

Shilian Dashan With the Propagation of the Caodong Sect in Cochinchina in the Seventeenth Century

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The prosperous development of the “Maritime Silk Road” in the 17th century not only brought convenience in sea transportation and promoted trade between countries, but also acted as a bridge connecting countries. This bridge has the function of cultural exchange between peoples, especially in introducing and promoting China’s cultural and ideological quintessence with neighboring countries. During this period, Linji and Caodong sects of Chinese Zen Buddhism were spread directly into Cochinchina of Dai Viet through Chinese senior monks who followed merchant ships to this place. Among them was the Most Venerable Shilian Dashan, a senior monk at Changshou Temple, Guangzhou, who accepted Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu’s invitation to teach the Soto Dharma in Cochinchina for nearly two years (1695-1696). Based on the study of relevant historical documents and autobiographical works on this trip by Most Ven. Dashan, the article presents his biography and activities. Moreover, this article analyzes the method of spreading Dharma, Chan ideology, as well as the significance of his Dharma propagation activities for Buddhism in Cochinchina at that time.

Keywords: Shilian Dashan, Buddhism in Cochinchina, Caodong Chan

Introduction

In the 17th century, Dai Viet went through a period of division due to the Trinh-Nguyen civil war (1627-1672), causing power of King Le power to remain only symbolic. The territory situated to the north of the Linh Giang River was referred to as Dang Ngoai (Tonkin) under the governance of Lord Trinh (郑主), whereas the region located to the south of the Linh Giang River was known as Dang Trong (Cochinchina) ruled by Lord Nguyen (阮主). During this period, Dang Trong became the destination of many merchant ships from China, Japan, France, Portugal, the Netherlands... due to its convenient geographical location. This geographical location has abundant natural resources and diverse products along with many large ports connected to the “Maritime Silk Road” axis. Due to the convergence of similar factors such as convenient sea transportation, culture, customs, writing, beliefs, and religions of China and Vietnam, it attracted Chinese traders and immigrants to come. And this is also what made Dai Viet at that time chosen by many Chinese monks as the destination to carry out the mission of spreading Buddhism in a land that possessed “right time, right land, and harmonious people”. Among

Acknowledgement: This article is funded by 2022-2024 China Overseas Chinese Federation Project: “Study on the spread and development of Chinese Zen Buddhism in Vietnam from 17th to 19th Century” (Project No. 22BZQK232); 2022 Guangxi Philosophy and Social Science Planning Research Project: “Study on the History of Buddhist Exchange between China and Vietnam” (Project No. 22BZJ001).

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the famous Chinese monks who came to spread the Dharma in Cochinchina in the 17th century was the Most Venerable Shilian Dashan (石濂大汕), a senior monk at Changshou Pagoda (长寿寺), Guangzhou (广州). The monk played an important role in spreading the Caodong sect (曹洞宗), a meditation or Chan sect (禅宗), to this land.

The Practice and Biography of Most Venerable Shilian Dashan

Most Venerable Dashan, his family name Xu (徐), name Shilian (石濂), Budhha name Dashan (大汕), was born in 1633 at the end of the Ming dynasty, the beginning of the Qing dynasty in China. His biography is recorded in the history book *Dai Nam liet truyen tien bien* (Prequel biographies, 大南列传前编) of Vietnam as follows:

Most Venerable Shilian, title is Dashan Hanweng (大汕厂翁), is from Jiangxi (江西), Qing Dynasty, a generous and kind person. He is knowledgeable in astronomy, astromancy, chronomancy, fortune-telling, horoscopes, and physiognomy. Besides, he also did sigillary script, chancery script, painting, portrait drawing, poem creating. At the end of the Ming Dynasty, the Manchus became kings of China. Lian maintained his righteousness and refused to become a Qing mandarin, so he said goodbye to his old mother and became a monk. (National History Office of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1994, p. 193)

Besides his title Dashan Hanweng, he is commonly known as Shi Dhuta¹ (石头陀). According to research by researcher Tran Kinh Hoa who based on the book *Hua Yi Bian Tai* (华夷变态, vol. 32) mentioned him as follows:

Although Shilian was born in Nanjing (南京), he resided in Guangdong (广东) for more than 20 years. During that time, his virtues were very bright, because many officials from near and far took refuge. (Shi, 1963, p. 244)

