

Specificity of Mahayana Buddhism in Vietnamese Intracultural Religious Communication

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the specificity of Mahayana Buddhism (Thien Buddhism) in Vietnamese culture in the context of intracultural religious communication. It reveals its origins and discusses the reasons for its becoming more popular than Theravada Buddhism and no less important than Confucianism, Taoism, and Catholicism. The concept of liberation and its features in the Vietnamese Mahayana tradition are examined. The reinterpretation of the notion of nirvana, its inseparability from the life of a particular person here and now ("the nirvana without [reaching] the peak" – Apratis thitanirvana) is analyzed based on the research literature. A reference to the humanistic ideal of a bodhisattva is made. The authors draw the conclusion that the renewal of Mahayana Buddhism aimed at its adaptation and development brought new vital force and attractiveness to this doctrine, due to which, regardless of the decline in popularity of this trend in India, it gained powerful development in various countries of the world, including those in the Far East and Vietnam. Development of Mahayana Buddhism in Vietnam significantly contributes to the spiritual treasury of the Vietnamese nation, along with Confucianism, Taoism, and Christian confessions. In accordance with the author's position without spiritual culture, intracultural religious communication, long-term progressive development of the country is impossible.

Keywords: Thien Buddhism, intracultural religious communication, Nirvana, Mahayana, Theravada, liberation, contemplation

I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism gained ground in Vietnam approximately in the 2nd century A.D. and quickly became a religion profoundly influencing the spiritual life of the Vietnamese both in the past and in the present, along with Confucianism, Taoism, and Catholicism. While the country was being built during the stage of its transition to socialism, Marxism-Leninism was adopted as the guiding ideology. Nevertheless, the Buddhist teaching had an enormous impact on the spiritual life of a significant part of the Vietnamese population as a theoretical system. During its development in Vietnam and according to the process of intracultural religious communication, Buddhism accepted the features of local culture, and such a special phenomenon as Vietnamese Buddhism took shape. It resulted from an

original synthesis of Buddhist teachings and local traditions. Therefore, Buddhism has always been present in the life of the Vietnamese and associated with the ethics of the Vietnamese nation throughout all the stages of its history. Hence, the use of the positive, rational core of Buddhism is tremendously necessary for shaping the worldview of the Vietnamese people at the new step in the country's development.

We would like to consider Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism primarily according to the Vietnamese and Russian sources. In the scientific literature published in Russian, Buddhism in Vietnam is still insufficiently studied¹. The research of propagation of Buddhism and its impact on the national culture of Vietnam can be found in the works by E. Yu. Knorozova [1], V.D. Nguyen [2], T.K.O. Chan [3] [4], M.H. Dao [5], A.B.

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¹ General information about investigations of Vietnamese Buddhism you can read in the article of Nguen Thi Hong "A survey of the literature on Buddhism in Vietnam for recent 20 years" (RGGU Bulletin № 7/08. Scientific monthly. Series "Philosophy". Moscow, 2008. Ph. 319—325).

Polyakov [6], O.V. Novakova [7], L.V. Vo [8], etc. The issue of Zen Buddhism is discussed in the studies of such Russian scholars as S.V. Uskov and S.T. Glukhov [9], N.L. Bogomazova and G.V. Valeeva [10], I.S. Rodicheva and O.S. Novikova [11], S.K. Kudrin [12], O.A. Matveychev [13], etc. Zen Buddhism within Vietnamese Buddhism is considered in the study by L. Ngoc Chong [14]. The article titled *The Originality of Vietnamese Buddhism* by O.S. Novakova provides a detailed review of the article by Dao Manh Hung titled *The Propagation of Buddhism and Its Impact on Popular Culture in Vietnam*. The authors emphasize the importance of the geographical position of Vietnam at the crossroads of the two world civilizations of Asia, the Indian one and the Chinese one. Therefore, Vietnam was under the impact of these civilizations' spiritual cultures. This fact affected the propagation of Buddhism as its two main movements: the Hinayana (Theravada) from India and the Mahayana from China [15] [16]. E. Torchinov notes that "although geographically Vietnam belongs to Southeast Asia, historically and culturally it is a part of the Far East historical and cultural region, since the foundations of Vietnamese culture are closely related to the Chinese cultural tradition and hieroglyphic writing and Chinese forms of Mahayana Buddhism (especially Chan / Thien) [17].

