

# King Trần Nhân Tông's Perspective to Create Trúc Lâm Zen School in Vietnam

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## ABSTRACT

This academic article examines the foundational perspectives of King Trần Nhân Tông in establishing the Trúc Lâm Zen School in Vietnam, a distinct and enduring form of Vietnamese Buddhism. Today, Vietnamese Buddhism is often synonymous with Zen Buddhism, particularly the Trúc Lâm Zen School, which King Trần Nhân Tông founded and nurtured over centuries. While Zen Buddhism is traditionally understood to have been transmitted from China, Trúc Lâm Zen represents a unique amalgamation of various Zen traditions present in Vietnam during King Trần Nhân Tông's era. This synthesis created a distinctive Vietnamese Zen lineage that reflects the deep enlightenment insights of its founder, setting it apart from both Indian and Chinese Zen sects. This article explores the core teachings of the Trúc Lâm Zen School through the lens of King Trần Nhân Tông, emphasizing its unique characteristics and its relevance in contemporary 21st-century life. Through a detailed study of historical texts and modern interpretations, the article sheds light on the enduring legacy of Thiền Trúc Lâm and its continued influence on Vietnamese spiritual practice.

**Keywords:** Trần Nhân Tông; Trúc Lâm Zen School; Zen Buddhism; Buddha nature

## Introduction

Looking at the whole country of Vietnam's history through the perspectives of politics, society and culture, Buddhism under Trần Dynasty, run by the Great King Zen Master Trần Nhân Tông (皇帝禪師陳仁宗) was known and revered as the most flourished period of Vietnamese Buddhism. Thiền<sup>1</sup> was

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<sup>1</sup> English: Zen; Classical Chinese: 禪.

studied and widely applied by the royal families of the Trần Dynasty,<sup>2</sup> laying the strongest foundation and manifestation of Vietnamese Buddhism as a result. “It is said that Buddhism was widely spread in Vietnam during the Tran Dynasty.”<sup>3</sup>

King Trần Nhân Tông is an Enlightened King,<sup>4</sup> also known as a Universal King or an *Ariya*.<sup>5</sup> His practical teachings bring success and gain support from most Vietnamese people while becoming the official religion of the time. To further illustrate, since its 20<sup>th</sup> century resurrection in Vietnam by The Most Venerable Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ<sup>6</sup> and supported by the Vietnamese government, many Vietnamese go on to adopt and apply the teachings of The Most Venerable Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh nowadays. Vietnamese people worship King Trần Nhân Tông as a Giác Hoàng Điều Ngự (literally Enlightened King of Vietnam). The establishments set forth by the Great King Zen Master during his reign have profoundly contributed to Vietnamese Buddhism, gaining the admiration, appreciation from the public while engendering studies from scholars. Today, and with the governmental and public support, the Zen School has become the official Vietnamese Buddhism. The article studies on how King Trần Nhân Tông founded the Trúc Lâm Zen School in Vietnam and how it has been taught to Vietnamese of nowadays by the Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ.

## 2. The Life of King Trần Nhân Tông

King Trần Nhân Tông (陳仁宗) (11<sup>th</sup> November 1258 in Lunar Year), his given name Trần Khâm (陳吟), is the third emperor of the Trần Dynasty. He is the oldest prince of The Great King Zen Master Trần Thánh Tông (皇帝禪師陳聖宗) and Empress Thiên Cảm Trần Thị Thiệu (元聖天感皇后陳韶). When the King was born, it was predicted that he would become a man of great dignity and respect,

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<sup>2</sup> George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore (eds.), *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition: Introduction to Asian Civilizations*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> Bui Phuong Loan, “Impact of Buddhism through Thien Tradition in Brilliant Dynasties in the Vietnamese History,” *International Journal of Science and Research*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (January 2019): 2319-7064.

<sup>4</sup> Thích Thanh Từ (expounded), 聖登錄 [*Thánh Đăng Lục - Records of The Sainthood of The Five Trần Kings*], (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 1999), p. i.

