

The Role of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ in Vietnamese Buddhism During the 13th-14th Centuries

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Abstract

This article investigates the pivotal role of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ in the development of Vietnamese Buddhism during the 13th and 14th centuries, specifically within the context of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen school. He is recognized as a significant figure whose contributions profoundly influenced the trajectory of Buddhism during the Trần Dynasty in Vietnam. Employing a synthetic analytical methodology, this study examines three primary research objectives: (1) the biographical details of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ and his relationships with key historical figures of the Trần Dynasty; (2) his role and influence in the establishment and doctrinal orientation of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen school; and (3) his characteristic activities and contributions to Trúc Lâm Buddhism.

Through a comprehensive review of existing historical and Buddhist documents, this research assesses that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ exerted a substantial influence on Vietnamese Buddhism during this period, both in terms of philosophical thought and practical application. The findings reveal that Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ played a crucial role in shaping the spiritual and ideological foundations of Trúc Lâm Buddhism, despite his lack of direct involvement in the formal administrative structures of the Buddhist establishment. His teachings and interactions with prominent figures of the time contributed significantly to the unique character of Trúc Lâm Zen. This study elucidates the enduring impact of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ on the development of a distinctly Vietnamese form of Zen Buddhism, emphasizing his contributions to the intellectual and spiritual legacy

of the Trần Dynasty. Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of re-evaluating historical figures who influenced the development of Buddhism beyond formal institutional roles.

Keywords: Vietnamese Buddhism; Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ; Enlightened laymen, Zen Buddhism, Trúc Lâm Zen sect

Introduction

In Vietnam, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ has long been a subject of scholarly interest, yielding a substantial body of research across various scales. An analysis of the existing research landscape reveals five primary dimensions of inquiry: history, philosophy, Zen thought, literature, and Zen practice. Twelve book-length studies, two national scientific conferences (held in 1993 and 2021), and numerous journal articles have been published within these dimensions. Notably, the *Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngữ Lục* (Record of the Words of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ) has been translated into English and French. The English translation, *The Wisdom Within: Teachings and Poetry of the Vietnamese Zen Master Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (1230-1291)* by Nguyễn Giác (2010), was initially published online in 2007 and subsequently revised for book publication in 2010. The French translation, *Les Propos de l'éveillé Tue Trung*, by Philippe Langlet, was published in 2015 (Vương, 2024, pp. 556-557).

Historical documents of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ are relatively scarce. The primary source remains the *Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ Ngữ Lục*, compiled by King Trần Nhân Tông, the third monarch of the Trần Dynasty. Supplementary information is scattered throughout the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (Complete Annals of Đại Việt¹) and records of the resistance against the Yuan-Mongol invasions (Tấn & Tâm, 2019). Despite the limited availability of primary sources, the

¹ Đại Việt was the historical national title of Vietnam, first adopted during the reign of King Lý Thánh Tông in 1054 and officially used until the reign of Emperor Gia Long in 1804, spanning approximately 723 years. This title was used as the official national name of Vietnam during the reigns of the Lý, Trần, Later Lê, Mạc, and Tây Sơn dynasties, as well as during the first three years of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1804). (Encyclopedic Dictionary of Vietnam).

extensive body of research on Tuệ Trung underscores his significant role in Vietnamese Buddhism, particularly during the Trần Dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries.

A systematic review of the literature reveals that most studies adopt a multidisciplinary approach. For example, Nguyễn Duy Hình's *Tuệ Trung, Scholar-Master-Poet* (1998) examines Tuệ Trung from historical, literary, and philosophical perspectives, while Nguyễn Lang's *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận* (Vietnam Buddhist History) (2012) focuses on historical and Zen philosophical dimensions. These studies have illuminated the valuable contributions of Tuệ Trung's Zen thought and literary works to Vietnamese Buddhism. However, a comprehensive, independent study focusing specifically on Tuệ Trung's role in Vietnamese Buddhism during the 13th and 14th centuries, particularly his relationship and influence on the First Patriarch of Trúc Lâm—the founder of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen school—remains absent. This gap in the existing literature provides the impetus for the present study.

This article aims to address this lacuna by pursuing three primary objectives: (1) to examine the biography of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ and his relationships with key historical figures of the Trần Dynasty; (2) to analyze Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's role and influence in the establishment of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen school; and (3) to explore the characteristic activities of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ within the context of Trúc Lâm Buddhism."

