

Vietnamese Zen Master Quang**Nghiem/ 廣嚴禪師 (1121 - 1191):****the thought "No need follow in the footsteps of Tathagata (休向如來行處行)"****in the verse (Gāthā) Ke Thi Tich (偈示寂/The last message).****By Ven. Le Chi Luc (釋源勢)**Ph.D. Research Scholar,
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522510, A.P, India.**Introduction.**

Zen Master Quang-Nghiem was born in North of Vietnam, he is the 11th generation transmission of the Vo Ngon Thong Chan' lineage / 無言通禪師 (759-862) who was known as disciple of Zen Master named Bach-Truong Hoai-Hai (百丈懷海). According to the book know as Eminent Monks of the Thien Community (Thien-Uyen-Tap-Anh/ 禪苑集英), a collection of biographies of famous monks in the Vietnamese meditation school, Zen master Quang-Nghiem before his death had gathered his disciples to teach and say the last verse:

離寂方言寂滅去，
生無生後說無生。

男兒自有衝天志，
休向如來行處行。

“Only when you escape from death that you can discuss the nature of death, Only when you are born into the land of no birth that you can talk of birthlessness. A young man has to have the ambition to shatter heaven, Don't bother treading the well-worn path of Tathagata.”¹

This is a last verse with full the essence of Vietnamese Zen Buddhism, with the spirit of Wúzhù (無住, 'not staying', Apratiṣṭhita), Wúzhí (無執, Anupāṭta, 'do not conservative'), do not cling on the words and literal sense of scriptures that is very suitable to the spirit of Bodhidharma (菩提達磨) as so as Zen Buddhism: 不立文字, 教外別傳, 直指人心, 見性成佛 (A special transmission outside the scriptures, No dependence upon words and

¹ Nguyen Duy (General Editor), Zen Poems from early Vietnam (900 CE - 1400 CE), published by Van Hoa Sai Gon, 2005.

letters, Direct pointing to the human mind, Seeing into one's own nature and attaining Buddhahood.)².

This poem can be divided into 2 parts:

Firstly, there are two verses: "Only when you escape from death that you can discuss the nature of death; Only when you are born into the land of no birth that you can talk of birthlessness." (離寂方言寂滅去，生無生後說無生)

Nirvana or Liberation, Free from Samsara or reincarnation is extremely important and is also the biggest goal of the Buddhist followers. The realm of infertility, liberation or Nirvana is extremely wonderful, cannot describe words clearly and concretely, it is beyond the capacity of the mundane human imagination. Therefore, it is only when the practitioner actually attains, realizes, experiences can understand that realm or Nirvana. On the contrary, any mention of on the way practicers are just an inaccurate interpretation, it is all shown through awareness and very subjective perspectives of human being, and that perception is greatly influenced by the environment, the

education, practice, and school/sect or practice's way of pursuing.

So, Zen Master Quang-Nghiem has been very cautious and made a very clear message "Do not declare what you have not truly experienced, not really enlightenment, understanding about absolute liberation (無生, 寂滅)". Only those who truly live in the realm of absolute liberation, not suffering from afflictions, freeing all the vexations (煩惱), constraints of the present world. The one are competent enough to talk about liberation. Through this, the Zen master Quang Nghiem taught his students to lead a life without afflictions and liberation right in the present life (生無生).

Secondly, the last 2 verses of the poem are "As a man you have sky-high aspiration, Stop following the footsteps of the Tathāgata." (男兒自有衝天志，休向如來行處行)³

The first above sentences explained of the experiential learning from the Buddha's teachings, the last two sentences mention the manner of self-help (自由) in the Zen's freedom (自在/

² Albert Welter, *The Disputed Place of "A Special Transmission" Outside the Scriptures in Ch'an*. accessdate June 23, 2006

³ Cuong Tu Nguyen, *Zen in Medieval Vietnam: A Study and Translation of the Thiên Uyển Tập Anh*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998, p.156