<sup>5</sup> Means: a sant, a noble man; Sanskrit: ārya; Classical Chinese: 聖.

<sup>6</sup> Thích Thanh Từ (Trần Hữu Phước, born July 24, 1924 in Cần Thơ) is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk. He has been most influential of increasing traditional Vietnamese Buddhism practices in Vietnam. He is having the most influence on today’s view on Buddhism and what it means to be a Buddhist monk through the implementation of the revived religion referred to as Trúc Lâm.

by his appearance, documented in *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*<sup>7</sup> as “bright look like that of a saint, stately appearance, golden bright nuance, perfect body shape, brilliant vigor.” He is also named “Kim Tiên Đồng Tử” for his unique fair and golden skin. King Father Trần Thánh Tông named him “Kim Phật” (金佛 – Golden Buddha)<sup>8</sup> for the same reason. A black mole was spotted on his left shoulder, one expected of someone who would shoulder the country later.

History had it that one night, The King’s mother, Empress Thị Thiệu, had a dream about a saint who descended and offered her two swords, one long and one short, to choose.<sup>9</sup> Without a second thought, she chose the short one, which was said to be the reason for her conception of the King.<sup>10</sup>

Prince Trần Khâm was later appointed as Crown Prince of Trần Dynasty in December 1274, at the age of sixteen.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, his King father invited the most respected teachers of the time to coach him in all subjects such as General Lê Phụ Trần,<sup>12</sup> the prominent mandarin, Nguyễn Sĩ Cố,<sup>13</sup> the famed scholar, and Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (慧中上士)<sup>14</sup> whom the King later was worshiped as his master in Thiền.

Yet, by his understanding of Confucianism and Buddhism, the Crown King Trần Khâm would wish to escape from the royal palace and become a monk

<sup>7</sup> Lê Văn Hưu, Phan Phu Tiên, Ngô Sĩ Liên, *大越史記全書 [Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư - Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet]*, trans. Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, VASS, (Social Sciences - Hanoi Publisher, 1985-1992), p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> Thích Phước Sơn (trans.), *三祖寔錄 [Tam Tổ Thực Lục – True Records of The Patriarchs]*, (Vietnam: Vietnam Buddhist Research Institute, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Thích Thanh Từ (expounded), *聖登錄 [Thánh Đăng Lục - Records of The Sainthood of The Five Trần Kings]*, (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 1999), p. 68.

<sup>10</sup> Zen Master Chân Nguyên, *Thiền Tông Bản Hạnh - The Record of Trúc Lam Zen School*, expounded Thích Thanh Từ, (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 1998), p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> Lê Văn Hưu, Phan Phu Tiên, Ngô Sĩ Liên, *大越史記全書 [Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư - Complete Chronicles of Dai Viet]*, trans. Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, VASS, (Social Sciences - Hanoi Publisher, 1985-1992), p. 182.

<sup>12</sup> A skilled general on the battlefield, one of the few excellent commanders of the Trần Dynasty army during the three Mongol Invasions of Đại Việt who is not from the Trần clan. Besides military activities, he also took charge of the position royal professor for crown prince Trần Khâm (Emperor Trần Nhân Tông). For his contributions, the King Trần Thái Tông granted him a marriage with the former empress Lý Chiêu Hoàng.

<sup>13</sup> 阮士固 (1230 - 1312). He is a poet and an excellent mandarin under Trần Dynasty in Vietnamese history.

