

## METAPHOR OF THE “IDEAL MIDPOINT” IN NGUYEN BINH KHIEM’S ETHICAL CONCEPTION

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***Abstract:** In the history of Eastern and Vietnamese philosophy, metaphor has been widely used by thinkers to express their ideas. In his intellectual legacy, Nguyen Binh Khiem employed numerous metaphors, including the “ideal midpoint”. This is considered a typical example of understanding his moral principles.*

***Keywords:** Metaphor, Doctrine of the Mean, Madhyamaka, Ideal midpoint, Golden midpoint.*

### 1. Metaphor (隱喻) as a tool for expressing a mindset

Metaphor involves using the figurative meaning of a word, or expressing an abstract concept by transferring its name from one object to a similar one or from an abstract domain to a concrete one. In ethics, the metaphor of the “ideal midpoint” or “golden midpoint” (黃金中點) is frequently used to articulate principles of human conduct towards external objects. M.T. Stepaniants posits that the “golden midpoint” metaphor is key to a better understanding of the universal and the particular in ethical philosophy<sup>1</sup>.

In ethical philosophy, the universal and the particular are two categories that reflect the most general and fundamental aspects, attributes, and relationships within the realm of ethics. Here, “the universal exists only in and

through the particular”, while “the particular exists only in a relationship leading to the universal”<sup>2</sup>. The universal aspect of ethics across different cultures, in our view, originates from the inherent goodness of human nature. This intrinsic goodness accounts for similarities in ethical behavior, as evidenced by Mencius (372-289 BC) through his example of a child falling into a well, rescued by others without considering whose child it was. However, in reality, ethical norms differ and are even disparate across cultures. A detailed discussion on this issue would be extensive and thus falls outside the scope of this paper. Our primary interest lies in why thinkers frequently use metaphors when discussing ethical phenomena and the guiding principles

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of moral behavior. Does the use of metaphor increase the particular content within ethics?

Nguyen Binh Khiem, during his lifetime, extensively used metaphors in his writings. This practice was not unique to his thought but was common among many other Vietnamese thinkers. However, there is a consistent phenomenon in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s use of the “ideal midpoint” (“golden midpoint”) metaphor to clarify the role of the “Middle Way” (道中) as a principle of ethical conduct. In Nguyen Binh Khiem’s thought, the use of this metaphor stems from multiple origins, primarily from Confucianism with its Doctrine of the Mean (中庸). This doctrine extols the “golden midpoint” as the ultimate goal of “supreme virtue” achieved through cautious human actions to avoid extremes, meaning neither deviation nor change. This concept was extended to loyalty to the king, and further, Nguyen Binh Khiem adopted it as a principle for all ethical actions. During Nguyen Binh Khiem’s era, the trend of *Tam Giao Dong Nguyen* (三教同原 - “Three Religions of the same/one Origin”) was increasingly influencing the reflections of thinkers. Thus, Nagarjuna’s Madhyamaka (中觀論) also drew the attention and expression of Nguyen Binh Khiem. Next, we will examine Nguyen Binh

Khiem’s conception of the “golden midpoint” through his expression of “the Middle Way”.

## 2. “The Middle Way” in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s thought from the perspective of the three religions

Regarding the virtue of the junzi (gentleman), the *Doctrine of the Mean* states: “The gentleman is harmonious but not a conformist—how strong is that! He holds to the Mean and does not lean to one side—how strong is that!” (*Doctrine of the Mean*, p.10). How does one maintain the middle (way) without leaning? This is not a simple matter, because in life, many situations arise that force people to choose between two options, which may first concern their survival and then that of the community to which they belong. Confucius considered the *Doctrine of the Mean* a beautiful virtue, because “*Trung*” (中) means “middle” and “*Dung*” (庸) means “not leaning”. This is also a guiding principle for people to avoid insufficiency or excess: “The Doctrine of the Mean is indeed a virtue, supremely beautiful! It has long been said that the common people cannot follow it!” (*The Analects*, VI, p.27). Therefore, resolving the complexity of finding the “ideal midpoint” is not an alternative between two extremes, but rather a point equidistant from those two extremes. The *Doctrine of the*

*Mean* clearly states: “Sincerity is the Dao of Heaven; cultivating oneself to become sincere is the Dao of man. One who is naturally sincere, hits the Dao without effort, understands the Dao without thought, and calmly holds to the Dao of the Mean: this is the sage”. This demonstrates that the “golden midpoint” is both ideal and extremely sensitive, and only a sage with a “supremely sincere” mindset can reach the state of impartiality (*Doctrine of the Mean*, p.20).