The Biography and Relationship of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ with Historical Figures of the Trần Dynasty

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ (1230–1291), whose birth name was Trần Tung, was the eldest son of An Sinh Vương Trần Liễu (Tù, 1997a, p. 58). His father was the elder brother of King Trần Thái Tông, the first ruler of the Trần Dynasty. Tuệ Trung had four half-siblings, including his youngest half-sister, Queen Nguyễn Thanh Thiên Cảm, who was the wife of King Trần Thánh Tông, the second king of the Trần Dynasty (Giu, 2022, pp. 333–353).

Given his lineage, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ was the nephew of King Trần Thái Tông, the cousin and brother-in-law of King Trần Thánh Tông, and the uncle of King Trần Nhân Tông, the third monarch of the Trần Dynasty. His close ties to the royal family highlight his significant status within the imperial court.

Qualities and Abilities of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ

From a young age, Tuệ Trung displayed an innate sense of nobility, integrity, and a deep affinity for Buddhism. As he matured, he maintained a composed and serene demeanor, prioritizing spiritual practice over worldly pursuits. His profound engagement with Zen Buddhism was acknowledged by King Trần Nhân Tông, who remarked:

"The demeanor of Thượng Sĩ was solemn, his gestures were straightforward and majestic. Every word he spoke was profound and mysterious. The contemporary masters all commented that the Master was a person of deep faith and understanding of Zen principles, and that his teaching methods were truly unpredictable" (Tù, 1997a, p. 64).

Official Positions in the Imperial Court

Despite his preference for spiritual practice, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ was entrusted with significant military and administrative responsibilities. King Trần Thái Tông bestowed upon him the title of Hưng Ninh Vương and appointed him to oversee the army and the people of Hồng Lô. He played a pivotal role in defending Đại Việt against Mongol-Yuan invasions, participating in two major battles. Following these victories, he was promoted to the position of Captain Guarding the Thái Bình maritime channel, a crucial strategic role in safeguarding the nation.

The Path of Spiritual Cultivation and Enlightenment

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ deepened his Buddhist studies under Zen Master Tiêu Dao at Phước Đường Monastery, eventually attaining Zen enlightenment. Following the successful defense of the country, he chose to withdraw from court life, resigning from his official duties

to dedicate himself to meditation and spiritual practice in Tịnh Bang hamlet. He found fulfillment in sharing Buddhist teachings with future generations, emphasizing the essence of Zen.

In 1291, at the age of 61, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ peacefully passed away at Dưỡng Chân Trang after a brief illness (Tù, 1997a, pp. 59–64). His legacy as a scholar, warrior, and Zen master continues to inspire Buddhist practitioners and scholars to this day. The biography and relationship of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ with historical figures of the Trần Dynasty

The Role and Influence of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ on the Establishment of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen Sect

After abdicating the throne in favor of his son, Trần Anh Tông, in August 1299, King Trần Nhân Tông retreated to Yên Tử Mountain to take monastic vows. To commemorate this event, the royal court issued *Phật giáo pháp sự đạo tràng công văn cách thức* (Buddhist Ritual Manual for Dharma Assemblies), a text that outlined standardized Buddhist liturgies and ceremonial procedures. Authored by King Trần Nhân Tông himself, this manual sought to unify Buddhist practice across the kingdom (Lang, 2012, p. 234).

According to *Thánh Đăng Lục* (Records of the Five Zen Lamps), upon ordination, King Trần Nhân Tông adopted the Dharma name *Hương Vân Đại Đầu Đà*. He subsequently undertook extensive monastic activities, including temple construction, Dharma propagation, and the ordination of new monks. In a pivotal event in 1308, he formally transmitted the patriarchal succession to Pháp Loa, in the presence of King Trần Anh Tông and high-ranking court officials. This momentous occasion established the Trúc Lâm Zen sect as an institutionalized Buddhist tradition, reinforcing its integration with the sociopolitical structure of the Trần Dynasty (Tù, 1997b, p. 368).

Lang (2012, p. 238) characterized Trúc Lâm Buddhism as a form of engaged Buddhism, emphasizing its close relationship with political governance and societal ethics. This philosophy is encapsulated in *Cư Trần Lạc Đạo Phú* (The Joy of Đạo Anywhere on Earth), in

which the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm articulated his view on the seamless integration of Zen practice with daily life:

"Living in the world, joyful in the Đạo, let's go with causation's flow
When hungry, eat; when sleepy, sleep Treasure is at home, seek no more
Facing things, with no mind, why search for Zen?"

