Buddhism and Popular Religion in Medieval Vietnam

J. C. Cleary


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-7189%28199121%2959%3A1%3C93%3ABAPRIM%3E2.0.CO%3B2-7

Journal of the American Academy of Religion is currently published by Oxford University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/oup.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
Buddhism and Popular Religion in Medieval Vietnam

J.C. Cleary

This article presents some of the data on the nature of religion in medieval Vietnam preserved in a remarkable thirteenth-century Zen book, the Truyền Đặng Tập Lục, the Vietnamese Record of the Transmission of the Lamp (hereinafter referred to as TDTL).¹

The TDTL is a collection of stories and Zen lessons presented as biographies of leading Vietnamese Zen masters. The identity of the compiler or author is unknown. The TDTL bears only a superficial resemblance to the famous eleventh-century Chinese collection of Zen biographies with a similar name, the Jing De Chuan Deng Lu. Unlike the Chinese book, which was edited with notions of Confucian respectability in mind, the Vietnamese Transmission of the Lamp is a rich source for the beliefs and practices of folk religion. The Chinese book is a more extensive, loosely knit collection that includes brief notices of little substance on many lesser figures, along with fuller accounts of the famous public champions of the Zen school in China. The Vietnamese work is a carefully crafted whole that skillfully weaves its Zen message into a comprehensive picture of a wide range of Buddhist beliefs and practices and popular images of curing, prophecy, and magic. Never far in the background is the on-going struggle to assert the national identity of Vietnam against Chinese pressure.

The TDTL is a unique source on medieval Vietnamese religion. It also is of general theoretical interest for the study of religion. It shows clearly that the characteristic beliefs of the "folk religion" of Vietnam were held by educated courtiers as well as unlettered commoners. It

J.C. Cleary is an independent scholar.

¹The text consulted in writing this paper is a photocopy of the edition of the TDTL in the archives of the École Française d'Extreme Orient, A. 2767, N. 279. A fuller version of the title is Đại Nam Thiên Ý Truyền Đặng Tắt Lục [Transmission of the Lamp in the Zen Gardens of Great Vietnam]. The text is divided into sections, each of which gives the story of one Zen teacher. For citations in this paper, I refer to the section cited by the name of the Zen teacher whose story is told there.

An annotated English translation of the entire text by the Vietnamese Buddhist scholar Nguyễn Tự Cường will be forthcoming soon.
demonstrates that the Buddhist elite, the enlightened adepts, were not reluctant to express their message within the framework of the beliefs of the folk religion. These facts call into question the validity of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment idea (recycled in the twentieth century as the Great Tradition / little tradition dichotomy) that generally one can expect to find a more intellectual, philosophical version of religion in the higher reaches of the social hierarchy, while the masses hold to a more emotional, superstitious set of beliefs. The interpenetration of “elite” religion and “folk” religion illustrated in the TDTL suggests that there may be a basic flaw in separating the study of folk religion and the study of scriptural religion into distinct specializations.

THE BUDDHIST SPECTRUM IN OLD VIETNAM

In traditional East Asia, Buddhism (the Buddha Dharma, the teaching of the enlightened ones) existed in many forms. According to the Buddhist conception of how religious teaching ought to be carried out, the principle of skill in means, such multiformity was necessary and proper.

Skill in means requires that the presentation of the Buddhist Teaching be adapted to the audience that is being addressed. The Buddhist view is that the totality of truth cannot be captured in words and can only be communicated by the use of provisional expedients that are only partial truths. Since the potentials and capacities of different audiences vary, the form in which the Dharma is communicated must vary accordingly. No particular form is privileged; skill in means is the opposite of dogmatism. The Buddhist criterion for true teaching is effectiveness for the purpose at hand, whether this is the elementary aim of improving the moral level and material welfare of the community and promoting good behavior, or the more advanced aims of deconditioning behavior, restructuring awareness, and liberating enlightened perception.

The TDTL provides evidence that the full spectrum of teachings characteristic of East Asian Buddhism existed in medieval Vietnam, as in contemporary China, Korea, and Japan. This spectrum included scriptural Buddhism in its learned and popular versions, Zen, Pure Land Buddhism, and Tantra.

The TDTL reflects a clear awareness of the Indian origins of Buddhism. In the biography of National Teacher Thông Biến [d. 1134], Thông Biến lectures the Empress Dowager on the history of Buddhism, starting with the story of Śākyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment and teaching career. Thông Biến also notes that Buddhism was brought to China
and Vietnam from India. The TDTL includes the biography of Vin-
itaruci [d. 594], by tradition a man from India who studied Zen in China 
before coming to Vietnam in 580 to start a line of Zen transmission 
there.

Both Vinitaruci and Thống Biên are shown espousing the central 
Mahāyāna tenet that all sentient beings have an inherent potential for 
enlightenment. Thống Biên says: "Fundamentally enlightenment is 
profoundly clear and eternally present. All beings share this inner truth. 
Because they are covered over by sentiments and sensory experience, 
they drift according to their karma and revolve through the various 
planes of existence."

In the biographies of Ngô Ân and Maha, the TDTL notes that certain 
Zen men in Vietnam knew Sanskrit. The life story of the Zen master 
and magician Không Lộ relates that Không Lộ and two of his compan-
ions travelled from Vietnam to India to seek wisdom and acquire super-
natural powers. According to his biography, when Đạo Hạnh wanted to 
learn magic to avenge his father's murder, he set out for India. The 
section on Sùng Phạm says that after receiving the mind-seal of his 
teacher in Vietnam, "Sùng Phạm travelled all over India seeking to 
broaden his knowledge. After nine years he returned [to Vietnam], clear 
in both discipline and concentration."

The TDTL has frequent references to the study of the Buddhist 
sutras. The sutras are the holy scriptures of Buddhism. They generally 
depict scenes in which Śākyamuni Buddha or other enlightened beings 
offer teachings to vast arrays of beings. These teachings sometimes take 
the form of verbal explanations, but Buddha often resorts to direct com-
munication that shows his audiences visions that illustrate aspects of 
reality as it appears to the enlightened.

The sutras set forth the theoretical framework and worldview of 
Buddhism. As Buddhism spread outward from India, the sutras were 
translated into the local languages: in the Far East into written Chinese, 
the language of literary culture throughout the area. Stories from the 
sutras were also transmitted orally, and their colorful and memorable 
scenes penetrated the nonliterate folk culture. Sutras were often chanted 
aloud from the texts or memorized and recited. Moreover, the physical 
texts of the sutras were venerated as holy objects, and copying the sutras 
was considered a meritorious act of piety.