<sup>14</sup> (1230–1291) was an influential Buddhist monk and skilled poet of the Thiền (Zen) tradition during the Trần Dynasty in Vietnam. Tuệ Trung authored treatises on Pure Land and Thiền teachings.

in order to practice the Buddha's Teachings and Zen,<sup>15</sup> a cede his title to his royal brother.<sup>16</sup> Well-known as a talented and wise young prince with profound knowledge gained from numerous books, the King is known to have reached the deepest of their meanings.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, his King Father did not approve his wish to become a monk. Both the King Father and the Empress Mother gave him a new title “Điều Ngự Vương” (調御王 – Supreme Master),<sup>18</sup> understood as one of the ten honorific titles of the Buddha – Supreme Master of Disciplines as explained by the Buddha in many suttas.<sup>19, 20</sup> The title chosen resembles *Puruṣadamyasārathi*,<sup>21</sup> in which *puruṣa* means man, *damyā* means to be converted and *sārathi* means the leader of a caravan, therefore “Leader of the caravan of men to be converted.”

Crown Prince Trần Khâm was ceded the throne to become the third King of Trần Dynasty, titled Trần Nhân Tông, at the age of twenty on November 5<sup>th</sup>, 1278 and his era named Thiệu Bảo (紹寶, 1278–1285) and later was changed to Trùng Hưng (重興, 1285–1293). His King Father – Trần Thánh Tông – titled himself as Retired-King. Though a King, Trần Nhân Tông spent his daily life in a simplistic manner. For instance, after a nap in Tư Phúc Temple inside the royal palace, the King dreamed of a big lotus like a wheel growing out from his umbilicus upon which a Golden Buddha was standing. A man tried to ask the King whether he knew this Buddha or not, to which the King responded: “This is the Maha-Voirachana Buddha<sup>22</sup> (Mahāvairocana).” As the result, the King became a vegetarian.

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<sup>15</sup> Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận – Commentary on The History of Vietnam Buddhism*, (Vietnam: Hanoi – Literature Publisher, 2008), p. 233.

<sup>16</sup> Thích Thanh Từ (expounded), *聖登錄 [Thánh Đăng Lục - Records of The Sainthood of The Five Trần Kings]*, (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 1999), p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> Thích Thanh Từ (expounded), *聖登錄 [Thánh Đăng Lục - Records of The Sainthood of The Five Trần Kings]*, (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 1999), p. 65.

<sup>18</sup> Zen Master Chân Nguyên, *Thiền Tông Bản Hạnh - The Record of Trúc Lam Zen School*, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> John R. McRae (trans. from Taishō), *維摩詰所說 [The Vimalakīrti Sutra]*, Vol. 14 No. 475, (USA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), p. 172.

<sup>20</sup> Tao-tsi Shih (trans. from Tripitaka), Frank G.F (eds.), *地藏菩薩本願經 [The Sutra of Boddhisattva: Kṣitigarbha's Fundamental Vow Sutra]*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition., (Taiwan: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, 2012), p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Nāgārjuna, *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra [The Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom of Nāgārjuna]*, trans. and com. by Étienne Lamotte, trans. from the French by Gelongma Karma Migme Chodron. Vol. 1, (France: Foundation Universitaire, 2001), p. 122.

<sup>22</sup> Mahāvairocana is a celestial Buddha who is often interpreted, in texts like the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, as the *dharmakāya* of the historical Gautama Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhism, Mahāvairocana is also seen as the embodiment of the Buddhist concept of Śūnyatā.

Under his reign, there were two great victories against Mongol Invasions, in 1285 and 1288, widely acknowledged for multiple glorious winning battles.<sup>23</sup> After winning the Mongols, King Trần Nhân Tông and his father decided to re-establish policies in both politics and society as fast as possible in order to ensure better preparations should foreign countries invade again.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, Đại Việt under his reign was hailed as the strongest dynasty across Vietnam's history. Furthermore, the people of nowadays still celebrate the Demise Day of the King to instill in young generations the appreciation towards the important King and Buddhist leader of Vietnam for his outstanding deeds and achievements.

### **3. King Trần Nhân Tông's Perspective to Create Trúc Lâm Zen School in Vietnam**

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's teachings were considered one of the foundational thoughts in forming King Trần Nhân Tông's Zen perspective. At the early age, Trần Thánh Tông, then King Father, sent him to study under the tutelage of his close friend Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ. Still young, the young prince obtained most of the important and essential ideas in Zen, comprehending all the Zen essence and mottoes, the most fundamental foundation for his future establishment of Trúc Lâm Zen School.

