
The Contributions of Master Vien Minh to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam

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Submitted: 11/07/2024 * Revised: 05/08/2024 * Accepted: 15/08/2024*

Abstract

This research article examines the life, teachings, and contributions of Master Vien Minh to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam. The study employs documentary research methodology to address three primary objectives: (1) investigating Master Vien Minh's life and works, (2) analyzing his application of the Buddha's teachings to the daily lives of Vietnamese people, and (3) assessing his contributions to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam. The research reveals Master Vien Minh's journey from an aspiring young monk to a influential Buddhist teacher and philosopher. It explores his unique approach to understanding and disseminating Buddhist principles, emphasizing the integration of dharma into everyday life. The study highlights his innovative meditation techniques and philosophical perspectives, which have made Buddhist teachings more accessible and relevant to Vietnamese practitioners. His philosophies about people and life include viewing life as an enlightened environment, seeing oneself as a wonderful scripture, living in accordance with cause and effect, obeying nature by returning dharma to dharma, and serving to perfection and perfection to serving. His meditation method for daily life involves dwelling in states of awareness. Furthermore, the research documents Master Vien Minh's significant contributions to various aspects of Vietnamese society, including literature, education, charity, and social development, demonstrating the far-reaching impact of his work on the growth and sustainability of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam's modern era.

Keywords: Contributions, Master Vien Minh, Theravāda Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhism

Introduction

“Happiness” and “suffering” are not unfamiliar words in human life because these two opposing states always exist in every individual if we have not found the right method to practice on a daily basis. More than 2500 years ago in India, many schools emerged to help humanity reach enlightenment and liberation, but none of these techniques could lead to ultimate liberation. Until Prince Siddhartha became enlightened, all those questions seemed

to be answered clearly and transparently. After the Buddha entered *Nirvāṇa*, the truth was introduced to many distinct nations all over the world to bring benefits to sentient beings and that was also one of his wishes to his disciples while he was still alive:

Bhikkhus, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans. Let not two go the same way. Teach, O Bhikkhus, the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing. Reveal the perfectly complete and purified holy life (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000).

However, each country's customs and culture as well as each sentient's level of understanding of Buddha's teachings is different, so many schools of Buddhism have been found to adapt to different ability of each living being. As a result, there are a large number of theories of the Buddhist sects established, making people who are new leaners studying the doctrine confused and even difficult to understand because they have the problems not only in the definition of the terms but also in the ideology of the sects which sometimes have some differences and even contradictory. Historically, Buddhism was present in Vietnam in the middle of the 3rd century BC (Le, 2006). In the late 1930, Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism was spread to Vietnam (Nguyen, 2021). Some people initially came to Buddhism because of their passion to learn the teachings to transform afflictions in life, so they studied very hard and read a lot of books and commentaries from different schools. Over time, the amount of knowledge they collected, accumulated, and borrowed became overloaded, but they lacked the experience of real practice. Another aspect is that some sects want to bring the doctrine of liberation closer to everyday life, and they use a wealth of means to transmit the dharma as folk beliefs. Since then, it has made the followers of Buddhism only take care of worship and pray for blessings, forgetting that the essential purpose of Buddhism is enlightenment and liberation. Amidst these shortcomings, it is necessary to have wise teachers with practical explanations of Buddhist teachings to meet the demand to study the dharma of those who are still struggling with the path of practice. Thanks to correct instructions, Buddhist learners will realize what true happiness in life is and simultaneously see clearly what they have lost for a long time. It can be said that Master Vien Minh is a fully wise and virtuous monk in Vietnam, belonging to the Theravāda sect and living in the modern era. The person helps many people untangling difficult knots in their practice as well as helping them orient their path more clearly. He is considered one of the monks with great influence and contributions