Several of the most famous Mahāyāna scriptures are mentioned in 
the TDTL. In the section on Bảo Tịnh and Minh Tâm, who were com-
panions in the Dharma, we read: "The two masters devoted themselves 
to chanting the Lotus Sūtra for more than fifteen years without ever
neglecting it." Of Thông Biên it is related: "He often taught people to practice by using the Lotus Sūtra, so people spoke of him [with the epithet] Ngô Pháp Hoa 'Awakened to the Lotus.'" Master Chân Không had his initial insight upon hearing a lecture on the Lotus Sūtra, and later won acclaim in the capital for his own expositions of the Lotus. In the story of Thôi Hội, his teacher Cảm Thành quotes the Vimalakirti Sūtra. Viên Chiều recited the Complete Enlightenment Sūtra and practiced its meditation perspectives. So did Tín Học. Tịnh Lực "often lectured on the Complete Enlightenment Sūtra; where [his listeners] were unsure of the meanings and principles, he would set them straight." The ascetic Đà Xá "made it his constant practice to recite the Huayan Sūtra." Ngô An "concentrated on the Complete Enlightenment Sūtra and the Lotus Sūtra and made a thorough study into their subtlety and beauty."

The TDTL preserves other evidence of the pervasive presence of the sutras among Vietnamese Buddhists. Bào Giám provided his home temple with copies of the sutras in his own hand. Tín Học came from a family whose trade for generations had been carving the wooden blocks used in printing the sutras. Pháp Dung composed verses of praise for the various scriptures.

Trưởng Nguyên, a Zen master of a minority race, famous for his asceticism, shunned the patronage of high society, lived in solitude in the mountains, and "devoted himself to chanting scriptures." He gave the gist of the scriptural teaching in these words:

How strange! How is it that all sentient beings possess the wisdom of the Tathagatas, but are lost in ignorance and delusion and do not see it or know it? I always teach them the Path, so that they can forever leave behind the clinging of false thoughts and witness within their own bodies the vast and great wisdom of the Tathagatas, with its benefits, its peace, and its bliss.

As in the other East Asian countries, in Vietnam it was normal for Zen adepts to know the sutras. For example, Khuông Việt "read widely in the scriptures, and investigated the essential teachings of Zen." Minh Trí studied sutras as well as Zen lore. Huệ Sinh, born in a family of high rank, took time from his Confucian studies as a youth to read "all the sutras and Buddhist philosophical treatises." Later he abandoned conventional society to seek enlightenment as a Zen monk.

Those unfamiliar with Zen from primary sources may be surprised to find Zen masters studying and venerating the Buddhist scriptures. Zen began as a movement that emphasized direct realization of the truth of the Buddhas and criticized the tendency of many Buddhists to study
the scriptures at a superficial verbal level without trying to live up to their message. But Zen teachers certainly never rejected the sutras themselves: their quarrel was with those who ignored the sutras’ practical intent.

This is reflected in the story of Zen master Maha in the TDTL. Maha, of Champa descent, was the son of a Lê dynasty official learned in Buddhist literature. Maha was very erudite and had studied both Sanskrit and Chinese. “Once when Maha was explaining a sutra, one of the good spirits that protect the Dharma appeared before him and reproached him: ‘What is the use of such external learning? You surely cannot use it to comprehend the true principle [of the sutras].’ At this, Maha lost his sight.” Despondent at being blinded, Maha is saved from suicide by the timely intervention of a Zen teacher. After three years of devoted practice, Maha regains his sight, and goes on to become an adept of formidable powers.

By the time the TDTL was composed, Zen teachers in China and Korea, as well as in Vietnam, were reemphasizing the integral links between Zen and scriptural Buddhism. They insisted that those who see any opposition between Zen and the scriptures, and champion one to the exclusion of the other, misunderstand both.

The biography of Ngô Ân contains this dialogue: “Someone asked: ‘What is Buddha? What is the Dharma? What is Zen?’ Ngô Ân said, ‘The Supreme Dharma King in his embodiment is Buddha, in his word is the Dharma, and in his mind is Zen. Though they are three, they return to one source. It is like the water in three rivers that is named according to where it is: though the names are not the same, the nature of the water is not different.’”

We also find this metaphoric affirmation of the harmony of Zen and the scriptures in the section on Tịnh Không: “Someone asked, ‘Are the meaning of the Zen patriarchs and the meaning of the scriptural teachings the same or different?’ Tịnh Không said, ‘Sailing the seas for ten thousand miles, all come to the Imperial City.’” (Here the “Imperial City” of course symbolizes enlightenment.)

Basic to the Buddhist teaching is the principle of karmic retribution, which asserts that one receives rewards and punishments according to one’s deeds. The corollary is that one’s present experience is determined by one’s karma, one’s actions in this life and past lives. Meritorious actions in past lives can give a person a “karmic link” to Buddhism, the priceless opportunity to come in contact with the Buddha Dharma in the present life. These ideas about karma are amply reflected in the TDTL.
In the TDTL section on Cẩm Thành, his teacher Võ Ngôn Thông tells him that their meeting each other “is due to previous karmic links.” In the biography of Viên Chiểu it is related that Viên Chiểu became a monk after a physiognomist told him, “You have a karmic connection to the Buddha Dharma. If you leave home [to become a monk] you are sure to become a great bodhisattva among humans.” (A bodhisattva is an enlightened person who functions in the world to work for the enlightenment of others.)

The principle of karmic retribution has direct implications for religious practice. The way to advance in the Buddhist Path is to purify one’s conduct, to improve one’s karma. Conversely, for deluded beings, ignorance generates actions, and these actions create the karmic consciousness that perpetuates delusion and leads to more misguided actions.

In the TDTL the Zen master Đại Xà tells the Emperor Lý Anh Tông [r. 1137-1175]: “If you can keep your karmic consciousness in check until it is quiet and peaceful, then you will cleanse away afflictions. There is no other method to cultivate.”

For Buddhist monks and nuns, particularly strict discipline was essential: there were codes of monastic conduct known as vinaya. In the biography of Đạo Huệ we read: “When he was twenty-five he became a monk under the guidance of [Thống Biên]. . . . Subsequently he came to Quảng Minh Temple and stayed on there investigating and refining his practice of the vehicle of discipline [vinaya].” Of Tịnh Giác the TDTL relates: “He devoted himself to studying the vinaya.” Viên Học’s biography says: “When he was twenty, upon hearing Chân Không teach, the mind-ground opened through for him. After that his studies of Zen became more and more profound and his observance of the precepts was beyond compare.”

Many of the biographies in the TDTL contain accounts of the strenuous austerities practiced by seekers on their way to becoming Zen masters. Austerities represent a dramatic break with the karmic pattern of worldly life, which is based on seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. In popular Buddhist belief, the practice of austerities was one of the hallmarks of the true religious life.

Quảng Trí, from an aristocratic background, “always wore a patched robe and fed himself on pine nuts.” Tịnh Không “practiced austerities for five or six years, eating almost nothing, sitting [in meditation] for long periods of time without lying down to sleep. Whenever he went into samādhi [deep meditative concentration], he would only come out of it after several days. Donors from all over offered him gifts, which just
piled up [unused].” Trương Nguyên, we are told, “went to Mount Tự Sơn and hid his traces. He dressed in straw and lived on chestnuts. His daily companions were the streams and rocks and monkeys. Twenty-four hours a day he gathered in his body and mind and fused them into a single whole.”

