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(Re-)invented Chan Lineage, Unique Vietnamese Meditation School, or Both? Thích Thanh Từ's "Revived" Trúc Lâm Tradition of Thiền Tông

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Abstract: This study explores how images of the past have been deployed to set up current arrangements of leadership and institutional identity by considering the career and teachings of Thích Thanh Từ in connection with his "revived" Buddhist tradition in Vietnam. Promoted as a continuation of the unique and pure Vietnamese Buddhist meditation tradition and associated with the Vietnamese national identity, the contemporary Trúc Lâm (Bamboo Grove) is a pride of many Vietnamese Buddhists. The original Trúc Lâm is claimed to be founded by the heroic King-turned-monk Trần Nhân Tông in the thirteenth century. The tradition was supposedly transmitted through the next two generations and died out. In the twentieth century, a Southern Vietnamese monk, Thích Thanh Từ (1924–), who had quit Pure Land (*Tịnh Độ*, C. *jingtu* 淨土) Buddhism to self-learn and practice meditation, decided to reinvent the medieval Trúc Lâm tradition and became the founder of the contemporary Trúc Lâm. Despite growing up during French colonization and American war, Thanh Từ was not politically involved; instead, he focused on setting up new monasteries, taught meditation, and discouraged his followers from political and social engagement. This paper examines how successful Thích Thanh Từ and his disciples are in popularizing Trúc Lâm in Vietnam, given that the majority of Vietnamese Buddhists follow Pure Land devotional practices. More importantly, it describes how Thích Thanh Từ combines the teachings attributed to Trần Nhân Tông and two Chinese Chan masters, Huike 慧可 (the Second Patriarch) and Huineng 惠能 (the Sixth Patriarch), to form Trúc Lâm's philosophical views and meditation techniques. With the clear-cut distinction between the delusional mind of sentient beings and the perfect mind of enlightened beings, Thích Thanh Từ presents the goal of Trúc Lâm practice as attaining the state of no-thought and sharpening it to perfection to perceive the "buddha nature" (*phật tính*, S. *buddhadhātu*, C. *foxing* 佛性) understood as the pure mind of nonduality and nonform. Outlining that process, he emphasizes the importance of "sudden awakening" (*đốn ngộ*, C. *dunwu* 頓悟) followed by "gradual cultivation" (*tiệm tu*, C. *jianxiu* 漸修). His meditation manual for ordinary practitioners with no experience of sudden awakening contains key techniques of (1) stabilizing the mind by counting and then observing breaths, (2) recognizing the "true mind" (*chân tâm*, C. *zhenxin* 真心) through practicing "no abiding in thoughts" (*biết vọng không theo*), "no mind for the externals" (*đối cảnh vô tâm*), "no dualistic discrimination" (*không kẹt hai bên*), and then proceeding to the stage of permanently abiding in the nature of true mind. These meditation methods are pertinent to Trúc Lâm's view that all phenomena that emerge via speculative thoughts are unreal and illusory, and that only the true mind is real. The first section of this paper explores historical connections between Vietnamese and Chinese forms of Buddhism, shedding light on why Trúc Lâm embraces Thiền Tông, which is transmitted from Chinese Chan zong, and how Thích Thanh Từ builds connections between Thiền Tông and the Vietnamese national identity. The second section focuses on Thích Thanh Từ's own life story, on how he practiced meditation and suddenly experienced "unlearned wisdom" (*trí vô sư/vô sư trí*, C. *wushi zhi* 無師智, an alternative term for true mind and buddha nature as a result of his practice) and how he succeeded in spreading the "revived" Trúc Lâm. With the first two sections as a background, in the third section, this paper explores Thích Thanh Từ's views and practices and critically analyzes those views and practices in the conclusion. Overall, I argue that Thích Thanh Từ's instructions on meditation are closely intertwined with his view of reality, which in turn is based on the mainstream Chan zong ideas.

Keywords: Vietnamese Buddhism; Vietnamese meditation tradition; Bamboo Grove; Trúc Lâm; Thích Thanh Từ; Thiền Tông; Chan zong; buddha nature; true mind; unlearned wisdom

1. Vietnamese Buddhism in Relationship with Chinese Buddhism

When visiting a typical Vietnamese Buddhist temple, one notices that there is always an ancestral altar room right behind the main altar hall. On the ancestral altar, a big statue or painting of Bodhidharma (Bồ Đề Đạt Ma, C. Putidamo 菩提達摩) is displayed for worship, reminding Vietnamese Buddhists about their religious roots. This raises the question why contemporary Vietnamese Buddhists, most of whom follow Pure Land Buddhism, revere Bodhidharma, who is claimed to be the 28th Indian Patriarch and the 1st Chinese Chan Patriarch. His name relates to the belief in the unbroken lineage of “wordless transmission” or “mind-to-mind transmission”¹ from the Buddha to his great disciple Mahākāśyapa and from him to generations of Chinese and eventually Vietnamese masters of the “Chan school” (*Thiền Tông, Chan zong* 禪宗)².

For years, Vietnamese scholars tried to understand when and how Buddhism initially came to the country. According to an old-fashioned view, a Chinese Buddhist, Mou Bo 牟博 (Mâu Bác), played a critical role in spreading Buddhism to Vietnam in the 2nd century CE (Thích Mật Thể 1943, chp. 1). This view is challenged in some later studies. For example, Thích Nhất Hạnh, writing under the name Lang Nguyễn (1973, pp. 21–28), claims that Indian merchants greatly influenced the Vietnamese with their Mahāyāna teachings since the 1st century CE. Then, by the end of the 2nd century CE, the Buddhist center Luy Lâu was firmly established in Vietnam, followed by Lạc Dương and Bành Thành—two Buddhist centers on what is currently Chinese territory. It should be noted that, according to the mainstream Vietnamese historical view, Chinese rulers dominated and assimilated a part of what is present-day Northern Vietnam for almost 1000 years (111 BCE–938 CE). Thích Nhất Hạnh believes that, before spreading to China, Buddhism had developed in Vietnam at the beginning of the first millennium because (1) Indian merchants traveling via the ocean route had to enter this present-day Northern Vietnam territory first before moving further up to mainland China and (2) this region was safe from turmoil in China during the first millennium because it was at the southern point of China, far away from the ruling center. Lê Mạnh Thát (Lê 2003, chp. 1) further claims that a missionary delegation assigned by Emperor Aśoka in around 247–232 BCE initially spread Buddhism to Vietnam. As early as the 2nd century BCE, Buddhist Sarvāstivāda ideas and practices became prevalent there. Thích Nhất Hạnh and Lê both assert that Buddhism was fostered in Vietnam before expanding to China. However, lacking solid sources, these writers end up relying on mere hints from a few dubious historical and folklore-like texts to conjecture what happened two thousand years ago.

Although Vietnamese scholars generate different theories about the origin of Vietnamese Buddhism, most agree on the mainstream claim of the existence of three traditions descending from Bodhidharma. They are named after three Chan zong masters who allegedly spread their Chan schools to Vietnam in, respectively, the 6th, 9th, and 11th centuries: Tì-ni-đa-lưu-chi (S. Vinītaruci, C. Piniduoliuzhi 毘尼多流支, a South Indian Buddhist monk who lived in China for seven years), Vô Ngôn Thông (C. Wu yantong 無言通), and Thảo Đường (C. Caotang 草堂). These three branches were supposedly unified during the Trần Dynasty (1225–1400) and combined with the ideology of “Buddhism into the world” (*Phật giáo nhập thế*) to form the unique and pure Vietnamese Thiền Tông school: Trúc Lâm Yên Tử³. Along with Vietnamese Buddhist academics, mainstream media writers, such as Anh Nguyễn (2020), Khánh Hòa et al. (2021), and Thanh Hà (2022), claim that the Trần Dynasty was the golden age of military power, social thriving, and cultural and artistic blossoming because Buddhism became a national religion and Trúc Lâm Yên Tử was practiced and embraced by everyone from kings and mandarins down to ordinary people. Nguyễn Giác (2019), based on Thích Thanh Từ (1998a), proudly asserts that

even Chan monks from the Song Dynasty (960–1279) China traveled to Vietnam to learn about the tradition.

According to a popular view among Vietnamese scholars, Thiền Tông had been adopted and blended into Vietnamese society for centuries, but since the fall of the Trần Dynasty, Thiền Tông, and Buddhism in general, were weakened for hundreds of years because the court favored Confucianism over Buddhism. L. Nguyễn writes that, later on, the Buddhist revival happened during the Trịnh–Nguyễn Civil War in the 17th century between Northern Vietnam (Đàng Ngoài) and Southern Vietnam (Đàng Trong, today’s central Vietnam) because of (1) the socio-political chaos in the country made the elites disappointed with Confucian ideas and turn to Buddhism and (2) many eminent monastics from China travelled to Vietnam and settled down there (L. Nguyễn 1973, p. 141). During that period, Tào Động (C. Caodong 曹洞) was adopted in Vietnam for the first time and Lâm Tế (C. Linji 臨濟)⁴ was thriving in Đàng Trong with the flow of immigrant Linji monastics from China. Liễu Quán (a subschool of Lâm Tế) was founded by a Vietnamese monastic with the same name (1667–1742) and is presented as an influential Vietnamese Thiền Tông school in Đàng Trong because of its Vietnamization of Chan practices (Quảng Điền 2021; L. Nguyễn 1973, pp. 456–60). While in Đàng Ngoài, Chân Nguyên (1647–1726, known as the Lâm Tế’s 36th generation) is credited with reviving Trúc Lâm Yên Tử (L. Nguyễn 1973, p. 145).

From the mid-19th through to the 20th century, the Vietnamese were colonized by the French. As Elise Anne DeVido (2007, 2015) explains, during the French colonization with its Christianization policies, Vietnamese elites, inspired by the famous Chinese Buddhist reformer Taixu 太虛 (Thái Hư, 1890–1947) and influenced by robust transnational movements around Asia, tried to reform Buddhism and make it an important part of the national identity.⁵ The first significant article on Vietnamese Buddhism that emerged during the period of French colonization is Trần Văn Giáp’s “Le bouddhisme en Annam, des origines au XIIIe siècle” (“Buddhism in Annam from the Beginning to the Thirteenth Century”). Written in 1932, it is based on *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh* (*The Story Collection of Outstanding Thiền Tông Masters of Vietnamese Buddhism*, C. *Chanyuan jiying* 禪苑集英)—the oldest Vietnamese text composed in Chinese (anonymous and undated) dealing with the alleged Buddhist history. Trần Văn Giáp’s work creates an impression that Vietnamese identity was affiliated with Buddhism, especially Thiền Tông, for centuries. By retelling the legendary stories of eminent Thiền figures—including kings, state councilors, grand tutors, court monastic-advisors, monastics, and skilled meditation laypeople—Trần Văn Giáp apparently succeeded in making Vietnamese elites believe in their glorious Buddhist past.

During the 1954–1975, when violent conflict erupted between the North and the South with American involvement, Buddhism in the communist-controlled North was severely weakened, while in the South, it persisted as a continuation of the earlier reform activities. Facing the Southern pro-Christianity government’s suppression of Buddhism and encountering the bloody conflict between the two sides of the country, Southern Buddhist monastics and laypeople engaged in peace activism. At the same time, they absorbed Westernized Buddhist ideas. Regarding the status of Buddhism in South Vietnam, Alexander Soucy (2022, p. 35) comments that “In the 1960s, Vietnamese Buddhism became truly international”. He also mentions that the works of D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) strongly affected the rising fascination with meditation not just in the academic world but in actual practice as well, as the cases of Thích Nhất Hạnh and Thích Thanh Từ demonstrate.

After the communist regime unified Vietnam in 1975, and until 1986—the year when the remarkable “free-market reforms” (Đổi Mới) started—Buddhism in the whole country had little influence or popular support. From 1986 until now, Vietnamese Buddhism has not only recovered but prospered with the increasing number of Buddhist institutions, publishing houses, various traditions, and new temples and monasteries. Although the Vietnamese Communist Party controls Buddhism (and other religions), and any Buddhist school that does not legally join the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam)⁶ has to live in jeopardy, the government still favors Buddhism for its alleged

connection with the national history and culture. More than ever, Thiền Tông is strongly promoted as a primary part of Vietnamese identity by the national and Buddhist media.

Starting with Trần Văn Giáp's work based on *Thiền Uyển Tập Anh*, *Thiền Uyển* has become the classic source for modern scholars to write histories of Vietnamese Buddhism. They agree that although *Thiền Uyển* was poorly written, it makes a valuable contribution to understanding Vietnamese Buddhism and Vietnamese history from the 6th to the 13th centuries. It reiterates and reaffirms the identity of Vietnamese Buddhism associated with many enlightened Thiền Tông masters and the popularity of Thiền Tông practices among the masses in medieval Vietnam. The nationalistic tone in later works on Thiền Tông is also very prominent.⁷ For example, Thích Mãn Giác (2016) goes as far as arguing that, based on new materials found in the Dunhuang caves, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng not only "created Chan" but was "actually a Vietnamese".

