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**THE THOUGHT OF ZEN MASTER CHAN NGUYEN FOR THE  
FOUNDATION OF LINH QUANG SCHOOL OF BUDDHISM AT TRA LU  
TRUNG, NAM DINH PROVINCE, VIETNAM**

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**Abstract**

As to stress the importance of the philosophical aspect of Buddhism in general, and of schools of Buddhism in Vietnam in specific, the author of this paper will analyze in depth the thought of Linji – Long Dong school of Buddhism via the thought of Zen master Chan Nguyen as a representative. Master Chan Nguyen is the founder of a remarkable school which is the basis of many schools of Buddhism in the north of Vietnam in the 17th century. Through these analyses, the paper would like to shed light on the development of Vietnamese Buddhism through historical periods since its introduction to this country.

**Keywords:** Buddhism in Vietnam, Buddhism philosophy, Vietnamese culture.

**Introduction**

Buddhism, which is a popular religion globally, has been in Vietnam for more than two thousand years. Nowadays, it has become the indigenous religion in Vietnam, being practiced and believed by majority of Vietnamese. In its development, Buddhism has influenced tremendously on the spirituality and belief of this nation. The distinctive characteristic of this religion is that when being introduced to Vietnam, it quickly embrace and integrate with Vietnamese's indigenous beliefs and culture, giving birth to a very unique phenomenon called "Vietnamese Buddhism".

One of the factor in the seamless fusion of Buddhism and Vietnamese culture is the the life-engaging spirit to spread its doctrine. This is an unique point of Vietnamese Buddhism in its development. Thus, the research and analysis its overall doctrine and its branches' doctrine has significant meaning in the research of modern Vietnamese Buddhism.

In this context, we pay attention to the doctrine of school "Chan Nguyen or Linji– Long Dong", a great zen school in the North of Vietnam, for the birth of zen school "Linh Quang – Tra Lu Thung" in Nam Dinh Province.

**2.The thought of Zen master Chan Nguyen**

Zen master Chan Nguyen - Chanh Giac (1647-1726), also known as Tue Dang monk, whose last name is Nguyen, whose first name is Nghiem (Nguyen Van Nghiem), whose nickname is Dinh Lan, was born in Tien Liet commune, Thanh Ha district, Hai Duong province. His mother belongs to Pham family. Once in her dream, she visioned an old man giving her a lotus. After

that, she got pregnant and giving birth to him in the Horse hour (according to Chinese Traditional Time System), on 16<sup>th</sup> September in year Dinh Hoi (1647). When growing up a little, Nguyen Van Nghiem followed his uncle, who is a student manager of the Imperial Academy. He is smart and knowledgeable. In 1665, when at his 19, reading the tale of zen master Huyen Quang, who is the third master in the Truc Lam lineage, he observed that master Huyen Quang, though being a First Doctoral Candidate nationally and a high-rank official in the feudalistic government, still eventually renounced everything for meditation and spirituality. He deduced that these so called power, famousness and material possession are all empty, which could not bring out the eternal happiness. Thus he vowed to renunciate.

Coming to Hoa Yen (Van Yen) pagoda on Yen Tu mountain, meeting master Chan Tru – Tue Nguyet, he was set dharma name as Tue Dang. Due to the early passing away of master Chan Tru, master Tue Dang and master Nhu Niem, who is his dharma peer, wandered at numerous place, practiced Dau Da asceticism and learned Buddhism dharma. Once he visited Vinh Phuc pagoda, on Con Cuong mountain, Phu Lang village to ask for dharma transmission with master Minh Luong – Nguyet An. Master stared directly towards his eyes, asking: “What do you want to learn?”. Master Tue Dang just kept silence without saying a word. Master Minh Luong then said: “It is non-doing that is the true dharma”. Then he initiated Tue Dang, renaming him as Chan Nguyen[1].

With new granted dharma name, he officially became the second generation of disciple of Linji branch at Dang Ngoai. According to some text written by zen master Minh Hanh - Tai Tai:

“The wise master is as ocean  
Illuminating yellow light  
With great will to attain the Tao  
Enlightenment and realizing emptiness” [1]

After a year studying dharma, master Chan Nguyen established the Miracle Dharma Lotus tower at Vinh Phuc pagoda, requesting The Three Buddha (Amitābha, Shakyamuni, Maitreya) and making channeling sacred stage to Bodhisattva. In this ceremony, master burned his two fingers to make offerings to The Three Buddha, vowing to practice ten virtues of Bodhisattva.

