



Lai Quoc Khanh [Ed.]

Buddhist Education in Vietnam

History, Present and Future Directions



Nomos

Vietnam – Politics and Economics

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Volume 5

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The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

ISBN 978-3-7560-1596-2 (Print)
978-3-7489-4515-4 (ePDF)

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-3-7560-1596-2 (Print)
978-3-7489-4515-4 (ePDF)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Khanh, Lai Quoc
Buddhist Education in Vietnam
History, Present and Future Directions
Lai Quoc Khanh (Ed.)
190 pp.
Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN 978-3-7560-1596-2 (Print)
978-3-7489-4515-4 (ePDF)



Onlineversion
Nomos eLibrary

1st Edition 2024

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Foreword

Writing a foreword for this volume from the perspective of a European is a difficult task. The various Buddhist denominations resist the differentiation between religion here and philosophy there that has been common in the global West since the late Middle Ages. Rather, the various schools of Buddhism see themselves as both, probably best understood as a certain way in which people themselves look at their problems. Moreover, its various forms, which marks another important difference to the so-called religions of revelation, are not primarily based on a divine self-communication, as for example in the form of the Bible, but on self-awareness on the path to salvation. The centre of the Buddhist world view is the realisation of truth through enlightenment. Most Buddhist schools agree on a few related core statements, particularly the *Four Noble Truths*, the *Three Poisons*, and the endeavour to escape the eternal cycle of death and rebirth.

To achieve this ultimate goal, a person takes refuge in the Buddha (i.e. the state of salvation), the Dharma (the teaching and the path to it) and the Sangha (the community of practitioners). The Sangha, in turn, is usually divided into the communities of lay people and ordained monks and nuns. Then the common ground between the millions of Buddhists around the world often comes to an end.

Firstly, this is because the various Buddhist schools provide their followers with different types of help in coping with their everyday lives. This is also related to the fact that in some countries Buddhism is a privileged state religion, while in others it operates within the framework of a secular constitutional order. In addition, there are the most diverse forms of syncretism with other religious traditions, for example in Japan and Vietnam.

Secondly, Buddhist communities allow quite different ways for their followers to reach enlightenment: through meditation, focussed action (as in Zen Buddhism), education, good deeds for family and society, almsgiving, living as monks and nuns, etc.

A *third* important point is that a standardised interpretation of the central teachings, a homogeneous *Buddhism*, does not actually exist, especially from a theological point of view (to use a term from the Greek-Roman tradition). To make another comparison with Christianity: since late antiquity, there has been a relatively clearly defined canon of central scrip-

tures (which are, however, interpreted very diversely). In the Buddhist tradition, on the other hand, there are the Pali and Sanskrit canons, for example, often in themselves clearly different canonisations, depending on the Buddhist school or national tradition. One consequence of this is that Buddhism can have significantly varying manifestations depending on the country, particularly in Southeast and East Asia, especially along the lines of the subdivision between the Theravada and Mahajana Buddhist schools that is also familiar in Europe. Sometimes, as in Vietnam, both forms can even be found, for example among the Khmer minority in the south of the country on the one hand and the majority of the Vietnamese on the other.

In short, the various forms of Buddhism sometimes differ quite significantly in their theoretical foundations, as expressed in their canonical scriptures or sutras. This makes it essential for a deeper understanding to pursue a Buddhist education based on science, and there is a great intellectual tradition of this in the core countries of Mahajana Buddhism, such as China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. These have experienced a revitalisation especially in Vietnam in recent years, where it is rather crucial to determine more precisely and discursively, beyond the vibrant popular beliefs, what the specific traits of Vietnamese Buddhism have been or should be in the future.