Nevertheless, Cuong Tu Nguyen (1997), a scholar of Vietnamese origin educated and working in the West, critically assesses *Thiền Uyển* and argues that the text is absolutely unreliable, as many stories it contains are copycats from Chinese transmission-of-the-lamp texts recording the lineages of Chan schools, especially the *Chuangdeng Lu* 傳燈錄 (*Truyền Đăng Lục*). He concludes that "the traditional/literal reading of the *Thiền Uyển*" is "both superficial and misleading" and Thiền Tông in medieval Vietnam was an "imagined community" (pp. 7–8). The view that Thiền Tông has never been practiced by the wide populace (being rather limited to small groups of educated elites) is supported by Soucy's anthropological observation (Soucy 2007, p. 343).⁸

C. T. Nguyen (1997, p. 31) also describes T. Griffith Foulk (1992) differentiating between the concepts of "lineage" and "school" in Chinese Buddhism. Chan "lineage" refers to the claimed genealogy of core individuals (i.e., the patriarchs descending from Bodhidharma, who unbrokenly transmitted the "mind of awakening"), while Chan "school" refers to a social structure formed by movements or groups united in a self-conscious manner and following specific beliefs and practices. Applying Foulk's thoughts on those concepts, he clarifies that the term "Tông" (C. *zong*, 宗) in "Thiền Tông" used throughout the *Thiền Uyển* and other Vietnamese "transmission of the lamp" texts covers both "school" and "lineage" in the above senses. In contrast to these and other contemporary Western scholars, most Vietnamese Thiền followers do not make this distinction, believing that Thiền Tông had been systemically organized and practiced by the actual community in Vietnam, guided by eminent meditation masters who have been patriarchs of different lineages transmitted from Bodhidharma. In reality, as C. T. Nguyen clarifies,

in most cases when a Vietnamese Buddhist claims that he belongs to the Zen school [Thiền Tông], it simply means he believes in the Zen lineage and gains inspiration from Zen ideals and world view. As for the abbot, what really matters and defines him as a "Zen master" is not necessarily his specific practices [...]. Rather, what defines him as a "Zen master" is his cherished memory of the sacred lineage to which he or, more properly, his teacher belongs (p. 31).

In connection to that, it is interesting to note that while Vietnamese Thiền followers might be treating Thiền Tông in both senses of "school" and "lineage", they do not necessarily practice Thiền Tông meditation but rather emphasize the continuation of their lineages. For example, Thích Nhật Từ (2020), a popular Buddhist monastic and scholar in Vietnam, openly says that even though he is officially a part of the Lâm Tế lineage, he knows for a fact that the two previous generations before him did not practice Lâm Tế meditation, and he himself has never practiced it.

It is also noteworthy that, as the works of Foulk (2007), Morten Schlütter (2008), and Alan Cole (2009, 2016) demonstrate, the stories that portray Chan patriarchs as enlightened Chinese masters in Chan literature were mainly fabricated by Buddhist elites during the Song Dynasty. These Buddhist elites created such narratives aimed at building the reputation of Chan in general and different Chan schools in particular for specific socio-political motives. Foulk's claim that "If I were to define the Chan/Zen tradition as a single, unambiguous object of historical research, I would present it as a discourse—a set of ideas and

tropes” (p. 453) is agreed with and quoted by Cole (2016, p. X). This raises questions about what we can truly know about medieval Vietnamese Buddhism, particularly when the key text *Thiền Uyển* mirrors such Chan literature.

What is unambiguous, though, is that Vietnamese Buddhism has a strong connection with Chinese Chan zong. Vietnamese Thiền followers justify the authenticity of their form of Buddhism by appealing to the transmission from Chinese Chan masters to Vietnamese Thiền masters. Most contemporary Buddhist monastics in Vietnam still focus on learning Chinese—classical Chinese in particular—to understand texts, most of which are written in Sino-Vietnamese⁹. This helps us understand the paradoxical issues of Thích Thanh Từ’s project, such as trying to present Trúc Lâm as independent from Chinese cultural influences and yet unavoidably connecting it to Chan zong to claim Vietnamese Thiền Tông’s authenticity. Thích Thanh Từ adopted Chan zong’s ideas and meditation techniques while trying to modify Thiền Tông’s views and practices to tailor them to contemporary audiences and connect them with the sense of Vietnamese identity and uniqueness of Vietnamese Buddhism.

2. Thích Thanh Từ

The 100-years-old monk Thích Thanh Từ is credited with reviving the Vietnamese meditation tradition, Trúc Lâm. A translator, commentator, writer, and poet, he used to hold several administrative positions, teach at Buddhist institutions, and give numerous Dharma talks (later published as books) to various audiences (mostly monastics). The scope of about 100 of his books and short texts ranges from basic to advanced Buddhist teachings. Thích Thanh Từ is honored and respected by most Vietnamese Buddhist monastics and laypeople who have known him, especially those well-educated in Buddhism. His leadership and influence on the Trúc Lâm system are remarkable, augmented by his cheerfulness, friendliness, sense of humor, modesty, and serious attitude toward Thiền Tông practices. Trúc Lâm undoubtedly owns its high reputation because of Thích Thanh Từ’s emphasis on meditation and strict monastic regulations. To his followers, he is an enlightened Thiền Tông master, full of compassion, wisdom, and a great sense of patriotism.

2.1. A Pure Land Monastic’s Conversion to Thiền Tông

According to Thích Thanh Từ, he was born in a non-Buddhist family but had a naturally strong bond with Buddhism. Ordained at 25, he became interested in studying sūtras and texts of different Buddhist traditions. Later, he became dissatisfied with such devotional practices as chanting buddhas’ names and urged himself to practice meditation with the goal of attaining buddhahood. At 42, he quit the Pure Land school and committed to exploring and practicing meditation on his own. He explains that due to his diligent contemplative practice during the 1966–1968 retreat, he suddenly acquired a deep insight into some Buddhist sūtras and called such experience “illumination of the path” (*sáng đạo*). He associates this insight with the highest achievement possible in Thiền Tông: revelation of “unlearned wisdom” (*trí vô sư/vô sư trí*, C. *wushi zhi* 無師智). Afterwards, he embarked on what he saw as his mission: teaching and spreading meditation for achieving the ultimate liberation as the key Buddhist practice. Based on his own experiences, he was convinced that strict rules and hardship were necessary to guide his disciples on the Buddhist path (“*Đời Tu Của Tôi*”, “My Monastic Life”, 1996c). After decades on the mission, he became a high-profile meditation master and founder of his own Buddhist tradition—the “revived” Trúc Lâm—that is widely presented as a continuation of the “unique” (*duy nhất*) and “pure” (*thuần túy*) Vietnamese meditation school, the original Trúc Lâm. We should note, however, this “revival” does not mean that the entirety of the doctrines and practices of the ancient Trúc Lâm were somehow brought back to life. Rather, the name “Trúc Lâm” was applied to the contemporary form of Vietnamese Buddhism developed by Thích Thanh Từ, with the main purpose of connecting his tradition with the pride of Vietnamese culture and identity.

In “*Đời Tu Của Tôi*”, Thích Thanh Từ also says that he incorporated various meditation instructions from different sources to facilitate his meditation practice. He began with the text *Lục Diệu Pháp Môn* (C. *Liumiao famen* 六妙法門, *Six Dharma Gates to the Sublime*)

by Zhiyi 智顗 (Trí Giã, 538–597), one of the first Chinese Buddhist thinkers to systematize Buddhist thoughts and practices and create an indigenous Chinese Buddhist system. Thích Thanh Từ translated the text from Chinese into Vietnamese in 1961. Later, he published it together with two other translated texts in his *Thiền Căn Bản* (*Discourse on Basic Meditation*) several times, including the 1999 edition. The text outlines a six-step sequential process¹⁰: (1) counting breath, (2) following or observing breath, (3) stabilizing mind, (4) contemplating impermanence and emptiness of the consciousness and bodily elements, (5) turning back to the “source” after destroying the duality of the objective sphere and of its subjective knowing, and (6) ultimate purification of the fundamentally pure mind. Thích Thanh Từ states that while he was able to practice the steps one and two successfully, he struggled with the step three due to the adverse effects of his attempts to stabilize his mind.

He then switched to *Ngũ Đình Tâm Quán* (*The Five Methods of Calming Meditation*). These methods, known in China as the *Five Gates of Chan* (C. *Wumen chan* 五門禪), are described in the *Meditation Scripture* (C. *Zuochan sanmei jing* 坐禪三昧經)¹¹ compiled in the fifth century by the famous translator Kumārajīva (C. Jiumo luoshen 鳩摩羅什, 344–413). This text was translated by Thích Thanh Từ in 1961 and added to his *Thiền Căn Bản* under the title *Tọa Thiền Tam Muội* (*Sitting Meditation for Cultivating Concentration*). The five methods are (1) contemplation of impurity, befitting those afflicted by lust/greed; (2) cultivation of compassion/loving-kindness for those afflicted by hatred; (3) contemplation of dependent arising for those afflicted by ignorance; (4) meditation on breath for those afflicted by speculative thoughts; and (5) meditation on the Buddha for those afflicted equally by all mental defilements¹². Thích Thanh Từ decided to use the method of contemplation of impurity. After completing the first phase of the method, which focuses on the thirty-six impure substances in the body, he moved to the second phase—contemplating purity for the sake of balancing the hatred toward oneself. However, he experienced severe pain while following instructions on visualizing his body being cut out to see a white bone emitting light.

The last material Thích Thanh Từ relied on is the *Tham Thiền Yếu Chỉ* (*Main Discourse on Meditation*) written by an influential Chinese Chan master Xuyun 虛雲 (Hư Vân, 1840–1959). Thích Thanh Từ translated the text into Vietnamese and first published it in 1962. The dominant content of the book is *huatou* 話頭 (*thoại đầu*), which Xuyun explains in one of his Dharma talk as follows:

Huatou, literally ‘word head,’ means ‘mind before thought.’ This method of investigation originates from the so-called Public Cases, or *gongan* [公案], in China. These were like legal documents and in the Buddhist sense, records of interviews. The *huatou* is the concise, essential point of all of the *gongan* dialogues, asking only ‘Who’ or ‘What.’ It involves questions that demand investigation, such as ‘Who is reciting mantras?’, ‘Who is prostrating to the Buddha?’, ‘Who is dragging this corpse around?’, or ‘Who is thinking of the Buddha?’. The ‘Who’ word is the same in all of them: the answer to be found in your own mind. Within your mind are both the state of a million thoughts and the state of mind before thought. This method is very simple, ordinary, and straightforward.

(Translated by Johns 2015)

Thích Thanh Từ chose to contemplate the question “What had I been before my parents gave birth to me?” (*Trước khi cha mẹ chưa sanh mình là gì?*). In the beginning, it worked for him, but one day, his mind could not focus on investigating the question anymore. He commented: “So, we can see that following the Buddhist path of practicing meditation without a teacher or guide is highly difficult and makes one feel miserable”.¹³ Not discouraged, he persisted in practicing meditation for months, using the three abovementioned sources, but he hit several additional deadlocks in the process. Feeling upset, he cried and practiced repentance to the Buddha. One night, he experienced an unexpected breakthrough to the “unlearned wisdom”.

It is worth noting that, as Thích Thanh Từ says, in the early 1960s, he had delved into an extensive collection of sūtras donated by a family of lay devotees before deciding to stay

in the meditation retreat. He found Theravāda sūtras more practical, detailed, and easier to understand than Mahāyāna sūtras. However, after attaining the insight that night, to his own surprise, he suddenly comprehended the meaning of some Mahāyāna sūtras that he had struggled with. Unfortunately, he does not specify which meditation technique he was using that led to this “insight experience” that happened at the end of the 1966–1968 retreat. It could have been a result of practicing the last method of contemplating *hwaou*, or possibly the culmination of all his attempts throughout the retreat.

2.2. The Unique Vietnamese Thiền Tông and National Identity

Born and growing up in Southern Vietnam during the Vietnamese resistance against French occupation and the intense war between the North and the South with the engagement of American troops, Thích Thanh Từ witnessed and experienced unspeakable sufferings that the Vietnamese underwent for decades. This might in part explain why his approach to Buddhism embraces a vigorous sense of the Vietnamese national identity.