The purpose of the discipline and austerities undertaken by those who aspired to enlightenment was to break their attachments to the world of sensory experience, to save the energy they would otherwise have expended seeking comfort and pleasure, and to reorient themselves toward the abstract goal of enlightenment. Austerity was taught in Buddhism as a means of empowerment, not as an end in itself. Tales of the austerities practiced by famous adepts figured prominently in the popular religion, to offer proof of the adepts’ special dedication and zeal and to explain how they attained their awesome powers.

Another way for Buddhists to improve their karmic prospects was to perform good works and thus accumulate merit. Meritorious works included efforts to promote Buddhism, as well as acts that served the general public interest. There are many examples of both given in the stories in the TDTL.

Trí Bảo, after living in the mountains as an ascetic, reentered society and dedicated himself to good works “such as repairing roadways and building temples and stupas. According to conditions, he gave everyone encouragement [to follow the Dharma]. He never acted for his own profit or to gain support.” (Stupas were memorial structures where holy relics were interred.) Giội Không served as a curer during a plague. He also was active in restoring old temples in his home area. After twenty years in the mountains, Chân Không was summoned to the imperial court and attracted patronage from some of the leading men in the state: “He used all that he received to repair temples, build stupas, and cast great bells, in order to safeguard the Dharma for posterity.” Chân Không’s disciple Viên Hộc “regularly took the lead in projects such as repairing bridges, building roads, and so on.” Y Sơn “travelled everywhere teaching, intent on benefiting people. All the money he received as donations he used to support Buddhist activities.”

Y Sơn described the motives of the genuine Zen adept in attracting patronage in these terms: “Fishing for fame, longing for profit—these are like bubbles floating on the water. Planting merit, sowing the seeds of good causal conditions—these are the truly precious jewels in our hearts.”

A major branch of Buddhism in East Asia was the Pure Land teaching. Pure Land believers put their faith in the power of Amitābha
Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Life and Infinite Light. Long ago Amitābha vowed to deliver all those who invoke his name, promising them rebirth in his Pure Land in the West. Amitābha's Pure Land is a paradise, where there is no suffering, disease, or death, where the environment is beautiful and pleasing, and where food and clothing are provided ready-made. Once reborn in the Pure Land, people can continue the quest for complete enlightenment in the direct presence of Amitābha Buddha, unhindered by the sufferings of this world.

The Pure Land teaching was devised and propagated as an easy way, open to all. Even sinners could achieve birth in the Pure Land, if they had faith in Amitābha and invoked his name sincerely. The fundamental Pure Land practice was recitation of the name of Amitābha, reinforced by vows to seek rebirth in the Pure Land.

Many Zen teachers from the tenth century on made room for Pure Land practice, encouraging certain students to recite the buddha-name as a means of concentrating and focusing their minds. Combining Zen and Pure Land practice became a common trend. In the Zen interpretation, Amitābha Buddha is the inherent enlightenment of our true nature, and the Pure Land is its fundamental purity. Reciting the buddha-name is efficacious when it becomes real mindfulness of buddha, unmixed with worldly concerns.

The TDTL contains only a few references to Pure Land Buddhism. When the Empress Dowager questions National Teacher Thông Biên, she asks him about reaching the mind of the Zen patriarchs through reciting the buddha-name. This question implies an acquaintance with the combined practice of Zen and Pure Land. According to his biography, the Zen master Khổng Lồ cast a large image of Amitābha Buddha at Quỳnh Lân Temple. The TDTL relates that after an illustrious public career spanning seventy-five years as a magician, exorcist, and healer, Khổng Lồ returned to the Western Paradise. While living in a reed hut in the mountains, Tịnh Lực “had deep attainment in the samādhi of buddha-remembrance through reciting the buddha-name.” This is an example of using the Pure Land practice of reciting the name of Amitābha to attain a state of stable meditative concentration (samādhi). Tịnh Lực told his students: “Use your minds to be mindful [of buddha] and your mouths to recite [the buddha-name] until you achieve decisive faith and understanding.”

Very much in evidence in the TDTL is the use of mantra or dhāraṇī, a practice derived from Tantric Buddhism. Tantric theory views the physical world, with its interplay of matter and energy, as an expression of absolute reality. Tantric practice involves elaborate rituals and intri-
cate visualizations, which use sound and form to align the mind of the participants with larger cosmic energies, often conceptualized as deities. Mantras (or dhāraṇis) are specific sequences of sounds that are linked to cosmic energy patterns; by reciting the mantra, the practitioners can attune their minds to these forces and achieve a deeper communion with the total reality.

Because Tantric forms invited misuse by those seeking sensory stimulation or self-aggrandizing magic powers, Tantra was an esoteric tradition. Its advanced practices were open only to those who had been properly initiated after undergoing a long process of purification and discipline. Nevertheless, Tantric influences diffused into popular Buddhism, where mantras were conceived of along the lines of magical spells. People sought power through the chanting of mantras and saw in the interplay of cosmic deities in Tantric mandalas a pattern for myths and exoteric rituals.

Throughout the TDTL, the use of mantras is closely associated with the possession of supernatural powers. It is related that Không Lộ, the great Zen master and magician, concentrated on the Great Compassion mantra when he first returned from his journey to India. Đại Xá, besides reciting the Huayan Sutra, chanted the Samantabhadra mantra, and was able to resist severe torture without showing any sign of fear. Nguyễn Học “always recited the dhāraṇi of the Fragrant Ocean of Great Compassion, and so he always got results when he treated sicknesses or prayed for rain.” Văn Hạnh, who could foretell the future, had devoted himself in his youth to the practice of dhāraṇi-samādhi, the attainment of meditative concentration through reciting dhāraṇi. Dao Hanh acquired a spirit-protector and magical powers by diligently reciting the Mind of Great Compassion mantra.

In all these stories of the use of mantras by famous adepts, great prominence is given to the popular idea of reciting mantras as a route to magical powers. But the author of the TDTL also includes a view of dhāraṇi from the perspective of the Zen school, in the section on Thống Thiên. “A monk asked, ‘What is buddha?’ Thống Thiên said, ‘The original mind is buddha. That’s why Xuanzang said, ‘Just comprehend the mind-ground: this is called dhāraṇī, total command.’”

**BUDDHISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY**

Vietnamese national identity has been shaped in part by a centuries-long struggle against Chinese hegemony. Despite a millenium of Chinese suzerainty and strong Chinese influence on their elite culture, the
Vietnamese were able to resist the assimilation into China that was the fate of the coastal peoples immediately north of them. Chinese control was shaken off in the tenth century, but the Vietnamese still had to repel several more rounds of Chinese invasion to preserve their independence. The TDTL adroitly reflects on this enduring theme in Vietnam’s history, both acknowledging the Chinese legacy and yet insisting on the autonomy and equal dignity of Vietnamese culture.

Buddhism came to Vietnam during the period of Chinese control, and Zen as a distinctive style of Buddhism started in China. The TDTL clearly recognizes the Chinese connections of the founders of Vietnamese Zen. According to the TDTL, Vinitaruci came from India to China, where he became a disciple of the third Chinese patriarch of Zen, Sengcan. The story tells that at Sengcan’s direction, Vinitaruci proceeded on to Vietnam (then the Chinese commandery of Jiaozhou) to link up with potential students of the Dharma there. Master Võ Ngôn Thông, the traditional founder of the other line of Vietnamese Zen, was originally from Guangdong (in south China). He studied with the great Chinese teacher Baizhang before coming to Vietnam in 820 and passing the Zen teaching on to a Vietnamese disciple.