in spreading Theravāda Buddhism widely in his country, where Buddhism in Vietnam as practiced by Vietnamese people is mainly of Mahāyāna traditions. He has skillfully interpreted and manipulated the Buddha's teachings to direct practitioners to receive the truth of liberation in the right way. He said that enlightenment is the perception of the truth in reality, seeing the dharma as it is, rather than creating something according to the ego's intentions (Vien Minh, 2019). The practice method of Master Vien Minh is suitable for many different classes and professions in society. From businessmen, actors, teachers, ordinary workers to students come to him to learn the dharma and they gain countless benefits when they followed his instructions. In addition, he makes many significant contributions to the development of Vietnamese Buddhism in general and Theravāda Buddhism in particular. He has a famous saying and is considered as the motto of his life and work that is "Serving to Perfection, Perfection to Serving" (Vien Minh, 2020). That is partly shown through his actions and dedication to Buddhism in Theravāda Vietnam. He devoted all his time and effort in all areas to help Buddhism become more widespread and widespread and some of his specific contributions to that development include constructing Buddhist sites, doing social charity activities, publishing books, directly opening and guiding meditation training courses.

From this study, it is possible to understand more about his life, the Buddha's teachings applied by Master Vien Minh to the daily life of Vietnamese people as well as his great contributions to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam. Thereby, we can learn more valuable practice experiences from him to bring benefits ourselves and society.

Research Objectives

- 1) To study the life and works of Master Vien Minh
- 2) To study the Buddha's teachings applied by Master Vien Minh to the daily life of Vietnamese people
- 3) To propose the contributions of Master Vien Minh to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam

Literature Review

The following is a review of the literature, information, and research papers relevant to the topic of this study:

Gioi Duc (2021) is the author of the book titled "History of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam," which discusses the stages of Buddhist councils and the process of Theravāda

Buddhism being transmitted to Vietnam. Through a historical process, today Theravāda Buddhism is quite developed in Vietnam thanks to the great contributions of Vietnamese monks. As is obvious, this book mentions many historical and famous temples related to the Buddhist monks who contributed to the development of Buddhism. One of those monks is the most venerable Ho Tong and Gioi Nghiem, whom Master Vien Minh served as an attendant. Therefore, through this book, readers can somewhat understand Master Vien Minh's life, works and contributions by some short stories.

Hậu (2017) presents a clear and specific overall picture of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam during the 25-year period starting in 1938 with the book titled "Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism: 1938-1963". The author emphasizes the original introduction of Theravāda Buddhism into Vietnam and the promotion of its main sects by detailing the stages of development during this period. In addition, the work provides a comparison of the similarities and differences in the methods of practicing insight meditation with Zen meditation, Pure Land, and Tiantai of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Vien Minh and Tran (2013) are co-authors of the book called "Path to Happiness". This work is a collection of 23 short sermons written by Master Vien Minh for a Buddhist magazine in 1970 and 1971. The book introduces how to practice Buddhist teachings to readers through various aspects of daily life, such as filial piety, Buddhism and worship, facing suffering, transforming thought, and more.

Huynh (2010) mentions fundamental aspects such as the history of Theravāda in Vietnam, the characteristics and practices of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam, and the present status of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam in her research titled "A Study of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam". It can be inferred that the Khmer people in the Mekong Delta practiced the Theravāda tradition, and their interactions with Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka greatly aided in the development of Buddhism in this region. To support the author's point, various facets of Theravāda Buddhism's current state in Vietnam are examined, such as education, meditation practice activities, the relationship between Khmer and Vietnamese Theravāda Buddhism, and more.

In summary, the literature reviewed offers an overall insight into the popular practice methods of Buddha's teachings in Vietnam and the historical stages of development of Theravāda Buddhism. Integrating these perspectives provides a deeper understanding of how Master Vien Minh has contributed to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam. However, from the

above literature and research works, it can be seen clearly that there has not any work carried out the research of the contributions of Master Vien Minh to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam systematically before. Therefore, the researcher decides to study this topic carefully and in depth.