In the recorded talk “*Nguyện Vọng của Tôi*” (“My Aspiration”), Thích Thanh Từ (2000c) explains that the name “Trúc Lâm” embodies Vietnamese culture and history, as well as Vietnamese Buddhism. Following the common view in Vietnam, he believes that the original Trúc Lâm was founded during the Trần Dynasty. He also takes for a fact that the Trần Kings were not only heroic and talented rulers, who defeated Mongols thrice, but also enlightened Thiền Tông masters, who applied Buddhism to their lives and developed it to the greatest extent in Vietnamese history. To him, the original Trúc Lâm founded by the King-turned-monk Trần Nhân Tông is the pure and the idea that Trúc Lâm unique Vietnamese Thiền Tông, because Trần Nhân Tông distilled and refined quintessential teachings from three Thiền Tông schools available at the time: Tì-ni-đa-lưu-chi, Thảo Đường, and Vô Ngôn Thông. Thích Thanh Từ emphasizes that Trúc Lâm is the unique Vietnamese Buddhist tradition because it was founded by the ancient Vietnamese hero who synthesized the best Buddhist teachings for the benefit of the Vietnamese. In short, he stressed that Trần Nhân Tông’s Trúc Lâm is “Thiền Việt Nam” (the Vietnamese Thiền tradition) and its cultivation methods are “*rất là Việt Nam*” (very Vietnamese).

Thích Thanh Từ’s sense of nationalism and passion for his tradition are expressed at the end of the talk:

We [Buddhist monastics] went to Thailand, Burma, Japan, etc., to study [Buddhism] as if there is nothing for us to study in Vietnam. If Vietnamese Buddhism had nothing yet, how could it have spread for nearly twenty centuries? If Vietnamese Buddhism had nothing, it would have been lost or disappeared already. [...] Therefore, I determined that, as a Buddhist follower, I must collect the best in Vietnamese Buddhism to set the base for the benefit of Vietnamese Buddhists.¹⁴

By reviving and advocating Trúc Lâm as the Vietnamese meditation tradition independent of other countries’ Buddhism, he associates the school with patriotism and even triggers a sense of nationalism¹⁵ in his audiences.

Furthermore, regarding the Vietnamese Communist Party’s concerns, Thích Thanh Từ’s background is “clean” as he has never been involved in politics, even during the turmoil of the 1960s. All his life seems to have been devoted to Buddhism and Trúc Lâm. Consequently, his revived Trúc Lâm tradition has been welcomed and extensively supported by the Vietnamese Communist Party.

Thích Thanh Từ believes that Vietnamese Buddhism has its own values separate from Chinese influences. The idea that the revived Trúc Lâm is a continuation of the “unique” and “pure” Vietnamese Thiền school is very significant for this position, even though both the contemporary Trúc Lâm and the medieval Trúc Lâm contain numerous Chinese Chan zong elements. It is not surprising that he translated Buddhist sūtras from Sino-Vietnamese into vernacular Vietnamese with the purpose of helping Buddhists understand the meaning of those texts and advocating for independence of Vietnamese cultural values from Chinese ones.

Putting the deep influences of Confucianism and Daoism aside, Thích Thanh Từ stresses the intertwining of Vietnamese culture and Vietnamese Buddhism, Thiền Tông in particular. He claims that “Buddhist thought has permeated the national spirit”¹⁶ and “if Buddhism is destroyed, the national spirit will also be shaken”¹⁷ (Thích Thanh Từ 2008, “Lời Giới Thiệu”, “Introduction”). He then demonstrates the indivisibility of Buddhism and the nation by pointing out how the Vietnamese have been influenced by Buddhist ideas and how those ideas were adapted to Vietnamese culture, including literature, music, architecture, customs, beliefs, and values, during twenty centuries of vicissitudes in Vietnamese history. He argues that “talking about Vietnamese Thiền Tông is talking about Vietnamese Buddhism”¹⁸ (Thích Thanh Từ 1992, “Lời Đầu Sách”, “Preface”), and that from the 3rd to 19th centuries the Vietnamese practiced predominately meditation (Thích Thanh Từ 2012, “Phương Pháp Tu Tịnh Độ Tông Và Thiền Tông”, “The Practices of the Pure Land Tradition and Thiền Tông”). By combining the sense of patriotism with the affirmation of the vital role of Buddhism and Thiền Tông in Vietnam, he draws attention of the Vietnamese Communist Party and Vietnamese elites to the importance of supporting the “coming back” of Thiền Tông and making it thrive again.

Thích Thanh Từ’s perspective on Vietnamese Buddhism and Thiền Tông are not much different from those other Buddhist reformists in the same period, such as Thích Nhất Hạnh, as they share the same social-political milieu. Soucy (2022, pp. 33–36) states that the ideas of reviving and reforming Buddhism advocated by the Japanese scholar and Zen apologist D. T. Suzuki around the 1960s strongly influenced Southern Vietnamese monastics and elites, who were heirs of Vietnamese Buddhist reformers in the earlier period inspired by the Chinese Buddhist modernist, activist, and thinker Taixu. Thích Thanh Từ worked in Buddhist academic institutions and absorbed the new approach to Buddhism, which stresses meditation practices over devotionism. This is likely the reason why he interprets Vietnamese Buddhist history in terms of its perceived affiliation with meditation. To him, while the continuity of Thiền Tông has occasionally been interrupted due to challenging political and social events, it has always remained an important part of Vietnamese identity. As a result, he is willing to take upon himself the task of guarding the continuity of the bright legacy of Vietnamese Thiền Tông ancestors.

2.3. *Becoming the Leading Master of Thiền Tông*

Thích Thanh Từ is considered the founder and the highest master of contemporary Vietnamese Thiền Tông. This is despite the fact that he has not been trained in meditation by any teacher or received the “mind transmission” in any Chan zong/Thiền Tông school. Paradoxically, this does not affect his status of a “Zen master”, and his followers respect him in particular because he is believed to have discovered the path on his own, just as the Buddha did. After the night he had experienced the “unlearned wisdom”, he started spreading his meditation techniques, initially teaching the first ten disciples in 1971. It should be noted that, aside from Thích Thanh Từ’s biography transcribed from his Dharma talks, the information about the early years of his teaching career is scarce. As Soucy (2022, p. 42) comments, “it is difficult to objectively determine what Thích Thanh Từ was doing in the war period up to around the start of the Renovation in the late 1980s”, and reasons for his decision to embrace Thiền Tông and revive Trúc Lâm are not clear (p. 41). However, in just a few decades, Thích Thanh Từ firmly established himself and his tradition on the map of the new Buddhist schools. He became the Thiền Tông leading master, and his Trúc Lâm tradition is both influential in Vietnam and reached out to the West. I see this as a result of at least six causes.

- (1) First is the rising demand for meditation in Vietnam, which itself is a result of both globalization and domestic conditions. Globalization has influenced Vietnamese Buddhism since the 1920s, blurring the line between “traditional” and “modernized” Buddhism. Vietnamese Buddhism underwent revival and modernization in part in attempts to resist Christianization by the French colonizers. It was further reformed in the 1960s in response to the socio-political chaos under the Southern Government’s

rule. Monastics in Vietnam today are, as a result, heirs of the reformists, many of whom emphasized what they saw as the original Buddhism, which prioritizes meditation over chanting and ritual as the means of achieving liberation. Prominent Buddhist monastics who focus on teaching meditation in contemporary Vietnam include Thích Trí Quảng, Thích Nhật Từ, Thích Chân Quang, Thích Trí Chơn, and Thích Phước Tiến, all of whom follow the Mahāyāna tradition; Thiện Minh, Minh Tâm, and Hạnh Tuệ, who follow the Theravāda tradition; as well as prominent followers of Minh Đăng Quang, who is credited as the founder of the Mendicant tradition (phái Khất Sĩ)—a syncretic school that emerged around the 1940s and 1950s in Southern Vietnam. In terms of domestic conditions, the development of the Vietnamese economy has led to an increase in the number of middle-class citizens prioritizing their mental health and spiritual well-being. This in turn has led to a surge in interest in and demand for meditation in the country;

- (2) Thích Thanh Từ and Trúc Lâm are strongly supported by the Vietnamese Communist Party due, in part, to his dedication to Vietnamese Buddhism and his emphasis on the “Vietnameseness” of his tradition.¹⁹ He holds a high-ranking position as the Vice-Supreme Patriarch of the Verification Council of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha. Trúc Lâm flourishes better than ever with its ambitious plan to establish its monasteries in all 63 provinces and municipalities—a goal soon to be accomplished. Not surprisingly, Trúc Lâm has established a substantial presence in the country. With 52 monasteries and 104 communities in Vietnam (and 16 monasteries abroad), the tradition has built its monasteries in the country’s prime locations. With their grandiose appearance and large size, these monasteries are easily distinguishable from typical Vietnamese temples. As a result, Vietnamese Buddhists now have better access to the tradition and can participate in Trúc Lâm activities in their own regions without traveling far. That said, not all monasteries can organize in-person meditation retreats. Although the tradition provides virtual Buddhist contemplative programs, they are available only to monastics and advanced laypeople. It is also challenging for the Trúc Lâm regulations to be implemented across the extensive network of monasteries at the same level;
- (3) As a leader of Trúc Lâm, Thích Thanh Từ instructs his disciples on how to make Buddhism beneficial to society. This emphasis on pragmatic benefits to society is partly responsible for Trúc Lâm’s success in recruiting an impressive number of ordained monastics. Instead of doing charity as many Vietnamese monastics do, he believes that, as a Buddhist monastic, he can best contribute to Vietnamese society by making Vietnamese Buddhism strong and with its help guide the country on the right path (Thích Thanh Từ 2000c, “Nguyện Vọng Của Tôi”, “My Aspiration”). To him, this means dedicating himself to providing Buddhist education and training monastics (and laypeople) in Thiền Tông meditation. Furthermore, according to Thích Thanh Từ, the monastics’ responsibility is to engage in the “Dharma generosity” to help others eradicate suffering forever. This is different from the “material generosity” that brings only short-term results (Thích Thanh Từ 2000b, “Từ Bi và Trí Tuệ”, “Compassion and Wisdom”). Also, declaring himself a revivalist of Trần Nhân Tông’s Trúc Lâm, he interprets the notions of “engagement into the world” (*tinh thần nhập thế*) and “monastics in harmony with lay people” (*hòa quang đồng trần*)²⁰ attributed to Trần Nhân Tông in the sense of monastics’ using the Buddha teachings and their own insight for transforming laypeople, rather than living separately from the world. Through the activity of the Dharma generosity, Trúc Lâm has built a strong network of 4000 monastics, many of whom are young and self-disciplined. However, only some are involved in teaching and spreading Buddhist Dharma, and most well-known Trúc Lâm teachers are monks;²¹
- (4) Thích Thanh Từ himself is the most influential Trúc Lâm figure. His remarkable life story as a monastic who had learned and practiced meditation with no teacher until his “unlearned wisdom” was suddenly revealed impresses his followers. Impressive

to them is also the fact that he dedicated himself to reviving the Vietnamese Buddhist meditation system with a significant number of monastics alongside dozens of monasteries (including ones abroad). Born in the Mekong Delta, with such typical characteristics of inhabitants of that area as friendliness, cheerfulness, and a sense of humor, Thích Thanh Từ makes his followers feel comfortable when interacting with him, even though he is well-known for promoting strict discipline. His main disciples, such as Thích Nhật Quang, Thích Thông Phương, and Thích Tâm Hạnh, with their high reputation for morality, dedication to meditation practices, and contribution to building the tradition, help attract further attention from Buddhists;

- (5) In its public outreach activities aimed at raising awareness of the tradition, Trúc Lâm relies both on the typical way of recruiting new followers in Vietnamese Buddhism—word of mouth—and on using contemporary tools such as websites, Facebook, and YouTube. However, Trúc Lâm’s virtual outreach techniques are more limited than those of such international Buddhist organizations as Plum Village (Làng Mai) established by Thích Nhất Hạnh or those of some famous contemporary monastics in Vietnam, such as Thích Nhật Từ or Thích Trúc Thái Minh. What Trúc Lâm is very good at is promoting its specific imagery. Trúc Lâm monasteries often display a statue of the sitting Buddha Śākyamuni with an enigmatic smile and holding a lotus flower. This represents the Chan legend of wordless transmission from the Buddha to his senior disciple Mahākāśyapa. Other common statues are those of the three ancient patriarchs of Trúc Lâm (Trần Nhân Tông, Pháp Loa, and Huyền Quang) representing Trúc Lâm’s roots (illustrated in Figure 1). Seeing those statues, one can recollect the whole narrative of Thiền Tông transmission from the Buddha all the way down to the contemporary Trúc Lâm monastics in Vietnam. Besides encouraging viewers to practice Thiền Tông, displaying these images also serves as an outreaching strategy to showcase the revived Trúc Lâm’s uniqueness by connecting it with the original Trúc Lâm, as well as with the Vietnamese history and culture;²²
- (6) Last but not least, the contemporary Trúc Lâm is successful at building its highly respectable image based on the combination of such elements as strict regulations, emphasis on “self-transformation”, Vietnamization, and patriotism. For example, to achieve the soteriological goal of manifesting the buddha nature (*phật tính*, S. *buddhadhātu*, C. *foxing* 佛性), Trúc Lâm encourages its followers, especially monastics, to adhere to stringent principles, engage in hours of sitting meditation (because sitting is claimed to be the best posture for keeping the mind stable and meditation efficient), and continue meditating during other daily activities. According to this tradition, the best way for Buddhists to contribute to the nation’s prosperity is by being moral, intelligent, and diligent Thiền Tông meditators. Trúc Lâm services attract mainly those Buddhists who have a strong sense of national pride and want to follow a Buddhist school superior to all others (as mentioned in Soucy’s 2022 work), as well as those who take the soteriological goals seriously. More importantly, Trúc Lâm’s advanced practitioners, commonly appearing calm, mindful, and dignified, can be an important factor in attracting the attention of the public and inspiring more Buddhists to follow this school.