According to “Analects of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ,” upon him being invited to the royal ceremony by his sister (also King Trần Nhân Tông's mother), in which food was served to everyone, vegetarian or not alike, Tuệ Trung, a well-known vegetarian,<sup>25</sup> did not hesitate to eat chicken, which shocked his sister and attending guests. Then his sister asked him: “Brother, we all know you practice meditation, why can you still eat chicken meat? How can you become a Buddha?”

Gently and calmly, Tuệ Trung responded: “Buddha is Buddha, me is me. I do not need to be like the Buddha and the Buddha does not need to be like me.

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In the conception of the Five Tathagatas of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, Mahāvairocana is at the center and is considered a Primordial Buddha.

<sup>23</sup> Đại Việt (大越, Great Viet), often known as Annam, was a Vietnamese kingdom and sovereign state on Eastern Mainland Southeast Asia from the 10th century AD to the early 19th century. Its early name, Đại Cồ Việt (大瞿越), was established in 968 by Vietnamese ruler Đinh Bộ Lĩnh after he ended the Anarchy of the 12 Warlords, until the beginning of the reign of Lý Thánh Tông (1054–1072). Đại Việt lasted until the reign of Gia Long (1802–1820) changed the name to Việt Nam (越南).

<sup>24</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông - Complete Works of Trần Nhân Tông*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition., (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 2010), p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> Trần Nhân Tông, *The Analects of Tue Trung Thuong Si*, expounded by Thích Thanh Từ, (Vietnam: HCMC General Publication, 1996), p. 25.

Don't you hear that Mañjuśrī is Mañjuśrī,<sup>26</sup> liberation is liberation, my dear royal sister?"

By this conversation, King Trần Nhân Tông, still a Grand Prince at that time, was really impressed and curious about Tuệ Trung.

There was another occasion when Prince Trần Nhân Tông's grandmother passed away. The King Trần Thánh Tông (King Trần Nhân Tông's royal father and then King of Đại Việt) invited Tuệ Trung and many most virtuous Venerable and Masters from across the country to join an offering held in the royal palace. During the event, King Trần Thánh Tông invited each of them to write a verse or a poem to showcase their Buddhist understanding. However, Prince Trần Nhân Tông reckoned that their understandings were not yet the essence of real Dhamma. Therefore, he decided to give a scroll to Tuệ Trung to write his own verse, which took the form as follows:

Interpretation shows interpretation  
Same with rubbing eyes for clearer sight  
But realizing it will not be any clearer  
The real always exists all along.

King Trần Nhân Tông right away replied:  
The real always exists  
But need to see the odd  
Seeing odd but seeing nothing odd  
That odd will self-extinguish.

Tuệ Trung read and recognized by himself.

On the occasion of the funeral of King Trần Nhân Tông's mother, Master Tuệ Trung gave the King two books, *Tuyệt Đâu* and *Dã Hiện*. In these two books, the King noticed that the way of Tuệ Trung's life is much different from that of a monastic life: Tuệ Trung is still a layperson practicing Dhamma. Therefore, he asked him: "Human being's *kamma* is dominated by the sin of eating animals' meat; how can they be liberated from the cause-and-effect law?"

Master Tuệ Trung taught carefully:

Assuming that there is one person staying backward, suddenly the King is passing his back and that person throws something to the King unexpectedly, will that person get afraid? Is the King angry? So, this should be clearly noticed that these two things are not related to each other.

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<sup>26</sup> Mañjuśrī is a *bodhisattva* associated with *prajñā* (insight) in *Mahāyāna Buddhism*. His name means "Gentle Glory" in Sanskrit. Mañjuśrī is also known by the fuller name of Mañjuśrīkumārabhūta, literally "Mañjuśrī, Still a Youth" or, less literally, "Prince Mañjuśrī". Another deity by the name of Mañjuśrī is Mañjughoṣa.