Research Methodology

This thesis is primarily based on documentary research. The methodology of the research can be divided into five stages as follows:

Data Collection

For the primary source, the researcher collects data from English translation of *Tipitaka*, Commentaries, and Sub-commentaries. In addition, for the second source, the thesis is utilized research books, Buddhist journals and textbooks, dissertations, theses, on-line sources and especially Vien Minh's books and his dharma talks and teachings have been recorded.

Analysis and Synthesis

Analyzing and synthesizing the raw data as well as systematizing the collected data to give a clear picture of the life and works of Master Vien Minh, together with the Buddha's teachings applied by Master Vien Minh to the daily life of Vietnamese people and finally propose the contributions of Master Vien Minh to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam.

Outline Construction

Constructing the overall outline of the work is in all related dimensions corresponding to the objectives.

Problem Discussion

Discussing the problems encountered according to the significance of the studies.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Formulating conclusions, identifying significant research findings, and giving the useful suggestions are for further research.

Research Results

The first objective shows Master Vien Minh's life and works. He was born and raised during a time of war that his hometown was one of the epicenters of fierce wars. From a young age, he showed intelligence and understanding of Buddhism. In 1963, at the age of 19, he became a monk with the most Venerable Gioi Nghiêm, who is the patriarch of Theravāda Sangha at that time. One year later, Master Vien Minh received bhikkhu ordination and

attended the first course at Van Hanh University. In 1973, Venerable Vien Minh and a few of his dharma brothers decided to go together to the foot of Hai Van Pass, Lang Co, Thua Thien Hue province to practice meditation and study more scriptures. Currently, he is living and abbot of Buu Long temple in Ho Chi Minh City.

Regarding the works of Master Vien Minh, most of his time is devoted to the work of propagating Buddhism. One of the proofs for that was his participation in teaching a number of Buddhist schools. In 1972, Master Vien Minh worked as a teacher in Phat Bao Buddhist Intermediate School in Ho Chi Minh City. From 2002 to present, Venerable Elder Vien Minh has been Director of the Research and Application of Theravāda Buddhist Meditation Center belonging to Vietnam Buddhist Academy. In 2006, Master Vien Minh worked for Vietnam Buddhist University in Ho Chi Minh City. After 3 years later, in 2009 he officially opened teaching classes to instruct *vipassanā* meditation in his country and abroad. Moreover, he also held a number of important positions in the such as General Secretary of the Vietnam Theravāda Sangha (1976) and abbot of Ky Vien Pagoda (1986) where the central headquarters of the Theravāda Sangha is located and simultaneously also is Deputy Head of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha from 2022 until now. In addition, in 2007, he founded and ran a Buddhist website called Trungtonghotong.org to spread insight mediation and this website has been attracted many Buddhists to participate (Vien Minh, 2022).

The second objective indicates perspective on life: life is the environment for enlightenment. As an inevitable rule, each person will have a different Karma, so the lesson of enlightenment for each person will also be different. Human life has ups and downs, and every event that happens to us is meaningful because it helps us see the true nature of life and thereby change our perception and behavior. Instead of avoiding suffering, we courageously face reality because that is the best environment for us to enlighten life and perfect our perception and behavior (Phra Rungrvit Aggadhammo et al., 2024).

In terms of his view of humans, each person is the most wonderful sutra and there is no sutra as precious as one's own sutra because to achieve enlightenment and liberation each person must make efforts to find the truth, not any god or anyone else in this life bring it to us. The sutra about the Four Foundations of Mindfulness that the Buddha taught us for more than 2,500 years is also the sutra about contemplation of the body, feeling, mind, and dharma that each person often reads every hour and minute. That sutra can only be understood most clearly when each person contemplates and practices it for themselves

(Ven. Nyanabhadra Pháp Tử et al., 2023). Therefore, we ourselves are the most wonderful sutra.