Dashan was the 29th generation disciple of the Caodong sect (曹洞宗), a meditation sect of Buddhism. Caodong sect is one of the five sects of Chinese Zen Buddhism, founded by Zen master Dongshan Liangjie (洞山良价, 807-869) and his outstanding disciple Caoshan Benji (曹山本寂, 840-901) in Jiangxi, China. Zen master Dashan was a disciple of Zen master Juelang Daosheng (觉浪道盛, 1592-1659) who practiced at Tianjie Temple (天界寺) in Jiangning Prefecture (江宁府), Nanjing (南京). Researcher Jiang Boqin (姜伯勤) mentioned Dashan's relationship with his master, meditation master Juelang, as follows:

Dashan in his youth practiced dhutanga, took refuge with Juelang Daosheng. Based on available materials, it is impossible to determine that Dashan is Juelang's legitimate disciple. However, there is no doubt that he was a disciple who took refuge and Dhutanga practicing with Juelang. (Jiang, 1999, p. 122)

Regarding the lineage order of Dashan, if based on the ancient Chinese bibliography, Dashan belongs to the 36th generation of the Southern Chan sect. And if Hui Neng (慧能) is considered the first generation, then Dashan is the 36th generation descendant of this Chan sect. But based on the epitaph on the stone stele (65 cm high, 35 cm wide) at Guangxiao Temple (光孝寺, Guangzhou) brought by monk Dao Yong (道永), he asked Venerable Dashan to write a word praising the merit of restoring the main hall worshipping the Sixth Patriarch (禅宗六祖) of the previous abbot of this temple. At the end of the epitaph, monk Dashan himself wrote, "Dashan, the 33rd generation disciple of the Caoxi Chan (曹溪禅) lineage, knelt down and wrote" (Jiang, 2003, pp. 107-108). Therefore, "from the fact that Dashan was personally invited to write this epitaph said in 1692, it proves that Dashan had a very high reputation in Buddhist circles in Guangzhou at that time" (Jiang, 2003, p. 108). He

¹ A mendicant (Anagārika) is someone who relies mainly on alms to make a living. In principle, monks have very little property, whether individual or collective, and in many cases, members take a vow of poverty so that they can devote all their time and energy to their practice. Retrieved at: <https://sacred-texts.com/bud/j4/j4033.htm> (June 24th, 2024).

became the abbot of Changshou Temple in Guangzhou, and a large number of monks followed him.

History books recorded the opportunity and behavior of Most Venerable Dashan to propagate Dharma in Cochinchina, Dai Viet, as follows:

Emperor Anh Tong (英宗) heard that Lian (濂) had profound Buddhist studies, so he sent Xie Yuanshao (谢元韶) to Guangdong to welcome this high monk. Lian was happy and immediately crossed the sea with Yuanshao to the South (in 1695). Lord Nguyen allowed Lian to stay at Thien Mu Pagoda as soon as he arrived in Cochinchina. During the reign of Emperor Hien Tong (显宗), the emperor often invited scholars into the palace to discuss Buddhism. Lord loved him very much because he was an expert in Buddhism as well as knowledgeable in astronomy and geography. In addition, Lian was also skillful in intervening before things happened, which was also useful... After staying for a few years, Lian asked Lord to let him return to Guangdong. Lord gave a very generous send-off gift... Lian's previous works include the poetry collections *Li Liu Tang* (离六堂集) and *Overseas chronicles* (海外纪事) circulate in the world. (National History Office of the Nguyen Dynasty, 1994, pp. 193-195)

In fact, the Meditation master Yuanshao obeyed the order from Lord Nghia Nguyen Phuc Tran (義主阮福漆, 1688-1691) to go to Guangdong to invite monk Dashan, possibly for the first or second time. When Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu (阮福周, 1675-1725, son of Lord Nghia) sent two Hokkien envoys named Chen Tianguan (陈添官) and Wu Ziguan (吴资官) to present their national letter and invitation for the third time along with a personal letter requested by monk Guo Hong (果弘), he accepted it. Most Venerable Guo Hong was once a disciple of Most Venerable Dashan and had gone to Dai Viet before, so now he invited the master to come to Thuan Hoa (顺化). After Most Venerable Dashan accepted the invitation, he arranged with a group of more than 50 disciples to take a merchant ship carrying many Buddha statues and dharma objects to Thuan Hoa on March 13, 1695.