However, beyond “sincerity” to the point of “supreme sincerity”, the path to the “golden midpoint” for all ethical actions, Confucius also advised people to be extremely cautious when pursuing their chosen goals. Caution is needed to avoid insufficiency and to achieve the necessary balance in relationships between people and between people and the natural course of things. In other words, it is the purposeful activity of human beings as rational and volitional entities, meaning they know how to choose strategies for their actions. This strategy is none other than moderation, for only then can one find the ability to regulate and uncover the profound causes of all existence harmoniously.

Moderation means restraining all extremist tendencies so that order in the world can be established. Therefore, Confucius always carefully avoided four

things: “No arbitrariness, no insistence, no obstinacy, no egoism” (*The Analects*, IX, p.4). When striving to maintain the rather fragile and sensitive balance between “excess and deficiency”, Confucius advised people to adhere to the principle of moderation and adjustment. This principle is by no means predetermined and rigid for all cases and all times, but rather a situational and flexible principle of conduct. This reminds us of Ho Chi Minh’s message to Huynh Thuc Khang in the early days of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam government, stating that one must “respond to all changes with an unchanging principle”.

The unchanging principle for the Vietnamese revolution at that time was “independence and freedom”, while in Confucius’s case, it was harmony, avoiding excess and deficiency. Confucius said: “*Qiu* (I) (referring to himself) has heard that feudal lords or high officials worry not about scarcity of wealth, but about unequal distribution; they worry not about the poverty of the people, but about their instability. If wealth is equally distributed, the people will not be poor; if the people are harmonious, wealth will not be scarce; if the people are stable, the nation will not fall” (*The Analects*, XVI, p.1). Confucius’s concept of equal distribution of benefits to achieve harmony in human relations may at first seem paradoxical

between “excess and deficiency”. Still, it is a way of resolving the situation in conditions of scarcity of resources, aiming for consensus among all people.

Establishing such a principle of response could only be achieved by a sage. Hence, Yan Hui sadly lamented: “The Master’s (Confucius’s) Dao is like gazing up; the more one looks, the higher it seems. The more one strives to penetrate it, the more solid it appears. It seems to be right before me, yet suddenly it is behind. The Master skillfully guides people step by step. He broadened my knowledge through literature and restrained me through rites. I want to stop, but I cannot. I exert all my strength [in learning] and feel as if something is towering, blocking my way; even if I want to follow [the Dao] to the end, I cannot” (*The Analects*, IX, p.10).

In summary, in the Confucian classics, the identification of the “ideal midpoint” aims to appropriately respond to phenomena of excess and deficiency, helping to adjust potential relationships in the real life of society positively. Nguyen Binh Khiem thoroughly absorbed this thought to propose a course of action for himself and for those who sympathized with him. His choice of the “ideal midpoint” originated entirely from the principle established in the Doctrine of the Mean, which later Confucian founders argued became a

guiding principle for ethical conduct.

“The Middle Way” is the path used to denote the boundary between two extremes, where each point in the infinite set of points on that path, besides its common aspects, also possesses specific characteristics determined by the opposition of the two extremes. Nguyen Binh Khiem wrote: “The Dao in me, I take the middle path/ Do not let it be muddy, do not let it be clear”<sup>3</sup>.

Nguyen Binh Khiem’s choice of “the Middle Way” as a principle of conduct was not accidental, but primarily dictated by the social context of his time. He was a statesman and a true Confucian scholar. Therefore, he could not accept phenomena contrary to the Dao of the sages perpetrated by some high-ranking officials in the Mac dynasty. After submitting a bold petition to King Mac, advocating for the execution of 18 corrupted officials, which the king did not accept, he resigned and retreated to Bach Van hermitage (白雲) in his hometown after 8 years of serving as Deputy Minister of Personnel. Later, due to his status as a profound scholar of Confucianism, especially Neo-Confucianism, and his significant contributions to the Mac dynasty, he was posthumously honored as Trinh Quoc Cong. People often called him Trang Trinh because he passed the highest imperial examination (*Trang nguyên*) with his Confucian knowledge

in the Cheng-Zhu school.