This book is dedicated to precisely this important endeavour: it is the first study in English from and about Vietnam to examine the state of academic Buddhist education in the country. It comes to very important conclusions regarding the situation at the universities as the core of academic education. These give rise to justified hope that the renaissance of religion, which is undoubtedly taking place in Vietnam, will also lead to a renewed Buddhist education system. It will, I am sure, considerably expand the exchange of the Vietnamese Sangha with that of other Buddhist countries and with other religious communities around the world. In addition, Buddhism has also exerted an increasing fascination on stress-stricken people in the western world for some years now. In this respect too, we can therefore look forward with great excitement to further developments in Vietnam, which this book lays the foundations for exploring.

Hanoi, in April 2024

Detlef Briesen

Preface

Many would agree that the situation of the Buddhist education system in Vietnam needs to be improved. However, this requires more detailed analyses of the actual status quo. Only such an evaluation gives the necessary findings for a better Buddhist education in Vietnam as a part of a broader attempt, the reform of the national education system as a whole.

First, on the one hand, Buddhist education in Vietnam only took place in VBS's Buddhist universities or intermediate schools, which a focus on Dharma teachings.

As a result, most studies on Buddhist education in Vietnam have focussed on the Dharma teachings rather than on a broader approach, i.e. as a pedagogical discipline in the national education system. This diminishes the importance and influence of Buddhist education. In this study, the current situation of Buddhist education in Vietnam is assessed in a comprehensive and modern way to provide reliable data and starting points for its reform in a broader sense. We hope that the results of the study will contribute to the great endeavour of taking Buddhist education in Vietnam to a new level.

With the establishment of the Tran Nhan Tong Institute at the National University of Hanoi and the permission of the Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to offer Buddhist education at doctoral level for the first time, Buddhism has become more firmly established in the country's national education system. This is a remarkable change in the guidelines and policies of the Party and State of Vietnam, in the history of national education in general and Buddhist education in particular. The doctoral programme in Buddhist education established by the Tran Nhan Tong Institute of the National University of Hanoi has been completed and put into practice. This is a remarkable achievement with the significant efforts of scientists and educators inside and outside the National University of Ha Noi, in addition to contributions made by others from the religious community itself and by domestic and foreign scholars. However, these are only the first steps. Training programs and course outlines should be specified; the organization should be set up scientifically; teaching and learning methods should be designed appropriately; resources for training (including financial resources, teaching human resources, learning materi-

als, facilities, equipment for the teaching and learning) should be prepared and mobilized; and learners need to be accurately assessed on their competency and fully equipped with necessary elements to take the training program.

In a first cautious assessment, the doctoral programme in Buddhist studies at this institute (also because of its combination with a master and bachelor programme) was a great and quite swift success, which quickly succeeded in meeting a considerable social demand. Based on this, it should now be possible in a further step to determine the opportunities for further improving the situation. To this end, it is necessary to comprehensively record and evaluate the current status in order to obtain data and scientific findings for further steps towards reform.

Second, in addition to directly serving Buddhist education in Vietnam, the results of this study can provide valuable scientific data and theoretical references for a number of other related fields such as political, management, religious and educational studies.

In addition, the results of the study can also provide valuable scientific data and theoretical references for other areas of education, for literature and linguistics, for philosophy and for graduate education and learning culture in general.

Thirdly, a study on Buddhist education in Vietnam can also be of great benefit to international readers, such as those interested in Vietnam's Buddhism or the country's culture and people.

An important contribution could also be to promote international exchange in the field of Buddhist educational research in general through such scientific endeavours.

Fourth, the authors determine that the study aims to survey and accurately assess the current situation and then predict the development of Buddhist education in Vietnam to propose significant recommendations and solutions within the framework of the national education system.

To that end, the study has the following main tasks:

- Building up the concepts of tools and a framework for evaluating Buddhist education in Vietnam today.
- Gaining an overview of the history of Buddhist education in Vietnam and in other countries and regions.

- Surveying and evaluating the current situation of Buddhist education in Vietnam.
- Predicting the future and proposing recommendations to improve and ensure the quality of Buddhist education in Vietnam.

