

Pantheistic Characteristic in Mahayana Buddhism in the South of Vietnam

TRẦN HỒNG LIÊN*

ABSTRACT: The paper provides a comparison among three most notable Buddhist schools in Vietnam, namely the Northern school, the Southern school, and Khất sĩ school. Interestingly, the Southern region of Vietnam is a more suitable place for establishment and development of all three schools in comparison with the Northern and Middle regions. Deep research on pantheon at pagodas and Buddhist temples, especially in Southern region, and on its resident's religious feeling reveals that Buddhism here, thanks to deep integration with indigenous beliefs, has formed its own specific characteristics.

For over two thousand years, Buddhism has always manifested its vitality since it came to Vietnam. The harmonization and integration of Buddhism into the national culture are so thorough and stable to an extent that many scientists compare it as water within milk, blood within flesh, or water absorbed into land, etc.

After a prolonged period of entering and developing, along with the unification, Buddhism in Vietnam has gained its own specific characteristics. These characteristics were defined and formed during its development in specific regions and strengthened by the geographic and politic characteristics of each region and socio-economic conditions of local communities. In the Southern region, besides common features, Buddhism has its own characteristics and varies complicatedly with many religious sects. In this new land, Buddhism had many advantages to develop into three schools, namely Mahayana, Hinayana, and mendicant monks¹.

The Northern School (also called Mahayana)² is a popular school in the Southern region for many centuries. The Southern school (known as Hinayana) did not appear in this region until 1938. It was introduced to Vietnam from Cambodia by Hộ Tông and named primitive Buddhism of Vietnam (Theravada). The Khất sĩ school (Mendicant monk) is a school which exists only in the Southern region with

*.Dr., Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences in the South.

its own directions. This school, founded by Minh Đăng Quang during 1943-1944, seeks to combine Mahayana and Hinayana.

1. Regarding the areas of development of those three schools, Southern region was a more suitable place for establishment and development than the Northern and Middle regions. Among the three schools, Mahayana is more *open*, creative, and dynamic. In terms of thinking about dogmas, rituals, and practices, Mahayana has more clearly shown a nature of *flexibility*, a high sense of *adaptability*³. During its own development of over 2,000 years, Vietnamese Buddhism, mainly the Mahayana, has achieved greatly in establishing and developing its own characteristics and nature, which represents significantly through sanctuaries and its pantheist along with a range of round Bodhisattva statues worshipped at the same time with Sakymuni and Adida Buddha.

Many thorough studies of Vietnamese Buddhism and Buddhism in the Southern region⁴ found evidences of traditional folks in Buddhism and indicated that they are important factors which contributed to the representation of Vietnamese Buddhism's characteristics.

2. Searching for the origin and reason resulting in the pantheistic characteristics in Mahayana in Vietnam is a necessity in identifying Vietnamese Buddhism's characteristics. While searching for the origin of pagoda in Vietnam, some scholars stated that "It is possible that the very first pagodas in Vietnam used to be temples worshipping traditional and folk gods or geniuses then Buddhist shrines were added in. People might not have put statues of Tứ Pháp (Four Dharmas) into the Buddhist temples but placed Buddha statues into temples worshiping Four Dharmas. This means temples to worship those agricultural goddesses had existed long before that then people turned them into female Buddha's"⁵. Along with the idea that Buddhism was turn into folk and popularized via its integration into indigenous folk beliefs, one author figured out two key characteristics of Vietnamese Buddhism: folkness and consistency⁶. In the Southern region only, when screening and surveying many ancient Buddhist temples, it is clearly that *their formation always associated with folk tales and traditional beliefs. For example, Buddhist temples were mostly built on available shrines or joss-houses; after building a pagoda, people often set up two small joss-houses beside it to worship the local earth god and Five- basic- element Goddesses (or Lady of Realm, Lady Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ; or the Lady of Water, Lady of Fire, etc.)*⁷

Thus, based on primitive *adaptability*, when this religion entered a region or a country, it *quickly accommodated with indigenous customs and traditions...* *Adaptability can be seen via the appearance of many indigenous gods on the Buddhist altar.* Dharma Protectors are the god who promoted doing the good; the god who punished anyone doing the bad, all acting as protectors for the Buddhist temples.