Reading the two lines of poetry above, most readers affirm that Nguyen Binh Khiem's conception of "Middle Way" originated from the "Doctrine of the Mean", meaning avoiding insufficiency (不及) and excess (太過). If understood this way, in our opinion, it oversimplifies his mindset. The principle of the Doctrine of the Mean is to avoid insufficiency and excess, to the point where Confucius considered "excess is like insufficiency" (過猶不及) (*The Analects*, XI, p.15). This means "standing between two extremes" but with discretion, as long as it does not exceed the permissible limits. In contrast, Nguyen Binh Khiem showed decisiveness in his situational conduct, stating, "do not let it be muddy, do not let it be clear". Because, as we understand it, the "clear stream" is good, but also extremely dangerous. In ethical quality, purity is admirable in the character of a scholar-gentleman, but if it is not the right time, it will be considered "eccentric" (立異). Nguyen Binh Khiem witnessed this phenomenon firsthand within the Mac court. He regarded corrupt individuals who "gnawed at walls and dug through foundations" to steal national property as belonging to the "muddy stream".

Thus, Nguyen Binh Khiem perceived "The Middle Way" not only as a path ensuring impartiality but also as a nearly absolute independent path between two

opposing forces. In other words, it is an ideal path that is difficult to achieve in reality because there is no relative unity between them.

The application of the "middle way" view to the realm of ethics can be seen in the epistemological theory of Mahayana Buddhism by Bodhisattva Nagarjuna, who is revered as the second Sakyamuni. Nagarjuna "diligently gathered the achievements that Mahayana scholars had silently contributed over hundreds of years, and brought them together... as well as establishing the position of Mahayana Buddhism"<sup>4</sup>. According to Nagarjuna's stance, "the essence of dependent origination is 'Emptiness'. Emptiness means unhindered. 'Emptiness' here does not fall into the concepts of 'empty' and 'existent,' but is the middle path. Therefore, the name Madhyamaka (中論) aims to clarify the middle way". The purpose of the Middle Way is to help people, when perceiving the world, not fall into the realm of external paths and ordinary beings, meaning denying both conventional truth and ultimate truth. Standing on the "middle" position means that "only those who comprehend the Middle Truth (中帝) can enter samsara without being bound or disturbed by samsara; they enter Nirvana yet do not forget to save suffering sentient beings"<sup>5</sup>.

During Nguyen Binh Khiem's time,

although Buddhism was somewhat weakened for political reasons as the Later Le dynasty prioritized Confucianism in its state governance, completely excluding Buddhist involvement in politics, Nagarjuna’s thought still greatly influenced the field of Buddhism in Vietnam. Nguyen Binh Khiem himself was knowledgeable in the three religions, especially Mahayana Buddhism. After resigning from his official post, most of his works showed the presence of Mahayana Buddhist thought regarding the nature of the world and the possibility of liberation, like those of Buddha Sakyamuni, etc. Therefore, Nguyen Binh Khiem’s conception of “The Middle Way”, in our opinion, cannot be explained from the Confucian perspective. At the very least, it should be acknowledged that his conception bore the imprint of Song Neo-Confucianism, a form of Confucianism during the Song dynasty that leaned towards understanding Confucianism of Confucius and Mencius under the influence of Buddhist and Daoist thought. In other words, Confucianism at that time was more or less influenced by Buddhism and Daoism.

Having absorbed Confucian and Buddhist knowledge from various sources, from his parents who came from the intellectual class, from his teacher Bang Nhan Luong Dac Bang

in Hoi Trao (Thanh Hoa Province), from his research and contemplation, and especially after leaving the official realm which he called “*thanh van*” (blue clouds), and returning to Bach Van hermitage, he sought Buddhist teachings to gain more knowledge to interpret the contradictory and ironic events of the world. Although a true Confucian scholar should apply his knowledge to serve the world, at that time, the fame that others strove to achieve was not enduring fame for posterity to follow; on the contrary, it was a means for “petty” Confucian scholars to enrich themselves. We believe that the contemporary historical context of Dai Viet, transitioning from order to chaos, from unity to division, gave rise to opposing forces vying for dominance. The greatest irony was that within a defined faction, there were divisions and struggles for personal gain. In such a situation, devising the most effective philosophy of conduct was extremely difficult.