Isvara). The second part of the verse is the path leading to the Buddhahood (佛果/ Phala) in the thought of the Zen master, the path to be a Buddha but not following in the footsteps of Buddha. If you stand in a certain category of speech, then following the Buddha means learning from his virtues and learning the his teachings (法/ Dharma), if you do not depend on Dharma, you know where to rely. The Buddha used teaching Dharma like a lamp, in Digha Nikayasutta - no. 16th said that *"Therefore, Ananda, be islands unto yourselves, refuges unto yourselves, seeking no external refuge; with the Dhamma as your island, the Dhamma as your refuge, seeking no other refuge."* But the Zen Master's Quang-Nghiem interoperated and said "don't follow Buddha, don't step on Buddha's footsteps", that's the style of Quang-Nghiem, the style of meditation's Sudden-teaching (頓教).

"Stop following the footsteps of the Tathāgata"

The above verse (禪語) has a long and very famous origin in the world of studying and practicing according to the Chan school tradition (禪宗). From the collection is from the Chan verse of famous Masters (語錄) or the typical stories

of Chan (禪宗典籍), there are many interesting stories related to this famous saying. Illustration show the collection of Great Chan master verses (古尊宿語錄), that Chan verse was recorded as “丈夫自有衝天志，不向如來行處行”. Later in the Song Dynasty, the collection of Five Great Chan school's verses (五燈會元) records the words of Zen Master *Cuìyán Kèzhēn* (翠巖可真禪師) with the following version: "男兒自有衝天志，不向如來行處行". There are about three versions with very small changes like the above. However the content is the same except for the words *Xiū, Bù, Mò* (休/不/莫) all implies prohibition, dissuade, "following the footsteps of the Tathāgata" or refers to the path of practice of *Rúlái* (如來), *Zhàngfu* (丈夫) or *Nán'ér* (男兒) so here used to refer to those who following the Chan's practice.

So, this verse means: If we imitates the stereotype of any person, even though he are great genius, but finally we have lost own uniqueness, we does not be ourselves. When we are ourselves then our mind begin to develop its magic. Such as a leaf still exists miraculously like a vast forest. A dewdrop crystal is still immense as the whole sky and shining in it. The

sparrow has its own flight path, so it is always a sparrow, why does it have to fly like an eagle? The scenery in the beautiful nature is thanks to a variety of colors and species, rich and diverse, while the stereotypes uniformity is only available for sand in the desert or reeds in river banks. If we cannot create our own and rely on others, it will make us crippled and never walk on our own feet. Just like a smart person who borrowed money from a bank, there may be billions of any currency unit in hand but it's borrowed money. Being born and grow up in a protective embrace of a mother extremely happy, but if life is forever in the arms of the mother without growing up, it is a great disaster.

Zen master Quang-Nghiem had advised practitioners to suitable path for themselves, no one has passed through yet. In other words, there must be another way to attain enlightenment. It is not necessary to look like Mahakashyapa smiling when Buddha holds out a lotus flower in the holding the flower and smiling (拈花微笑) story. It was a beautiful story displayed of the first appearance of Chan Buddhism; or as Master Hui-Neng (慧能大師) was enlightened with verse: "Thoughts should not be conditioned on

situations" (應无所住而生其心), etc. In several Zen masters have been enlightened in special and strange situations by other ways but no one can copy. The thought of Zen master Quang-Nghiem is not strange compared to the teaching language of Tathagata. That teaching likes "depending on sick then giving medicine"; it depends on each person's knowledge and ability to devise appropriate, inconsistent, and non-conservative methods of practice. If the practitioners are forced to simulate the practices of enlightened Chan masters such as: spending a lot of time for searching and smiling with a lotus flower; or repeatedly listening to the verses "*Thoughts should not be conditioned on situations*", etc. It is really unproductive and unwise to do that.

