Nguyên (1647–1726), a master in the Trúc Lâm lineage. The Trúc Lâm Yên Tử monastery, after being renovated on approximately twelve acres of land, officially opened on November 11, 2002. The decor inside the temple was simple, with all horizontally lacquered boards (Hoành Phi) and couplets (Câu Đối) inscribed in Latin-Vietnamese (Quốc Ngữ).[88]

In 2004 Thích Thanh Từ rebuilt Sùng Phúc monastery in Hà Nội, the current capital of Vietnam. Sùng Phúc is one of the oldest temples in the nation, built during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For twenty years the monastery had no resident monk. In 1998 Thích Thanh Từ appointed one of his disciples to be a resident there. The monastery was then rebuilt beginning February 16, 2004, as a two-story building totaling 43,000 square feet, including a 5,000-square-foot meditation hall that could accommodate 600 people and serve Buddhists from Hà Nội and neighboring areas. In 2005 Thích Thanh Từ attended its opening ceremony and delivered the first Dharma talk of the year, with around 1,500 Buddhists in attendance.[89]

In 2005 Tây Thiên Trúc Lâm monastery was built on Tam Đảo Mountain, roughly 1,000 feet above sea level. The complex covered 123 acres, eleven of which were occupied by buildings and sat on the foundation of one of the three oldest temples named Thiên Ân Thiền Tự. The main hall of 7,250 square feet could accommodate 600 meditators. At the beginning of 2010, the monastery projected six meditation sessions each summer, with