It is worth noting that meditation is not widely practiced in Vietnamese Buddhism, and most Vietnamese people do not show a strong inclination toward it. However, the emergence of Trúc Lâm in contemporary Vietnam highlights a significant shift in how Vietnamese society perceives and embraces the nature of Buddhist views and practices. In the next session, we will delve deeper into Thích Thanh Từ’s views and practices, as well as their relationship, which have contributed to distinctive characteristics of Trúc Lâm.



Figure 1. The altar in TrúC Lâm Yên Tử monastery displays statues of the three TrúC Lâm Patriarchs from medieval Vietnam: Trần Nhân Tông in the middle flanked by Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang, with the motto “The Most Noble Unlearned Wisdom”. The photo taken in 2023 is used with permission.

3. The TrúC Lâm Tradition

3.1. TrúC Lâm’s Philosophical Ideas

Thích Thanh Từ points out that although he respects all meditation traditions, he had no choice but to choose Thiền Tông because he is a Vietnamese Buddhist monastic with “Thiền Tông blood” flowing inside. Besides distinguishing Thiền Tông from Theravāda and other forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism, he also claims that in terms of meditation techniques, Thiền Tông is the most advanced Buddhist tradition while Theravāda is the lowest. To him, Thiền Tông is the fastest yet hardest path to buddhahood, and only brave people without fear of death can dare to follow it. Presenting his tradition as more special and sophisticated than others, he describes Thiền Tông with such enigmatic words as “the more secretive, the more obvious; the more transcendental, the more realistic; the more far-away, the more close-up; the more mysterious, the more simple”²³ (Thích Thanh Từ 1997a, “Tại Sao Tôi Tu Thiền”, “Why Do I Practice Meditation?”).

Regarding the tradition’s philosophical foundations and soteriological goals, Thích Thanh Từ says that he believes in the notion of the buddha nature taught in Mahāyāna sūtras. According to his interpretation, everyone has the buddha nature, which is like a clear mirror, but it is obscured because of ignorance, similar to dust covering the mirror. When the dust cover of ignorance becomes thin, the buddha nature shines forth. Without the revelation of the buddha nature, one cannot become awakened. He equates the awakened mind with “true mind” (*chân tâm*, C. *zhenxin* 真心) and unlearned wisdom—a wisdom realized without reliance on a teacher, similar to awakening realized by the Buddha (Thích Thanh Từ 1996c, “Đời Tu Của Tôi”, “My Monastic Life”). He (Thích Thanh Từ 2020) also writes the following:

What do we practice Buddhism for? To stop and calm the monkey mind. As the monkey mind calms down, the true mind appears. This is awakening. One becomes awakened within, not through finding it somewhere else [outside].²⁴

This soteriological goal of awakening likely appeals to devout Buddhists who wish to achieve liberation from *saṃsāra*.

Thích Thanh Từ also embraces the Mahāyāna concept of “emptiness” (*tính/tánh không*, S. *sūnyatā*, C. *xíngkong* 性空). He (Thích Thanh Từ 2020) stresses the importance of internalizing the concept of emptiness by chanting *Bát Nhã Tâm Kinh* (*The Heart of Wisdom Sūtra*, S. *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya Sūtra*, C. *Banruo xīnjīng* 般若心經) and contemplating emptiness which the sūtra describes in the sense of “form is emptiness, emptiness is form”. In his transcribed talk (Thích Thanh Từ 2000a, “Tánh Không và Chân Không”, “Emptiness and True Voidness”), he contends that the *Prajñāpāramitā* system delves deeper than the *Āgama* (i.e., non-Mahāyāna Buddhism) system into the view of emptiness. According to him, the *Prajñāpāramitā* teaches that nothing exists naturally by itself, but rather is a result of interconnectedness of various conditions. All phenomena, including the Buddha’s teachings and buddhahood, arise based on conditions. When one sees through the unreal and illusory nature of all phenomena and breaks through mundane attachments to things, one becomes free from suffering. As he puts it,

“One now sees things and knows they are unreal, so one does not cling to them at all. Because of not clinging, one does not worry whether one has things or not. For that, what is it if not liberation?”²⁵

Furthermore, Thích Thanh Từ describes the differences between “emptiness in terms of conditioned arising” (*tánh không duyên khởi*) and “the transcendental existence in true voidness” (*chân không diệu hữu*). According to his “Tánh Không và Chân Không”, while emptiness refers to the nature of the reality of phenomena, true voidness is the primordial pure nature of the mind devoid of wandering thoughts and transcending cyclic existence. The realization of true voidness leads to the development of supernatural powers, like those of the Buddha. He believes it is a misconception to equate emptiness with true voidness, as the former focuses on denying the independent existence of things, while the latter represents direct access to the true mind. He concludes that practicing Buddhism enables us to detach ourselves from the objects of the six senses through realizing emptiness and eventually, through realizing true voidness, manifest the true mind—the supreme enlightened mind not different from that of the Buddha.

In short, Thích Thanh Từ’s fundamental teaching is that by contemplating emptiness to understand the illusory mundane world and then enabling the cessation of all thoughts to disconnect themselves from the mundane world, practitioners’ true mind or buddha nature is naturally revealed. Consequently, the awakened mind manifests the unlearned wisdom, which happens due to meditation without reliance on a teacher, as in the Buddha’s case.

3.2. Trúc Lâm Meditation Methods

Thích Thanh Từ clarifies that he does not adhere to any one of the later Chan zong branches, such as Caodong, Linji, or Yunmen. Instead, he claims to have synthesized the key teachings of the three important Thiền Tông masters, combining them with his interpretation of the nature of reality. The first is the method of “not abiding in thoughts”²⁶ attributed to the Second Chan Patriarch Huìkē (Huệ Khả), which aims at dealing with mistaken perceptions, being aware of thoughts but not following them. The second method, allegedly taught by the Sixth Chan Patriarch Huìnéng (Huệ Năng) and aimed at recognizing nonduality²⁷, embraces the practice of detachment of the six sense doors from the six sense objects.²⁸ The third method, attributed to the King Trần Nhân Tông and aimed at responding to impermanent and illusory dependent arising, is “encountering external objects with no discriminating mind” (*đối cảnh vô tâm*).²⁹ Thích Thanh Từ also adds one more method that sums his approach to the path: perpetually living with the real because the real is liberation and the unreal is rebirth; realizing that whenever objects are perceived,

whether past, present, or future, they are all illusory. Depending on their capacities, practitioners are allowed to be flexible in which method/s to use (Thích Thanh Từ 1992, “Thiền Tông Việt Nam cuối Thế Kỷ XX”, “Vietnamese Thiền Tông at the End of the Twentieth Century”).

Besides that, in contrast to the common claim attributed to Chan zong that its followers do not require the guidance of Buddhist scriptures, Thích Thanh Từ teaches that Trúc Lâm practitioners will benefit from studying Buddhist sūtras in order to enhance their meditation skills. He (Thích Thanh Từ 1999b, “Lời Giới Thiệu”, “Introduction”) encourages his disciples to (1) learn the Buddha’s teachings, (2) reflect on those teachings for deeper understanding, and (3) apply them to practice (which is a common approach in Buddhism).

To present the contemporary Trúc Lâm as authentic, Thích Thanh Từ and his disciples connect the tradition with certain ideas of the 13th-century Trúc Lâm as well as Thiền Tông in general. For example, his disciple, Thích Tâm Hạnh, mentions what he calls the “Thiền house’s proverb” (*châm ngôn trong nhà Thiền*): “No word expression, outstanding transmission distinguished from textual teachings. Pointing directly to mind, realizing the truth to become buddhas”.³⁰ According to Tâm Hạnh, Bodhidharma’s teaching of “pointing directly to mind” (*chỉ thẳng tâm người*, C. *zhizhi renxin* 直指人心) is not different from Trần Nhân Tông’s teaching of “looking inward to illuminate oneself” (*phân quan tự kỷ*)³¹ (Thích Tâm Hạnh n.d., “IV. Kiến Trúc, Cảnh Quan Và Ý Nghĩa”, “IV. Architecture, Landscape, and Meaning”). That way, by embracing the latter teaching, Trúc Lâm’s promoters present it as the continuation of Thiền Tông lineages extending back to China’s Chan zong, which in turn is presented as having developed from the Buddha’s direct mind transmission.

Despite Chan zong’s rhetoric devaluing textual teachings and advocating mind transmission, its literature in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam is extensive and rich. As mentioned above, Trúc Lâm especially emphasizes the importance of combining practice with textual studies. Paradoxically, while propagating Vietnam’s independence from Chinese cultural influences, Thích Thanh Từ’s Trúc Lâm contains numerous Chinese elements. Although Trúc Lâm followers can chant and understand some sūtras translated by Thích Thanh Từ into the modern Vietnamese language, apprehending Sino-Vietnamese terminology in Thiền Tông texts is challenging. He himself and some of his disciples, such as Thích Thông Phương (2008), attempt to clarify the meaning of many abstract ideas contained in typical encounter dialogues of Chinese Chan masters because such concepts are too overwhelming and arcane to most Vietnamese Buddhists.

Regarding Trúc Lâm meditation techniques, as indicated by Thích Thanh Từ (1999b, “Nghị Thức Tọa Thiền”, “Ceremony for Sitting Meditation”) and commented by his senior disciple Thích Tâm Hạnh (2020), Trúc Lâm meditation practices contain two stages (apart from assuming the correct posture, warming up at the beginning, and relaxing the mind and body at the end of a meditation session). The preparation stage, designed for developing concentration for the beginners, includes two phases. First, they start with the breath, counting from 1 to 10, either by counting each inhalation and exhalation separately or by counting each in-and-out breathing cycle as one unit. If they confuse the numbers, they return to number one again. After having mastered the breath counting, they move to the next phase: observing and contemplating the breath. Thích Thanh Từ teaches that practice at this phase should last until practitioners have mastered it, while Tâm Hạnh addresses its duration, which he recommends lasting from three to six months. When breathing in and out, practitioners acknowledge that they are breathing in and out. While doing so, they connect the contemplation of breath with the realization of its impermanence and expand that understanding to contemplating the fragile, illusory, and temporary nature of life.

The main stage is presented as a distinctive meditation technique of Trúc Lâm: applying the practice of not abiding in thoughts to knowing deeply the “true mind”. When speculative thoughts arise, rather than following them, the mind recognizes its true nature—the buddha nature. At the same time, while doing meditation, the mind is not attached even to the concept of meditation. As Tâm Hạnh puts it, echoing Thích Thanh Từ’s teaching, doing meditation without doing meditation is the actual meditation practice. According to this

approach, if arising thoughts are not paid attention to, they gradually disappear, and the clarity and the true knowing of the mind are left unobscured. Elaborating on this process, Thích Thanh Từ instructs practitioners to move through its five successive stages: (1) letting the breath be with a peaceful and calm mind, (2) persistently reminding themselves about the true mind, (3) recognizing the true mind and being aware of its presence, (4) absorbing the true mind at the phase of constantly “knowing it without thought”, and finally (5) effortlessly continuing the practice until even the concepts of “knowing” and “without thought” are dropped. In the last phase, the mind is perceived as boundless and eternal.