One day, master Chan Nguyen asked master Minh Luong: “The pearl after many years being polished in the rock, now being present, what is it?” Master Minh Luong and master Chan Nguyen staring into each other’ eyes. Then master Chan Nguyen kowtowed. Master Minh Luong then entrusted: “The Linji school from now on is entrusted to you. Make it great”.

After receiving dharma from master Minh Luong, master Chan Nguyen was ordained the head monk of Dragon Cave pagoda (QuiLin pagoda) on the Yen tu mountain, and Quynh Lam pagoda, which are the two ancient foundational place of Truc Lam school. He received the quintessence of the sutra of the school.

Thus, master Chan Nguyen received dharma from Linji school, but being ordained as a successor of Truc Lam school. He got his realization with master Minh Luong of Linji school, but he also had a profound connection with Truc Lam school. He endeavored to make Buddhism great as it

was in Tran dynasty. That was why he received the ordination of Truc Lam. Master Chan Nguyen is the one who fused the quintessence of Truc Lam and Linji at Dang ngoai, forming the Linji – Long Dong school. Prof. Nguyen Duy Hinh stated: “In summary, being considered as the 36<sup>th</sup> lineage of Chinese Linji School, Chan Nguyen is called Tue Dang – Chan Nguyen. The Truc Lam school could only be considered as Linji school from Chan Nguyen onwards. The gravestones stating that only existed from 17<sup>th</sup> century onward. Thus, it is Chan Nguyen’s lineage, not the Three Founders of Truc Lam’s lineage”[3].

In 1684, master Chan Nguyen built the Nine Lotus tower at Quynh Lam pagoda according to the design of the Nine Lotus built at Ninh Phuc pagoda built by master Huyen Quang. In 1692, at the age of forty six, master Chan Nguyen was summoned by King Le Hy Tong for consultation of dharma. The King was very much impressed with the knowledge and virtue of master, granting him the title “The Supreme Merit” and making offerings of Buddhist’s robes and tools for worshipping. In 1722, at the age of seventy six, master Chan Nguyen was granted the title “The authentic realized monk” by King Le Du Tong. In 1726, master Chan Nguyen summoned his disciples and transmitted his dharma [8]:

“The Buddha nature is always within ourselves

Clearly and transparently in every moment

With the basis of observing six senses

Numerous dharma will enable us to realize truth immediately”

After that, master said: “I am eighty, soon will enter the Buddha realm”. In October 28<sup>th</sup>, he passed away, dying at the age of 80. His disciples organized a cremation ceremony, then distributing his sarira to Quynh Lam pagoda and Long Dong pagoda. Master Chan Nguyen was considered to be the one who revived Truc Lam school.

His works include:

The book of the dharma of the master, establishing ceremony for starting ascetic practice.

Welcoming master approving the faculty of awareness.

The Dragon Book of Pure Land Buddhism’s literature.

The Dragon Book of Pure Land Buddhism’s way to select next generation.

The important arguments in Pure Land Buddhism.

The predestine of attaining enlightenment.

The great virtue of Zen Buddhism.

The great virtue of South Sea Bodhisattva.

The virtue of prince Dat Na.

The virtue of Hong mong.

Satory to Buddhahood.

Thought of zen master Chan Nguyen.

On metaphysics, he asserted his view on emptiness nature. In his poem the “the silent Chan Nguyen”, he wrote [8]:

“Silent Chan Nguyen,  
Before being birthed by the sky, the earth and parent  
Chan Nguyen was already peaceful, illuminating, full and silent.  
He is a Buddha with both self-realization and other-realization  
Who is compassionate, who teaches dharma, which is beneficial for human and celestial beings.”

Before being birthed by the sky, the earth and parent, Chan Nguyen was already peaceful, illuminating, full, silent and formless (emptiness). What is a Buddha? After a human being realizes the truth (self-realization), the process of teaching other people is called other-realization. Who has both self-realization and other-realization is called Buddha. A Buddha is one who could teach dharma with compassion, bringing benefits to human and celestial beings. It is a common belief that the human realm is full of ignorance and suffering; and being born in deva realm is happiness. But from Buddhism’s viewpoint, the deva realm is still subject to birth, death and thus to samsara, which is not yet an absolute happiness. Thus Buddha still needs to teach dharma to this realm.