Due to the limited time, the authors focus on evaluating bachelor and master programs of Buddhist studies at four of Vietnam's Buddhist universities regarding three components:

- Curriculum, textbooks, lectures.
- Teaching staff, organizing methods, teaching methods, testing and assessments.
- Facilities and equipment for Buddhist education, in which, assessing the quality of the training quality, during the past five years, is the most important task.

Our enquete applies a combination of specialized and interdisciplinary methods from social sciences and humanities, corresponding to its research tasks. Specifically:

- Using bibliography, literature review, survey questionnaires, field trips, observations, expert interviews, and analysis of the collected data.
- Establishing and applying theoretical frameworks, survey data analysis, discourse analysis, policy analysis, event analysis, systematization, and generalization.
- Employing predictions, policy analysis, systematization – structuralism, inductive analysis, synthesis, generalization, expert interviews.

As for collecting information by questionnaires, the research group designed a questionnaire consisting of seventy-three closed (multiple-choice) questions and an open statement. The authors have issued random forms to Buddhist monks studying at three Buddhist universities in Hanoi, Hue, and Ho Chi Minh City, with 400 respondents (150 each in Hue and Ho Chi Minh City, 100 in Hanoi). 337 completed questionnaires were returned to us, of which 337 were from Hanoi, 144 from Hue and 118 from Ho Chi Minh City. The collected data was processed using SPSS software. (see reports and results in appendices).

For this project to be completed, we would like to thank Associate Professor Dr. Nguyen Kim Son, Minister of Education and Training of Vietnam, former Director of Hanoi National University and Director of Tran Nhan Tong Institute – who supported the idea and created many

Preface

favourable conditions for the authors, including funding for the study as a scientific project at Hanoi National University. We would like to thank the leaders of the Vietnam Buddhist universities and intellectuals such as Most Venerable Dr. Thich Duc Thien, Thich Tam Duc... and Luong Gia Tinh and many other scholars, who have helped us gather and process documents and provided us with helpful scientific ideas. My special thanks go to the University of Social Science and Humanities, USSH, VNU, Hanoi and its Rector, Professor Dr. Hoang Anh Tuan, who have generously supported the publication with a printing grant.

Since there are only few studies on Buddhist education in Vietnam so far, this study has taken great attempts by all the authors. Despite these great attempts, our publication still has weaknesses, so we would highly appreciate feedback on it to improve our consecutive studies.

Hanoi, in April 2024

Lai Quoc Khanh

Chapter I. Theories Of Buddhist Education

Lai Quoc Khanh

1. Key Concepts

Training

The concept of training is closely related to that of education. In fact, both terms, in our case as *Buddhist training* and *Buddhist education*, are often used alternately. Therefore, to understand the meaning of *Buddhist training and education in Vietnam*, the two terms must priorly be clarified.

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the *education* is defined as

1. "the process of teaching, training, and learning, especially in the settings of school, to improve knowledge and develop skills,"
2. "a particular model of teaching or training,"
3. "the institutions or people involved in teaching and training,"
4. "the subject of study that deals with how to teach,"
5. "an interesting experience that teaches you something." (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 488)

The English term *education* is equivalent to *Jiao yù* (教育) in Chinese. According to Xian Dai Han Yǔ Cí Diǎn (现代汉语词典), *Jiao yù* is defined:

1. As a noun, it refers to cultivating people in accordance with a specific requirement, mainly to teaching/learning activities in school.
2. As a verb, it refers to training a person according to a particular goal.
3. Also, as a verb, the use of knowledge and reasoning to persuade others to act according to principles, rules, or requirements. (Xiàn Dài Hànyǔ Cí Diǎn 2008, 691)

In Vietnamese, it is termed as *giáo dục*. Following the Tieng Viet Dictionary, the term refers to two meanings:

1. "The activities that systematically influence the mental and physical development of an object, making her/him gradually gain the qualities and competencies as required," and

2. “A system of the teaching and instructing policies and agencies of a country.” (Viện Ngôn ngữ 2004, 394)

From these above definitions, education refers to the conscious activities of subjects in a defined relationship, revolving around knowledge and skills, with the purpose to form the qualities and abilities through which make educated persons develop and attain already-defined requirements.