Master Tuệ Trung right away clarified:  
 Everything is manifested by Dhamma  
 Sin is created whenever doubt of the truth appears  
 There is no such a thing  
 Which are created by germ or seed  
 ...  
 Everyday facing the outside world  
 But outside world is created by mind  
 Outside world and mind are not two  
*Pāramī* is everywhere.

King Trần Nhân Tông however still wonders how to distinguish between the meaning of “creating sin” or “making merit,” then asked and the master said the serves to clarify:

Eat vegetables and meat, both create *kamma*  
 As long as they are still born, where is *kamma* or  
*puñña*.

King Trần Nhân Tông asked: “What will we become if only practicing the precepts?” Master Tuệ Trung smiled and said:

Practicing precepts and *khanti*  
 Creating sin, not making merit  
 If only sins are created and not merits  
 Then do not practice.

...  
 Just like a person climbing a tree  
 Means asking for the unsafe  
 Like a person not climbing a tree  
 Then nothing will disturb.

King Trần Nhân Tông was advised not to spread this if the right time did not come yet. One time, the King was taught essence of Zen from Master Tuệ Trung: “Reflect inwardly to see the essence of you. Do not follow other ways.”<sup>27</sup> Since then, Tuệ Trung was known and worshiped as master of King Trần Nhân Tông.

The most important perspective of Buddhism influent King Trần Nhân Tông is about “Mind and the Buddha” or could be say the “Buddha nature” which was expressed clearly through the King’s poem in *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo Phú – Living in The World, Joyful in The Way*.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “*phản quan tự kỷ bốn phận sự, bất tùng tha đắc*” (反觀自己本分事，不從他得).

<sup>28</sup> Anh Chinh, “How Zen Perspective of Trung Thượng Sĩ influent to Vietnamese Trúc Lâm Zen Sect”, The Government Committee for Religious Affairs,

So, we know, Buddha is in the house,  
 No need to search from outside  
 Short of roots, we look for Buddha  
 Understand this, we are Buddha....<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. Trúc Lâm Zen School in Vietnam

As mentioned above, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ should be the biggest influence to the King by his teaching and understanding. As a Prince of Đại Việt and a student of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, King Trần Nhân Tông understood and recognized the motto as well as the essence in Thiền, a foundation for him to attain greater understanding. Together with analyzing the characteristics of Vietnamese people and filling the best quintessence of the three current Zen Schools in Vietnam, he went on to found Trúc Lâm Zen School for the Vietnamese people. According to the Most Venerable Thích Thiện Nhơn:

Trúc Lâm Buddhism was the first indigenous Buddhism of the Vietnamese, and was promoted by the eminent Buddhist Emperor Tran Nhan Tong in order to uphold the self-reliant spirit of unity and unification of Buddhist sects into an independent Sangha, purely Vietnamese, in the aspirations of the Vietnamese, in accordance with the historical context of the country and its cultural identity. It can be said that this is the unique culture of Buddhism and Vietnamese people.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, Trúc Lâm Zen School contains three main norms:

1. Attaining the enlightened wisdom by self-practice and self-realization as a basic aim.
2. Merging and mixing the essences of the three current Zen Sects in Vietnam at that time together with the King's wisdom.
3. Therefore, it is relevant to the Vietnamese's conception and expectation to become Trúc Lâm Yên Tử, which is officially considered the Zen of Vietnam.