“Dharma is numerous in form, but all is empty  
As to teach people, dharma was born  
It is truth that everything constantly changes  
Silently, Chan Nguyen returns to emptiness”

All the dharma being taught is empty. As “firefly flower” phenomenon: in sunny day, rubbing eyes, we will see many point of light in space similar to firefly (firefly flowers). But they are just subjective construct and thus not real. Thus Chan Nguyen said: “Dharma is numerous in form, but all is empty”. However, as sentient beings are always in ignorance, so Buddhism establishes dharma temporarily in order to guide them the way to overcome ignorance. Dharma is just temporary since there is nothing permanent, everything is constantly changing, thus the phenomenon “Be but not be”. Thus, in the world, everything are unreal and temporary. Master Chan Nguyen advices everybody to return to the original source: “Silently, Chan Nguyen returns to emptiness”.

The thought of Chan Nguyen, or the thought on metaphysics of Chan Nguyen, originated from the thought on metaphysics of Truc Lam school. The thought of metaphysics of King Tran Nhan Tong is expressed via many names such as “light”, “peaceful and clear mind”, “Buddha”, “truth”, “reality”,... It is the treasure in everyone, and is also the original of the universe, beyond all the dualistic contradictory. Even though it lies in everyone’s nature, but due to the corruptions in life, people are more and more forgetful in greed, anger and ignorance. The matter is returning to the original, returning to what Tran Nhan Tong calls “home”. The view that “everybody has Buddha nature and will eventually become Buddha”, partly comes from Mahayana Buddhism’s view. It also inherit the thought of two predecessors King Tran Thai Tong and Tue Trung Thuong Si.

The view on Buddha nature: according to Chan Nguyen, the lotus which Buddha raised to his disciples at Ky Vien meeting and making Mahākāśyapa smiling, is symbol of Buddha nature in

all the Buddhas and sentient beings. To realization the tao is to realization of Buddha nature. This nature does not be discriminated in space and time [8].

“Once in the Ky Vien meeting  
Buddha raised a lotus  
There is wise Mahākāśyapa,  
who attains the highest enlightenment, smile gently  
Buddha are numerous and noble  
Lotus are in all sentient beings  
The flower’s nature is silently  
all-inclusive and non discriminating of sky and earth”

The view on mind: Chan Nguyen continues to elaborate on the Buddha nature. He asserts that “Realizing the mind is Buddha, there is no other Buddha, which is Buddha nature, realizing Buddha is nature, there is no other nature such as holding hand, which his hand, which is water to wave, the wave realizes itself as water, hand is holding hand”. Thus Avatamsaka Sūtra wrote:

“If sentient beings want to realizes

The three generation of Buddha

Meditate on the Dharma

That all is creation of mind”

Mind, Buddha and sentients being are in oneness. Thus a wandering mind for outer salvation is as a child who lost his parents. Sanskrit calls buddhadhātu, Chinese calls Buddha nature. It is not separate from ourselves [4].

If a mediator attains satory, realizing this Buddha nature, he immediately becomes a Buddha. So what is Buddha nature? This nature is the within everyone. It is the source of everything, which is similar to the fact that the earth gives birth to numerous trees and animals. It includes all the dharma. Realizing it sentient beings will go beyond goodness and evilness. Numerous Dharma are all originated from it. Thus “The mind is, then there is the need for dharma. When it ceases, all dharma will vanish.”

Therefore, the view on the Buddha nature of mind of Chan Nguyen inherits from Truc Lam school, and also from the Nam Phuong branch of Buddhism. “You should know: your form is similar to a wall. Eyes, ear, nose, tongue are the doors of the wall. There are five doors outside, one door inside is the mind, which is the king of all other doors. All of these doors are dependent on our Buddha nature. Without Buddha nature, they cannot exist. A Buddha is one who are aware of this inherent nature, without seeking outside! When this nature is in ignorant then Buddha is sentient beings. And this nature realizes itself then sentient beings are Buddha” [6].

