

Buddhist Social Work in Vietnam; The Effort to Maintain and Develop Buddhism

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Introduction

Nowadays, there are three main Buddhist schools in the world; those are Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Tantrayāna. Every Buddhist school has changed to appropriate to national culture and tradition of the country which Buddhism has been introduced, therefore, we can recognize their own school by looking at their appearance, for example how to dress, greet and communicate. In this topic, I am going to explain “Some things have changed because of Vietnam's culture and traditions in Buddhist Social Work.”

Research Methodology

The type of research used in this study is from the content of the book “Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận” (The Comments on Vietnam Buddhist History), written by Nguyễn Lang (Bhikṣu Thích Nhất Hạnh), and what is happening in Vietnam Buddhism.

Research Problem

Are the appropriate changes to national culture, and tradition the opposite of Buddhism?

Research Hypothesis

At first glance, we can see many things differ between Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism. Especially, Mahāyāna in Vietnam and other Theravāda countries, there are many questions, such as, why do Mahāyānists wear gray, brown or sienna color? Why does style of Mahāyānist robe is different from Theravāda monks? Why are Mahāyānist monks or nuns vegetarians? Can Mahāyānist monks or nuns get married? For that reason, I would like to explain why it has been changed.

Research Sources

Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận (The Comments on Vietnam Buddhist History), written by Nguyễn Lang (Bhikṣu Thích Nhất Hạnh), and the real social issue in Vietnam what I have known.

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Research Discussion

According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary:

Culture: the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organization of a particular country or group.

Tradition: a belief, custom or way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people, a set of these beliefs or customs.

Culture and Tradition are really a huge topic, therefore, in the limitation of the paper, I am going to introduce and explain some main things which are look difference between Theravāda and Mahāyāna.

Vietnamese Buddhism in the Period of Introduction

As mentioned in History of Vietnam, Buddhism spread to Vietnam around the first century A.D. The literature certainly indicates that in half of the second century A.D, there was already a prosperous and important Buddhist center in Giao Chi (antique name of Vietnam). According to archeology and folklore, there is some evidence that Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam in the third century B.C.

It was believed that the Jambudīpa monks who followed the merchant boats might have made their stayings at small temples in Giao Chi, and were offered of clothing and food by the Jambudīpa merchants and Giao Chi people. Giao Chi people also learned how to worship Buddha, practiced Dharma, and make offerings to Saṅgha.

Concept of Buddha: Giao Chi people believed that there was only one Buddha who has many special powers. They clearly learned and recited the Ratna Sutta in the Sanskrit language, because they pronounced the term "Buddha" as "Bụt" in Vietnamese folk tales, not as "Phật" from the Chinese word "佛" in nowadays.

Concept of Dharma: They believed in the law of cause and effect, rebirth, they offered to Saṅgha and helped the poor persons by giving food to get merit.

Concept of Saṅgha: "Tăng Môn" was a term indicated that a person of the Saṅgha in yellow or saffron robes, shaved heads, giving up family life and wealth, worshiping Buddha, chanting Sanskrit scriptures; and live on the offerings of the Buddhists.

Buddhism had penetrated into the life of folk beliefs in Giao Chi people as naturally as water permeated the earth, without any reactions or obstacles, because human beliefs did not resist the basic teaching of Buddhism.

Chinese Dynasties' Influence on Vietnamese Buddhism

However, during the time of the Chinese dynasties ruled Vietnam for 1000 years from the first to tenth centuries. For the scholars, and the leaders of Giao Chi who infiltrated the Han Chinese culture and tradition, such as Taoism, Confucianism, and even Chinese Buddhism. Especially, the Han Chinese scholars who fled to Giao Chi because of the war in their country. Vietnamese culture and tradition had to be under Chinese's influence in ten centuries. Consequently, Vietnam Buddhism must made efforts to maintain and develop in such this situation.

The changing of the robe:

As the above mentioned, “Tăng Môn” was a term indicated that a person of the Saṅgha in yellow or saffron robes, shaved heads. However, in that time, yellow or saffron color is similar to the color of the royal robes, particular of a king. The gray, brown, and sienna color belongs to seekers or recluses, so Vietnam Buddhist robes should have changed. In addition, in Vietnamese and Chinese culture, they do not use sarong as wear, and a person of high position in society must be well dressed, it means he should cover his body when he is in public places, for that reason the style of robe should be changed.

However, when a monk or a nun gets Ordination (*śrāmaṇera* or *śrāmaṇerikā*) or Higher Ordination (*bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī*), they are received yellow or saffron robes. They really respect their received robes, because they think those robes as the robe of the Buddha. Normally, they dress yellow or saffron robes when chanting, meditating, offering the Buddha, and some ceremonies.

The changing to become a vegetarian

On the other hand, in Vietnamese and Chinese culture, unlike Indian or Srilankan society, not only men have to work for income but also women have to do to earn money for their family. Especially, in cultivators' houses, no one was at their home in the daytime to prepare meals for Saṅgha, so Buddhist monks and nuns have to cook by themselves.

As we known in Jīvakaṣutta (MN 55), the Buddha answered the question of Jīvaka:

Adiṭṭhaṃ, asutaṃ, aparisaṅkitaṃ—imehi kho ahaṃ, jīvaka, tīhi thānehi maṃsaṃ paribhoganti vadāmi.

In three cases, Jīvaka, I say that meat may be eaten: it's not seen, heard, or suspected.

How can we eat meat and fish, because we have known how such the meat and fish is at the market in the circumstance.

Mahāyānist monks or nuns get married?

In Vietnam Saṅgha community, they follow to Dharmaguptaka Prātimokṣa. A bhikṣu should keep 250 precepts, and a bhikṣuṇī should keep 348 precepts.

| Groups of rules | Dharmaguptaka Prātimokṣa | | Theravāda Pāṭimokkha | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|----------|----------------------|-----------|
| | Bhikṣu | Bhikṣuṇī | Bhikkhu | Bhikkhuṇī |
| <i>pārājika</i> | 4 | 8 | 4 | 8 |
| <i>saṃghāvaśeṣa</i> | 13 | 17 | 13 | 17 |
| <i>dvāv-aniyatau</i> | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| <i>naihsargika-prāyaścittika</i> | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| <i>pāyattika</i> | 90 | 178 | 92 | 166 |
| <i>pratideśanīya</i> | 4 | 8 | 4 | 8 |
| <i>śaikṣa-dharmāḥ</i> | 100 | 100 | 75 | 75 |
| <i>saptādhikaraṇa-śamathāḥ</i> | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| | 250 | 348 | 227 | 311 |

If we compare Dharmaguptaka Prātimokṣa with Theravāda Pāṭimokkha, the grave rule groups are the same. Hence Mahāyānist monks or nuns cannot get married as the definition of the term “Tǎng Môn” is a person who is giving up family life and wealth, worshiping Buddha, chanting Sanskrit scriptures; and live on the offerings of the Buddhists.

Research Conclusion

In short word, the method of Buddhism is not to be opposed, but to be sociable in any national culture and traditions where we propagate the teaching of the Buddha. This feature is evident in the development history of Buddhism around the world. The culture and traditions of every country is mostly different, but the teaching of the Buddha should be the same, the same in the purpose as the Buddha said to asura Pahārāda in Pahārādasutta, i.e. “*ayaṃ dhammavinayo ekaraso, vimuttiraso*”; this teaching and training has one taste, the taste of freedom (AN 8.19). It means anyone who practices the Dhamma and Vinaya which the Buddha taught, one will be freedom.

Keywords: Buddhism, Vietnamese, Social work, Culture, monk

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