Education is a series of activities organized to effectively impact cognition, attitudes, and behaviour of the target object, creating positive changes, thereby reaching a defined educational goal. There are many types of activities to influence and change people according to specific goals. However, in general, education refers to the acts of transmission and absorption, teaching, and learning (教 giao) to produce, nurture, and grow up (育 duc). Such activities are positive for the existence and development of humans and their societies. Therefore, following these definitions, the term *education* is meant in a positive way.

Teaching and learning are two parallel processes of transmission and absorption in educational situations. As they come from real life, the contents that are taught and learned are very productive. Nonetheless, they can be generalized as knowledge, standards of value, and behaviour patterns, i.e. those within the realm of people’s cognition, attitude, and behaviour. The contents of education result from the accumulation of knowledge from community to community and from generation to generation.

The process of education may take place between one individual and another, but it may also occur within oneself (self-education). It may be through the whole life of a person, from his birth to his death, and in the environment of family, school, and society. These educational environments are closely interrelated with each other.

Different states and societies each may have their own educational philosophies, systems, contents, and methods. However, besides the specific aspects associated with societies in certain development stages, there is at least one common aspect: the commonality of humanity. It is the dialectic of the development of humankind in the realm of education.

Strongly associated with education is the concept of training. There are several ways to specify its semantics. According to Wikipedia,

“Training is teaching or developing in oneself or others, any skills and knowledge or fitness that relate to specific useful competencies. Training has specific goals of improving one’s capability, capacity, productivity, and

performance. It forms the core of apprenticeships and provides the backbone of content at institutes of technology.”

And, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, training is understood as a process of learning skills that a person needs to do something. It refers to instructing a person or an animal regarding:

- A specific working skill or action.
- A preservation for specific or particular activities, especially for fitness in sports, needs more challenging training.
- To develop inborn abilities and qualities. (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 1629)

Training is *dao tao* in Vietnamese (*đạo Ch. 陶* to educate or cultivate and *tao Ch. 造* to create or make). The compound word *dao tao* is not existing in Chinese. Instead, another compound, *huấn luyện* (Ch. 訓練) is used, meaning to make a person good at a specific capacity or skill (Xiàndài hànzi diǎn (現代漢字典) 2008, 1554). Accordingly, in the Vietnamese Dictionary, the term *đạo tao* is defined as

“To make an individual a competent person in accordance with a certain criterion.” (Viện Ngôn ngữ 2004, 288)

In other places, it refers to the activity of tutoring a person or an animal a type of skill or a pattern of behaviour using practicing or instructing over a period of time. There is a variety of training categories and types. Some examples are basic and intensive, specialised, professional and vocational training, distance or correspondence training and self-training.

In common sense, training is often understood to be narrower than education in connotation, as training is of the later development stages of a person’s life at a certain age and level of education. Moreover, it is more about providing skill education than knowledge education, and it may continue beyond initial competence to maintain, upgrade and update skills throughout working life. However, the line between these two concepts is rather indistinct. The terms *education* and *training* are used alternatively, or *training* is understood as the primary connotation of education, especially when it refers to professional education.

Vietnam’s Education Law, approved by the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, term XIV, session 7, on June 14, 2019, has determined the educational and training levels of the national education system, including:

- Preschool education consists of preschool and kindergarten education.
- General education is composed of primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education.
- Vocational education includes elementary, intermediate, collegial, and other vocational training programs.
- Higher education training is for bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees.

Accordingly, the concept of training is associated with specific levels of vocational and higher education. This is the reason that in the Law, the terms *vocational education and training* and *higher education training* are used and that in the provisions of the Law on preschool and general education, the term *training* is not used. In short, according to Vietnam's Education Law, training refers to professional and specialized training in vocational and higher education.