(Translated by Trần Đình Hoàn) (Vietnam Institute of Literature, 1977, p. 510).

The Influence of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's Thought on Trúc Lâm Buddhism

Two core philosophical tenets of Trúc Lâm Buddhism—*Cư trần lạc đạo* ("Living in the world while embracing the Đạo") and *Trong nhà có báu* ("The treasure is within one's mind")—were inherited from Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's teachings. Although King Trần Nhân Tông significantly developed these ideas within the Trúc Lâm tradition, he explicitly acknowledged Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ as his primary spiritual mentor, stating that it was Thượng Sĩ who guided him toward understanding the essence of Zen (Tù, 1999, p. 103).

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's influence extended beyond philosophical thought; his approach to Zen practice, which emphasized direct insight over doctrinal study, profoundly shaped the Trúc Lâm Zen sect. The king's profound respect for Thượng Sĩ is evident in his writings, where he repeatedly credited him as the teacher who had the most significant impact on his spiritual journey (Tù, 1997a, pp. 63–64).

Through a process of adaptation and synthesis, the foundational ideas of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ were incorporated into the Trúc Lâm Zen tradition. The following diagram illustrates the transmission of these key concepts:

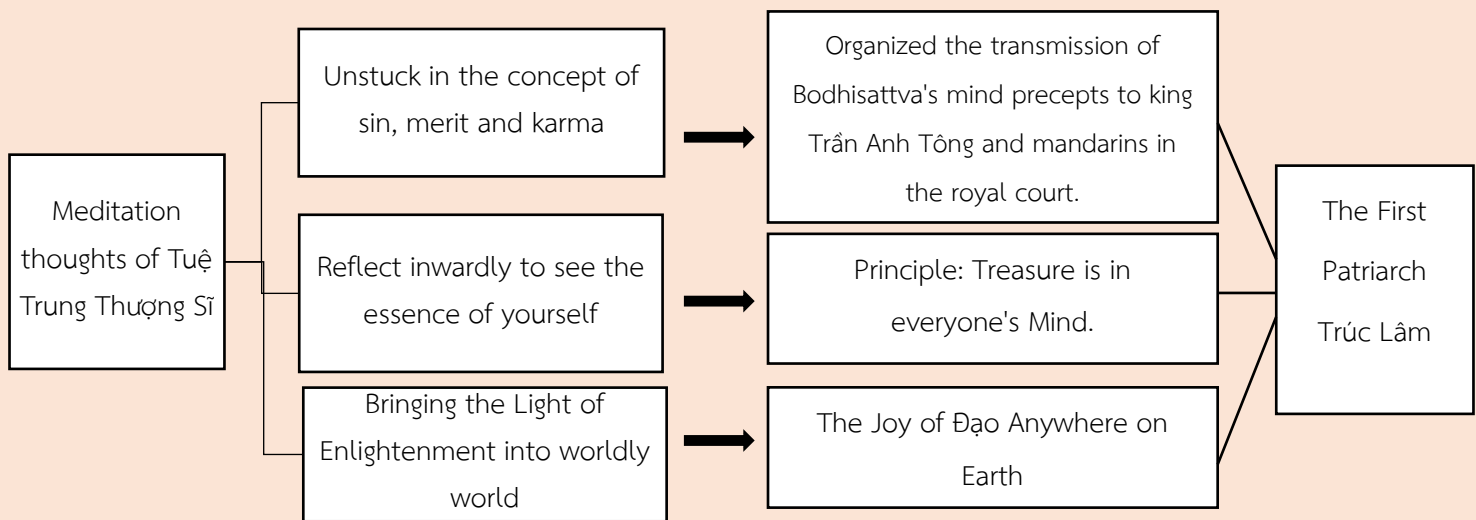


Figure 1: The influence of Zen thought of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ on Trúc Lâm's First Patriarch.