While it is clear that this meditation method consists of a gradual process, Thích Thanh Từ and his disciples also embrace a typical concept of “sudden awakening” (*đốn ngộ*, C. *dunwu* 頓悟) that does not require any particular meditation technique. He (Thích Thanh Từ 1988, p. 20) explains as follows:

Sudden-awakening meditation is the practice of direct awakening to the nature of the mind, called “realizing the nature of mind [the buddha nature/the true mind] to start cultivating” [*kiến tánh³² khởi tu*]. There is no object [to contemplate on], no method [to follow], and nothing to achieve. Being delusional is being a sentient being; being enlightened is being a buddha. This is what is called “realizing the nature of mind to become a buddha” [*kiến tánh thành Phật*]. This way of practice is “practice without practicing” and “attainment without attaining.”³³

Despite the emphasis on sudden awakening with no gradual transformation of mind (unlike in the case of Theravāda or many forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism), Thích Thanh Từ adopts the familiar Chan model of the Ten Oxherding Pictures (*Thập Mục Ngưu Đồ*, C. *shimu niutu* 十牧牛圖)³⁴ explained through ten short poems to illustrate the gradual contemplative process leading to buddhahood (pp. 20–24).³⁵ Ox, a familiar animal in Chinese and Vietnamese culture, initially represents the wild and unruly human mind. The meditation practitioner—the ox herder in this case—needs to work hard to tame and gradually domesticate his ox-like mind. The Ten Oxherding Pictures also demonstrate the crucial idea that any wild mind can be gradually trained, tamed, and eventually disappear due to the buddha nature shining forth from within.

Importantly, the notion of awakening in Trúc Lâm, while aligning with some of the mainstream Chan zong’s teachings of the no-thought mind and the nature of mind, has its own unique elements. The abovementioned term *kiến tánh* indicates awakening, but in Trúc Lâm it does not indicate the supreme level of awakening equal to that of buddhas (Thích Thanh Từ 1992, 1997b; Thích Nhật Quang 2009, 2010). In particular, Thích Thanh Từ contends that *kiến tánh* only means the initial insight of understanding the nature of mind, and that a partially awakened person is only called a virtuous and eminent friend (*thiện tri thức*, S. *kalyāṇamitra*, C. *shanzhi shi* 善知識) or an ancient master (*tổ*, C. *zu* 祖)—not a buddha. It is because Thích Thanh Từ distinguishes between the incomplete awakening (*giải ngộ*, C. *jiiewu* 解悟) and the complete awakening (*chứng ngộ*, C. *zhengwu* 證悟). The former can occur when someone instantly acquires insight into the meaning of a particular Buddhist teaching which leads to realizing the nature of the mind right after encountering it. For it happens immediately, it is called “sudden awakening”, and it belongs to the “learned wisdom” (*trí hữu sư*) category. However, because afflictions (*tập khí phiền não*, S. *kleśa*, C. *fannaο* 煩惱) still remain, a person with the experience of sudden awakening needs to keep practicing meditation until the unruly thoughts cease and the final awakening is attained. In that stage, the unlearned wisdom manifests and one’s rebirth cycle stops³⁶ (Thích Thanh Từ 1992, V. “III. Yếu Chỉ Thiền Tông Hay Cốt Tủy Kinh Điển”, “III. The Central Teachings in Thiền Tông or the Buddhist Sutras’ Essential”).

In addition, Thích Thanh Từ also delineates three levels of awakening (*giác ngộ*, C. *juewu* 覺悟) which, respectively, correspond to three levels of ignorance (*vô minh*, S. *avidyā*, C. *wuming* 無明). The inferior level of awakening is attained when one realizes the nature of selflessness (*vô ngã*, S. *anātman*, C. *wuwo* 無我) to cope with the superior ignorance of clinging to self. The middle level of awakening indicates realization of the no-thought mind or “no mind” (*vô niệm*, C. *wunian* 無念) which opposes the middle level of ignorance

of thought arising. The superior level of awakening consists of the realization of the nature of mind³⁷ which counterbalances the inferior ignorance of forgetting the nature of mind. According to him, *kiến tánh khởi tu* (seeing the true mind to start cultivating), also known as *đốn ngộ tiệm tu*³⁸ (experiencing sudden awakening to gradually cultivate) is the essential teaching and the ideal form of practice for practitioners of Thiền Tông. He presents two techniques for meditators on the path of *kiến tánh khởi tu*: (1) being ceaselessly aware that thoughts are unreal—a technique leading to the abandonment of clinging to thoughts and their gradual disappearance and (2) being ceaselessly aware of the nature of mind—a technique that helps eliminate mistaken discrimination between the six senses and the six sense objects.

Thích Thanh Từ also takes into consideration those earnest practitioners who are not yet able to realize the true mind. For them, he provides two contemplative methods for achieving small awakening or sudden awakening at the first stage: (1) perpetually meditating on a *huatou* or a *gongan* until the doubt³⁹ generated through such meditation is destroyed and (2) following the technique of not abiding in thoughts while doing sitting meditation and diligently contemplating emptiness of the body during other activities.

It is interesting to note that in China, the approach of sudden awakening followed by “gradual cultivation” (*tiệm tu*, C. *jianxiu* 漸修) was articulated in its classic form by Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 (Khuê Phong Tông Mật, 780–841), who was highly critical of the Hongzhou 洪州 (Hồng Châu) lineage that was advocating what he called “sudden awakening followed by sudden cultivation”. Zongmi’s approach became highly influential in Korean Sŏn during the mid-Koryŏ dynasty (937–1392), being advocated by such key Sŏn figures as Pojo Chinul 普照知訥 (Phổ Chiếu Trí Nột, 1158–1210). In China, in contrast, it has never attracted a widespread following and was attacked by the followers of the Hongzhou and, later, the Linji lineage whose “sudden awakening followed by sudden cultivation approach” reigned supreme. In fact, Linji was the only direct transmission Chan line to survive after the Tang dynasty in China (Buswell 1987, p. 334; 1991, pp. 44–57). Thích Thanh Từ’s approach to awakening parallels that of Zongmi, who distinguished between “awakening of original insight”/“understanding awakening” (C. *jiewu* 解悟) and “awakening of complete realization”/“realization awakening” (C. *zhengwu* 證悟). The former corresponds to the insight necessary to begin the path, the latter to the final state of buddhahood. That initial insight consists of intellectual comprehension of the Buddhist teachings and has to be followed by gradual cultivation (Gregory 1987, pp. 286–97; Broughton 2009, p. 37). Besides that, as a Buddhist scholar-monk, Zongmi is well-known for advocating the combination of cultivation and doctrinal aspects of Buddhism, in contrast to the mainstream Chan zong devaluing the role of scriptures. Thích Thanh Từ shares Zongmi’s viewpoint on this matter as well. In fact, Thích Thanh Từ learned Zongmi’s perspectives on Chan while he was translating Zongmi’s *Prolegomenon to the Collection of Expressions of the Chan Source*⁴⁰. In Thích Thanh Từ’s (1996b) *Nguồn Thiền Giảng Giải* (*The Commentaries and Explanations of the Thiền Source*), he expresses his endorsement of Zongmi’s harmonization of two extremes: the doctrines of “sudden awakening” versus “gradual awakening”, as well as the advocacies of “not relying on scriptures” versus “only relying on scriptures”. He believes that this middle-way approach expresses the best of all the teachings of buddhas and ancient Chan masters and, based on it, provides cultivation techniques before and after the experience of “sudden awakening”.

It is clear that Trúc Lâm’s core meditation structure based on Thích Thanh Từ’s interpretation of Chinese Chan literature⁴¹ is a mix of different ideas of Chan figures. Even though he claims that he uses only Huike’s and Huineng’s teachings (besides those of Trần Nhân Tông) as the foundation of the Trúc Lâm practices, he and his disciples also embrace later philosophical ideas and meditation techniques attributed to or developed by later Chan figures like Zongmi. One possible reason for this is to establish Trúc Lâm’s reputation for following the origin of Chan teachings.

In sum, clarifying the issue of an awakened person being in need of gradual contemplative practice, Thích Thanh Từ articulates different levels of realization, wherein the ini-

tial realization is presented as the starting point of the gradual process leading to the final realization of buddhahood. Significantly, no matter how diverse and flexible the meditation techniques he teaches are, he is always consistent with his main position that only the no-thought mind is the true mind or suchness. Treating “no-thought mind” or “no-mind” as the central goal to be attained by diligent practice of meditation, he also developed internal regulations for supporting his monastic disciples and lay followers on the path toward that goal.

3.3. TrúC Lâm’s Internal Regulations

In contrast to most Vietnamese temples, TrúC Lâm’s internal regulations and activities are rather strict and designed for creating settings most conducive to meditation practices. According to Thích Thanh Từ’s (1999b) *Thanh Quy Các Thiền Viện (The TrúC Lâm Monasteries’ Regulations)*, regarding recruitment criteria, those wanting to join TrúC Lâm should be in good health and between ages 18 to 55. Monastics from other traditions need to complete the TrúC Lâm Buddhist Studies program. Laypeople can be qualified if they have finished high school and spent years studying and practicing Buddhist meditation. Both lay and monastic candidates need to undergo from one to three years of training in TrúC Lâm monasteries to qualify as official TrúC Lâm Sangha members. Afterwards, they are required to participate in TrúC Lâm’s four-year Buddhist Studies program focusing on Thiền Tông and some common sūtras. This demonstrates that TrúC Lâm’s recruitment standards are high and selective, and that Thích Thanh Từ’s tradition is tailored mostly to well educated people.

The manual emphasizes ten fundamental precepts for monastics and six principles for building a harmonious environment in the saṅgha to assist each individual in their cultivation. It also requests monastics to curtail unnecessary travel and not to keep private money. As part of their daily schedule, monastics must do the formal sitting meditation almost six hours a day in addition to keeping their mind concentrated during other activities. In several main monasteries, such as the TrúC Lâm Đà Lạt, the interior section is used only by monastics dedicated to meditation; the exterior section is used by monastics doing administrative and logistical tasks, as well as by other trainees and guests. Thích Thanh Từ (1996c, “Đời Tu Của Tôi”, “My Monastic Life”) clarifies that, based on his experiences of going through difficulties, he became convinced that strict rules and hardship were necessary to protect and support his disciples on the path of Buddhist meditation.

Sitting meditation for up to six hours daily is an extreme challenge for even experienced monastics, especially for those who converted to TrúC Lâm from other Buddhist traditions. By following the tradition’s discipline together in the same saṅgha, each individual member is expected to courageously overcome sloth and pain from the hardship of long-sitting meditation. As a result, the image of diligent and dedicated TrúC Lâm monastics contributes to their tradition’s high standing, in particular when compared to stories in the press and media about corrupt and spoiled Buddhist monastics of other schools.

Not all TrúC Lâm monasteries nowadays follow the same sitting meditation schedule, and not all monastics are required to complete the Buddhist Studies program or limit traveling. One of the first TrúC Lâm monasteries, Thường Chiếu, has also raised dozens of children novices. It appears that the increasing number of monasteries and monastics, insufficient management capacities, and efforts to adapt to local conditions and popularize the tradition, together lead to the loosening of regulations. Nevertheless, the tradition is generally renowned for hard training and strict rules, and TrúC Lâm monastics are highly respected for undergoing such hardship.

3.4. TrúC Lâm’s Views on Science, “Superstitions”, and “True Religion”

Because of the Communist Party’s policies regarding “superstition” and the growth of an antisuperstition population in contemporary Vietnam, religious institutions started conversation with the public about their own position on superstition and science. Thích Thanh Từ and his TrúC Lâm tradition present their practices as scientific and rational, crit-

icizing “superstitious” activities as obstacles on the Buddhist path. This view seems to fit well with the contemporary religious demands of Vietnamese who are influenced by Westernized Buddhism that emphasizes the connection between meditation and scientific benefits, as well as those who concur with the Vietnamese Communist Party’s policies against “superstition”.⁴²

Thích Thanh Từ (1997a, “Tại Sao Tôi Tu Theo Phật”, “Why I Practice Buddhism”) values the importance of intellectual study and scientific research. He believes that science, in all of its fields, is instrumental in building and developing the nation. However, he also notes that for balanced and sustainable development, wisdom developed through intellectual study must be coupled with compassion. He (Thích Thanh Từ 1997a, “Tại Sao Tôi Tu Thiền”, “Why I Practice Meditation”) also expresses concern that science is like a double-edged knife. On the one hand, scientific innovations seem to make human life easier and more enjoyable. On the other hand, modern weapons have the potential to destroy civilizations.