Buddhist Studies and Buddhology

Different scholars have already worked on the conception and definition of *Buddhist Studies* and *Buddhology* so far.

There is a notion that these two terms point to the ideological system of the Buddha, being a collection of all the teachings of the Buddha throughout the 49 years of his propaganda life, and later classified and systematized into specific themes and categories by Buddhist masters of different generations. In general, as suggested by both the terms *Buddhist Studies* and *Buddhology*, all the Buddha's teachings are scientifically encapsulated in the Tripitaka (Pali: Tipitaka), which is a theoretical system covering all the problems related to human life and the universe, preached by Buddha Shakyamuni, as a scientific discipline.

In terms of science, Buddhist Studies or Buddhology can be compared with other scientific disciplines such as Psychology, History, Law, Education, Philosophy, Sociology, Economics, and Anthropology. Therefore, to become a Buddhist, it is necessary to learn intensively and get profound knowledge of the Buddha's teachings, according to the programs and categories of study. In short, Buddhist Studies or Buddhology is a method of learning Buddhist knowledge.

According to the Buddhist Dictionary, Buddhist Studies or Buddhology (Chinese 佛學) is a systematic study of Buddhism's origin and ideological development. Its main contents are the teachings preached by the Buddha,

later collected by his immediate disciples. Then, the Buddhist masters of different generations, based on those teachings, taught, researched, and analysed systematically, resulting in a theory of two important themes: the universe and human beings.

Buddhist study consists of two logical aspects, namely theory and practice, covering four categories:

doctrines, reasonings, practices and realization.

They are said to be the guidelines that could lead people to the state of absolute liberation and true happiness. The development of the Buddhist system in India, according to Master In-Shun of Taiwan, can be divided into five periods as follows:

1. *Period of easily achieving Liberation with the Listeners (Sravakas) as a major force:* This period begins from the time when the Buddha established Buddhism until his passing away. The core teachings taught by the Buddha at this period are the Twelve Causes and Conditions, Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths, teaching individuals how to stop illusion and suffering in order to attain peaceful Nirvana.
2. *Period of the Listeners (Sravakas) separated to form the Buddhist schools that bore Bodhisattva tendency.* This period lasted from the time of Buddha's Nirvana to 400 years later (around the fourth to the first century BC), which was equivalent to the period of Sectarian Buddhism. There was a controversy between two ideological tendencies at that time: Theravadins of pragmatism and conservatism, and Mahasanghikas of idealism and radicalism. About 100 BC, from the two basic schools, twenty sects were gradually formed (called Twenty Sectarian Buddhism). Of these twenty, important Theravada sects were: Savastivada, Sautrantika, and Vajiputtaka. The Sarvastivada held the theory of sarvam atthi: All things (dharmas) are in existence, real and independent in terms of their appearances. This theory is shortly stated in such principles as the eternal existence of things, the three states of actual existence, and the natural world of micro atoms. The Sautrantika contended that rupa (form) had only four elements and the mind was real, and that the present was real, while the past and the future did not exist. As for the Vajiputtaka, it said that the very being was the subject of samsara, and that five aggregates were not one or the other. The sects of Mahasanghika, in general, focused on the absolute transcendent nature of the Buddha, the