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[http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/1351/Tu\\_tuong\\_Thien\\_cua\\_Tue\\_Trung\\_T\\_huong\\_Sy\\_anh\\_huong\\_toi\\_Thien\\_Phai\\_Truc\\_lam\\_Viet\\_Nam](http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/1351/Tu_tuong_Thien_cua_Tue_Trung_T_huong_Sy_anh_huong_toi_Thien_Phai_Truc_lam_Viet_Nam) (accessed September 18, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Trúc Lâm Đầu Đà (King Trần Nhân Tông), *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo Phú - Living in The World, Joyful in The Way*, trans. Nguyen Huu Vinh and Tran Dinh Hoanh. (Taiwan and US, 2015), p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> Trần Nhân Tông Institute (Thích Bảo Nghiêm), *Trần Nhân Tông and Trúc Lâm Buddhism: The Unique of The Perspective and Culture*, (Hanoi: Hanoi National University, 2018), p. 39.



The second main teaching of Trúc Lâm Zen School is “Engaged Buddhism,” the *Bodhicitta* way (菩薩道) in practice. This teaching was highlighted, introduced, and experimented by the founder – King Trần Nhân Tông during his lifetime.

When people live in the worldly life, observation and practice the “ten good deeds” helps them to refrain from doing bad things and to create a pure mind. Therefore, this approach can help them to practice to observe what is happening in their mind. In the same sense, if we can take a phone call as an example: we want to make a phone call to someone; if we can hear the response from the other side, it means we know that the person is available to answer. It means that whatever that person does, their knowledge about the nature of their ear always exists, so it is easy to know there is a ringing bell and pick up to answer; otherwise, the person cannot hear anything. It means the nature of the hearing ears is always there, regardless if we can realize it or not. “When we are awakened, the organs work and our knowing nature is bright. When we are asleep, the organs are closed and our knowing nature is vague.”<sup>31</sup> In the verse, King Trần Nhân Tông himself said:

Living in the work, happy with the Way.  
You should let all things take their courses.  
When hungry, just eat; when tired, just sleep.  
The treasure is in your house; don’t search anymore.  
Face the scenes, and have no thoughts then you  
don’t need to ask for Zen.<sup>32</sup>

Through such verses, the King shows clearly that his teaching resides right within each person, the “Buddha nature” always existing. We do not need to look outside or further away, and the only way is to look deeply inside our mind, analyzing how it behaves to understand it better. The “Buddha nature” of each person is the treasure which guides humans to attain the highest goal – Nibbāna or liberate from all attachments. Correspondingly, simply look at the treasure within us, which is called Thiền. The more we try to search outside, the more we lose ourselves in the process. Because the outside condition is only a temporary factor which will sooner or later fade away, while “Buddha nature” is the real essence of each human, a factor capable of bringing us to the other shore. Therefore, by teaching the people to practice the “ten good deeds,” King Trần Nhân Tông illustrated how it can help understand the nature existing within ourselves.

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<sup>31</sup> Thích Thanh Tu, *Keys to Buddhism*, trans. Thuan Tue, Huyen Bach and Thuy Lien Shutt, (Vietnam: Religious Publishing House, 2008), p 28.

<sup>32</sup> Nguyen Giac, *The Way of Zen in Vietnam*, (US: Ananda Viet Foundation, 2020), p. 28.

## 5. Teaching of Trúc Lâm Zen School in Modern Life

According to Professor Lê Mạnh Thát, Trúc Lâm Zen School was originated from Thảo Đường Zen School. However, to be a new establishment, Trúc Lâm Zen School had to admit the essence from the past, and summarize the contemporary contributions.<sup>33</sup> It means that, in order to form a unique Zen technique for his people, the King collected and analyzed and practiced all various ways of Zen of the time. The most appropriate teaching is “Engaged Buddhism” from King Trần Nhân Tông while he himself is an excellent mirror. The perspective of the King could be viewed as an influence from his teacher – Tuệ Trung Thúc Sĩ, because he “became religious without entering a pagoda while possessing a vast knowledge of Buddhism.”<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, Professor Lê Mạnh Thát reckons that Buddhist devotees under King Trần Nhân Tông did not forget the primary aim of their life, one that leads them to find a way to liberate from their respective worldly life.<sup>35</sup> As a King of a country, burdened by works dealing with the whole country, King Trần Nhân Tông deeply understood the importance of inter-connection between individuals, communities or society as a whole, despite his time staying inside the forest to practice. Without society, individuals cannot exist and grow, and vice versa, without the individuals, society cannot exist and develop. Hence, the inter-connection and co-operations between the two factors become the most important in the King’s writing *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo Phú*. “*Living in the work, happy with the Way* is the way to live in the society and still follow the Buddha way, in order to realize the “Buddha nature.”