While drawing parallels between Buddhist practitioners and scientists in terms of their research methods, Thích Thanh Từ (2013) also claims that because scientists focus solely on external factors, they do not deeply understand human nature. In contrast, Buddhist meditation practitioners who spend considerable time in retreat, through silent introspection gain a profound understanding of humans and all phenomena in the universe. He concludes that while science can make human life more convenient and temporarily happier, Buddhist meditation masters can help humans comprehend their true nature and ultimately become liberated from *samsāra*. He thereby claims that Buddhist meditation produces results far surpassing what science can contribute to the human world. Thích Thanh Từ agrees with the Vietnamese Communist government that criticizes the “irrational” and “superstitious” practices of the majority of Vietnamese Buddhists. He (Thích Thanh Từ 1999a, “Mê Tín Chánh Tín”, “Wrong Views and Right Views”) distinguishes between what he sees as the wrong views and the right views, explaining that the wrong view is a blind belief that causes people to lose all intelligence. Those who advocate superstition are the ones who cause chaos in the world, bringing the nation back to savagery. Neither a “true religion” nor a “civilized nation” should allow superstition to creep in, and yet, many Vietnamese, including Vietnamese Buddhists, are superstitious, he complains.

In the same 1999a transcribed talk, Thích Thanh Từ explains why popular “superstitious” practices such as spirit possession, shamanism, making offerings to the stars to ward off bad luck, divination, sortilege, and burning joss paper as an offering to deceased ancestors, are unreasonable. In the case of burning joss paper items for ancestors, he says that because dead relatives have already taken rebirth as a result of their karmas, they cannot stay in the underworld to wait for such items. Furthermore, according to him, superstitious people who believe in spirit possession are fooled, those who rely on divination to determine auspicious days to proceed with their activities are selfish, and those who seriously take sortilege are cowards and lack confidence. He insists that such practices are unethical and a waste of time and money, and that Buddhists should not blindly engage in them.

One activity common to all religions, including Buddhism, is praying. One can pray by using one’s own preferred words or by chanting religious texts, such as *sūtras*. In 1999a, Thích Thanh Từ argues that prayer can be based on the right view or the wrong view depending on how people make it. If Buddhists pray expecting something to happen according to their wishes, it is the wrong view approach, because praying cannot change karma, he claims. But if Buddhists pray with the understanding that praying is a way of expressing piety, generosity, and compassion, their prayers are based on the right view. Overall, he strongly criticizes the common attitude of Buddhists who, according to him, pray with the wrong view. Thích Thanh Từ (2000b, “Chúng Ta Đi Chùa Để Cầu Xin hay Để Tu Học Theo Phật”, “Buddhists Go to Temples to Pray to the Buddha for Fulfilling Their Wishes or Actually Practicing the Buddha’s Teachings”) explains the law of karma and why Buddhists should change their attitude and behavior related to praying. He concludes: “If

[Buddhists] pray for help, it is not a Buddhist practice; therefore, doing a Buddhist practice means not praying”.⁴³

It is not surprising that Thích Thanh Từ disapproves of mainstream practices of Buddhist monastics who (1) focus on daily chanting of Pure Land sūtras and ritual texts and (2) become professional priests spending too much time conducting such ceremonies as funerals. He claims that the chanting practices are based on reliance on external powers, which is not relevant to the current independent status of Vietnam, while conducting funerals and other “superstitious” rituals makes Buddhism backward.⁴⁴ Therefore, he claims, the Trúc Lâm tradition does not embrace superstitious activities (Thích Thanh Từ 1997a, “Tại Sao Tôi Chủ Trương Khôi Phục Phật Giáo Đời Trần?” “Why do I Advocate to Revive the Trần Dynasty Buddhism?”). Because of that, according to Laura Thuy-Loan Nguyen (2021, p. 123), monastics at Trúc Lâm monasteries conduct only three types of short rituals: “Praying for Peace” (*Cầu An*) and “Praying for the Dead” (*Cầu Siêu*) at the end of a repentance session, and making “Food Offering to the Gold Wing Bird” (*Cúng Đại Bàng Cánh Vàng*) before every lunch for the sake of cultivating compassion. Some Trúc Lâm monastics do conduct funerary rituals, but they do it for “teaching the spirit of the dead the Dharma” to make “a positive impact on their rebirth” (Soucy 2022, p. 87).

Despite their criticisms of the typical Vietnamese monastics for daily chanting of Pure Land sūtras and ritual texts, Trúc Lâm monastics also conduct daily chanting sessions. However, they mainly focus on the ritual text *Sám Hối Sáu Căn* (*The Repentance of the Six Senses*), which is based on Trần Thái Tông’s *Khóa Hư Lục* (*Instructions on Emptiness*, C. Kexu lu 課虛錄). Trần Thái Tông was the first king of the Trần Dynasty and grandfather of Trần Nhân Tông. He is also seen as a heroic king under whose rule the Vietnamese defeated the Mongols for the first time, as well as an eminent Thiền master who composed some works on Buddhism. *Khóa Hư Lục* is a collection of sermons and essays about Buddhist philosophical ideas, morality, and practices, including “Khoa Nghi Sáu Thời Lễ Phật Sám Hối” (“The Six-session Ritual Ceremony of Praying to the Buddha and Conducting Repentance”). The text recommends that Buddhists practice the ritual of repentance six times per day, each time reviewing previous misdoings of a particular sense (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind). While commenting on Trần Thái Tông’s *Khóa Hư Lục* regarding the repentance ceremonies, Thích Thanh Từ (1996a) expresses his view on the benefits of doing repentance. According to him, it helps eradicate mountains of previous karmas and clean up current karmas. These benefits only work if practitioners genuinely review their wrongdoings, feel remorse about those acts, and remember to correct and not repeat them again. He claims that, by doing repentance with such “right intention” (*chánh tư duy*, S. *samyaksamkalpa*, one of the eight factors in the Noble Eightfold Path) combined with the powerful blessing from the Buddha, Thiền meditators can quickly (within one day or even one hour) purify themselves and improve their primary practice.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Trúc Lâm monastics chant *Sám Hối Sáu Căn* only one time daily because he contends that the core practice in Trúc Lâm is sitting meditation, while the repentance ceremony is only its supporting activity.

In *Những Cánh Hoa Đàm Tập 3* (*The Udumbara Petals Volume 3*, Thích Thanh Từ n.d.), he provides three reasons why he uses Trần Thái Tông’s *Sám Hối Sáu Căn* as a mandatory chanting activity in his tradition. Firstly, it is reasonable for Vietnamese Buddhists to use in their practice this ritual text composed by an ancient Vietnamese Thiền master. Secondly, the content of the text *Sám Hối Sáu Căn* is profound as it presents the activities of the six senses as the causes of rebirths. Lastly, by chanting *Sám Hối Sáu Căn* which is translated into vernacular Vietnamese, Buddhists contribute to preserving and developing Vietnamese form of Buddhism.⁴⁶

As demonstrated, in Thích Thanh Từ viewpoints, engaging in “superstitious” activities leads to such adverse results as the lack of self-reliance, diminishing of compassion and wisdom, and development of negative qualities, which are the opposite of positive results issuing from practicing the “right” form of Buddhism, Thiền Tông and Trúc Lâm in particular. Therefore, he strongly encourages his followers to hold the right view to be able to improve their Buddhist meditation. In short, based on what he sees as rationality

contrasted to superstition, he attempts to present Trúc Lâm as something akin to a secular Buddhism. At the same time, he presents its meditation practices as more profound and important to humankind than any scientific invention and as transcending secular concerns.

4. Conclusions

The contemporary Trúc Lâm is claimed to be a revived tradition, but in fact, it was newly established by Thích Thanh Từ, who was inspired by the legendary King-turned-monk Trần Nhân Tông of the 13th century. According to his own narrative, which cannot be verified due to the lack of historical documents, Thích Thanh Từ was ordained in the Pure Land tradition, then quit it to explore meditation through self-study and practice based on writings attributed to the well-known Chinese masters. After adopting three types of contemplative techniques to his own practices and struggling with difficulties during the 1966–1968 retreat, his unlearned wisdom was finally revealed. Following that, he dedicated himself to teaching meditation and, in the 1970s–1980s, established about ten monasteries for monks and nuns who wanted to learn and practice his meditation teachings.

In 1993, the first Trúc Lâm monastery was built in Đà Lạt—a remarkable milestone of officially creating a tangible material identity for the newly invented tradition envisioned as a revival and continuation of the 13th-century Trúc Lâm Yên Tử. Since then, Thích Thanh Từ and his disciples, with the enthusiastic support from the Vietnamese government, have been spreading their new tradition of meditation-based practices throughout the country and abroad. Nowadays, he is the leading teacher of Thiền Tông in Vietnam, and the contemporary Trúc Lâm is recognized as a highly respected and unique Vietnamese meditation school. He and his disciples are credited with popularizing Thiền Tông among Vietnamese Buddhists, most of whom still practice devotional Buddhism, including recitation of the Buddha Amitābha's name with the wish to be taken to his Pure Land after death. As the founder and leader of Trúc Lâm, Thích Thanh Từ's teachings are the basis of the tradition's views and practices. Regardless of his great personality, outstanding contribution to Vietnamese Buddhism, as well as his impressive success in putting his tradition on the global map of new religious movements, his teachings contain several issues that appear paradoxical.

The first one pertains to the identity of the “Vietnamese Thiền Tông”. Thích Thanh Từ is determined to make the contemporary Trúc Lâm a Vietnamese Thiền school independent of Chinese cultural influences. Are the reasons that the founder of the revived tradition is a Vietnamese, the language used in its texts is modern Vietnamese, and the tradition is adapted to the Vietnamese milieu sufficient enough for presenting the tradition as independent from Chinese cultural influences? In their advocacy of “Vietnameseness” separate from “Chineseness”, Thích Thanh Từ, his followers, and many Buddhist scholars present the 13th-century Trúc Lâm as the “pure” Vietnamese Buddhist tradition and the pride of the country. However, despite the allegedly unique Vietnamese features of the medieval Trúc Lâm that he and such writers as [Thích Tâm Hạnh \(2023\)](#), [Thuận Trần \(2018\)](#), and [Thích Đạt Ma Phổ Giác \(2015\)](#) think they know for a fact, presenting any Buddhist tradition as “pure” is problematic in the first place and not much different from the claims about the “pure” or “original” Buddhism. Promoting the contemporary Trúc Lâm as a revival which is a continuation of the medieval Trúc Lâm with the mission to preserve the “Vietnameseness” of Thiền Tông or Vietnamese Buddhism in general, Thích Thanh Từ strongly criticizes traditional Buddhist temples, which rely on Sino-Vietnamese language for chanting and follow devotional practices with Chinese ritual characteristics. Of course, it is helpful for the Vietnamese to understand Buddhist texts in the modern language, but language is just a part of a particular culture. While the revived Trúc Lâm has adapted the vernacular Vietnamese, it continues teaching ideas derived from Chinese Chan writings. Willingly or not, it admits a strong influence of Chinese Buddhism on Thiền Tông.

The second issue pertains to the tradition's doctrines. Thích Thanh Từ and his leading disciples popularize Thiền Tông/Chan zong as a meditation tradition whose unbroken continuity is based on the wordless transmission from enlightened teachers to their great disci-

ples. This is despite the fact that he himself admits that he is self-educated and self-trained during the meditation retreat based on texts written by none of the three masters (Huike, Huineng, and Trần Nhân Tông) that his Trúc Lâm's core foundational practices are claimed to stem from. More importantly, even though Thích Thanh Từ emphasizes rationality in his tradition's doctrines and practices, his ideas resemble paradoxical teachings of Chan zong: while he presents Thiền Tông as the most sublime Buddhist tradition advocating sudden awakening with nothing to achieve and no methods to follow, he provides many materials and Dharma talks on meditating gradually, moving from preliminary stages to the most advanced. This is illustrated by his teachings on the Ten Oxherding Pictures and his meditation manual depicting the gradual process of mind transformation toward the ultimate awakening.

The last issue is the fact that despite promoting Trúc Lâm as the sublime tradition superior to all other forms of Mahāyāna and Theravāda, Thích Thanh Từ's views and practices are indebted to those very traditions. For example, in its contemplative practice, the preparatory stage of calming the mind is partly taken from the samādhi teachings synthesized by Zhiyi. Also, its view about the nature of reality or emptiness is clearly derived from such Mahāyāna texts as the *Perfection of Wisdom* sūtras. Its view on the ultimate truth also relies on the notion, common to many Mahāyāna systems, of tathāgatagarbha or the buddha nature—the absolute essence of buddhahood within all beings. (This is not to deny, of course, that as a synthesis of these and other ideas and practices, it has its unique characteristics described above.) Regarding “emptiness”, although Thích Thanh Từ emphasizes that Thiền followers need to remind themselves of all phenomena being illusory and to not cling to anything, he has a vigorous sense of national belonging and commits himself to doing the best for his nation.