Most Venerable Dashan transmitted the sermons to Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu and accepted him as a disciple of the 30th generation of the Caodong sect during his time in Cochinchina. Dashan also wrote many essays in the form of prospectuses, couplets posted on temple doors, and letters exchanging explanations on Buddhism and meditation with Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu. In addition to Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, he also preached the Buddhism though to the mother of the country, the princess, and a number of royal families, princesses, and academic scholars of the time. Furthermore, Dashan also held forums, gave sermons, and played the role of Tangtou Bhikkhu (堂头和尚). He presided over the ceremonies of ordination of the Sadi precepts, Bodhisattva precepts, and Bhikkhu precepts with an extremely solemn scale of up to 1,400 people. He traveled to Tam Thai Pagoda (三台寺) in Ngu Hanh Son (五行山), stayed at Hoi An (会安) trading port in Quang Nam for about two months to treat illnesses and ordain more than 300 people. While residing in this location, Dashan penned an article urging for contributions to restore Di Da Pagoda (弥陀寺), which would serve as a temporary sanctuary for Chinese travelers in times of distress. Additionally, he advocated for the establishment of a cemetery to honor Chinese individuals who had passed away in foreign territories. Furthermore, Most Venerable Dashan composed a paper proposing offerings to be made at the Temple of Guan Di (关帝庙). Lastly, he authored a piece appealing for donations to repair the Ai Van Pass road. In addition to these endeavors, Dashan also crafted a "Hearing Statement" containing several recommendations pertaining to diplomatic and educational matters, which he intended to present to the Lord for consideration. Most Venerable Dashan and his group of followers bid farewell and embarked on their journey back to Guangdong after dedicating their time to reconstructing the old temple and imparting the Buddhist sermons in Cochinchina. This event took place on July 22, 1696. Upon their return,

they were warmly greeted by Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu and the royal family, who bestowed upon Venerable Dashan a grand farewell. In addition, Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu generously offered him 5,000 taels of silver to contribute towards his salary for the construction of the Main Hall (大雄宝殿) at Changshou Temple. Furthermore, he presented Venerable Dashan with a substantial amount of precious wood to aid in the construction. As a token of his respect and affection, Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu also gifted him a special bowl and a golden staff. After returning from a trip to preach the sermons in Cochinchia, the reputation of monk Dashan increased even more. At that time, Venerable Dashan had very extensive interactions with many circles in society. He pleased many people, but also offended some. Being a talented person, he studied more deeply than others, so his personality was somewhat conceited, complimenting and criticizing without restraint, coupled with a lavish lifestyle, and some jobs that were too “new”. These things went beyond the current regulations of temple, such as making handicrafts and being suspected of dealing with overseas merchants etc. It was these things that were considered “irrelevant” that caused him to be in trouble. Due to personal enmity, Dashan was intentionally harmed by the mandarin inspector, Pan Lei (潘来). Pan Lei wrote books attacking, blaming, and denouncing him to the authorities of Guangdong province, causing the last years of his life reeling and suffering in prison. Dashan was arrested and interrogated by the Guangdong Provincial Surveillance Commissioner Xu Sixing (许嗣兴), then ordered to deport him to Ganzhou Shan Pagoda (赣州山寺), Jiangxi (江西) around year 1702. The trial of Dashan was carried out very quickly, sketchily and then convicted, raising many suspicions about the transparency of the case. In particular, this judge previously had many “flaws” due to violating regulations during the trial. During the time Most Venerable Dashan stayed at the temple in Ganzhou (赣州), many followers took refuge in the three Jewel. The authorities were worried that Dashan would cause trouble again, so they expelled him from the temple again. The senior monk passed away when he was escorted back to his hometown around 1704, at the age of 71 in Changzhou (常州).

The Method of Propagating the Buddha Dharma by Venerable Dashan in Cochinchina

When carrying out the mission of spreading the Dharma in Cochinchina of Dai Viet, to overcome language barriers and cultural differences between China and Vietnam, Most Venerable Dashan used the two basic methods: a combination of theory and practice and the method of “Applying opportunities into practice”.