In its section on Thông Biên, in which Thông Biên gives an account of the history of Buddhism, the TDTL balances this recognition of the Chinese origin of the Zen school with an affirmation of Vietnamese equality with China in terms of Buddhist development. Thông Biên quotes a dialogue between the (Chinese) Dharma teacher Tanqian and the Emperor Sui Wen Di [r. 580-611], the second great unifier of China, who was also an ardent patron of Buddhism. After noting how many temples and stupas he has had built, the Chinese emperor says: “Although Jiaozhou [i.e. Vietnam] belongs to China, we still need to bind it to us, so we ought to send monks renowned for their virtue there to convert everyone and let them all attain enlightenment.” Tanqian then reminds the emperor:

The area of Jiaozhou has [long] been in communication with India. Early on, when the Buddha Dharma came to China, it also came there and flourished. Temples were built, monks were ordained, scriptures were translated. Because of this prior connection, there were already [eminent] monks and nuns there. In our time there is the venerable Pháp Hiển, who received the transmission from Vinitaruçi, and who is now spreading the school of the Zen patriarchs. Pháp Hiển is a bodhisattva living among humans . . . Thus [the situation of Buddhism in Vietnam] is no different from China. . . . There are already Buddhist teachers there: we do not have to go to convert them.
In several TDTL stories, Buddhist adepts defend Vietnam by impressing Chinese envoys as men of culture, thus demonstrating to them that Vietnam is a highly civilized nation not to be trifled with. The biography of Viên Chiểu contains this story: At the end of the eleventh century, the Vietnamese emperor Lý Nhân Tông gave a copy of a work by Zen master Viên Chiểu to the Chinese envoy, who sent it along to the Song emperor Zhezong. Zhezong summoned a Chinese Buddhist master to explicate the book.

When he had read it, he joined his palms and bowed in homage and said, "In the south a flesh-and-blood bodhisattva has appeared in the world, and he is well able to expound the Dharma. How could I add or subtract anything?" Emperor Zhezong then had a copy made to keep for himself, and sent the original back to Vietnam. . . . Emperor Lý Nhân Tông was very pleased and rewarded Viên Chiểu handsomely.

In other tales in the TDTL, Zen masters use their magical powers to repel Chinese aggression.

In 986 the Chinese army of the Song regime invaded Vietnam. When the Emperor was informed of this, he ordered Khuông Việt to pray [for national salvation]. The enemy army took fright and fled to the Ninh River in Bảo Hụt. Wild waves sprang up, raised by the wind, and flood-dragons appeared leaping and prancing about. The Chinese army fled in complete disarray.

In another tale, the Vietnamese adept takes steps to reverse the damage wrought by the Chinese invaders, and to safeguard the future of the nation.

When La Quí An was about to die, he said to his disciple Thiền Ông: "Formerly, [the Chinese magician-general] Gao Pian constructed a fortress by the Su Li River because he knew that our territory of Cổ Pháp [in that vicinity] has an imperial aura about it, the energy of a place where kings come from. To suppress this energy, he had rivers and lakes rechanneled and dammed up in nineteen places. I have already advised [the local Vietnamese lord] Khúc Lâm to have [the watercourses] rebuilt as they were before. In addition, at Minh Châu Temple I have had a cotton tree planted to secure all these disrupted sites. You should know that in the future a true king is sure to appear [to rule Vietnam] and support our True Dharma.

La Quí An went on to predict the rise of the Lý dynasty, which consolidated Vietnam's independence from China. (Cổ Pháp was the home area of the Lý family.)

The TDTL sums up the always ambivalent relation of Vietnam with
China with particular charm in a story in the TDTL section on Không Lộ:

Zen master Không Lộ journeys to the capital of China in search of copper from which to cast four great ritual vessels. Dressed as a monk, he waits patiently in front of the palace until summoned by the Emperor. When the Emperor asks him what his business is and where he comes from, Không Lộ replies: “I am a poor monk from a small country. . . . My present wish is to cast four vessels for Vietnam, but my strength is not sufficient to accomplish my intention. Therefore, I did not shrink from the long journey: I have come here in the humble hope that the Sagely Emperor will show his mercy and give me a little fine copper to use to cast the vessels.”

The Emperor asks how many men Không Lộ has brought along to help him transport the copper, and Không Lộ answers: “There’s only me. Please fill my bag and I will carry it myself. That will be enough.” The Emperor says: “Take as much copper as your strength allows. Such a trifling matter is not worth discussing.”

Không Lộ starts filling his bag with copper coins and takes more and more until he has used up all the copper in the Chinese treasury; still his bag is not full. “People gaped in amazement and shook their heads. The matter was reported to the palace, and the Emperor was astounded. He regretted that he had already given his permission [for Không Lộ to take all he could] and there was nothing he could do about it.”

The Chinese Emperor offers Không Lộ an escort back to Vietnam, but Không Lộ declines, saying, “I can carry this one bag of copper myself. Don’t bother to accompany me.” Then he returns to Vietnam in a twinkling on an eye, using his magic powers. Back home, he uses the copper to cast buddha-images, a stupa, a large cauldron, and several giant bells for famous temples in Vietnam. Then he composes a verse:

Crossing the ocean on my straw hat
A thousand mile journey in one breath
Filling my bag with all Song’s copper
My arm can heft ten tons!

The message of the story is clear. On the one hand, Vietnam has undeniably accepted much from China in culture and religion. After all, the TDTL was written in Chinese, and Zen Buddhism itself originated in China. Không Lộ must travel to China for copper: “His family was poor and their strength was limited. One day he got the idea that in the great land of Song, there must be a lot of fine copper that could be used for casting.” On the other hand, resisting Chinese claims of hegemony,
Vietnam has accepted the Chinese legacy only on Vietnam’s own terms. Không Lộ outwits the mighty Song Emperor and makes off with his majesty’s wealth by means of his own unsuspected powers, to use it to embellish the temples of Vietnam. “I can carry this one bag of copper myself. Don’t bother to accompany me.” Represented by the redoubtable Không Lộ, the Vietnamese have taken the “copper” (the literary culture and Zen style of Buddhism) of China and made it their own.

BUDDHISM AND THE STATE

The TDTL gives many examples of the prestige of certain Zen masters among the social elite. Buddhist adepts were received at court, attracted patronage from emperors and courtiers, and sometimes functioned as advisors to the throne. Many of the Zen masters whose stories appear in the TDTL were involved with the Vietnamese imperial court:

“When Khuông Việt was in his forties, his fame reached the royal court. Emperor Định Tiên Hoàng [r. 968-979] summoned him for an audience. The Emperor was pleased with him and honored him with the rank of ‘General Supervisor of Monks.’ In 971 the Emperor granted him the sobriquet ‘Great Teacher Who Brings Order to Vietnam.’ Emperor Lê Đại Hành [r. 980-1005] honored Khuông Việt even more. He was consulted in all military and court affairs.”