Buddhism with the spirit of mercifulness and saving from misfortune and danger had clearly promoted the role and decency of Bodhisattva in Mahayana. While in pagodas of the Northern school, Bodhisattva and indigenous gods are worshipped, we can see only Sakyamuni worshipped in Hinayana pagoda. The symbol of mercifulness among Bodhisattvas is the Goddess of Mercy. People worshiped and respected Her as the Mother of people, and called her Lady Buddha. The polytheistic characteristic of the Vietnamese belief, along with the emphasis on the femininity results in the worshiping of Mother Goddess that is very popular in all three regions of the country. One author commented on this fact that “simultaneous dependence on the nature, in the field of thoughts, results in the collective way of thinking; in the field of religion that is the polytheism. The femininity in agriculture, in the field of social relationship, results in a lifestyle which gives more favour to sentiment, and women are respected; in the field of religion that is the worship of goddesses. Because the Vietnamese are more directed to prosperity, their goddesses are not the young and beautiful girls but mothers and old ladies”⁸.

3. Polytheistic belief, in which there are many female goddesses, can be popularly found in pagodas in the Southern region, especially ancient Buddhist temples that belong to Mahayana.

Some human gods appeared in Vietnamese Buddhist temples in Southern region such as *Hùng King* (Bình Đông temple, Bình Dương province); *Hai Bà Trưng* (Niệm Phật court, Hung An road, Hồ Chí Minh city); *Trần Hưng Đạo* (Bửu Phong temple, Đồng Nai province); *Nguyễn Trung Trực* (Sùng Đức temple, Hồ Chí Minh City).

Apart from human gods who are human or legends, there are still many gods from Heaven such as Lady Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ worshipped in Thiên Phước Buddhist temple (Vĩnh Long province); Bửu Lâm temple (Tiền Giang province), etc. Many Buddhist temples have evidences of worshipping kings who were considered sons of the Heavenly God (Thiên Tử) which is a common practice in ancient Buddhist temples in the Northern region.

Thành Hoàng Bốn Cảnh (Bốn Cảnh tutelary god), who is originally worshipped in communal house in the village, has also been found in a Buddhist temple (Giác Vương pagoda, Hóc Môn, Hồ Chí Minh city).

Thần Bốn Mạng (Individual Protector God) has his shrine in the front module of Long Bàn temple (Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu); Châu Viên temple (An Giang), etc.

In mountainous areas, traces of worship four mountain deities (*Tứ vị sơn thần*) have been found in Phước Lâm temple (Tây Ninh township); Linh Sơn Tiên Thạch Tự temple (Bà Đen mountain, Tây Ninh); etc.

Since deeply influenced by folk customs, traditions, and belief, Mahayana temples have adopted to annually *worship votive tablets of gods who can mobile the ghost soldiers*.

Especially, in ancient Buddhist temples in the Southern region, there are two small altars, of which one is placed in front of the temple (the room to go to the front altar) worshipping *ten types of forsake spirit*; and the other is *Xuất Sanh altar* (in the back of the temple). The altar of ten types of forsake spirit uses to worship forsake spirits, injustice deaths, ghost soldiers, and soldiers died in wars.

Apart from the deities and gods mentioned above, in Buddhist temples, there are Long Vương (Sea God) shrine placed separately or together with ten Diêm Vương (the Deaths), called otherwise *the ten great halls*, representing ten kings who controlled and managed the hell.

The process of residential integration among different ethnic groups such as the Chinese, the Khmer in the Southern region resulted in the religious integration within the temple. *Quan Thánh, Thiên Hậu statues* (Trường Thạnh temple, Phật Ấn, Hồ Chí Minh City); *Thiên Phụ, Địa Mẫu* shrine which was commonly worshipped in the Chinese joss-houses are found in Bửu Phong temple (Đồng Nai), etc. *Neak Tà* joss-houses of the Khmer are also found in Linh Quang temple (Vĩnh Long), Linh Sơn (Long An), Phụng Sơn (District No. 11, Hồ Chí Minh City), etc. *Vishnu*, a Brahman genie, is found in Phước Lâm temple (Bà Rịa – Vũng Tàu), Bửu Sơn, Bửu Thành, Phước Hội (Đồng Nai), etc.

Evidence of Taoism is also left in genies' shrines in Buddhist temples via the image of *Bắc Đế* (Trường Thạnh temple, Hồ Chí Minh City) or the statue set of *Ngọc Hoàng (Jade Emperor)*, *Nam Tào (Southern star god)*, *Bắc Đẩu (Northern star god)* in almost all ancient Buddhist temples, especially the votive tablets of *Five Masters*.