From the figure 1 above, the point that needs further explanation is the teaching of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ to King Trần Nhân Tông about the issue of sin, merit and karma. It was precisely through this enlightenment that Trần Nhân Tông transcended conceptual and formal constraints, gaining profound insight into the nature and characteristics of precepts, sin and merit. Therefore, later, the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm expanded the precepts and organized a ceremony to transmit the Bodhisattva's mind precepts to King Trần Anh Tông and the royal princes and mandarins in the royal court (Thơm, 2021: 79). The important thing is that the precepts that the king and his mandarins received here are the Mind precepts², which are part of the precepts' nature and not the precepts' form. This is considered a special innovation in the propagation of Buddhism by the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm. It was precisely due to this openness that the king and his mandarins could practice and study Buddhism while simultaneously governing the nation, and managing military and political affairs without obstruction or difficulty. In the history of Buddhism, only transmitting the precepts' nature without the precepts' form is extremely rare. At the same time, it is also one of the reasons

² Is the common precept of Mahayana Buddhism. It focuses on preventing evil and unrighteousness in the mind. Also called "Nhất tâm giới", "Đạt-ma nhất tâm giới". It is the precept that gathers all precepts into one's own mind to contemplate and practice. (Phat Quang Dictionary, 959)

why the spirit of the socially engaged bodhisattva during the Trần Dynasty was developed strongly.

In conclusion, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ played a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual and spiritual foundations of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen sect. His deep engagement with Zen philosophy, combined with his mentorship of King Trần Nhân Tông, ensured that his ideas became embedded in the sect's core teachings. As a scholar and practitioner, he exemplified a seamless integration of Buddhist wisdom with engaged spirituality, leaving a lasting impact on Vietnamese Buddhism.

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's Influence on Trúc Lâm Buddhism

After participating twice in the resistance against the Mongol-Yuan invasions, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ resigned from his official position and chose a secluded life in Tịnh Bang hamlet. There, he established Dưỡng Chân Trang as a place of retreat, where he devoted himself to meditation and spiritual cultivation. Despite his withdrawal from public affairs, his reputation as a Zen master attracted many monks and lay Buddhists seeking his guidance. Unlike other Buddhist teachers of his time, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ did not engage in formal Dharma propagation through collective sermons or institutionalized teachings. Instead, he tailored his instruction to the specific needs of each individual who approached him, offering direct and personalized guidance (Từ, 1999, p. 59).

His pedagogical approach was highly regarded, particularly by King Trần Nhân Tông, who praised his skillful and flexible teaching methods. According to the Record of the Words of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ, those who sought his counsel invariably benefited from his profound insights. Through his mentorship, he enlightened numerous monks, many of whom later played pivotal roles in shaping Trúc Lâm Buddhism. His influence was primarily disseminated through this group of disciples, who integrated his Zen philosophy into their teachings and practices. His impact is evident in 13 recorded cases of Zen dialogues and 13 koan studies, which reflect his perspectives on liberation and the fundamental principles of Zen practice.

1. Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ and the Spirit of Engaged Buddhism in the Trần Dynasty

The Trần Dynasty is widely recognized for its distinctive form of engaged Buddhism, which manifested in two key ways. First, Buddhist principles were deeply integrated into national governance, influencing policies related to education, economics, and state administration. Second, this engagement was evident in the Dharma propagation efforts of the First Patriarch of the Trúc Lâm Zen School (Làng, 2012, pp. 237–239).

A foundational figure in this movement was King Trần Thái Tông, the first monarch of the Trần Dynasty, who was also a dedicated proponent of Zen Buddhism. As a young ruler, he once considered renouncing his throne to become a monk. However, Zen Master Viên Chung advised him, stating: “There is no Buddha in the mountains; the Buddha is in your mind. If Your Majesty realizes this, you will immediately attain Buddhahood without the need to seek it elsewhere.” This teaching led King Trần Thái Tông to recognize the principle of Phật tại tâm (Buddha is in the mind) and ultimately return to the throne (Tù, 2023, p. 18). From then on, he actively promoted this idea, encouraging individuals to seek enlightenment within themselves rather than through external pursuits.

However, given the geopolitical context of the Trần Dynasty—marked by external threats and the challenges of consolidating national unity—the idea of Phật tại tâm in its original form had certain limitations. If individuals solely focused on personal enlightenment without considering their societal responsibilities, the collective strength and solidarity of the nation could be weakened, potentially endangering its stability.

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ inherited and expanded upon this concept by emphasizing “Vạn pháp chi tâm tức Phật tâm” (The mind of all dharmas is the Buddha’s mind). His interpretation extended beyond the individual realm, asserting that the Buddha-mind is present within all sentient beings. By shifting the focus from individual enlightenment to collective enlightenment, his teachings fostered a greater sense of communal interconnectedness. This

philosophical development encouraged individuals to recognize their intrinsic relationship with society, thereby strengthening national unity.