Emperor Lý Thái Tổ [r. 1009-1028] often visited the temple of Zen master Thiền Lão. After one conversation with Thiền Lão, the Emperor “suddenly had insight.” When Thiền Lão died, the Emperor “deeply mourned his passing and personally composed verses expressing his grief. He sent an envoy to arrange a vegetarian feast [at Thiền Lão’s funeral] and to pay his respects.”

Zen master Cưu Chí lived in seclusion in the mountains, but “his reputation as a teacher reached the imperial court. Emperor Lý Thái Tông [r. 1028-1054] invited him to the capital several times, but Cưu Chí did not come. The Emperor paid three visits to his temple to inquire after him. The Imperial Tutor Lương Văn Nhân also greatly respected Cưu Chí.”

After hearing Thông Bình’s explanations of Buddhist history and the Buddhist Teaching in 1096, the Empress Dowager Phù Thánh Cấm Linh Nhân “honored him with the title ‘Chief Monk’ and gave him a purple robe. She gave him the sobriquet ‘National Teacher of Consummate Eloquence’ and rewarded him richly. Subsequently, she revered him so much that she summoned him into the palace, and paid homage
to him as National Teacher. She inquired into the essential teachings of Zen and had a deep appreciation of its message.’"

“The Emperor Lý Nhân Tông [r. 1072-1127] and the Empress Dowager Cảm Linh Nhân were turning toward the study of Zen in those days, so they built a temple next to Cảm Hùng Palace and invited Mạn Giác to live there, so that it would be easier for them to see him and ask him questions. They did not call him by name, but [as a mark of respect] always addressed him as ‘Elder.’ . . . The Emperor conferred upon him the rank of ‘Inner Palace Teacher of Enlightenment’ and the sobriquet ‘Purple-Robed Great Monk.’ ”

Relations between Zen teachers and the court were not always so smooth:

“When Princess Nam Khuyến wanted to renounce the mundane world, she secretly asked Tịnh Không to ordain her as a nun. When the imperial court discovered this, a decree was issued to arrest Tịnh Không. When he was brought to court, his countenance was calm and serene. The Emperor respected him deeply, and revered him as a noted monk of great virtue. Tịnh Không firmly denied all invitations to serve at court.”

“Emperor Lê Đại Hành had invited Zen master Maha to court many times to question him [about Buddhism], but the master would only join him palms and bow his head. After the Emperor pressed him repeatedly, Maha replied, ‘I am just a crazy monk from Quan Âi Temple.’ The Emperor became very angry. He ordered Maha to be held in custody in the palace and assigned men to guard him. The next morning Maha was seen outside the monks’ quarters, even though the door [of his cell] remained locked as before. The Emperor thought this most uncanny, and ordered Maha freed.”

Many Zen adepts were reluctant to come to court, though imperial invitations were hard to refuse:

“Emperor Lý Anh Tông [r. 1137-1175] had heard about Trường Nguyên and admired his religious life. He wanted to meet him, but Trường Nguyên refused, so the Emperor ordered the master’s old friend Border Minister Lê Hội to bring him back to the palace. While they were staying the night at a guest house of a temple [en route], Trường Nguyên regretted [that he had consented to come to court] and escaped back into the mountains.”

“Emperor Lý Huệ Tông [r. 1210-1225] admired Hiền Quang’s lofty conduct and invited him to the capital with full ceremony many times. Hiền Quang went into hiding and sent an attendant to reply [on his behalf] to the imperial envoy: ‘A poor wayfarer, I was born in his maj-
esty’s land and I eat his majesty’s provisions. I have lived in the moun-
tains serving Buddha, but after passing many years, I have not yet
achieved any merit. . . . What reason is there to invite me to the capital?’
From then on, Hiền Quang never left the mountain.”

On occasion Zen teachers did accept a role in high politics:

Đa Bảo, who had predicted the rise of the Lý dynasty while Lý Thái
Tông was still a boy, was often invited to court and “consulted about all
court and political matters.”

Another instance was the case of Viên Thông, who came from a
family of mong-officials. “In 1130, Emperor Lý Thần Tông [r. 1127-
1137] summoned Viên Thông to Sùng Khai Palace to ask him about the
principles of political order and disorder and national prosperity and
decline.

“Vien Thông said [in a classical Confucian vein]: ‘The realm is like
a vessel. Put it in a safe place and it will be safe. Put it in a perilous
place and it will be in peril. It all depends on how the ruler conducts
himself. If his benevolence is in harmony with the hearts and minds of
the people, then they will love him as a parent and look up to him as the
sun and moon. This is how to put the realm in a condition of peace and
safety.

“‘Whether there is order or chaos also depends on the officials. If
they win the people’s loyalty, then there is political order. If they lose
the people’s loyalty, then there is chaos. I have observed the rulers of
previous generations. None of them succeeded without employing true
gentlemen, humane, moral men. None failed unless he employed petty
men, shallow, self-seeking men. When we trace the origins of how
[political success or failure] came about, it did not happen suddenly
overnight; rather, it developed gradually. . . . The [apparent] sudden rise
and fall of rulers necessarily depends on a gradual [prior] process of
doing good or evil. . . .

“‘To bring the people peace means to respect those who are below,
to be a chary as someone riding a horse holding worn-out reins. If a
ruler can be like this, he cannot but flourish; if not, he cannot but
perish. . . .’

“The Emperor was pleased and appointed Viên Thông General
Capital Superintendent of Monks and Magistrate for Religion. Viên
Thông would approach the Emperor in a relaxed manner and offer pol-
icy suggestions, and the Emperor never went against his advice.” Later
Vien Thông was given the title Guest of the Court. He was appointed as
an executor of Lý Nhân Tông’s will: “The Emperor entrusted all affairs
to Viên Thông.” Viên Thông also participated in the regency for the heir to the throne, who was still a child.

In its many anecdotes bearing on the relationship of Zen teachers to the social elite and court politics, the TDTL adheres closely to the traditional attitude of the Zen school in this area. Zen adepts were typified by their detachment from the attractions of worldly fame and profit. It was axiomatic that authentic Zen masters only came to court when it would serve a legitimate altruistic purpose: either to further the Buddhist Teaching or to perform some other public service.

While the high esteem of emperors and courtiers for certain Zen masters is a prominent theme in the TDTL, the book gives only passing references to institutional arrangements relating to Buddhism. It may be that these were common knowledge; familiar details too taken for granted to be worthy of much note. The scant mention made of institutional matters in the TDTL might be meant to convey the message that this aspect was tangential to the real functioning of the Buddhist Teaching.

There are items that suggest that the Vietnamese emperor, as supreme feudal lord, could and did allocate labor and land and other wealth for the benefit of Buddhist temples.

In the biography of Thiện Lão, who was often visited by Emperor Lý Thái Tông, it is related that after Thiện Lão’s death, “the Emperor had [Thiện Lão’s] temple enlarged and refurbished, and assigned people to take care of the upkeep and supplies of the temple.” In the story of Đà Bao, another favorite of Lý Thái Tông, it is related that the Emperor issued a royal decree that Đà Bao’s temple be rebuilt. This decree presumably obligated the local people to furnish the labor and building supplies for the project. Emperor Lý Nhân Tông granted Mân Giác, whom he and his mother often consulted about Zen, various titles as well as tax exemptions for fifty of his kinsmen.