In the main court of Bửu Lâm temple (Tiền Giang), there is an altar for worshipping *Thần Nông* (*Agricultural God*), *Phục Hy*, *Huyền Đế* (*ancient Chinese emperors*).

Especially in some Buddhist temples in Sóc Trăng, the pantheistic characteristic of shrines is prominent. It is easily seen in Bửu Lâm temple (Sóc Trăng township), apart from genies or gods who clearly represent for the cultural integration of the Việt, Chinese-Vietnamese, and Khmer via the worship of Ông Hổ (Lord Tiger), Ông Tà, Thiên Phụ (Heavenly Father), Địa Mẫu (Mother Earth), etc., there are shrines for Phật Mẫu Diêu Trì (Mother Buddha), Ngọc Hoàng Thượng Đế (Jade Emperor), Trăm quan cừu thần (a hundred mandarins and officials), Kim Tinh Thánh Mẫu (Heavenly Mother Goddess), Thập Điện Diêm Vương (Ten Kings of the hell), Quan Thánh Đế Quân, etc. In Phật Quang temple (Mỹ Tú district, Sóc Trăng province), there are shines to worship Ông Tà, Năm Ông (Five Masters), Bắc Đế (Northern king), Thần Tử Vi (Horoscope God), Thần Vàng (Gold God), Thần Quang Địa (Bright Earth God), Tam Hoàng (the Three Emperors), Bạch Hầu (the White Monkey), Cửu Vị tinh quân (Nine Bright stars), Thổ Thần (Earth God), Năm Bà Ngũ Hành (Five Ladies of basic elements), Bà Chúa xứ (Lady of Realm), Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ, Chúa Tiên, Tỳ Lam, Các Cô, etc.

In Hải Phước An Tự, an ancient Buddhist temple in the multi-ethnic minority area of Vĩnh Hai commune, Vĩnh Châu district, Sóc Trăng, people also worship Lady Mã Châu, Tiên Đồng, Ngọc Nữ, Thiên Lý Nhân, Thuận Phong Nhĩ, Bắc Đế, Quan Thánh Đế Quân (all gods from Taoist pantheon) along with an altar for Ông Hổ (Lord Tiger).

4. In the middle of the 19th century, in the Mekong River Delta, Buddhism was even adapted to fit the level of education and awareness of the majority of the local people. We can see this via the religious sect of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, then Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, etc. This adaptation had brought to Buddhism in the Southern region a new face of creativeness and freshness. Based on the adaptable spirit, Buddhism here had its deeper sense of locality and nationality.

5. As mentioned above, types of worshipping gods in Mahayana pagoda are very various and rich. The pantheistic characteristic of Mahayana has deeply shown many human and social meanings. For many Vietnamese people, the religious feelings of pantheism has shown via various forms of worshipping and worshipped gods, etc.

First of all, the variety and richness in the shrines in pagodas shows the tolerance of the Vietnamese. They have personified natural forces humanly and sacredly, i.e. Lady of Iron, Lady of Water, Lady of Wood, Lady of Fire, and Lady of Earth based on the will of conquering the nature and at the same time integrating with it. The desire for “good rain and wind, peaceful nation, and wealthy people”, good crops, etc. is always wanted by wet-rice people, resulting in the worship of Thần Nông (Agricultural God), Sơn Hà Xã Tắc, Tứ Đại Thần Châu, etc. along with supermen such as Buddha, Goddess of Mercy, Phục Hy, Huỳnh Đế, Quan Thánh, Thiên Hậu and many other gods and saints.

The pantheistic feeling of the Vietnamese also had thorough good-oriented mentality. That is why Lý Thị Thiên Hương (otherwise called Nàng Đênh - Miss Đênh) is respected and honoured. The legend of her death to protect personal dignity is a lesson of dignity for women. Also, it was not by chance that Thiên Hậu (Queen of Heaven) was integrated into Buddhist temples and in Chinese – Vietnamese’s temples. Her dutifulness and submissiveness to people is the sample for later generations to follow.

The inclination to the good in Buddhist temples in the Southern region could also be seen clearly through two statues of two genies, i.e. Thiện Hữu Thiện Báo and Thiện Hữu Ác Báo, called otherwise God who promotes doing the good and God who punishes anyone doing the bad. The good, the beauty are the goals for everyone to reach for. That explained to the deification of many real human beings such as Lady Đen, Lady of Realm and Lady Thiên Hậu. Three of them all were honoured as Mother Goddesses like Madame Man Nương who has become Goddess of Mercy since nearly two millenniums.