Thiền is proven to have been applied in both lay life and monastic life. All the necessary practices are about realizing the “Buddha nature” no matter wherever we live. Once realizing the “Buddha nature” always existing and considered as the only truth, external factors are merely unreal. Moreover, according to the King, Thiền is always newer every time it is mentioned. New is not about the way of teaching, but in how it is applied depends on the time and the living styles. When we define as new, Thiền can be applied in each of our actions, when we work, eat, or carry out personal activities. Thus, not only monks

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<sup>33</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông - Complete Works of Trần Nhân Tông*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition., (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 2010), p. 206.

<sup>34</sup> Minh Chi, Hà Văn Tấn and Nguyễn Tài Thư, *Buddhism in Vietnam*, (Hanoi: World Publisher, 1999), p. 102.

<sup>35</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông - Complete Works of Trần Nhân Tông*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition., (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 2010), p. 221.

and nuns can realize the “Buddha nature,” lay Buddhists also can, much like King Trần Thái Tông<sup>36</sup> and Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ<sup>37</sup>.

Another point taught by King Trần Nhân Tông is the contribution of each individual to the country and the “ten meritorious actions” in daily life, considered to be the “foundation of social virtue” in which building a temple is highlighted as a contribution to the country.”<sup>38</sup> Since the entire nation had to stand up to fight for the freedom from Mongol Invasions in year 1285 and 1288 respectively, King Trần Nhân Tông understood deeply the characteristics of his people. Đại Việt people are willing to sacrifice themselves for the freedom of the country as a whole and younger generation in particular. Therefore, by teaching them the importance of building temples is considered to be the most suitable deed to Buddhism as well. As believed at the time, religion was thought as an important moral support for the country.<sup>39</sup> As a result, building temples and doing good deeds can apply widely in this modern time as a strong foundation for a religion in Vietnam.

## **6. Teaching of Trúc Lâm Zen School by Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ in Modern Life**

The Most Venerable Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ mentioned in his book *The Most Three Important Matters in My Monk Life* that the best of the patriarchs should be studied and adopted, however flexibly to uphold to this modern time.<sup>40</sup> Thiền teachings from Trúc Lâm Zen School nowadays is well known as Thiền Trúc Lâm, or the “new normal Thiền.” Using modern or “new normal” are meant to denote the ways of application these techniques to be relevant to current life, while Thiền mainly focuses on the “true mind” or “Buddha nature.” And the “true mind” is always true, despite the form being old or new. Thiền Trúc Lâm or Vietnamese Zen Buddhism, 710 years since the time of King Trần Nhân Tông, is

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<sup>36</sup> He is the husband of Lý Chiêu Hoàng (Lý dynasty’s Queen) in a marriage arranged by his uncle Trần Thủ Độ and received the crown from his wife. He led the victorious war of 1258 against Yuan-Mongol invaders, then abdicated in favor of his son Trần Thánh Tông and became a monk as a Zen Master and well-known for realizing his “Buddha nature.” Author of *Khóa Hư Lục* (Treatise on Nothingness).

<sup>37</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Ba Vấn Đề Trọng Đại Trong Đời Tu Của Tôi – The Most Three Important Matters in My Monk Life*, (Vietnam: Hanoi Publisher, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Minh Chi, Hà Văn Tấn and Nguyễn Tài Thư, *Buddhism in Vietnam*, (Hanoi: World Publisher, 1999), p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Trần Nhân Tông - Complete Works of Trần Nhân Tông*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition., (Vietnam: HCMC Publisher, 2010), p. 220.