II. DIFFERENT BRANCHES OF BUDDHISM IN VIETNAMESE INTRACULTURAL RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

Despite the fact that, according to O.V. Novakova, the conceptual center of East Asia was "the Confucian doctrine with its scale of moral and ethical values", Buddhism "was not a secondary religion" [18]. A.B. Polyakov emphasizes that, "after millennia of northern dependence, Vietnam chose its own, independent Buddhist way of development. Buddhist monks held prominent official positions at the court and took part in resolving military issues..." [19]. P.V. Pozner mentions that "the most widespread religion in Vietnam is Buddhism represented by Buddhism of the School of Contemplation. However, local cults, preeminently, the cult of ancestors, are simultaneously common in the traditional Vietnamese society" [20].

Besides, Buddhism in Vietnam has two basic trends that influenced at one another in intracultural religious communication: folk Buddhism and Buddhism of enlightened people. The first one is a combination of Buddhist philosophy and mythology. This is a massive Buddhist movement which is mystical in its nature. It interweaves the concepts of Heaven, the Buddha, and the Spirits. As to such a trend as Buddhism of enlightened people, it has a philosophical nature; this teaching unites various schools belonging to the three

main movements: the Hinayana ("The Small Vehicle"), the Mahayana ("The Big Vehicle"), and Buddhism of the mendicants (which is the symbiosis of the Hinayana and the Mahayana). The Mahayana movement achieved the greatest development in Vietnam; at different historical stages, it significantly influenced the cultural and spiritual life of the Vietnamese. According to the polymath Nguyen Lang, the author of the book titled *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*, "in the early 3rd century, Buddhism in Vietnam was represented exclusively by the Mahayana, the Thien (Contemplation) teaching" [21].

In Vietnam, three main branches of the Mahayana are presented: Zen (in China, this branch is referred to as Chan, and in Vietnam, as Thien), Vajrayana, and Amidaism. These three schools initially developed in China, after which, they reached Vietnam. Buddhism came to China from India, but the above-mentioned Buddhist schools were a specific product of Buddhism developing in China, primarily Chan Buddhism. According to Nakamura Hajime, a Japanese specialist in the history of Buddhism, the logic of Indian Buddhism could not develop in China and East Asia in general, whereas Chan Buddhism was powerfully developing in this region precisely because of its illogical nature [22].

While in China, Japan, and Korea, Buddhism developed in a variety of different Buddhist movements, throughout the history of Buddhism in Vietnam, only the Thien School existed independently. Until now, not a single documentary material has been found on the basis of which one could confidently assert the independent existence of any other trends. Neither Vajrayana nor Amidaism became separate schools in Vietnam (unlike Thien Buddhism); they were merely elements that were absorbed by the Thien teachings. In other words, the history of Buddhism in Vietnam is essentially the history of the Thien schools [23]. Many researchers consider that the Vietnamese adopted Thien Buddhism due to the fact that many of the postulates in its creed are close to Vietnamese culture. These are love for nature, diligence, and valorization of the feeling of compassion for man and all the living creatures.

It can be supposed that Mahayana Buddhism emerged to overcome the limitations of Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism explaining Buddhist sources from various points of view enriched the Buddhist teaching, but at the same time, it made it more rigid and conservative. As a result, the flexibility typical of early Buddhism was lost. The path of liberation by means of monastic practice suggested by the Theravada movement is difficult to comprehend and implement, making Buddhism lose its attractiveness for most people. The emergence of the Mahayana was caused by the need to return massive support to the Buddhist teaching. Mahayana Buddhism profoundly

developed the concept of liberation in a number of new aspects [24]. Mahayanists, as V. I. Rudoy explains, "went further" in their epistemological constructions, developing the doctrine of the "emptiness of dharmas" [25].

Theravada Buddhism proceeds from the statement that life is suffering, from which it derives the concept of liberation by joining a monastery, dissociation from life in order to achieve nirvana as the state of the higher peace. Viewed as a whole, this is a passive sort of liberation. By overcoming the above-listed drawbacks, the Mahayana seeks for a new way to liberate man. This movement of Buddhism emphasizes liberation of the mind, accentuating that liberation can be achieved without abandoning life. The theory of Mahayana Buddhism considers that the human soul comprises both error and enlightenment, the nature of the Buddha and the earthly nature, hell and nirvana. Man whose soul strives for enlightenment overcomes delusions.