The tolerance which integrated into Buddhist shires many gods and spirits has shown that the pantheism of the Vietnamese is full of creation, dynamic, reality, especially seen in the new land. People who come to temples and pagodas to worship Buddha and genies do not pray to soon become Buddha or Immortals, they pray for what are necessary for daily life such as good crops, advantageous trading, avoiding the bad, being happy and prosperous. Thus, the pantheism in Mahayana temples shows a high reality that cannot be seen in Hinayana.

The practical thought of Mahayana results in the engagement into the earthly world by many monks of different generations. Buddhist temples in the Southern region, especially in Hồ Chí Minh City which once acted as bases for revolutionary force made the biggest number throughout the country. The patriotic tradition nested

through thousand of thousand years, along with the spirit of engaged Buddhism explained the fact that during the invasion of enemies, many monks had “took off robes to wear soldiers’ uniform”. Temples such as Giác Lâm, Thiên Tôn, Đức Lâm, Long An, Trương Thành, Phật Ấn, Long Thành (Sài Gòn) or Hội Linh (Cần Thơ), Sắc Tứ Tam Bảo (Rạch Giá, Kiên Giang), Bửu Long (Tiền Giang), etc. had become the places to hide propaganda leaflets, to hold secret meetings, to secretly nest many revolutionary activists.

The image of the young monk Thiện Chiếu with his active contributions to the society and Buddhism, especially via Buddhist revival movement, has shown the close combination between religion and life. He has shown the fact that a monk is firstly a citizen of a country who would love the country and the people. His parallel sentences held in the front gate of Linh Sơn temple during the Buddhist revival movement inspired many monks, and showed the stereotype of the Vietnamese Buddhism, especially in the Southern region: *“Buddhism should be engaged with life, not neglect it. Being merciful, one may have to sometimes kill some persons for the interest of the entire people.”*

6. Pantheistic characteristic in the Mahayana, on the one hand, has social and human contribution, on the other hand, is the source for superstitious elements which may lead to misunderstanding of Buddhist teachings such as praying for help and protection, fortunetelling, etc. The images the Jade Emperor, Cửu Thiên Huyền Nữ, etc. unexpectedly resulted in among many Buddhist followers a tendency to worship the Jade Emperor who is supposed to rule the universe. Meanwhile Buddha, Goddess of Mercy can only provide guidance in life.

7. What is more, because of the spirit and promotion for engaged Buddhism, Mahayana monks are encouraged to join the real life. Whereas, they have more chances to be deteriorated and degenerated than those follow Hinayana. Daily activities and contacts with society of the Mahayana monks create a challenging environment for themselves. Many monks could not overcome the real challenges and infringed upon the dharma rules.

In conclusion, worshipping multi genies and gods in Mahayana is a popular phenomenon in Vietnam, especially in the Southern region. In certain circumstances, pantheistic characteristic has brought social and human meanings, contributed significantly to the Vietnamese Buddhism. It shows its most specific features in the

Southern region Vietnam where, regarding the geographic and human conditions, the resident have experienced, and been challenged by, various schools of thoughts.

Reference:

¹. Refer to *Buddhism in the Vietnamese community in the Southern region*, Social Science Publishing house 1995; *Buddhism of the Southern region from the 17th century to 1975*, Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, 1996, both written by Trần Hồng Liên.

². Some people thought Mahayana is Northern school or Bắc Truyền (Great Vehicle), and Hinayana is Southern school or Nam Truyền (Theravada). In fact, there is not always such a distinction .

³. Should fit in each situation, region, and period of time.

⁴. Refer to Vũ Ngọc Khánh. *Take Buddshim to heart*. Buddhas birthday writings, 2592, 1985.

⁵. Hà Văn Tấn, Nguyễn Văn Kự, Phạm Ngọc Long. *Vietnamese Buddhist temples*, the Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi 1993, p. 27.

⁶. Refer to Nguyễn Duy Hinh. *Discussing about two characteristics of Vietnamese Buddhism*, in *Regarding religions and belief in Vietnam at the present*, the Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi 1996.

⁷. Trần Hồng Liên. *Buddhism in the Vietnamese community in the Southern region (from the 17th century to 1975)*, *Ibid*.

⁸. Trần Ngọc Thêm. *The foundation of Vietnamese culture*, Hồ Chí Minh City University, 1995, p. 194.