In this poem “on meditation”, master Chan Nguyen’s view on meditation are [8]:

“Following Buddha’s way is joyful  
Following Buddha’s way is joyful

Whether he is in beautiful places  
or he is in a pagoda  
But only for those who understand meditation  
This is also a state gained by sedan”

Here, Chan Nguyen asserts that meditation is actually very joyful. But this joyfulness can only be felt by those who are in deep meditation, understanding how to control their greed, anger and ignorance, thus heading toward enlightenment. But for those who are new to meditation, the discipline such as vegetarian meals, zazen and chanting sutra would be tiresome [8].

“When the borocole is sour  
The soup is too pale  
The cap is engrained with blackness  
The uniform is too old”  
But it is still joyful, as the meditators are generous, who do not see these are problems. The real happiness of the mediators are:  
“Being in grape forest and jungles  
The eight virtues tea is ready right here, without the need to prepare  
The triyāna cake is already full-taste, without the need for any more preparing effort  
The Bodhi fruit is sweat, which fulfils our hunger for eon  
The dumber flower is fragrant for thousands of lives  
Heading to the West, there is gem stage awaiting  
Heading to the East, there is golden stage waiting  
The boat of compassion is spacious for countless beings  
The prajñā boat is spacious for countless beings”

Thus, the mediators are those do every thing in awareness, liberating themselves and other sentient beings.

The view on the techniques for enlightenment: In the poem “the virtue of Zen Buddhism”, master Chan Nguyen many times mention “dharma transmission via four eyes”

“Dharma transmission via four eyes  
The master and the disciple together have a deep communion  
All the Buddha and predecessors are present in that moment  
The nature of meditation is seen through when there is dharma transmission via four eyes  
The six forms is seen through when there is dharma transmission via four eyes  
It is a form of secret seal in zen Buddhism  
The self is eternally realized when there is dharma transmission via four eyes  
It is a form of secret seal in zen Buddhism”

Master Chan Nguyen attained his self-realization with master Minh Luong through “dharma transmission via four eyes”. This technique originated at the time Buddha. Once in the Linh Son

meeting, Buddha raised a lotus, awaiting among his disciples, who would understand the truth and his intention. Mahakassapa is the only one who could look at Buddha and smile. Buddha then confirmed his realization.

In Tao, the intention of a master looking at his disciples is to transmit his realization to the disciples. Thus, when master Chan Nguyen asked master Minh Luong: “What is the meaning of the sentence: “The gem was hidden many years in the mountain, today being seen clearly”?” The monk and Chan Nguyen looked at each other’s eyes. A deep communion happened, it the the moment the hidden gem in mountain is seen.

Beside the above mention technique, Chan Nguyen also mentioned many other techniques, such as “Looking at the Zen stick, beware”. Or “Eyes blink, eyebrows raise, soul transmits”. Or

“Roar as a lion  
Scream a single word  
The mighty spirit is shown”

Once a monk asked a Linji Zen master:

“What is the great meaning of dharma?”.

The master replied by roaring. The monk then performed the greeting ceremony.

“You seemed to fall into intellect.” The master replied.

“Which branches Buddhism do you advocate? Who is your master? I asked master Hoang Ba three times, and got beaten three times.” The monk asked another question.

The master screamed again, and beat the monk, replying:

“You could not enter the realm of emptiness with this much attachment” [9]

Chan Nguyen also wrote about Pure Land Buddhism:

“The flowers blossom in the Nine Lotus stage  
Those who chant Amitābha Buddha’s name  
will together enter the realm of blissfulness  
They will be illuminated with yellow and gem light  
They will be joyful, ecstasy and without worries  
Sitting on the lotus stage, they will be deathless and born-less”

The Nine Lotus stage is the path of Pure Land Buddhism. It is actually a nine-phases level from low to high. Those who want to enter the realm of blissfulness must chant Amitābha Buddha’s name. Once entering, their body will turn into illuminating yellowness. They will be joyful, ecstasy, without worries, sitting on the lotus stage. The reasons for Pure Land’s thought appearing in Linji- Long Dong school are:

The objective reason is that master Chan Nguyen (1647 - 1726) lived from 17<sup>th</sup> century to early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the era in which Trinh Dynasty and Nguyen dynasty competed and waged war, dividing the nation into The Inner Realm and The Outer Realm at the Gianh river. From 1600, in the era of King Le Kinh Tong, there was King Le – Lord Trinh in the North, and Lord Nguyen in

the South. Both Lord Trinh and Lord Nguyen worshiped King Le, but they fought with each other constantly. From 1627 to 1672, there were seven big fights, lasting for several years continuously. The battlefields are frequently in Nghe An province and Bo Chinh in Quang Binh province. “The degeneration of feudalistic government and the national division of sphere of influence by Lord Mac, Lord Trinh and Lord Nguyen, are the political highlights. Both the governments of The Inner Realm and the Outer Realm are corrupted, being an obstacle to social development” [7]. In the context of the chaos caused by wars and the degenerating government, the life of people in general became difficult. As a result, people lost faith in the government and started to search for strength from religions.