In the section on Viên Thông, who had served as a political advisor to Emperor Lý Nhân Tông, it says that when Viên Thông retired to his native district and built a temple there, “the revenue from three villages was provided for him by the National Treasury.”

After Không Lộ was able to exorcise a newly built palace, Emperor Lý Nhân Tông “rewarded him with a thousand pounds of gold and five hundred acres of farmland to provide for ceremonial expenses.” After Không Lộ cured the crown prince, the emperor “rewarded him with a thousand pounds of gold and a thousand acres of land for his temple’s permanent endowment, tax-free.”

Given the situation in contemporary China, Korea, and Japan, it is
reasonable to assume that many of the major temples in Vietnam enjoyed some degree of tax-exemption and drew income from lands that had been donated to them by aristocrats or by imperial authority. The TDTL notes that certain masters (e.g., Tịnh Không, Chân Không, Tịnh Thiền, Y Sơn) attracted many donors. It is likely that Buddhist temples themselves were also the beneficiaries of donations made by pious nobles and commoners: gifts of money, supplies, and land.

PROPHESY, CURING, AND MAGIC

The TDTL is permeated with accounts of the supernatural powers of its heroes, the great Zen masters of old Vietnam. There are stories of prognostication, exorcisms and cures, rainmaking, battles of magic, rapport with wild animals, command over spirits, levitation, and deliberately directed rebirth. Taken together, these tales make up a unique collection of data about popular beliefs among the medieval Vietnamese. Those who study Vietnamese folk religion in the period of French domination will recognize many familiar motifs already in evidence in this thirteenth century work.

Many of the TDTL’s tales of prophesy relate to affairs of state.

The following story is from the biography of Đề Bào, a disciple of Khống Việt: “When Lý Thái Tổ [the founder of the Lý dynasty] was still a hidden dragon [living as a child with his family], Đề Bào met him and said, ‘This boy has uncommon physiognomy. In the future he will be a king.’ The Lý family were greatly shocked and said, ‘At the present time our king is still reigning and the country is at peace. How can you say something that could get our whole family executed?’ Đề Bào said, ‘The mandate of heaven has already been decided. Even if you wished to avoid it, it would be impossible to do so. If these words prove correct, please do not forsake me.’ When Lý Thái Tổ ascended to the throne, he often invited Đề Bào to court to ask him for lessons in Zen and he would reward him with generous donations.”

When the Emperor Lê Đại Hành asked Văn Hạnh how to handle a Chinese invasion, Văn Hạnh accurately predicted that the Chinese would withdraw. When Lê Đại Hành and his courtiers could not decide whether to invade Champa, Văn Hạnh “memorialized the throne advising the Emperor to act quickly and not miss the opportunity. As it turned out, the Vietnamese were victorious.”

When weird events were reported during the reign of the tyrant Lê Ngoa Triệu, Văn Hạnh correctly interpreted them as omens of the imminent collapse of the Lê regime and the rise of the Lý dynasty. Văn Hạnh
was able to inform the uncles of the Lý founder in advance of their
nephew’s successful coup d’état against the Lê in the capital.

There are other stories in the TDTL of predictions of purely personal
matters:

When Viễn Chiêu was a youth, before he had left home to become a
monk, he went to visit an elder adept in physiognomy who lived in his
home area. “The elder looked him over thoroughly and said, ‘You have
a karmic connection to the Buddha Dharma. If you leave home you are
sure to become a great bodhisattva among humans. If not, it is hard to
guarantee how long you will live.’”

Văn Hạnh was able to foresee a plot against himself: he sent word
to his enemy that he knew an attack was coming, and the man was
afraid and desisted. The TDTL comments: “There were many other
such instances of Văn Hạnh having prior knowledge of events and being
able to see into the past.” The ability to predict the future was a mark of
the religious adept in old Vietnam, proof of his special powers.

The TDTL also contains several stories of the Zen masters using
their healing powers to help win people over to Buddhism.

The section on Đạo Huệ relates this incident: “In 1161 the Imperial
Concubine Thủy Minh fell ill. The Emperor sent an envoy to summon
Đạo Huệ to the capital to cure her. . . . When Đạo Huệ reached the
palace, the moment he arrived just outside the concubine’s door, her
illness was cured. The Emperor Lý Anh Tông was very pleased and
lodged Đạo Huệ at Bảo Thiên Temple. Within a month countless num-
bers of admirers had arrived, both courtiers and religious men. Đạo Huệ
opened a teaching hall and began to propound the Dharma and convert
people.”

Zen master Maha used his powers as a healer to influence a commu-
nity of hunters who worshipped demons and spirits. “The local people
told him, ‘For a long time in this area there have been many people who
die of leprosy. All the healers and sorcerers have been helpless [to deal
with it]. If you can cure this disease, we will listen to your advice.’
Maha then blessed some water with mantras and sprayed it from his
mouth over those suffering from the disease. The sick ones were imme-
diately cured. Although the local people were moved to submit to
Master Maha, because of their deeply ingrained habits, it was not possi-
ble for him to convert them right away.”

The biography of Đạo Hạnh says that under the influence of Zen
master Sùng Pham, “Đạo Hạnh’s Dharma-power increased and his kar-
mic affinity with Zen became more and more mature. . . . He blessed
water with mantras and used it to cure the sick. Everything he did was effective."

Another curing story that could be taken as a political metaphor involves the Zen magician Không Lỗ: "When [the crown prince] Lý Thần Tông was twenty-one, he suddenly changed into a tiger. He would crouch down and bite at people, acting like a horrifying wild monster. [His father] the Emperor had a golden cage made to keep him in. . . . The Emperor ordered one of his commanders to take a dragon boat and bring Không Lỗ [to the capital]. When the commander came to his hut, Không Lỗ laughed and said, 'Isn't it the tiger business?' The commander said, 'How did you know?' Không Lỗ said, 'Thirty years ago I knew this would happen.' Không Lỗ came to the palace and sat peacefully [in front of the emperor and his caged tiger-son]. In a sharp voice he said, 'Let the officials bring a great cauldron of oil right away, put a hundred needles in the cauldron, and light a great fire under it.' [When the oil was boiling], Không Lỗ reached into the cauldron with his hand and took out the hundred needles. He stuck them into the prince's body while pronouncing a spell: 'How noble to be the son of heaven!' The hair and tail and claws and fangs fell away spontaneously and the prince was returned to his human form.'"

There are stories in the TDTL of cures effected by the power of supernatural beings, cures which help the religious seeker to advance on the Path. Tình Giới was from a poor family, but sincere and earnest by nature. "When he was twenty-six, he fell seriously ill. In a dream he saw a god who gave him some medicine. When he awoke, he had been abruptly cured. So he decided to leave home to become a monk. . . ."