- altruistic aspirations of the Bodhisattva, and held that the mind was pure and that the past as well as the future was not real.
3. *Period of Mahayana and Hinayana with the Bodhisattvas as a prominent force:* In this period, Mahayana Buddhism began to form and develop (from about the first century BC to the third century AD). Buddhism in this period focused on the idea of Bodhisattva as its primary trend but did not disapprove Hinayana Buddhism. The prominent figure of this period was Nagarjuna (150–250 AD). He composed a commentary on the Middle Way, often known as madhyamaka-kārikā, which advocated that the world of reality experiences was arising and disappearing continuously. All phenomena were not real in nature. Based on the universal principle of dependent-origination (c. pratītyasamutpāda) and in terms of the absolute realm, the madhyamaka-kārikā declares that all dharmas are inherently empty and call it as absolute truth. However, it recognizes that dharmas are not real in existence in terms of the relative realm and calls it as worldly truth. Accordingly, no attachment to any extremist concept is the *Middle Way*.
 4. *Period of Tathagata tendency:* This refers to the development of Buddhism 700 to 1,000 years after the passing away of the Buddha. In this period, the matter of becoming a Buddha was divided into two theories: the Buddha of Dependent Origination (the seed of Buddha was gradually cultivated to grow up) and the Buddha of nature (all sentient beings already had Buddha nature, so were able to become Buddha). Two eminent figures for this period are Asanga and Vasubandhu, who established the *Theory of Mere Consciousness*, as contrary to Nagarjuna's notion of voidness, with the threefold properties: parikalpita (illusion), paratantra (dependent arising) and pariniṣpanna (fully true realization). This theory advocates that all things are made possible by consciousness and that there are three general kinds of consciousness: alaya-vijñāna (store-house consciousness), manas-vijñāna (mind root), and pravṛttivijñāna (six common consciousness, eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind).
 5. *Period of the unification of Brahma and Buddha:* This time witnessed the decay of Indian Buddhism. That is, at that time, the secular trend of mystical mantra assimilated the inherent Tathagata tendency; Buddhist thought was gradually combined with Brahmanism, and then came to the era of the unification of Brahma and Buddha. Again, since Mahayana Buddhism flourished, such ideas as the immeasurable supernatural power of the Buddha, the altruistic aspiration of Bodhisattva and so forth

developed. As a result, Mahayana Buddhism was turned into Tantrism. During this period, the Buddhist practitioners were engrossed in the pursuit of becoming the buddhas, losing the inherent loving-kindness spirit of Mahayana Buddhism. While Brahmanism was flourishing on the scene, such ideas as idealism, absolute truth, totalism, altruism, mysticism, and abrupt enlightenment, were gradually assimilated with Brahma. It was because of these reasons that Buddhism lost all its traces by the 12th century in India. Whereas, in China, Buddhism which was introduced in the Han dynasty (the first century AD) flourished. It was divided into different schools of thought with various doctrines. To avoid conflict between and among them, Chinese Buddhists utilized the method of classifying Buddhist sutras to reconcile divergent tendencies. After the introduction period, Chinese Buddhism was gradually divided into eight schools, ten schools, and thirteen schools. In terms of eight Buddhist schools, the Chan (meditation), Pureland, Vinaya and Tantra belong to the practical schools, while Sānlùn-zōng (三論宗 - The Three Commentaries School), Tiāntāi-zōng (天台宗), Huáyán-zōng (華嚴宗) and Mere-Consciousness school are the doctrinal ones.

If classifying to study Buddhism, it can be viewed from different angles. If surveying Buddhism in terms of historical thought, it can be divided into early Buddhism and developed Buddhism; If viewing from the geographical point of view, it can be divided into two systems of thought: Southern Buddhism and Northern Buddhism. And, if following doctrinal contents, it can be viewed as twofold Dharma as Mahayana/Hinayana, temporality/truthfulness, saint/pure, exoticism/esoterism, and doctrine/meditation. Modern scholars also tend to classify the academic study of Buddhism into two major disciplines, according to the new academic movements such as the cosmology and libertology (equivalently axiology). The former relates to research and description on the truths of things as its goal, and logic as the centre of its arguments. In contrast, the latter takes the presentation of the method, practice, and the true meaning of liberation or Nirvana as its central concern. The American researcher Nathan McGovern divided the academic study of Buddhism into two subjects: Transcendental philosophy (ontology) and relativistic philosophy (cosmology). The scope of the cosmology of Buddhism is extensive. Some schools, based on the continuous cause and effect of phenomena, explain everything according to pluralism; some put a stress on what can be called idealistic singlism, which holds that material phenomena are developed by the spiritual principle; some affirm