After the fall of Tran dynasty and then Ho dynasty, the nation fall into the control of invaded Minh Dynasty. Le dynasty was founded after King Le Loi defeated Minh dynasty. It employed Confucianism as national religion and ideology, withdrawing Buddhism from social superstructure. In this context, Buddhism retreated to the countryside. The countryside men are mostly uncultured, making Zen Buddhism inaccessible to them. Thus Pure Land Buddhism with its simple technique of chanting Buddha’s name become popular. Buddhism in this period mostly employed Pure Land Buddhism.

Buddha said that there are eighty four thousand techniques of meditation, each depending on each one’s nature. It is possible that everybody could find their suitable methods. Thus, following Pure Land Buddhism or Zen Buddhism are all in accordance with Buddha’s dharma.

Vietnamese Buddhism, especially in the Tran dynasty, are the confusion of Truc Lam branch and Zen-Pure Land Buddhism altogether. In the poem of “dwelling in the world, enjoying the Tao”, King Tran Nhan Tong wrote:

“Pure Land is pure heart  
Why must seek the faraway Tao in the West?  
Amitabha Buddha is the light  
Why must struggle seeking for faraway ecstasy?”[5]

In the above four sentences, King Tran Nhan Tong explained his understanding about Pure Land Buddhism. The essential point is that whether to follow Zen or Pure Land, it is important is to purify one’s heart first. “Amitabha Buddha is the light”, Amitabha is Buddha’s nature. In Sanskrit, Amita means unbounded light, which illuminates ten directions of dharma realms and unbounded time, which means timelessness[2].

In 1684, master Chan Nguyen created the tower of Nine Lotus in Quynh Lam pagoda, which simulated the Nine Lotus in Ninh Phuc in Bac Ninh province. The tower was located in the Goodness Accumulation house in The Buddha hall. It was made by wood with eight sides and a height of 7.8 meter. Its axis was connected to a bronze mortal, which allows it to rotate. The disciples could rotate the tower clockwise, walk and chant Amitabha simultaneously. It has nine stages above the lotus stage. From the ninth stage, the first one is the the scenery of Buddha attaining enlightenment, teaching dharma with different mudras. The fifth stage is scenery of Bodhisattvas, who have generated Bodhicitta, a spontaneous wish and compassionate mind to



attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings. The fourth stage describes the founder of different branches of Buddhism. The third stage describes Amitabha and the ecstatic realm. The second stage praises Shakyamuni and Amitabha Buddha. The first stage describes the ecstatic realm, and the interaction of Amitabha Buddha with these nine realms. All the content was created according to Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra. Amitabha Buddha is a celestial Buddha who dwells in Sukhāvātī (represented as a meditating Buddha) and works for the enlightenment of all beings (represented as a blessing Buddha) [3]. The Nine Lotus tower is the indication of Pure Land's thought in Chan Nguyen.

### **3. Conclusion**

In summary, from the thought of master Chan Nguyen, we could deduce: Truc Lam and Linji Zen school are all influenced by Nam Phuong Mahayana zen school of master Hue Nang, which stresses "satory", "No mind is enlightenment", "emptiness", "Buddha nature", "absolute truth".

Truc Lam school has inherited Linji school from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with zen masters Thien Phong and Dai Dang as representatives. Thus, the fusion of Linji school and Truc Lam school in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was the second time. Their merging shows a great karmic fate of Truc Lam school and Linji school.

Master Chan Nguyen had the connection with both of two schools, fusing their thought to form his own thought of Linji - Long Dong school. However, his thought was attributed by Truc Lam school more than by Linji school. He also influence greatly to Linh Quang – Tra Lu Trung. The monks and nuns of this school employed Chan Nguyen's thought as their guide to practice Buddhism from 1815 to now.

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