In the section on Viên Chieu, it is related how the master's study of the Dharma was greatly advanced by a visionary curing experience: "One night when Viên Chieu was in samàdhi, he saw the bodhisattva Manjuśrī take a knife to him, cut open his stomach, and wash out his guts. Then Manjuśrī gave him some medicine. After this, what Viên Chieu practiced in his mind seemed preordained to mesh [with reality], and he had deep attainment in the samàdhi of words, expounding the Dharma most eloquently."

In a familiar pattern in Buddhist legend, the TDTL shows adepts using magical powers to gain entree for the Buddhist teaching: "One day Emperor Lý Nhân Thông said to Giác Hải, 'May we hear something about your supernatural powers of movement by according with Reality?' Giác Hải then worked magical transformations; he projected his body up into the air fifty or sixty feet above the ground and then suddenly descended again. The Emperor and his courtiers all applauded in
admiration and acclaimed Giác Hải. He was rewarded and given free access to the palace.”

For an agricultural society like medieval Vietnam, adequate and timely rainfall was a life-and-death concern. In droughts the imperial authorities offered prayers for rain and enlisted the help of religious adepts.

Tinh Giỏi’s biography relates this story: “In 1177 there was a summer drought. The Emperor Lý Cao Tông ordered all the eminent monks to pray for rain, but to no avail. The Emperor had heard reports of the master’s renown for a long time, so he dispatched an envoy to bring Tinh Giỏi to Bảo Thiên Temple in the capital. Tinh Giỏi stood in the courtyard there at midnight and burned incense, and immediately rain began to fall. [After this] the Emperor honored and esteemed him deeply, always referring to him as the ‘Rain Master.’” Tinh Giỏi also had the power to stop the rain: “In 1179 . . . there was very heavy rain which flooded the roads and interfered with the harvest. Tinh Giỏi stood praying for seven days at a ritual gathering to stop the rain, and the rains became normal again.”

Thiên Nham, after long years of chanting dharanis and practicing asceticism, also had the power to make rain: “In the Thiện Thuận era [1128-1132] there was a drought. Thiên Nham was summoned to the capital by imperial edict. He prayed for rain and immediately got results.”

Another motif that occurs frequently among the occult qualities of the Zen masters in the TDTL is uncanny power over wild animals. The adepts have recovered the rapport with nature that the inhabitants of ordinary society have lost.

The biography of Đạo Huệ relates: “The feeling that emanated from Đạo Huệ moved the apes and monkeys so much on the mountain [where he lived] that they would come to listen to him.” When Đạo Huệ was about to leave to answer an imperial summons, “the apes and monkeys on the mountain cried sadly as if they felt grief and reluctance to let him depart.” When Hiền Quảng was living in the mountain forest as an ascetic, he “began to dress in leaves and stopped eating rice for ten years. . . . Wherever he stopped to sit or lie down, all the wild animals that saw him became tame.” After his teacher died, Pháp Hiền practiced meditation on Mount Tử Sớn. “His body was like a dried-out tree; for him, things and self were both forgotten. The birds of the air came to him as if tame and the beasts of the field approached him with familiarity.”

“One day while Zen master Trí was sitting in meditation [in the
forest on Mount Tú Sơn], he saw a tiger chasing a deer coming toward
him. Trí admonished them: ‘All sentient beings cherish their lives—
you should not harm each other.’ The tiger bowed its head to the
ground [as a person would when] taking refuge [from a teacher] and
went away [letting the deer escape].’ When Trí was away from his
retreat, ‘huge tigers would crouch in front of the gate, so no one would
dare to rob the place.’

POPULAR BELIEFS AND MAGIC: A ZEN PERSPECTIVE

Why would a Zen book like the TDTL include so many stories of
supernatural powers and magic? The TDTL was written for an audience
and in a milieu where the existence of such things was taken for
granted. In the context of the popular beliefs of the time and place, one
way to establish the sanctity and authority of a religious figure was to
attribute to him powers beyond the reach of ordinary people: the power
to foretell the future, to cure disease, to exorcise evil, to direct his own
rebirth, to travel long distances in the twinkling of an eye. To the popu-
lar mind in medieval Vietnam, these were prime marks of the person of
true attainment.

To establish the credentials of Zen masters and draw attention to
their Zen lessons, what better way than for the TDTL to depict their
supernatural abilities and superhuman powers? Since to Zen adepts no
particular forms were sacred, they were free to work within any locally
recognized forms by which communication could be facilitated.

The TDTL demonstrates clearly that in old Vietnam belief in magic,
omens, and supernatural powers extended through the highest levels of
the social hierarchy, the court nobility. From a Buddhist perspective, the
common denominator of vulgar religion is not the social class or even
the intellectual level of the believers. The mark of vulgar religion is the
underlying attitude that religious means can be used to manipulate the
supernatural to serve worldly motives. According to the Buddhist cri-
terion, what sets apart the genuine religious elite is their selfless approach
to religion as a means of realizing truth for its own sake. Members of
this elite can be and have been recruited from all walks of life. By
stressing the lowly origins and foreign ethnicity of some of its most illus-
trious teachers, the Zen tradition made a special point of rejecting the
social and ethnic prejudices that assume that religious merit coincides
with social standing or cultural affiliation.

When the TDTL colors its accounts with tales of magic, it is in an
attempt to communicate with people for whom magic was accepted as
real. The Zen masters in the TDTL use magic for altruistic purposes, not for personal gain. Following its consistent design, among dozens of stories of supernatural powers and magic, the TDTL makes oblique comments from the perspective of the Zen school, putting the whole topic in its place.

In the biography of Đạo Hạnh, in which magical elements play a prominent role, there is a clear implication that magical powers are not the ultimate goal of religious practice. After his arduous struggle to learn magical arts in order to avenge his father’s death at the hands of a sorcerer, when “his magic powers were now complete,” and his vengeance has been accomplished, Đạo Hạnh finally goes to seek instruction from a Zen teacher. Đạo Hạnh states his dilemma in a verse:

Long mixed up among the dusts of the ordinary world,  
I have not recognized the real gold  
I do not know where true mind is  
Please point it out truly to me, extend your skill in means  
Let me fully comprehend thusness and stop this painful seeking.

An anecdote in the section on Khánh Hỷ delivers a message to the same effect, by using a sorcery ceremony as a metaphor for wishful thinking and futile reliance on mechanical acts:

“One day while Khánh Hỷ and [his teacher] Bồn Tích were on their way to a donor’s house to receive offerings, Khánh Hỷ asked, ‘What was the true intent of the Zen patriarchs?’ Just then they heard the sounds of a sorcery ceremony coming from someone’s house. Bồn Tích said, ‘Are these not the words of a sorcerer calling down spirits?’ Khánh Hỷ said ‘Don’t tease me, Master.’ Bồn Tích said, ‘I never play tricks.’”

Here Bồn Tích makes use of a fortuitous circumstance to challenge Khánh Hỷ for his rote approach to Zen. Bồn Tích intimates that by asking the age-old question (as if the true intent of the Zen ancestors could be put in words and an appreciation of it could be directly conveyed, with no effort on the learner’s part), Khánh Hỷ is behaving simple-mindedly, like a sorcerer who thinks that the mechanical invocation of magic words will beckon the spirits.