To live according to Conditioning Cause and Obeying Nature, it is very necessary to return dharma to dharma because all dharma are impermanent. We just need to let go of the ego to let the dharma operate according to its own rules. The 10 paramitas are the most concrete example of returning the dharma to the dharma because these 10 dharmas all help us let go of ego, detachment from greed. In addition, “serving to perfection, perfection to serving” are also a way of living according to dharma. Perfection is understood as enlightenment. Serving sentient beings helps us achieve complete enlightenment, and after attaining enlightenment, we continue to serve sentient beings to help others become enlightened as well. “Serving to Perfection” means doing things bringing benefit for oneself and others in the spirit of selflessness and altruism to demonstrate a life of morality, concentration, and wisdom. “Perfection to Serving” is to live fully in a life of morality, concentration and wisdom to show a life of self-awareness and awareness of others.

The meditation method of Master Vien Minh for the daily life of Vietnamese people is to dwell in a state of awareness. It concludes care, mindfulness and observation. Care is morality, attention is concentration and observation is wisdom. Similar to those three attitudes, which are effort, mindfulness, awareness. Effort is being serious and sincere with the reality that is. If the mind is carelessly drifting away from reality, then effort means returning to the reality of body-feeling-mind-dharma. Mindfulness means not forgetting the reality that is- the reality of body - feeling -mind-dharma and awareness to see and know that object honestly and clearly. When we are not doing anything and the body is in a relaxed, carefree state, the three attitudes of the mind are clearness, calmness, purity. Clearness is a mind that is not confused, sees reality clearly, calmness is a mind that is not scattered, freedom, peace and purity is a mind that does not harm oneself or others. From there, we can create a table to show the relationships between the elements (Vien Minh, 2020).

Table 1 The Connection of the States.

<i>Sīla</i>	Care	Effort	Purity
<i>Samadhi</i>	Attention	Mindfulness	Calmness
<i>Paññā</i>	Observation	Awareness	Clearness

In the third objective it is found that for the field of literature, he published a great number of books in a wide variety of genres, ranging from scholarly works to everyday stories, fun stories, and even poems. These works of great value are studied and explored by many generations of monks, nuns, and Buddhists. His writing style is characterized by the use of modern language that is close to everyday life, accompanied by detailed explanations and examples from a variety of fields to suit the level of readers. He composed beautiful poems of, some of which have been set to music by artists, resulting in gentle and soulful melodies that easily touch the hearts of listeners. His rhymes often serve as reminders for practitioners to return to the body, feeling, mind, and dharma.

Regarding construction, he built great works of international stature, such as the Buu Long Pagoda. Each temple he built has a unique and contemporary artistic style. The architecture reflects a multicultural approach, harmoniously blending the beauty of various foreign cultures while preserving the soul of Vietnamese architecture. In addition, he is one of the very few masters who have built a separate monastery for nuns. Furthermore, he also gives precious advice and provides financial support for many construction projects according to the Theravāda sect throughout Vietnam.

In terms of education, he is involved in teaching both in his home country and abroad. In the domestic country, he teaches at Buddhist schools and temples. Every year, he opens many different retreats, and those who cannot attend in person can ask questions via online platforms, to which he replies directly. Besides, he organizes the International *Tipiṭaka* Chanting Council of Vietnam to preserve and repeat the Buddha's teachings.

Besides, Master Vien Minh also attaches great importance to charity and society. He supports poor people in many aspects, including healthcare, education, and other necessities. In particular, his help is very flexible, depending on each person's difficult situation and the tough period of the country where he provides distinct support. He also integrated ethnic festivals into learning the doctrine, helping the younger generations to both understand the national culture and having the opportunity to understand Buddhism.

Discussions

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature and highlight the life and works of Master Vien Minh. Notably, a book written by Gioi Duc (2021) describes the process of becoming a monk and the work he did while studying at a Buddhist school. Additionally, Vien Minh recounts the period when he and his Dharma brothers retreated to

a forest to practice meditation and further study the philosophies of other civilizations, confirming previous research outcomes.