The Method of Combining Theory and Practice in Propagating the Buddha Dharma

When Most Venerable Dashan came to propagate Dharma in Cochinchina, he paid great attention to the importance of the teachings and meditated argumentation of China. He expressed his desire to promote the teachings of the Buddha and the Patriarchs in this place as follows: “I look forward to: Developing the prayer wheel and expanding the inheritance from predecessors. Abundant grace, saving all living beings across the four seas” (Shi, 1963, p. 38). Most Venarable had also spent a lot of enthusiasm and time writing many sermons and explanations to enlighten the Bhikkhus and Buddhist followers here. Typically, he wrote a “Proclamation” posted on temple doors so that Sangha and Buddhists could understand an overview of the historical lineage of Buddhism and Chinese Chan Buddhism. In addition, he also made requirements in terms of studying the Buddhism scriptures and preserving precepts. Moreover, Dashan presented and explained the profound meaning of some basic Buddhist concepts such as Maha, Prajna, Bodhi, intrinsic ego (tathata) in his reply to the great scholar Hao Duc Hau in the Cochinchina.

He also wrote the work *Golden Chamber Protector Book* (护法金汤书) explaining the issue of mental

cultivating², Buddha nature, instructing Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu how to conduct Buddhism Koan Chan (参公案) to gain enlightenment. Most Venerable wrote the article “Amitabha Buddha’s theory of Self-Nature” (自性弥陀说) to give detailed instructions to the Queen Mother on how to practice reciting the name of the Buddha in the direction of combining Chan and Pure Land dual practice before saying goodbye and returning to Guangdong.

Different from the heavy style of theory, profound and difficult to grasp and understand as in the Chan works of Chinese Chan masters, this is a remarkable thing in Buddha Dharma preaching of Dashan. Most Venerable Dashan tried to express himself in the most understandable and most vivid way by combining Buddha doctrines with simple examples when explaining a certain topic in Buddhism Chan to Buddhists in Cochinchina. Thanks to that, it helps learners know how to apply it to suit each person’s level and foundation to achieve enlightenment (bodhi) and liberation (moksa).

In practical terms, when propagating the Dharma, Venerable Dashan conducted many practical and effective Buddhist activities. Notable events he presided over include: on April 1, 1695, the ordination of novices and a Buddha Dharma; on April 6, the ordination ceremony for monks; on April 8, Buddha’s Birthday, he led the Bodhisattva precept ceremony for Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, the Queen Mother, princesses, and the royal family. He also gave a Dharma teaching to those who had received the Bodhisattva precepts on April 9. On April 12, Most Venerable Dashan led 1,400 monks in Cochinchina to complete the bhikkhu ordination ceremony, followed by the “Ancient Buddha alms-giving” (古佛乞食) ritual, among other activities.

The Method of “Applying Opportunities Into Practice” in Propagating the Buddha Dharma

Most Venerable Dashan carried out the Buddha Dharma propagating in Cochinchina based on the principle of “Applying opportunities into practice” (应机接物) according to the family tradition of the Caodong Chan sect in China. This is clearly reflected in his “Proclamation” posted on the temple doors for everyone to see. He believed:

Those who undertake the Buddhist work, holding the responsibility of being a Bhikkhu must welcome to four kind of people³ from all directions, and wholeheartedly civilized educate to everyone; regardless of whether it is a refined or crude matter, a large or small issue, if someone sincerely comes to seek advice, they must be guided and instructed. Even those who do not ask, if one hears of them, efforts must be made to teach them; choosing appropriate words to instruct, even if it means exhausting one’s voice and energy, not stopping midway due to fatigue, ensuring the listener is enlightened and turns from wrong to right; teaching daily progress, learning over time becoming second nature, thus gradually conforming to the Way. (Shi, 1963, p. 45)

For those who were not well-versed in the teachings of Buddha and Chan, who came to him looking for guidance, Most Venerable Dashan joyfully explained in simple terms to help them understand their confusing issue. For instance, when Dang Long Marquess sent someone with a letter asking, “What is the meditation path (Chan path)?”; “What is the essence of enlightenment?” (Shi, 1963, p. 207). The meditation master wrote a detailed and clear response, using subtle and specific examples to enlighten them. Additionally, during his stop in Hoi An (会安), Quang Nam (广南), Most Venerable Dashan took the opportunity to happily organize an ordination ceremony for over 300 people who had missed the Great Ordination Ceremony held earlier in Thuan Hoa.