THE ZEN MESSAGE

Zen was an integral part of Mahāyāna Buddhism. As such, it taught that all people are inherently endowed with the potential for enlightenment, a potential that can be brought to life by breaking through the shell of conditioned perceptions that encases ordinary people. The Zen
school incorporated as its theoretical basis Mādhyamika and Yogācāra Buddhist philosophy and the worldview of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra. Zen became the intellectual spearhead of Buddhism in East Asia, exercising a powerful influence on religious practice, philosophy, and aesthetics among the cultured elite. Zen teachers "appeared in the world" and by their personal example and mastery of the Dharma offered proof that the enlightenment of the buddhas was not something superhuman, existing only in the realm of myth. By the startling originality of its rich and intricate literature, the Zen school commanded the attention of cultured people in China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan.

The utterances of the Zen masters contain multiple layers of meaning and structure that are designed to interact with the mentalities of the listeners, open them up, and transform them. Contrary to the notion that most Zen sayings are irrational paradoxes meant only to assert the futility of rational thought, Zen discourse can be readily read, by those who know its codes, to contain a wide range of messages fully consonant with the theory and practice of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

To illustrate this point, and to show the real identity of the TDTL as a masterpiece of the Zen school, let us turn to some of its Zen-style teachings. Explanatory comments follow each passage.

Someone asked Viên Chiểu, "'When mind and phenomena are both forgotten, inherent nature is real.' What is real?"

Viên Chiểu said, "The raindrops on the cliffside flowers are the tears of a goddess. The wind hitting the bamboo in the courtyard is the master musician's lute."

According to Buddhist ontology, there is only one reality; all particular phenomena are manifestations of the one reality. Delusion occurs when people reify the constructs they project upon the phenomenal world, in particular, when they accept their conditioned minds as their real selves and the phenomena they perceive as independently existing entities. To the enlightened eye, the multiplicity of the natural world bespeaks the absolute reality immanent in it.

Vân Phong asked his teacher Thiền Hồi, "When birth-and-death comes, how can we avoid it?"

Thiền Hồi said, "Where there is no birth-and-death, we are sure to avoid it."

Vân Phong asked, "Where is the place where there is no birth-and-death?"

Thiền Hồi said, "You must comprehend it right in the midst of birth-and-death."
Birth-and-death is *samsāra*, the cycle of suffering and affliction brought on by ignorance and the actions ignorance engenders. The elementary teaching of Buddhism offers a way out of birth-and-death by the ending of ignorance and desire: *nirvāna* as the antithesis of *samsāra*. The advanced teaching of Buddhism shifts to the absolute viewpoint, which recognizes that birth-and-death only exists from the viewpoint of delusion; from the enlightened viewpoint, there is no duality between *samsāra* and *nirvāna*. This truth enables the bodhisattvas to experience the absolute while engaged in the relative world as compassionate teachers of enlightenment.

Someone asked Viên Chiểu, "What is the meaning of [the Zen formula] 'seeing inherent nature and becoming buddha'?

Viên Chiểu said, "When spring comes the withered trees are adorned all over with flowers. The wind blows a thousand miles carrying their divine perfume."

The man said, "I do not understand. Please instruct me again, Teacher."

Viên Chiểu said, "The fruit tree has been around for ten thousand years. Its dense branches reach to the clouds."

"Spring" denotes the activation of the inherent potential for enlightenment which is our inherent nature. "Flowers" represent the compassionate actions of the enlightened. "The fruit tree" is the tradition of enlivening teachings.

Viên Chiệu said, "What a pity that having choked once, you sit here hungry and forget to eat."

Here Viên Chiểu was addressing a pupil who had failed at first to understand his message, become discouraged, and neglected to notice further "nutrition" offered by the teacher.

Viên Chiểu said, "We laugh at the person who clings in vain to his real nature and is drowned in midstream."

The goal of Zen is not to sink into the peace and bliss and emptiness of the absolute, "clinging to real nature": this is only a waystation, "midstream," not the final destination. The Great Vehicle goal is to return to function as a bodhisattva in the world of the relative, now immune to delusion.

Cửu Chiệt said to his disciples as he was about to die:

"All Dharma-gates, all Buddhist methods, originally come from your own inherent nature. . . . All the afflictions that bind you are empty."
Misdeeds and merits, right and wrong, are all illusions. There is nothing but cause and effect. In the realm of karma, do not differentiate: if you do, you will not find freedom. [With freedom], you see all phenomena, but without any objects of seeing. You know all phenomena, but without any objects of knowing. You know that all phenomena have interdependent origination as their basis. You see that all phenomena have true reality as their source. Even amidst defilement, you understand that the world is like a magical apparition. You clearly comprehend that the true identity of sentient beings is the One Reality—there is no other reality. You do not abandon the karmic realm: you use the proper skillful means to show the uncreated Dharma in the realm of the created, but without differentiating and without the marks of creation. This is because desire is ended, self is forgotten, and conceptual judgments are abandoned.”

This passage is a clear example of the underlying unity of Zen and scriptural Buddhism.

Bảo Giám spoke this verse:

Wisdom is like the moon shining in the sky
Its light encompasses countless worlds, shining to infinity
If you want to know it, you must pick it out with care
The dense thickets on the mountain are locked in the evening mist

Wisdom is omnipresent and eternal, but people locked up in conditioned perceptions, the “mist,” overlook it and see only the conventional image of reality they have been trained to see.

Nguyễn Hộc said to his disciples: “The Path has no image or form. It is right before your eyes, not far away. Turn back and find it in yourself. Don’t seek to get it from others. Even if you could get something from them, it would not be real. . . .”

“The Path” here means reality itself. Each person ultimately must experience it for herself.

As he was about to die, Thụy Chiếu spoke this verse:
Fundamentally the Path has no face
Yet it shows its freshness day after day
In the galaxy of thousands of worlds
No place is not its home
Huệ Sinh said:
If a person knows this Dharma
Then sentient beings and Buddha are the same
Quiet and still, the moon over Lanka
Utterly empty, the boat that crosses the ocean
If you know emptiness, through emptiness you awaken to being
Then you are free to go everywhere while still in samādhi

For one who knows reality, and sees the real nature of things, there is no
dualism between sentient beings and Buddha, because the real nature of
sentient beings is their buddha-nature. “The moon over Lanka” repre-
sents the one reality. The “empty boat” is the personality purified of
ignorance, craving and anger, which “crosses the ocean” of phenomenal
existence. “Samādhi” is stable meditative concentration.

A monk asked Chân Không, “What is the wondrous Dharma?”
Chân Không said, “You will know only after you have awakened.”

The monk said, “I have not been able to understand your previous
instructions, so how can I understand your present teaching?”

Chân Không said, “If you go to the deep caves where the immortals
dwell, you will be able to bring back the elixir that will transform you.”

The monk asked, “What is the elixir?”
Chân Không said, “Through eons of ignorance, you do not com-
prehend it, but the morning of enlightenment you open up into
illumination.”

The monk asked, “What is illumination?”
Chân Không said, “Illumination shines through the whole world,
[revealing that] all sentient beings are together in a single family.”