In addition, this study focuses on the Buddha's teachings applied by Master Vien Minh to the daily life of Vietnamese people, including views about people and life, conditioning causes, and obeying nature, as well as Master Vien Minh's meditation method. The suggestions aim to help people lead a better life by showing how to convert negative energy or depression in daily life into positive power. For instance, when things do not go as we want, instead of feeling disappointed and hopeless, we can see life as a school that helps us become enlightened. The purpose of life's changes is to test our patience and calmness in perceiving the truth. All the favorable conditions or adversities in our present life are just environments for us to adjust our unwholesome actions and wrong perceptions into more correct behaviors and perceptions. When perception is correct, actions will also be correct. By knowing and acting correctly, we will not cause bad karma in the present life, and therefore our lives will become more and more sublime. To avoid hurting ourselves and others, we should dwell in a state of awareness, such as care-attention-observation, effort-mindfulness-awareness, and clearness-calmness-purity. Currently, these aspects are rather new and have not been explored in previous research.

Finally, the study highlights the contributions of Master Vien Minh to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam in areas such as literature, construction, education, charity, and society. Most aspects of his contributions have not yet been studied. A typical example is the field of construction. The temple's architecture showcases the cultural exchange between Vietnam and its neighboring countries, demonstrating the harmonious integration of Theravāda Buddhism into Vietnamese Buddhist culture. Specifically, the Gotama Cetiya tower in Buu Long Temple exemplifies this. Its architecture is modeled after ancient Buddhist culture, drawing inspiration from the Suvannabhumi civilization, the Indian Buddhist civilization of the Asoka era, and Nguyen dynasty architecture in Vietnam. It serves not only as a meditation environment but also as a miniature school and a valuable resource for those fascinated by architectural styles and cultural diversity, providing an immersive learning experience.

Knowledge from Research

This research has proposed the contributions of Master Vien Minh to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam, as shown in the figure below:

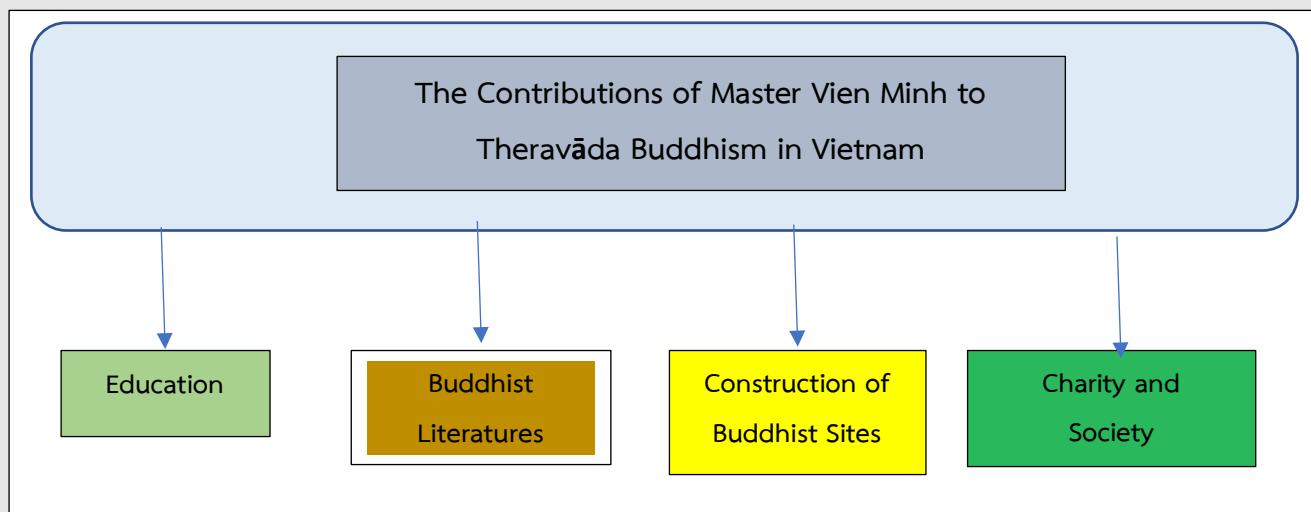


Figure 1 The Contributions of Master Vien Minh to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam

Research findings in the article reveal several crucial insights, shedding light on the path to developing Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam in particular and globally in modern times. More importantly, the findings mentioned above can be further developed and applied in various aspects through the following methods.