Before Nguyen Binh Khiem, the thinker and founding father Nguyen Trai had tasted all the bitterness of life, in any circumstance, he remained determined to be “loyal and filial, unblemished by磨 or tainted by dye”. The common point between these two Confucian scholars, living in two successive centuries, was their

unconditional loyalty to the monarch. They both received harsh “responses” from political life, though Nguyen Binh Khiem’s was milder. Their thought was always imbued with the spirit of “worry first, rejoice later” (先憂後樂), and it was very difficult for them to abandon the “Confucian hat” they wore. However, their difference lay in their approach to coping and interacting with the deteriorating social ethics, which were increasingly deviating from the moral standards of the sages.

In Nguyen Binh Khiem’s writings, we see that he enthusiastically delved into the principles of the *I Ching* and keenly applied them to his own life, while also helping others to act accordingly. He repeatedly mentioned the image of the *Tai Chi* (太極), viewing it as the origin of all existence in a dynamic state. However, to understand the ceaseless movement of *Tai Chi* and the myriad things born from it, according to Nguyen Binh Khiem, one needs a “truly calm” and lucid mind. Looking at the *Tai Chi* diagram, we clearly see the extremely subtle and sensitive boundary between its two primordial elements, Yin and Yang. Although Yin and Yang are relatively dependent on each other, due to dynamism, Yin can change positions with Yang, leading to the phenomena of waxing and waning. However, the boundary drawn by a “soft” curve is

easier to recognize. The midpoint on that curve creates the balance of Yin and Yang, which is quite clear when looking at the *Tai Chi* diagram. Of course, correctly identifying the “ideal midpoint” is not simple, even merely conventional. Therefore, Nguyen Binh Khiem attributed ethical relationships to the “ideal midpoint” through another indirect metaphor, which he called “middle landing place” (中津). The word “landing place” (津) here, combined with “to cross/pass” (渡), is understood as a landing place (津渡). Studying the essay “*Trung Tan Quan Bi Ky*” (中津館碑記 - Inscription on the Stele of Trung Tan Tavern/Pub), we will see that Nguyen Binh Khiem effectively used the “ideal midpoint” metaphor to indicate ethical principles of conduct.

According to Nguyen Binh Khiem, in the autumn of the Year of *Nham Dan* (1542), he resigned from office and returned to his hometown. While strolling with elders in the village at Trung Tan (Middle landing place), he noticed its beautiful location, connected to the transportation system, so he proposed building a tavern there as a resting place for passersby. Everyone agreed, and the construction proceeded smoothly. When the tavern was completed, he named it “Quan Trung Tan (Middle Landing place Pub/Tavern)”. When people asked for the

meaning of the tavern’s/pub’s name, he explained: “‘Trung’ (Middle) means uprightness. To fully preserve one’s goodness is trung; not to fully preserve one’s goodness is not trung. ‘Tan’ means a landing place. To know where to stop is to be at the right landing place; not to know where to stop is to be lost. The name of this tavern generally means this. For example, loyalty to the king, filial piety to parents, affection for siblings, harmony with husband and wife, trustworthiness with friends—these are *trung*. To face wealth without greed, to see profit without 争奪, to rejoice in goodness and be tolerant of others, to deal with all things with sincerity—these are *trung*. Where there is *trung*, there is supreme goodness. If one can truly take this as a standard, knowing the essential point of return, then all things will naturally unfold from it, and nothing will fail to reach supreme goodness. How can such beautiful merits be measured?” Thus, the metaphor of “middle landing place” is equated with “uprightness”, not only avoiding deviation but also being at the right landing place as a condition for preserving goodness.

Nguyen Binh Khiem’s use of the word “landing place” also carries another implicit meaning: salvation or liberation (*dao bi ngan* - 到彼岸). He further explained in the stele inscription

as follows:

“*Trung* (Middle) means goodness /  
*Tan* (Landing place) means returning.