These and other issues notwithstanding, it is difficult not to admire Thích Thanh Từ's insightfulness and judiciousness in developing his tradition's ideas and practices. The notion of the true mind/no-thought mind and unlearned wisdom is set as his core philosophy. To help his disciples discover that true mind, he created rules and regulations facilitating their development of mental and physical capacities necessary for doing sitting meditation for up to six hours per day. There are as few distractions as possible in the tradition's monasteries to support his adherents' focus on their main practices. He believes that with the help of disengaging from any activities associated with “superstition”, developing compassion and wisdom, and chanting daily repentance texts for the sake of purifying karmas, Trúc Lâm's meditators can quickly progress on the path of inner transformation. Importantly, he believes that practices concisely described as “experiencing sudden awakening to gradually cultivate” (*đốn ngộ tiệm tu*), which is the foundation for two key “mottos” in Chan zong, Thiền Tông, and the revived Trúc Lâm: “realizing the nature of mind to start cultivating” (*kiến tánh khởi tu*) and “realizing the nature of mind to become a buddha” (*kiến tánh thành Phật*), lead to the state free from any thought arising, which is equivalent to the complete awakening.

In sum, Thích Thanh Từ's instructions on meditation are closely intertwined with his view of reality, which in turn is based on the mainstream Chan zong ideas. His tradition's views on rationality, nationalism, and its own uniqueness successfully appeal to the growing number of monastic and lay Trúc Lâm followers in Vietnam—a trend that is likely to stay and grow for years to come.

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Notes

- ¹ T. Griffith Foulk writes that “By the early ninth century, the idea had emerged that what Bodhidharma brought to China was nothing other than the ‘buddha-mind’ (*foxin* 佛心), meaning the very awakening of Śākyamuni Buddha, as opposed to the doc-

trines (contained in the *sūtra*) in which he expressed that awakening”. Also, the idea of wordless or mind-to-mind transmission undermines the significance of scriptures (Foulk 2007, p. 445).

Chan zong is considered an indigenous form of Chinese Buddhism. Its literature is traced back to the early Tang dynasty (618–907). Subsequently, Chan (J. *Zen*; K. *Sōn*; V. *Thiền*) spread to the rest of East Asia.

Yên Tử is the name of the Buddhist temple belonging to the Yên Tử historical and cultural heritage complex site in North Vietnam. The Yên Tử temple is presented as one of the most important temples where the first three patriarchs of the medieval Trúc Lâm delivered Dharma talks. L. Nguyễn (1973, pp. 232–34) writes that the meditation master Huệ Tuệ, the head of the meditation tradition Yên Tử at the Yên Tử temple, ordained Trần Nhân Tông there. He also claims that Trần Nhân Tông is the Sixth Patriarch of Yên Tử and the First Patriarch of Trúc Lâm. Nowadays, the 13th-century Trúc Lâm is also called Trúc Lâm Yên Tử.

Thích Trung Định (2021) contends that Lâm Tế spread to Vietnam for the first time during the Trần Dynasty, while Thích Giác Minh Hữu (2020) believes that the first person who transmitted Lâm Tế to Vietnam was the Chan master Nguyễn Thiệu (1648–1728). In any case, many Vietnamese scholars believe that Lâm Tế was a popular school in the 17th century.

Other than reform ideas propagated in the literature, how “robust” such reforms were and whether they formed actual “movements” is not clear. What we can be sure about is that any particular Buddhist reform attempt is the result of various pressures from local politics and internationally shared efforts to use Buddhism to shore up budding nationalism.

It is the only Buddhist saṅgha association recognized by the Vietnamese government and a member of the Vietnamese Fatherland Front.

This is somewhat akin to D. T. Suzuki’s nationalistic approach to Japanese Zen, as described in Brian Victoria’s (2013) work.

It should be noted that, as Morten Schlüter (2008, p. 5) points out, during the period of “mature” Chan of the later Song Dynasty (960–1279), most Chinese were also not interested in Buddhist teachings of meditation and awakening or concerned with Chan lineages.

Most Vietnamese Buddhist temples (other than those of Thanh Từ’s tradition and several reformed temples) still use texts written in Sino-Vietnamese for daily chanting, which is a custom passed through generations. As Mark J. Alves (2018, p. 12) explains, Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary refers to the Vietnamese pronunciation of Chinese characters as found in Vietnamese dictionaries. This vocabulary is typically associated with the Middle Chinese, which dates back to the latter half of the first millennium and before Vietnam’s independence from China.

Thanh Từ orderly lists them in Vietnamese as follows: *sổ tức (đếm hơi thở)*, *tùy tức (để tâm theo hơi thở)*, *chỉ, quán, hoàn, tịnh* (Thích Thanh Từ 1999c, “Phần 3: Lục Diệu Pháp Môn-Sơ Dẫn”, “Part 3: Six Dharma Gates to the Sublime—Brief Introduction”).

In his *Thiền Căn Bản* (Thích Thanh Từ 1999c, “Lời Giới Thiệu”, “Introduction”), Thanh Từ claims that the author of the text is “Samgharakasa”. According to Eric M. Greene (2021, p. 65), the text is “a compilation of the writings of a number of Indian masters”.

Regarding the fifth method, Greene (2021, p. 65) writes that the later passage says *nianfo* 念佛 is suitable for “those who have committed grave sins who wish to beseech the Buddha [for pardon]”. Thích Thanh Từ (1999c, “Phần 2: [...] Pháp Môn Trị Đẳng Phần”, “Part 2: [...] The Method to Treat Equally Distributed Mental Defilements”) contends that this method is suitable for those “who have committed grave sins who wish to become a buddha” (người phạm tội trọng mong cầu làm Phật).

Như vậy mới thấy đời tu mình không có thầy, không có người hướng dẫn thật là khổ vô cùng.

Chúng ta qua Thái Lan học, qua Miến Điện học, qua Nhật Bản học v.v... để nói lên rằng ở Việt Nam chưa có gì để chúng ta học. Nếu Phật giáo Việt Nam chưa có gì làm sao truyền bá được gần hai mươi thế kỷ. Nếu không có gì thì nó bị mất bị diệt rồi. [...] Cho nên tôi chủ trương mình theo đạo Phật thì phải có lập trường, lấy cái hay của Phật giáo Việt Nam làm chỗ đứng cho vững, để mình làm lợi ích cho người Phật tử Việt Nam.

The concept of nationalism originated in the West, and its excessive emphasis on primordial ethnic and religious loyalties has been used by populations worldwide to affirm their perceived unique and even superior national identities. Buddhists in Asian countries are not an exception. As Volker Grabowsky (2018) contends, Buddhism has been used to arouse nationalist sentiments in many Asian countries, including Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet. It has played a crucial role in contributing to new forms of national integration in the postcolonial period. In the increasingly globalized world, Buddhism still provides a source of legitimacy for the nation-state and national identity for many populations, sometimes directed against non-Buddhist minorities perceived as cultural threats. There is a plethora of informative research on the topic of the “state-Buddhism” dance, such as Thomas Borchert’s (2007) work, Iselin Frydenlund’s (2013), and Ladwig and Shields’s (2014). Examples of figures linking Chan zong with nationalism are Thanh Từ in the case of Thiền Tông in Vietnam, D. T. Suzuki in the case of Zen in Japan, and Ch’oe Namsŏn (1890–1957) in the case of Korean Sŏn (mentioned in Vladimir Tikhonov’s (2010) study).

Tư tưởng đạo Phật đã thấm nhuần tinh thần dân tộc.

Đạo Phật bị phá hoại thì tinh thần dân tộc cũng lung lay.

Nói Thiền Tông Việt Nam là nói Phật giáo Việt Nam.

Based on the national media and government-sponsored research on Vietnamese Buddhism, the Vietnamese Government expresses its thumbs-up attitude to tie Thiền Tông to national identity. The Vietnamese Government publicly endorses (legendary) stories of eminent Thiền masters, some of whom are supposed to have greatly contributed to politics. It is understandable that

the Vietnamese Government urges to build a high self-esteem for its nation, which was dominated, colonized, and invaded for many centuries. Thiền Tông legends seem to be a tool used and promoted for this purpose. Another reason can be that Buddhist meditation is popularized as a scientific practice fitting with the Government's propaganda of a rational approach to religious conduct.

The phrase (C. *heguang tongchen* 和光同塵) literally means “blending light with dust”.

Even though the contemporary Trúc Lâm established many nunneries and provides nuns with the same quality education and living conditions as monks, the role of nuns in the tradition is still inferior to monks because of deep influences of such Confucian values as patriarchy and Vietnamese Buddhist customs. Only experienced old monks hold essential administrative positions and preside over Trúc Lâm saṅgha meetings. Also, the most prominent and visible of Thanh Từ's disciples in the press and media, as well as the most well-known Trúc Lâm authors of Dharma teachings are monks (Thích Nhật Quang, Thích Thông Phương, Thích Tâm Hạnh). As Soucy (2022, p. 139) observes regarding one of Trúc Lâm monasteries, Sùng Phúc, “the monks always take the central position and nuns are physically relegated to the side”. Nevertheless, some emphasize gender equality in the tradition, such as Laura Thuy-Loan Nguyen. She (Nguyen 2021, p. 146) believes in the revived Trúc Lâm's gender equality because (1) Thanh Từ affirms that both males and females share the same capacity to attain unlearned wisdom and (2) there are many nunneries with around a thousand nuns in the Trúc Lâm system. The fact is that, compared to the level of much higher gender equality in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Plum Village system, Thanh Từ's Trúc Lâm is far behind that. Still, it can be considered a good model of gender equality in comparison to other Buddhist schools in Vietnamese society.

Such popularizing techniques are common to religious movements in general. As Andrew V. Abela (2014, p. 50) argues, the marketing of religion must appeal to the consumer's imagination through aesthetic (visual), poetic (story form), and truthful (truths relevant to the audience) characteristics designed to engage the imagination of the target audience.

Càng bí hiểm càng hiển bày, càng huyền nhiệm càng chân thật, càng xa xôi càng gần gũi, càng kỳ bí càng giản đơn.

Chúng ta tu để làm gì? Để dừng, lắng tâm lắng xả. Tâm lắng xả lắng xuống thì tâm chân thật hiện đủ. Đó là giác. Giác bằng cách thực hiện ngay nơi mình, chứ không phải tìm kiếm ở đâu khác.

Bây giờ nhìn cái gì cũng giả nên không chấp giữ. Do không chấp giữ nên được mắt không lo, như vậy không giải thoát là gì.

V. *biết vọng không theo*. The term “non-abiding” (*vô trụ/trú*, S. *apratiṣṭhita*, C. *wuzhu* 無住) indicates the mental state of not residing in or clinging to anything. The method of nonabiding in thoughts is connected with the legendary conversation between Bodhidharma and Huike. Andrew Ferguson (2000, p. 20) describes it as follows: “Huike said to Bodhidharma, ‘My mind is anxious. Please pacify it’. To which Bodhidharma replied, ‘Bring me your mind, and I will pacify it’. Huike said, ‘Although I’ve sought it, I cannot find it’. Bodhidharma then said, ‘There, I have pacified your mind’”. Commenting on this story, Thanh Từ writes: “It is clear that the method of pacifying the mind is no method. Only when turning the wisdom light to scrutinize how unpacified the mind is, does the mind disappear. It is called ‘turning the light inward on oneself’ [*hồi quang phản chiếu*, C. *huiguang fanzhao* 迴光返照] in Thiền house's terminology. We say ‘not abiding in thoughts’”. (*Rõ ràng pháp an tâm mà không có pháp, chỉ xoay ánh sáng trí tuệ soi rọi xem cái tâm bất an ấy thế nào thì nó biến mất. Thuật ngữ nhà Thiền gọi là “Hồi quang phản chiếu”. Chúng tôi gọi “Biết vọng không theo”*).

In Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, “non-duality” (*bất nhị*, S. *advaya*, C. *buer* 不二) indicates the nature of reality.

The six respective pairs are the eyes and visible objects, ears and sound, nose and odor, tongue and taste, body and tactile objects, and mind and mental objects. Thanh Từ links this second method with the story of Huineng's great awakening after listening to Kinh Kim Cương/Cang (*The Diamond Sūtra*, S. *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* or *Vajra Sūtra*, C. *Jīngang Jīng* 金剛經). In particular, it is related to the part in the Sūtra where the Buddha responds to his disciple Subhūti's question about how to pacify the mind of one who intends to pursue the path toward “supreme perfect awakening” (S. *anuttara-samyak-sambōdhi*). The Buddha teaches to “not cling to forms and likewise sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects, and mental objects that cause such [unruly] mind. As there is no object to cling to, no [unruly] mind exists”. (*Chẳng nên trụ sắc, chẳng nên trụ thanh, hương, vị, xúc, pháp mà sanh tâm kia; nên không chỗ trụ mà sanh tâm ấy*.) Thanh Từ believes that Huineng's key teaching is sublime compared to others: “No infection, no entrapment, and no attachment while interacting with the six sense objects is meditation. It is not like escaping from those objects for keeping mind in peace and equanimity as in other meditation methods”. (*Không nhiễm, không kẹt, không dính, ngay khi tiếp xúc với sáu trần là Thiền định. Không phải chạy trốn cảnh trần, rồi sau tâm mới an định như các lối Thiền định khác*).