III. NIRVANA AS THE UTMOST GOAL AND PERFECT LIBERATION IN THE MAHAYANA

Nirvana is a multiple-valued notion. In Sanskrit, this word is spelt as *nirvāṇa* and can be explained in three ways from the philosophical perspective:

- Nir: to exit, to separate; vana: a winding, by-pass, changeable road. *Nirvāṇa* means abandoning a winding road, leaving it, i.e. breaking out from the circle of births and deaths;
- Nir: not; vana: stenchy, dirty. Nirvana – not stenchy, not dirty (calm, secluded, clean);
- Nir: to part, to move away; vana: a thicket. Nirvana – to part from the thicket (to move away from difficulties in life) [26].

Most Buddhists explain this term as follows: "nir" means to deny, "vana" is the flame of the three poisons; nirvana means no longer effusing the flame of the three poisons. Although all these explanations are different, they have a common meaning: nirvana is getting rid of desires, breaking the karmic circle, and absolute purity. In nirvana, the flow of linear time exists no longer, yet there is an eternal condensation of space and time in human consciousness. Hence, nirvana in Buddhism is not some blissful region that has a certain location in space and time. Nirvana is a spiritual state implying perfect placidity, calm, wisdom, annihilation of attachments and desires, getting rid of ignorance, and cessation of all suffering and misfortune (kleshas). Shakyamuni Buddha regarded it as a feeling of infinite pacification, limitless freedom, and absolute happiness of liberation. In its essence, nirvana in Buddhism is a supertemporal, non-spatial concept which is indefinite and has no beginning or end. According to Shakyamuni, truth does not have to be found at the edge of the world,

it exists right here and now. It is exactly the wrong way of thinking that prevents man from seeing nirvana in the existing reality. Thus, nirvana is primarily achieved by overcoming the errors of human consciousness [27].

The emergence of Mahayana Buddhism became a movement for the revival of Buddhism which sought to find its place in society that resulted from the need to overcome the limitations of the Theravada. Due to the fact that nirvana in early Buddhism is limited to an individual framework, whereas the Mahayana is focused upon the notion of the Bodhisattva, which implies the need to benefit the others, therefore, in Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of nirvana changed its direction – it is a "nirvana without [reaching] the peak", or a "nirvana which takes its stand nowhere" (a "non-abiding" or "not fixed" nirvana).

A nirvana without [reaching] the peak (Apratis thitanirvana) is the original concept of Mahayana Buddhism which assumes that there are those who dwell in the real world, continue staying in the circle of samsara, yet have freedom and immanence, and are entirely their own masters, while being active and helping the others achieve their liberation. This nirvana without [reaching] the peak is a compromise between the ideas of liberation and the infinity of rebirth known as samsara. Thus, in the Mahayana, nirvana actually goes beyond the idea of the circle of rebirths and the thought of liberation and implies taking dynamic actions in life to save the others.

The concept of a nirvana without [reaching] the peak in Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the relentless spirit of selfless devotion, the desire to free the others from their errors. Nirvana can be achieved anywhere as soon as complete awakening (*bujjhati*) takes place. Consequently, to reach liberation, one does not need to reject life; one merely needs to achieve a state in which no differences between this shore, samsara, and the other one, liberation, exist, and there are no more differences between all the living things and the Buddha, delusion and enlightenment. Samsara is identical to nirvana, and the overshadowed consciousness (*klesha*) is identical to enlightenment (*bodhi*). Nirvana and samsara are just the same; yet, if you look at them in an ignorant manner, all you see is the cycle of rebirth, and if you look at them after you have reached enlightenment, this is nirvana [28].

According to the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, nirvana is not cognized as something different from the circle of births and deaths or samsara, as the pursuit of differences is the result of erroneous judgments. The vision of the future that will come when the world of senses is completely eliminated is the nirvana of the "Elders" (the Theravada). "As to the nirvana of the Mahayana, it overcomes the limits of duality of nirvana and samsara" [29]. Thus, the Mahayana, proceeding from the statement that "samsara is nirvana", has

demonstrated the mankind that the wheel of births and deaths and nirvana are inseparable, and enlightenment can be achieved in the earthly world itself. Due to this fact, Buddhism has become closer to people, giving them faith that they can find their way in the world of sufferings.