Knowing when to stop brings peace /  
Even in haste, one does not depart [from  
goodness].

Walking gracefully on the right path  
/ Undisturbed by other forks.

Practicing within oneself to respond  
to others / contemplating it will lead one  
to it.

Serving parents with utmost filial  
piety / Serving the king without deceit.

Older brothers are affectionate,  
younger siblings are respectful. The  
husband initiates, and the wife follows.

Associating with friends, one stops  
at trustworthiness / Attached with deep  
affection.

Striving to walk on the path of  
goodness / not considering it as one’s  
own.

If others possess talent, it is as if one  
possesses talent for oneself.

Who are the sages / They are those  
with few desires.

To reach the ultimate / it lies in  
contemplating one’s actions.

The teachings of the ancients are  
exceedingly clear / True virtue is our  
model”<sup>6</sup>.

The entire instruction above is a  
way of expressing the fundamental  
contents of Confucianism based on  
the “Doctrine of the Mean”, which is

“true virtue” as we have presented. In “*Trung Tan Quan Bi Ky*”, Nguyen Binh Khiem also mentioned the convergence between “*trung*” (middle) and “*thien*” (善 – goodness/the Good), meaning that wherever there is “*trung*”, there is supreme goodness. However, that is only a necessary condition, not sufficient. According to him: “If the Dao meets its time, it achieves adaptability / A slight deviation, and it is no longer the middle path”<sup>7</sup>. Thus, to achieve “The Middle Way” requires careful consideration of the prevailing circumstances (in space and time), and extreme caution to avoid even the smallest mistakes. In another instance, he also referred to appropriate conduct, through the calm observation of a scholar with the aforementioned mindset, called “*thoi trung*” (時中 - timely mean/at the right moment): “When the beautiful season arrives, stretching across myriad miles / Silently observing the will of Heaven, one understands *thoi trung*”<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. Conclusion

When discussing “The Middle Way”, Nguyen Binh Khiem used the “ideal midpoint”, also known as the “golden midpoint”, as a metaphor through the image of the “middle landing place” (中津). This signifies the correct path in ethical conduct, without deviation in any situation (Confucianism). It is also a place from

which to deliver/ferry people across the river (*dao bi ngan* - reaching the other shore), used to signify the Buddhist mindset in saving and liberating people from endless suffering (*samsara*). Here, we do not wish to elaborate on the word “*quán*” (pub/tavern) for the following reason: in the original text, the character “*quán*” was written as “觀”, meaning a place where Daoist priests engaged in their activities. However, translators have argued that this character does not fit the content of the “*Trung Tan Quan Bi Ky*”, and therefore replaced it with “館” (*quán* - tavern). We believe that adhering to and understanding the original character “觀” (*quán*) would help us better understand Nguyen Binh Khiem’s mindset when he intended the entire text of the Trung Tan Tavern stele to include a third component: Daoist thought. This is because traces of such “*quán*” structures in the Northern Delta show their dual function as both resting places for travelers and sites for Daoist activities. Daoist thought is not directly presented in this stele inscription, but elsewhere, Nguyen Binh Khiem also referred to a “leisurely” and “self-contained” mindset, arguing that only in such a spiritual state can one truly comprehend the essence of “The Middle Way”.

Returning to the issue of the “universal” and the “particular”

in Nguyen Binh Khiem’s ethical conceptions, we wish to emphasize the consistency in “The Middle Way”, which he interpreted as impartiality. This reflects the mindset of a Confucian scholar who is “unmoved by poverty or wealth” (*bản tiền bất năng di*), becoming an ethical imperative for a Confucian who takes the “golden mean” as a standard. The particular aspect of his thought is the combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism

to clarify the mindset of choosing the “ideal midpoint”. Seeking the implicit meaning behind the use of metaphor is a worthwhile endeavor when studying the thought of each nation in specific historical periods. Vietnamese thinkers throughout history, instead of rigorously logical argumentation, often used images and metaphors as the most effective messages, and here, Nguyen Binh Khiem is a typical example.

*(Translated by Phan Thi Thu Hang)*

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