The “Applying opportunities into practice” method of Most Venerable Dashan in propagating the Buddha

² Citta-bhavana or Metta-bhavana in Pali Canon.

³ Pali: catasso parisa (四众): bhikkhu (比丘), bhikkhuni (比丘尼), upasaka (优婆塞), upasika (优婆夷).

Dharma in Cochinchina is also evident in that he did not limit his efforts to Buddhist activities alone. He also showed special interest in many practical issues that benefit the country and its people, without any hesitation as he himself recounted:

In my free time, I discussed with the king ancient and modern methods of governance, advising on various approaches such as lenient punishments, valuing virtue, loving and benefiting the people, promoting trade, and reducing taxes, etc... the king gladly trusted and followed these suggestions. (Shi, 1963, p. 98)

During his journey to Quang Nam, Dashan wrote a preface calling for donations to establish a cemetery to gather the remains of deceased Chinese immigrants in Hoi An. On this occasion, he also composed a petition encouraging the renovation of Di Da Temple (弥陀寺) and wrote a ceremonial text to be read during the offerings at the Guan Di Temple (关帝庙) and the Fujian Huiguan (福建会馆) along with other activities.

Chan Thought of Most Venerable Dashan

In general, the Chan thought of monk Dashan in the work *Overseas Chronicle* (海外纪事) revolves around four basic contents including: Chan-Pure Land dual practicing thought, Buddhist and Confucian syncretism thought, Caodong-Linji merged thought, and religion and life harmony thought.

Chan-Pure Land Dual Practicing Thought

When propagating the Buddha Dharma in Cochinchina, Most Venerable Dashan had a tendency to combine the dual practice of Chan (禅宗) and Pure Land (净土宗). This stemmed from his awareness that, being responsible for propagating the Buddha Dharma in a foreign territory, combining the dual practice of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism was necessary to practitioners and Buddhists whose foundations were still limited. They found it difficult to fully grasp the profound philosophies often associated with Chinese Chan. Therefore, Dashan integrated the “self-nature” (自性) concept of Chan with the practice of reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism.

In the “Amitabha Buddha’s theory of Self-nature” (自性弥陀说), written by Dashan to guide the Queen Mother in the practice of reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name, he wrote:

It is said: The method of practice is simple and convenient, nothing compares to reciting the name of the Amitabha Buddha. Provided one cuts off all worldly ties, keeps the mind on the six-character mantra (Namo Amitabha Buddha); if the mind is undistracted, the recitation will surely be sincere. Naturally, the Way will be in harmony and manifest... Amitabha is present within our undisturbed mind... When a single thought does not arise, the entire essence manifests. Seeing forms without being defiled, hearing sounds without paying attention, the dual aspects of movement and stillness, absolutely do not arise, maintaining an empty mind, tranquility—all is the Dharma realm. Self-nature is Amitabha, Amitabha is self-nature. (Shi, 1963, pp. 114-115)

Pure Land Buddhism advocates the practice of single-mindedly reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha to achieve the state of “Keep your mind steady” (一心不乱) aiming for rebirth in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss after death. Dashan combined the Pure Land practice of reciting the six-character mantra “Namo Amitabha Buddha” with the Chan theories of “original self-nature”, “no-thought mind”, and “non-abiding mind”. The novelty in Chan thought of Dashan lies in his identification of self-nature with Amitabha, considering Amitabha as “self-nature”. Therefore, reciting the name of Amitabha Buddha helps practitioners persist in achieving “concentration” (samadhi, 定), maintaining a pure mind, remaining unaffected by external conditions, thus opening the “Wisdom” (prajna, 慧) that recognizes the original self-nature or Buddha-nature within oneself, thereby attaining

enlightenment and liberation.