<sup>40</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Vietnamese Zen Sect at the Late 20<sup>th</sup> C*, (Vietnam: Phuong Dong Publisher, 1998), p. 59.

amalgamation from the teachings of Hui Ke,<sup>41</sup> Hui Nang<sup>42</sup> and King Trần Nhân Tông himself. Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ explained of his practices as follows:<sup>43</sup>

1. Recognize the wandering thoughts coming and let them go.
2. Face the outer conditions without attaching to those, because all the outside conditions are temporary.
3. Do not stick in the dualism, because it is unreal.
4. Live with the reality, do not follow the unreal things because the unreal world is *samsāra*, and the real is Nibbāna.

Of the four, the first practice forms the basic of the teachings directed as beginners. Because our mind always manifests something distracting us from seeing our “Buddha nature,” all these wandering thoughts are just illusory and unreal. This is a way to tame the “monkey mind.” As a result, the practice of recognizing the wandering thoughts and letting them go naturally without doing anything are to clear off the illusory clouds and to realize the true “Buddha nature.” Yet, the above features also mentioned how the practitioners can apply in their daily lives in a manner not too distant or elevated to understand. However, it must as well depend on each practitioner’s capacity to apply in various contexts from which they can choose the most appropriate one.

From the teachings of King Trần Nhân Tông and the renewal initiated by Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ, Thiền Trúc Lâm has been known to be applying in not only monastic life but also in daily lives by everyone across all life activities. There are many ways to apply; however, the main point is to maintain a focus on realizing the true mind or “Buddha nature,” a real and permanent one. The Buddha’s Teachings are not all about living a monastic life; they include

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<sup>41</sup> Dazu Huike (487–593), Chinese: 大祖慧可; Chinese: Chán and the twenty-ninth since Gautama Buddha. The successor to Bodhidharma.

<sup>42</sup> Dajian Huineng (traditional Chinese: 大鑒惠能; February 27, 638 – August 28, 713), also commonly known as the Sixth Patriarch or Sixth Ancestor of Chan. According to tradition he was an uneducated layman who suddenly attained awakening upon hearing the Diamond Sutra. Despite his lack of formal training, he demonstrated his understanding to the fifth patriarch, Daman Hongren, who then supposedly chose Hui Neng as his true successor instead of his publicly known selection of Yuquan Shenxiu.

Hui Neng is regarded as the founder of the “Sudden Enlightenment” Southern Chan school of Buddhism, which focuses on an immediate and direct attainment of Buddhist enlightenment. The *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (六祖壇經), which is said to be a record of his teachings, is a highly influential text in the East Asian Buddhist tradition.

<sup>43</sup> Thích Thanh Từ, *Vietnamese Zen Sect at the Late 20<sup>th</sup> C*, (Vietnam: Phuong Dong Publisher, 1998), pp. 60 – 61.

“Engaged Buddhism” and with a true mind for practice, everyone can achieve the ultimate reality which exists within each of us human being.

## Conclusion

The article aims to study the life of Trúc Lâm Zen School’s Vietnamese founder – King Trần Nhân Tông, himself a great King and religious leader of Vietnam, since its conception to the modern time. Through his life and perspective, later generations can understand better the origin of a Zen school founded upon the unique characteristics of Vietnamese people, and how the teachings can be applied in daily life. Begging to transcend the chronicle framework of modern time, the study aims to inspire younger generation of the twenty first century to also learn about the lifestyle of 700 years ago and how these characteristics and perspective have remained across history. Thiền Trúc Lâm being taught and applied widely nowadays in Vietnam is evidential in how the practice, never too difficult or complex to see, is the way of reaching inside to reflect “Buddha nature.” To be able to recognize how our mind leads our actions in daily life and therefore realize our own “Buddha nature” is the ultimate practice of Thiền Trúc Lâm.

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