Sacred teachings (Dharma) were the skillful means "the footsteps of the Tathāgata" is a past experience, Chan practitioners must be a wise person to see the truth of the matter, so as not to be confused to waste a lot of time for finding the true path. "*Stop following the footsteps of the Tathāgata*" was a great verse but it is also easily misunderstood by the practice beginners. Perhaps they didn't know the real ideas outside words, then follows the literal meaning of the

verses and forget to find deeply meaning of it. That's the cause of confusion and then they don't know whether to follow the Buddha or Patriarch's teachings.

The verse "*Stop following the footsteps of the Tathāgata*" needs to be understood in the spirit of non-attachment (無執/ Annupādāna) of the Mahayana Buddhism (北傳佛教), in order to promote the self-reliance spirit of those who were Chan's practitioners (禪生). On the contrary, if we persist in believing the literal meaning of this verse only, it's easy for us to arise the arrogance or conceit (我慢/ Māna) which was the reason leading us to meet many obstacles on the Buddhism practicing path. This verse was presented in the opposite side, taking the rejection of the ultimate values as a way to encourage and promote the efforts of practitioners who were a stereotype person and without the spirit of self-reliance, passive and weak in mind. Therefore, that denial is to help the practitioners to reach higher realms of wisdom.

Self-reliance spirit of Buddhism.

Buddhism is one of the foremost religious-spiritual, social, and indeed, political philosophies of the world. Buddhism was not only

brought about a revolution in religious-spiritual ideal, but also declared the reality of existence for all human beings in this world. Another important contribution of Buddhism towards humanity is emphasis upon self-sufficiency of man and making one's life meaningful through one's own efforts. The concept of Self-reliance was not only addressed in Chan school (禪宗) or Mahayana Buddhism, but also appears in Early Buddhist texts. More specifically in Mahāparinibbānasutta (大般涅槃經/ The Discourse about the Great Emancipation), Lord Buddha's said:

“Tasmātihānanda,
attadīpā
viharatha
attasaraṇā
anaññasaraṇā,
dhammadīpā
dhammasaraṇā
anaññasaraṇā.”⁴

*(Therefore,
Ānanda, live
with yourself as
an island,
yourself as a
refuge, with no
other refuge,
with the
Teachings as an*

⁴ D.ii.101 (Mahāparinibbānasutta)

island, the Teachings as a refuge, with no other refuge.)

阿難！以自己為洲，以自己為歸依，自己的庇護所，勿以他人為歸依。阿難！雲何為比丘以自己為洲，以自己為歸依，勿以他人為歸依；以法為洲，以自己為歸依，勿以他人為歸依。⁵

Here, the spirit of self-effort or self-reliance was taught by the Buddha very clearly. Gautam Buddha taught Ananda to believe in himself and the Buddha's teachings, move on your own, try your best to practice, refuge on Dhamma, the Tathagata is guider only. This was also mentioned in Dhammapada sutta (法句經) as follows: “*Tumhehi kiccamātappaṃ, Akkhātāro tathāgatā.*” (*You yourselves should*

make the effort; the Tathagatas only can show the way.)⁶

Similarly, in another discourse Gautam Buddha declared to those in Kalama that: “*Come Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our teacher".*”⁷

The above passage is quoted from the Kalama Sutta which was a famous text and known as described as a Buddha's charter about free from research. This Sutta supported prudence by the use of sound logical reasoning arguments for seeking truth and wisdom. So, the Kālāma Sutta was against to blind faith, dogmatism and belief spawned from specious reasoning. Here Gautam Buddha gives advice on how seekers should respond when they are confronted by diversity of views relating to the way leading to

⁶ Dhp no.276.

⁷ "Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas" (AN 3.65), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html>.

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https://palidictionary.appspot.com/zh_TW/browse/a/attad%C4%ABpa

enlightenment and spiritual fulfillment.