Buddhist and Confucian Syncretism Thought

Dashan had a philosophical tendency to syncretize Buddhism and Confucianism. This is clearly reflected in the memorial he wrote for Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, where he stated: “There are not two paths in the world; the Buddha and the Sage share one heart. There is only one path” (Shi, 1963, p. 51). In his work *Golden Chamber Protector Book* (护法金汤书) which he presented to Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, he wrote:

Whether you leave or enter the world, there are no two paths. According to Confucianism, Yao (尧) and Shun (舜) spoke of “loyalty” (忠); Confucius (孔子) spoke of “oneness” (一); The *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸) speaks of “sincerity” (诚), though the terms differ, their source is one. What is “oneness”? “Oneness” is the mind (心). Maintaining “oneness” is to have a righteous mind, and by this one can cultivate oneself. If cultivate yourself mean self-cultivate; if protect home can family manage; if manage the family lead to rule the country. In all matters of employing people, administration, military, law, rituals, music, whether great or small, one understands clearly and handles them appropriately. (Shi, 1963, p. 88)

Most Venerable Dashan demonstrated his unique thought of the syncretic between Buddhism and Confucianism through his interpretation of Confucian concepts, such as “loyalty”, “oneness”, and “sincerity”; all converging into the single term “oneness”, which he equated with “mind” (citta, 心). To keep “oneness” is to have a righteous mind. A righteous mind is the enlightened mind, no longer driven by material desires and delusive thoughts. This allows the practitioner to achieve a state of freedom and unobstructed clarity, whether in self-cultivation, family manage; or in grand matters such as employing people, administration, military, law, rituals, music, and governance, achieving complete success in all endeavors.

Caodong-Linji Merged Thought

When discussing effective means of Chan practicing, Most Venerable Dashan advocated integrating the methods of the Caodong sect with the practice of investigating the huatou (参话头) and koans (公案), which were widely used in the Linji sect (临济宗). In his work *Golden Chamber Protector Book* to Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, Dashan instructed the Lord on the method of investigating the huatou by writing:

This old monk has no miraculous methods, but I invite you, Your Majesty, to contemplate the huatou “Who is my master?” (如何是我主人公). Contemplate without dreaming, without using consciousness to measure, without using logic to explain... Do not relax the huatou for a moment. Contemplate again and again, over time, and one day, suddenly, with a loud crash, you will feel as if your nose has fallen off, and upon touching it, you realize it has been on your face since the beginning. (Nguyen, 2000, pp. 627-628)

Dashan believed that investigating the huatou was a useful means to achieve the highest realm of Chan. That is the realization of Buddha nature (佛性) inherent in each person and he emphasized that it is the true “master” within oneself, not something to be sought externally. On the other hand, in the work *Overseas Chronicle* (海外纪事), he also mentions the distinctive meditation method “Mozhao Chan” (Silent Illumination Chan, 默照禅) of the Caodong sect. In the “Letter to clerk Yi Er” (示亦尔记室), he states: “The true mind is empty and still, spiritual and bright, capable of illuminating all things without being obscured by them. Only by being unhindered and thoroughly understanding can one become a superior gentleman” (Da & Yu, 1987, p. 124). The “superior gentleman” that Dashan refers to here signifies a person who has attained enlightenment through meditation, whose true mind is serene yet constantly illuminating, the man who have comprehended the principle of “true emptiness, wonderful existence” of Prajna (wisdom in Buddhism).

Religion and Life Harmony Thought

The Religion and Life harmony thought of Most Venerable Dashan when propagating the Buddhist Dharma in Cochinchina is shown by the fact that he paid great attention to applying how to spread compassion and Buddhist wisdom into life, especially in governing the country and protecting the people. For example, one time, Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu wanted to set a date to hold a precept ceremony to thank Buddha, so he asked monk Dashan what needed to be prepared. He put forth the concept that:

Taking the precepts is not just about keeping your mouth clean and your thoughts clean. Lord taking the precepts must be thoroughly cleaned up, with no one left unsettled, no matter unsatisfactory, then it can be called perfection. Now, first of all, king should liquidate unjust prisons, release imprisoned prisoners, diagnose the poor, educate the stagnant, abolish strict prohibitions, have mercy on traders, show mercy to workers. In short, all work should be done to help others, benefit others, and should be honored with goodwill. (Shi, 1963, p. 97)

According to him, the specific actions mentioned above that are beneficial to the country and the people are the most practical manifestation of Lord taking the precepts, “both saving oneself and others” (自渡渡他).

The Propagating Significance of Most Venerable Dashan for Cochinchina Buddhism in the 17th century

The Buddha Dharma preaching by Most Venerable Dashan and his disciples made very meaningful contributions to the development of Cochinchina Buddhism at that time. This Buddha Dharma propagation is expressed in two main aspects including establishing the lineage sect and protecting the Buddha Dharma—protecting the people.