In its essence, the nirvana of Mahayana Buddhism is a continuation of the concept of nirvana in Theravada Buddhism; however, it emphasizes active participation in life. At the stage of early Buddhism, nirvana was regarded as the cessation of earthly existence, the departure to the realm of passive calm, which seemed complicated to achieve, and because of that, Buddhism was gradually losing its attractiveness. In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept of nirvana was raised to a higher level and adapted to the epoch and the demands of society. This is a more vivid and activity-based understanding of nirvana. The thought that "all the living things can become a Buddha" was widely developed in Mahayana Buddhism. According to this idea, anyone practicing Buddhism can become a Buddha [30].

IV. CONCLUSION

The position of liberation for one's own benefit and for all the living things in Mahayana Buddhism is an active step in the development of the Buddhist teaching. Early Buddhism was leading to liberation by one's own forces, advising to "light a torch independently and go ahead". Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes that, if you want to achieve liberation, it is necessary to help the others free themselves together with you. By helping the others free themselves, you liberate yourself. The idea of liberation is the soul of Buddhism. The desire to free people from sufferings has a profound humanistic meaning. The faith in the possibility of independent liberation, the perspective of absolute happiness and tranquility in nirvana helps people regain spiritual strength to persevere when facing vicissitudes of life. Liberation in Buddhism is like salvation in theistic religions, and on this mutual spiritual understanding is possible to communicate with Christian confessions inside Vietnamese religious culture. In spite of metaphysical difference, moral result of liberation and salvation is the same.

Generally speaking, Mahayana Buddhism has taken a giant step in developing the concept of seeking liberation by active participation in life. The researcher Kimura Taiken analyzed the basic features of the Mahayana in comparison with Hinayana (Theravada) Buddhism. In his opinion, "Theravada Buddhism has a negative nature, whereas the Mahayana has a positive one; the traditional Theravada oriented towards personal freedom is supported by individuals, and the Mahayana, by mass movements. In the Theravada, the goal is personal liberation; the Mahayana sees its goal

as liberation of the entire society; the Theravada stands for reclusion, and the Mahayana stands for vigorous activity; the Theravada is oriented towards those who have decided to reject the worldly life and devote themselves to monasticism, and the Mahayana is accessible to anyone. The Mahayana proclaims the slogan of returning to the spirit of the Buddha and eminently inherits the original Buddhist spirit; therefore, we can say that the Mahayana is closer to the true teaching of the Buddha" [31].

It is fair to say that, based on the "Four Noble Truths" as the key statements, Buddhism developed by stages, introducing its own nuances in the concept of the way and manner of leaving sufferings at each stage. Buddhism has come a long way of searching and development, from the position of denying worldly life, estrangement from it suggested in early Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism to the Mahayana concept of active participation in life.

The Mahayana is the search for the roots manifesting the essence of the Buddha's teachings. It seeks to restore the original spirit of the Buddhist teaching [32]. For this very reason, we can say that early Buddhism serves as the foundation, the powerful root which shaped Mahayana Buddhism. In its turn, Mahayana Buddhism is the flowers and fruits of this tree, due to which the tree itself grows and gains its strength. Nirvana in Buddhism can be attained in many ways: it is important to follow the Dharma, stay chaste, and meditate. The renewal of Mahayana Buddhism aimed at its adaptation and development added new vitality and attractiveness to this teaching; as a result, despite the decline in the popularity of this trend in India, it gained intense development in many countries of the world, including those in the Far East and Vietnam [33]. As O.V. Novakova mentions, "in the face of the harsh challenges of the 21st century, mainly globalization and competition, the impact of traditional civilizational values in society will only keep growing" [34]. In this regard, development of Mahayana Buddhism in Vietnam significantly contributes to the spiritual treasury of the Vietnamese nation, along with Confucianism, Taoism, and Christian confessions. We believe that without spiritual culture, intracultural religious communication, long-term progressive development of the country is impossible.

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