This adaptation of Buddhist thought was particularly well-suited to the socio-political realities of the Trần Dynasty. As a newly established dynasty facing the challenges of governance, stability, and external threats, a philosophy that harmonized spiritual liberation with active social engagement was highly pragmatic. The concept of engaged Buddhism, which promoted the realization of enlightenment through participation in worldly affairs, provided a compelling spiritual foundation for the king, court officials, and citizens alike (Vương, 2024, pp. 547–548).

By integrating Buddhist principles into governance and daily life, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's teachings played a crucial role in shaping the ideological framework of Trúc Lâm Buddhism. His approach not only reinforced the moral and ethical underpinnings of the state but also ensured that Buddhist practice remained relevant and accessible to those actively engaged in political and social responsibilities. His legacy thus contributed significantly to the development of a unique form of Vietnamese Buddhism—one that seamlessly blended spiritual cultivation with national service.

2. Contributions of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ in Explaining Zen Thought

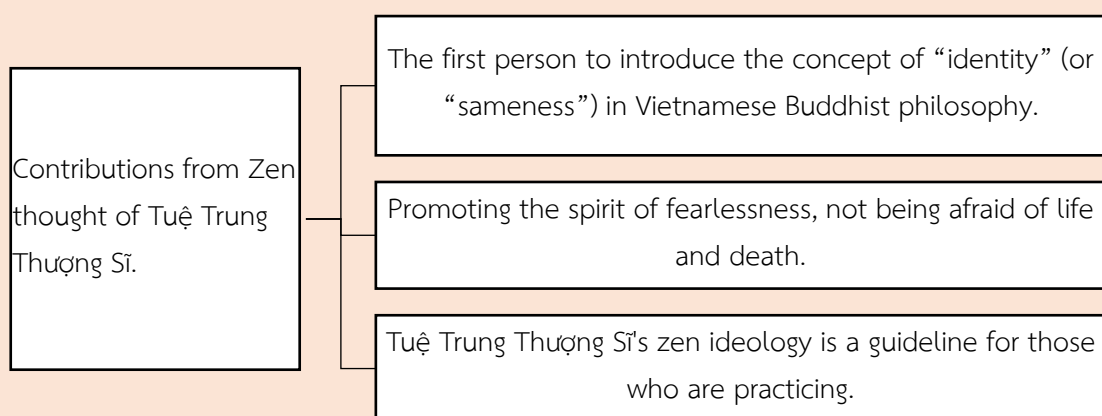


Figure 2: Contributions from Zen thought of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ.

Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ holds a pivotal position in the development of Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy, particularly in his elucidation of Zen thought. According to the research of Prof. Nguyễn Hùng Hậu, Tuệ Trung is credited as the first thinker to introduce the concept of ontology into Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy (Hậu, 2022, p. 11). He proposed that the essence of all things is beyond linguistic expression, serving as both the origin and the return point of all phenomena. This essence, which he described using various terms such as Nature, True Nature, Buddha Nature, Mind, and Dharmakāya, is ultimately ineffable. Importantly, he emphasized that these terminologies are mere conceptual representations and not the essence itself (Hậu, 2022, p. 12).

Nguyễn Duy Hinh, in his work *Tuệ Trung, Scholar - Master - Poet*, interprets Tuệ Trung's philosophical outlook as a response to his disillusionment with worldly success. Hinh asserts that Tuệ Trung's renunciation of fame and wealth led him to perceive life as an ephemeral dream, prompting his retreat into a life of seclusion and philosophical inquiry (Hinh, 1998, p. 163). However, this interpretation may oversimplify Tuệ Trung's perspective. His work *At Ease with Birth and Death* reveals a spirit untroubled by the cycles of life and death, advocating for an attitude of fearless acceptance rather than detachment born of disillusionment. His final moments exemplify this fearlessness: lying on a wooden bed in an auspicious position, he calmly passed away after instructing his household not to mourn, reaffirming the natural course of life and death (Từ, 1997a, p. 64).

This extraordinary approach to mortality was not unique to Tuệ Trung but was shared by the rulers of the Trần Dynasty, including Trần Thái Tông, Trần Thánh Tông, Trần Nhân Tông, Trần Anh Tông, and Trần Minh Tông. Their composed acceptance of death resonated throughout the nation, inspiring a spirit of resilience and fearlessness, most notably evident in Đại Việt's victories over the Yuan-Mongol invaders (Vương, 2023, p. 47).