From the fundamentals of the spirit of self-reliance mentioned in the Early Buddhist scriptures, later this thought was received and developed further along with the development of Mahayana Buddhism and Chan Buddhism. From the basis of the spirit of self-reliance, the concept of Self-release (自度) has been established which means "self-release by the attainment of gnosis or wisdom."⁸ By other way, self-release was to practice by yourself, to experience the Dharma, to mobilize by itself, without relying on anyone else. Concerning this issue, there is a well-known story of Chan School which mentions about the life of the Zen Master Hui-Neng/慧能 (638-713), recorded in The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch (六祖壇經). There was a conversation between Hui-Neng (慧能) and Master Hong-Ren (弘忍大師) who known as the Fifth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, in they first met:

- Master Hong-Ren asked: *Who are you and what do you seek?*
- Hui-Neng replied: *I'm a commoner from Xinzhou of Lingnan. I have travelled far to pay homage to you and seek nothing other than Buddhahood.*
- *So you're from Lingnan, and a barbarian! How can you expect to become a Buddha?* Asked Master Hong-Ren.
- Hui-Neng replied: *Although people exist as northerners and southerners, in the Buddha-nature there is neither north nor south. A barbarian differs from Your Holiness physically, but what difference is there in our Buddha-nature?*⁹

Hui-Neng is an uneducated, illiterate person but in the face of a master of Chan Buddhism like Master Hong-Ren, he can frank, bravely answer very clearly that: "*to seeking the Buddhahood*". Thereby it can be seen that the level of knowledge belonging to Hui-Neng's spirit is enormous. He seeked directly to Buddhahood, do not for Araham or Pratyekabuddha's realm or anything else. Because of his

⁸ William Edward Soothill (compiled), *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms: With Sanskrit and English equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali index*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited - Delhi (2003), ISBN: 81-208-0319-1, p. 209.

⁹ Hsing Yun, *The Rabbit's Horn: A Commentary on the Platform Sutra*, Buddha's Light Publishing, p.2.

intelligence than that of others, Hui-Neng was given position was the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism by patriarch Hong-Ren. On the way to take Hui-Neng to leave Huang-Mei pagoda (黄梅寺) by boat, Hong-Ren has rowing to take Hui-Neng passed the river, although Hui-Neng wanted to help him because Hong-Ren was older but Hong-Ren disagreed. He also said: I am your Master so I should help you to passing the river bank. Hui-Neng replied: When I'm ignorance, you need to help, but now I has enlightened, let me self-release. (迷時師度，悟時自度). This is also a very popular anecdote that promotes the spirit of self-reliance in Chinese Chan Buddhism.

According to Mahayana Buddhist Tradition, the practitioners were not only seriously observing the monk's disciplines to protect their body and mind. But also must endeavor to study the Buddha's teachings, taking that as a background solid foundation for sublimation in the path of practice, to achieve certain spiritual achievements, that is the spirit of self-help, self-release. Besides, practitioners also have to make great vows, follow the Bodhisattvas path to benefit sentient beings, help sentient beings free from this

suffering's world. That is to improve oneself and benefiting others (自利利他) of the Bodhisattvas way and also is the greatest goal of Buddhist followers.

The Buddha pointed out a lot of methods, many different paths but together came to the same most important goal is liberation from any sufferings, achievement absolute peace, attain reality enlightenment. However, each method is only suitable for a group of people, not for all. Therefore, it leads to the difference in thinking due to heterogeneous approach. That is the cause of the contradiction, antipathy and criticism of each other. The practitioners often tend to be conservative the method they have chosen and do not accept the difference things. They maintain their path and consider it to be unique and the most accurate. In the eyes of Chan Masters, being conservative and arguing is utterly futile, bringing no benefit to the mind and can't stop suffering.