Academia: The study emphasizes the field of literature. It can be integrated into school subjects such as religious studies. Additionally, it can be seen as a reference source for forums or journals on medicine related to psychotherapy.

Literature: This can be composed to disseminate to the general public as a useful reference for compiling books about the life and contributions of Master, a venerable elder who played a significant role in the development of Theravāda Buddhism.

Architecture: This research not only may be used to preserve and promote the cultural value and spiritual significance of spiritual architectural heritage but also provides valuable resources for architects designing religious projects and for investors developing spiritual tourist destinations that are suitable for visitors' needs and ensure sustainability.

Communities: Community workshops or tea meditation sessions can be organized to discuss his contributions, comment on poetry, or share meditation experiences. Through these activities, they can learn from each other, enhance their understanding of Buddhism, and build a community of people who share a passion for the values that it brings.

Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of Master Vien Minh's pivotal role in shaping Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam. Master Vien Minh's approach to Buddhism, characterized by a deep understanding of both Eastern and Western philosophies, has enabled him to bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary Vietnamese society. The research highlights several key aspects of Master Vien Minh's teachings and contributions. His philosophical perspective, which views life as an enlightened environment and emphasizes living in harmony with cause and effect, has resonated deeply with Vietnamese practitioners. The Master's innovative meditation method, focusing on states of awareness in daily life, has made Buddhist practice more accessible and relevant to laypeople. Moreover, Master Vien Minh's multifaceted contributions to Vietnamese society - spanning literature, construction, education, charity, and social development - have significantly enhanced the presence and influence of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam. His work has not only enriched the spiritual lives of individuals but has also contributed to the broader social and cultural landscape of the country.

This study underscores the importance of cultural adaptation and practical application in the dissemination of religious teachings. Master Vien Minh's success in making Buddhist principles relevant to modern Vietnamese life serves as a model for religious leaders and scholars in other contexts. His approach demonstrates how ancient wisdom can be effectively translated into contemporary practice, fostering both individual spiritual growth and societal development. The results of this study bring enormous merits to some extent. Firstly, they offer a comprehensive view of his life and work, from childhood to his present life, including the occupations he has done and is currently doing. Secondly, they deepen our understanding of the Buddha's teachings as applied by him, particularly in the daily lives of Vietnamese people. Finally, they broaden our perspective on his contributions to Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam in fields such as literature, construction, education, charity, and society. Master Vien Minh's life work represents a significant chapter in the story of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam. His teachings and contributions have not only enriched the spiritual landscape of Vietnam but have also ensured the continued relevance and growth of Buddhist practices in the modern era.

Suggestions

These suggestions for further study would not only deepen our understanding of Master Vien Minh's contributions but also provide valuable insights into the broader dynamics of religious adaptation, cultural integration, and spiritual leadership in contemporary societies.

1. Institutional Development: A detailed study of the educational institutions and programs established by Master Vien Minh, examining their curriculum, teaching methods, and impact on the propagation of Theravāda Buddhism in Vietnam.
2. Social Impact: A study on the social and charitable initiatives inspired by Master Vien Minh's teachings, examining their impact on local communities and their role in shaping public perception of Buddhism in Vietnam.
3. Environmental Ethics: An exploration of Master Vien Minh's teachings on environmental stewardship and how they contribute to Buddhist eco-theology in Vietnam.

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