Thanh Từ thinks that Trần Nhân Tông utilized the “understanding” (*chỗ thấy*) of Huike and the teachings on “awakening” (*chỗ ngộ*) and “practice” (*chỗ hành*) of Huineng when composing his works on Thiền (which were influenced by Chinese literary styles). The most well-known work possibly written by Trần Nhân Tông is *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo* (*Dwelling in This Mundane World with The Joy of Experiencing the Dharma*, Nôm: 居塵樂道) in the Phú (rhapsody, C. *fu* 賦) genre. Its ten sections are in chữ Nôm, the ancient ideographic vernacular script of the Vietnamese language, while the closing short stanza is in classical Chinese. The closing stanza, in particular, summarizes critical Thiền's philosophy and practice: “Let's follow the flow of conditioned arising, dwelling in this mundane world with the joy of experiencing the Dharma,/Let's eat when hungry and sleep right away if tired./There are treasures inside the house; let's stop looking for them [somewhere else]/Encountering external objects with no discriminating mind, let's stop inquiring about meditation [Thiền]”. (C: *Juchen ledao qiesuiyuan* 居塵樂道且隨緣, *Jize sunxi kunzemian* 饑則飧兮困則眠, *Jiazhong youbao xiuxunmi* 家中有寶休尋覓, *Duijing wuxin mo wenchan* 對境無心莫問禪, V: *Ở đời vui đạo hãy tùy duyên/Đói đến thì ăn, mệt ngủ liền/Trong nhà có báu, thôi tìm kiếm/Đối cảnh không [vô] tâm chỗ hỏi thiền* [translated into the

modern Vietnamese by Thanh Từ.) Thanh Từ selects the idea of “encountering external objects with no discriminating mind” (*đối cảnh vô tâm*) because, according to him, it presents the 13th-century Trúc Lâm practices. He believes that Trần Nhân Tông’s Trúc Lâm is the complete meditation tradition that utilizes remarkable methods of Vietnamese Buddhist predecessors and skillfully harmonizes them with ancient Chan methods. It is worth mentioning, according to “(Nom Foundation n.d.), “Chữ Nôm, is the ancient ideographic vernacular script of the Vietnamese language. After Vietnamese independence from China in 939 CE, chữ Nôm, an ideographic script that represents Vietnamese speech, became the national script. For the next 1000 years—from the 10th century and into the 20th—much of Vietnamese literature, philosophy, history, law, medicine, religion, and government policy was written in Nôm script. During the 24 years of the Tây-Son emperors (1788–1802), all administrative documents were written in Chữ Nôm. In other words, approximately 1000 years of Vietnamese cultural history is recorded in this unique system”. Trần Nhân Tông is widely depicted as one of the pioneers in attempting to promote chữ Nôm to make Vietnam independent of Chinese cultural influences.

³⁰ *Bất lập văn tự, giáo ngoại biệt truyền. Trực chỉ nhân tâm, kiến tánh thành Phật.* C. *jiaowai biechuan* 教外別傳, *buli wenzi* 不立文字, *zhizhi renxin* 直指人心, *jianxing chengfo* 見性成佛. The original Chinese version of this famous passage attributed to Bodhidharma is translated by Morten Schlütter (2008, p. 14) as follows: “A separate transmission outside the teachings,/not setting up words,/directly pointing at the human mind,/seeing one’s own nature, Buddhahood is achieved”.

³¹ Laura Thuy-Loan Nguyen (2021, p. 21) translates this term as “self-exploration”. According to Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngũ Lục Giảng Giải (The Recorded Sayings [ngũ lục, C. yulu 語錄] of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ: Commentaries and Explanations) by Thích Thanh Từ (1997b), Trần Nhân Tông learned this idea from his teacher Trần Quốc Tung, who was also his uncle. Quốc Tung (1230–1291) is presented as a victorious military commander credited with leading the Vietnamese in two victorious battles and playing an essential role as a diplomat contributing to the third victory over the Mongols. He is also presented as a great Thiền master, respectfully addressed by his Dharma name “Tuệ Trung Bodhisattva” (Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, C. Huizhong shangshi 慧中上士). When Trần Nhân Tông asked Tuệ Trung about the supreme teaching of Thiền Tông leading toward awakening, Tuệ Trung responded as follows: “One’s foundational responsibility is looking inward to illuminate oneself, not to rely on something/someone outside” (Sino-Vietnamese: *Phản quan tự kỷ bốn phận sự, bất tùng tha đắc*, Modern Vietnamese: *Quay lại soi sáng chính mình là bốn phận gốc, không từ bên ngoài mà có được*).

³² *Kiến tánh* or *kiến tính* (C. *jianxing* 見性, literally “seeing the nature”) is presumably mentioned for the first time in *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Kinh Pháp Bảo Đàn, C. *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經).

³³ Thiền đón ngộ là lối tu trực ngộ bản tâm, gọi là kiến tánh khởi tu, không có đề mục, không có phương pháp, không có gì sở đắc, chỉ mê là chúng sanh ngộ là Phật, nên nói “Kiến tánh thành Phật” lối tu này không tu mà tu, không chứng mà chứng.

³⁴ Thích Thanh Từ (1998b, “Tựa”, “Preface”) writes that the author and date of the original story (including the pictures and poems) with six pictures are unknown and this old-version story was lost. However, he continues, many new versions of the story containing ten pictures started appearing during the Song Dynasty in China. They are of two types: one with the Mahāyāna ideas and the other with Chan zong ideas. The two sets of pictures are different, but their verses and commentaries “remain unchanged” (?). He writes that, the most popular versions of the story are authored by two meditation masters: Qingju 清居 (Thanh Cư) and Kuon shiyuan 廓庵師遠 (Quách Am, a.k.a. Khuếch Am Sư Viễn). According to D. T. Suzuki (1960, pp. 127–28), both of them lived during the same period. Qingju (J. Seikyo) made use of only five pictures of the ox to illustrate the gradual development of the Zen life. These pictures indicate a progressive whitening of the animal, ending in the disappearance of the whole being demonstrated by an empty circle. Later, Kuon Shiyuan (J. Kaku-an Shi-en) thought this was somewhat misleading because an empty circle might make someone take mere emptiness as all-important and final. He updated the story to the ten-picture version with the poems and introductory words attached to the pictures. Eventually, Kuon Shiyuan’s concept of the story was different from the one involving the whitening of the ox. It should be noted that, to Thanh Từ, the version of the whitening process of the ox is used in Mahāyāna other than Chan, while the version that does not include the whitening process is used in Thiền Tông/Chan zong.

³⁵ The titles of the ten pictures affiliated with the ten verses and further commentaries are as follows: (1) Searching for the Ox, (2) Seeing the Footprints, (3) Seeing the Ox, (4) Catching the Ox, (5) Herding the Ox, (6) Riding the Ox Back Home, (7) the Ox Forgotten and the Oxherder Remaining Alone, (8) The Ox and the Oxherder Are Both Out of Sight, (9) Returning to the Origin, Back to the Root, and (10) Entering the Marketplace with Hanging Arms (Thích Thanh Từ 1998b). Thích Thanh Từ (1988, pp. 23–24) believes that the highest stage of A La Hán (S. *arhat*, P. *arahant*, C. *Aluohan* 阿羅漢) in Theravāda, the achievement of eradicating all afflictions, is only equivalent to the eighth picture in the series of the Ten Oxherding Pictures.

³⁶ Thanh Từ claims that this final awakening stage is equivalent to the tenth picture in the series of the Ten Oxherding Pictures.

³⁷ According to Thanh Từ, the nature of the mind is also named the true mind, the Dharma body (*Pháp thân*, S. *dharmakāya*, C. *fashen* 法身), bodhi (*Bồ đề*, C. *puti* 菩提), thusness (*Chân như*, S. *tathatā*, C. *zhenru* 真如), nirvāṇa (*Niết bàn*, C. *niepan* 涅槃), and the original face (*bản lai diện mục*, C. *benlai mianmu* 本來面目).

³⁸ C. *dunwu jianxiu* 頓悟漸修. The word *tiệm tu* (C. *jianxiu* 漸修) means “gradual cultivation/practice”.

³⁹ According to Thanh Từ, the “doubt” refers to the technical *gongan* idea of “great doubt—great realization, small doubt—small realization” (*đại nghi đại ngộ, tiểu nghi tiểu ngộ*, C. *dàyī dawu* 大疑大悟, *xiǎoyī xiǎowu* 小疑小悟), and that cultivation of great doubt helps eliminate unruly thoughts. He teaches that while practicing the *gongan* method, practitioners are not allowed to study any

Buddhist texts or engage in logical reasoning. Despite mentioning *gongan* as one among many contemplative techniques, Thanh Từ promotes the technique of “not abiding in thoughts”—a technique whose practice does not require abstaining from study and thus fits well with his advocacy of learning scriptures. Thanh Từ believes that learning Buddhist ideas is not an obstacle to practicing this technique. Rather, he claims that this technique assists one in better understanding the Buddha’s teachings, and that such understanding helps one meditate more efficiently.

- 40 V. *Thiền Nguyên Chư Thuyên Tập Đố Tự* (translated by Thanh Từ), C. *Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu* 禪源諸卷集都序. The text is fully translated into English by Jeffrey L. Broughton (2009, pp. 101–79).
- 41 Chan literature that Thanh Từ studies includes *The Platform Sūtra* (a mythical record of the teachings of Huineng) and texts containing recorded sayings of other ancient Chan masters such as Bodhidharma, Huike, Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (Mã Tổ Đạo Nhất), Lingyou 靈祐 (Linh Hựu), Pang Jushi 龐居士 (Bàng Cư sĩ), Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良价 (Động Sơn Lương Giới), and so on.
- 42 The stereotypical yet outdated distinction between true religion and superstition helps Trúc Lâm position itself as a distinguished and highly respected Buddhist meditation-focused tradition, different from other typical Buddhist devotional traditions in Vietnam. However, the current antisuperstition campaign advocated by other well-educated and well-known monastics of non-Trúc Lâm traditions, such as Thích Nhật Từ (Thích Nhật Từ Official 2021), Thích Phước Tiến (Phật Pháp ứng Dụng 2022), Thích Thiện Thuận (Viện Chuyên Tu 2016), and Hương Nhũ (Thiền Quang Media 2018), is as strong and intense as Thanh Từ’s. This campaign, combined with antisuperstition publications by the Vietnamese Government (HTV-Đài Hà Nội 2024; Minh Anh 2024; Truyền Hình Nhân Dân 2023; and so on), attempts to raise awareness among the Vietnamese people about the negative consequences of following folk customs associated with the so-called “irrational” practices, many of which are implemented at typical Buddhist temples. Soucy’s anthropological work (Soucy 2022, pp. 137–71) demonstrates some of the key reasons why Buddhists in Hanoi completely or partly follow Trúc Lâm. He writes that men, who are more likely to associate Buddhist devotional practices with superstition, follow Trúc Lâm in order to achieve the practical result of self-transformation by learning “true” Buddhism with no superstitious elements and doing meditation. A woman in Soucy’s study is convinced that practicing Trúc Lâm meditation results in scientific health benefits, but she still visits a Buddhist devotional temple to pray to supernatural figures for health, wealth, luck, and so on. Overall, despite the antisuperstition campaign by Thanh Từ and many other Buddhist monastics in contemporary Vietnam, “superstitious” practices are prevalent in Vietnamese society.
- 43 Nếu xin cầu thì không phải là tu, còn tu thì không có cầu xin.
- 44 Many religious followers in independent and developed countries embrace devotional practices emphasizing reliance on external powers as a means of salvation.
- 45 Regarding Trần Thái Tông’s and his view on this matter, Thanh Từ refers to *Kinh Đại Bảo Tích* (the *Sūtra of the Heap of Jewels*, *S. Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra*, C. Dabao jijing 大寶積經), an ancient collection of Mahāyāna sūtras.
- 46 Nowadays, some reformed Buddhist temples (Hoàng Pháp, temples of the Giác Ngộ system, etc.) also use this Trần Thái Tông’s text for their repentance ceremony (twice per month or every day).

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