Chan Buddhism considers whole of methods (ways) are just a skillful means (Upāya/ 方便法), not the end or the ultimate goal (究竟) of practitioner, liberation (解脫/ Mokṣa) is the real goal to be directed. Therefore, in the Diamond

sutta (Vajraccedika-sutra/ 金剛經) there is a saying that: "凡所有相, 皆是虛妄, 若見諸相非相, 即見如來". Its means: "Every form or quality of phenomena is transient and illusive. When the mind realises that the phenomena of life are not real phenomena, the Lord Buddha may then be clearly perceived." or in another part of this sutta Lord Buddha told Subhūti (須菩提) sublime Gatha as follows: "若以色見我, 以音聲求我, 是人行邪道, 不能見如來." which means: "I am not to be perceived by means of any visible form. Nor sought after by means of any audible sound; Whosoever walks in the way of iniquity, Cannot perceive the blessedness of the Lord Buddha."¹⁰

The Chan practitioner's orient thought are not cling or conservative in the forms, words and methods, but it is also impossible to have no principles or methods to support one's practice. The big problem is to understand that everything is only meant to support the practice, which is the skillful means to the ultimate goal. That must determine exactly the goal of practitioner to liberation and enlightenment. That was not the way or method of practice.

¹⁰ William Gemmell, transl. (1912). *The Diamond Sutra*, London: Trübner.

Therefore in the Diamond Sutta Gautam Buddha said: 汝等比丘, 知我說法, 如筏喻者, 法尚應捨, 何況非法 - "By those who know the teaching of the Law, as like unto a raft, all qualities indeed must be abandoned; much more no-qualities" (English Translation by Max Muller from Sanskrit to English). The Tathagatas are just guides, they have liberated from sufferings and they teach beings how to achieve the same results as them. However, do not dependence on misunderstandings, private feelings, individual's understanding and then attached to the skillful means. Like the story of a finger pointing at the moon (標月指)¹¹, the wise does not follow the finger but see the moon and the infatuated person follows only the finger pointing rather than looking directly at beautiful moon, huge and shine in the sky.

In summary, the main idea of Chan Buddhism is the spirit of Wúzhù (無住), Wúzhí (無執), not bound by any specific forms, texts, methods but always keeping an open mind, free mind and non-conservatory. That is also essential

¹¹ Fo Guang Ta-tz'u-tien 佛光大辭典 (Fo Guang Dictionary). Fo Guang Ta-tz'u-tien pien-hsiu wei-yuan-hui 佛光大辭典編修委員會. Taipei: Fo-Guang ch'u-pan-she, 1988.

thought of the Diamond sutra: “Thoughts should not be conditioned on situations (應无所住而生其心)”. In addition, the self-reliance, trust in your own striving, being aware of your own strength, self-mastery, determining exactly the goals to be directed and ultimately contemplating. Finally following the teachings of the Buddhas and the Patriarchs, the practitioner step by step proceeded to cultivate on their path.

Meditate in the life of Vietnamese under Ly-Tran Dynasty.

The system of Chan Buddhism in Vietnam was established by the Souther lineage/Nan-zong/ 南宗 (毘尼多流支, Vinītaruci) at Phap-Van Pagoda (南宗法雲寺) and Wu-yen-tung (無言通) lineage of Chan Buddhism at Kien-So Pagoda (建初寺); and the third is the lineage of Truc-Lam (竹林) Chan, a typical meditation line of Vietnamese. These three lines of Chan have developed to the peak of the Ly - Tran period with many Chan Master who made great contributions to the Dai-Viet (大越).

Vietnamese Buddhism in the Ly - Tran dynasty with the thought very flexible and open; practicing and achieving peace in the secular

life (居塵樂道); engaged to social or merged with the lifetime (和光同塵). Those were the dominant thought of Chan Buddhism in Vietnam. Another noteworthy point is the Chan Masters of Ly - Tran period gathered the profound philosophies of the Buddha's teachings and then expressed in a few very short verses. This is a flexible form, the real means outside verses, using allegorical form or example to lead Chan Buddhist studiers easily to learn the Ultimate truth. Beside of Chan's common principles is Wúzhí (無執, Anupāṭta), Sudden-enlightenment (頓悟), Direct transmission from mind to mind (以心傳心); the Chan Buddhism of the Ly - Tran dynasty also had its own characteristics such as merged with the common lifetime, serving the country and people, cultivating personality, etc. It's creating a very unique identity of the Dai-Viet's Buddhism.