Although Tuệ Trung remained a layperson, his profound enlightenment and knowledge made him a revered teacher sought after by both monastics and laypeople. The *Record of the Words of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ* documents 13 instances of individuals consulting him on

Zen theory, including 11 monks and two lay followers. Additionally, eight poems written by eminent monks of the time praise his virtues, with one authored by the First Patriarch of Trúc Lâm and the remaining seven by his disciples. This indicates that, despite not taking monastic vows, Tuệ Trung held an esteemed position within the Buddhist Sangha, challenging the notion that doctrinal instruction was reserved solely for monks. His teachings underscored an egalitarian approach to enlightenment, transcending conventional distinctions of form and status (Vương, 2024, p. 553).

Core Teachings of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ

1. **The Thought of "Phản quan tự kỷ" (Self-Reflection):** This teaching, foundational across Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, emphasizes introspective practice as the path to enlightenment. Tuệ Trung succinctly articulated this insight with the phrase: "Phản quan tự kỷ bốn phận sự, bất tùng tha đắc" (Reflect inwardly to see the essence of yourself. Don't seek it externally). This maxim became a guiding principle for practitioners, reinforcing the necessity of inner realization over external dependence (Tù, 1997a, p. 105).
2. **Letting Go of Dualistic Perception:** Human cognition is conditioned by dualistic thinking—good versus bad, self versus others, existence versus non-existence. Tuệ Trung taught that such distinctions are mere conventions, as all phenomena arise interdependently. He urged practitioners to transcend this conditioned mindset through meditative concentration and the wisdom of Prajñā, thereby realizing the fundamental non-duality of existence (Lang, 2012, p. 223).
3. **Detachment from Language and Conceptualization:** Tuệ Trung warned against clinging to words and scriptural interpretations, emphasizing that true understanding of the Dharma lies beyond linguistic constructs. He advised practitioners to seek direct experiential realization rather than becoming ensnared in textual exegesis.

4. **Recognizing Buddha-Nature:** The ultimate aim of Zen practice, according to Tuệ Trung, is the direct realization of one's inherent Buddha-nature. He taught that Buddha's nature is both the seed and the fruition of enlightenment, underscoring the necessity of continuous self-cultivation. The task of a Zen practitioner is to progressively illuminate this nature until achieving complete awakening (Trang & Ngọc, 2024, p. 40).

In summation, Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's contributions to Zen thought extend beyond doctrinal exposition; his life itself was an embodiment of his teachings. His fearless approach to life and death, his radical assertion of lay participation in Zen practice, and his emphasis on self-reflection and non-duality shaped a distinctive Zen tradition within the Trần Dynasty. His teachings not only influenced his contemporaries but also laid the groundwork for future Vietnamese Zen Buddhism, reinforcing a vision of enlightenment accessible to all, regardless of social or monastic status.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the significant role of Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ in shaping Vietnamese Buddhism during the 13th and 14th centuries. First, the investigation outlined his unique position within the Trần royal family, which provided him with a platform for both intellectual and spiritual influence. Secondly, the research examined his profound impact on the ideological development of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen school's first patriarch. While Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ did not directly participate in the formal establishment of the school, his philosophical contributions were instrumental in shaping its doctrinal orientation. In particular, the core concepts of *phản quan tự kỷ* (self-reflection) and *hòa quang đồng trần* (integrating enlightenment into worldly life) were later expanded upon by the First Patriarch Trúc Lâm, forming the foundational principles of *trong nhà có báu* (the treasure lies within) and *cư trần lạc đạo* (living in the world while embodying the Way), which became defining tenets of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen tradition.

Furthermore, this study highlighted Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ's engagement with both monastic and lay Buddhists. Despite not assuming an institutional role, he played a crucial part in transmitting Zen teachings through direct, personal instruction. His disciples and followers, many of whom occupied influential positions within the Buddhist community, contributed to the broader dissemination of his philosophical insights.

In conclusion, while Tuệ Trung Thượng Sĩ did not directly participate in the organizational development of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen sect, his philosophical legacy profoundly influenced its doctrines and methodologies. His teachings and literary contributions remain invaluable cultural and spiritual assets of Vietnamese Buddhism, reaffirming his status as a pivotal figure in the evolution of Vietnamese Zen.

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