Example, Tran-Nhan-Tong king (佛皇陳仁宗) said:

“Pure Land (淨土) is pure heart, do not expect to ask the country at Western (西方). Amitabha (彌

陀) is the enlightenment of consciousness, do not to find the Pure Land (極樂).”

Or:

“The Buddha in the house doesn't have to look far Because our mind is deluded, we have to look for Buddhahood (enlightenment)”

¹²

When discussing about Buddhahood, Truc-Lam Chan lineage advocates "Buddha is not in the mountain but only in the heart" or if "know the purity of mind, it is the Buddha." (Thiền tông chỉ nam tự/禪宗指南序); Truc-Lam Chan inherited Hui-Neng's idea that is "Buddha and Saint are inherently different". Truc-Lam Chan advocated if who want to know clearly about mind he have to meditation. Meditation to calm, prevent evil towards good things. Truc-Lam did not choose the passive path like "facing the wall to meditate" (觀碧坐禪) but advocated

"Recite the Buddha's names, follow the Pātimokkha rule and practice meditation" (念佛,受戒,坐禪). Reciting Buddha's name is a self-educating, self-suppressing way to keep for speeches and mind to become purity. Follow the Pātimokkha rule is a way of keeping oneself far from evil action. Evil does not arise it means good things develop. So, Tran-Thai-Tong (陳太宗) composed the book for explain the importance of the precepts and talk about the benefits of reciting Buddha's name, meditating (課虛錄/Khoa-hu-luc). Through the presentation of the precepts, Truc Lam has turned it into moral lessons rather than Buddhist teachings, with the purpose of stabilizing social order at that time. The Khoa-hu-luc called for people to do good deeds, giving alms to the poor, loving others, respecting the country, worshiping the king ... This is the core of Engaged Buddhism in Ly-Tran Dynasty.

Conclusion

Zen Master Quang-Nghiem is the lineage generation of the Chan Sudden-enlightenment (Magga ekayano/頓悟) line in Vietnam. His thoughts were very popular at the time of the Ly - Tran dynasty (1009 - 1400 AD). Under the rule of

¹² Tran Nhan Tong, Cu Tran Lac Dao Phu (居塵樂道賦), The book of Poetry Ly - Tran, volume 2, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1989, p. 505.

Confucian thought and feudal institutions, the individuality of man is bound by feudal's rules and imposed by Confucian's thought. People in the feudal society always put themselves in the common of the collective's society. They have to sacrifice everything that belongs to privacy and individuals in order for the collective to exist. The emergence of Buddhism and most importantly was Chan Buddhism which liberated the people in that society ideologically. If feudal society suppresses the development of individuality then Chan Buddhism liberates it. Chan Buddhism opened up a vast world for practitioner, improving personal values, putting all hope and confidence in them. The liberation in meditation is very radical, opening a horizon of absolute liberation and giving practitioner the greatest hope that is Buddhahood.

In summary, the thought of "*Stop following the footsteps of the Tathāgata*" of Zen master Quang-Nghiem in particular and Chan Buddhism in general is a liberal, wonderful thought and beyond the confines of space and time. Thought of Chan practitioners about self-reliance and self-effort are also the ideological about self-reliant ideals of modern people in present society. Self-reliance is important for the

present person to go further and more successfully in the spiritual sphere of religions and social works. However, in order for practitioners to be self-reliant and decide their own future and life, they need to have a solid knowledge base. They need to have a clear knowledge, bravery and a certain realization of Dharma. For the vast majority of beginner practitioners, the accumulation of knowledge, research and practice according to the instructions of the Masters and following Buddha's teachings is essential.

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