Establishing the Lineage Sect

Due to historical factors, Southern Buddhism (Cochinchina) generally lacks the historical depth and diversity of schools and sects like Northern Buddhism (Tonkin). In the 17th century, in Cochinchina, the Linji sect was propagated by several Chinese Chan masters who migrated to this area, such as Yuanshao (元韶), Zirong (子融), Fabao (法宝), among others. Meanwhile, the Caodong sect was introduced by the Chan master pair of Dashan and Xinglian. Although in terms of timing, Xinglian Guohong (兴莲果弘) arrived in Cochinchina before Dashan and was appointed National Teacher by Lord Nguyen, residing at Tam Thai Pagoda (三台寺) in Quang Nam, yet there are no historical records on the Buddhist activities of Xinglian. Therefore, scholars generally recognize the significant role of Dashan in spreading the Caodong sect from China to Cochinchina. The introduction of the Caodong sect in Cochinchina is significant in that it added richness and diversity to the historical development of Buddhism in the region. Additionally, according to the Caodong sect lineage, during his time propagating the Buddha Dharma in Cochinchina, Dashan bestowed the Bodhisattva Precepts upon Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu. Furthermore, Most Venerable Dashan accepted him as the 30th-generation disciple of the Caodong sect official lineage, and conferred upon him the Dharma name Hung Long (兴龙) layman. Based on the character “Hung” (兴) in Hung Long (兴龙), Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu and National Master Xinglian (兴莲) were considered equals. During his stay, many members of the royal family and high-ranking officials also took refuge and received precepts from Dashan, including the Queen Mother, Princess Hien, and Thieu Duong Marquis, among others.

Protecting the Buddha Dharma—Protecting the People

Although he only stayed for a short period of time, about one and a half years, the Buddhist activities of monk Dashan created a vibrant atmosphere in religious life in Thuan Hoa (顺化), Quang Nam (广南) at that time.

Religious activities in Cochinchina society have a very clear meaning of “protecting the Buddha Dharma—protecting the people”.

In the 17th century in Cochinchina, to mobilize manpower for the fierce battles during the Trinh-Nguyen civil war, the Nguyen Lords increased the conscription of men aged 16 to 60 into the military. This caused many families to fear for their sons, leading them to send their children to temples to become monks in order to avoid being forced into military service. Consequently, a number of problems have arisen, such as lax discipline, loose management, and a lack of understanding of the Buddhist doctrine and scriptures. To help rectify these shortcomings, Senior Grand Master Dashan wrote a “Proclamation” and posted it on temple doors to inform practitioners of the monastic rules and proper methods of practice, aiming to maintain the integrity of the Buddhist teachings. Additionally, Most Venerable Dashan also organized numerous grand-scale Buddhist activities at this location, including conferring the novice ordination to thousands, presiding over three ceremonies to transmit the precept to full monks, and giving Buddha teachings to hundreds of new ordinands. These activities drew large crowds from across the country, who were delighted by what they considered an unprecedented grand festival (Shi, 1963, p. 74). Dynamic Buddhist activities of Most Venerable Dashan and his disciples whose positive outcomes were achieved. These outcomes leading to the observation that:

Among the populace, nearly everyone in Thuan Hoa and Quang Nam, or the decorum and conduct within the monastic community were significantly improved at least. The Thuan Hoa Buddhism Sangha began to have order and discipline compared to the previous state of loose and problematic management. (Thich & Ha, 2006, p. 168)

During the time Most Venerable Dashan was propagating the Buddhist Dharma in Cochinchina, with the close relationship between him and Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu, he had many opportunities to converse with the Lord. He offered earnest advice on various issues beneficial for governing the country and bringing peace to the people in these conversations. As noted by the Most Venerable himself, he personally wrote the “Eighteen Articles of National Policy” (立国政约十八条), which included matters such as caring for soldiers, loving the people, promoting trade, benefiting the nation, and maintaining laws and regulations, detailing each aspect clearly (Shi, 1963, p. 100). After presenting it to the Lord, the Lord found it appropriate and ordered it to be inscribed on a board and posted at the entrance of the residence, instructing civil and military officials as well as the people to know. Most Venerable Dashan also wrote the Hearing paper presenting four suggestions for the Lord to make a consideration. Hearing paper included important matters such as diplomatic relations with the Qing dynasty in China, establishing garrisons to strengthen the borders, caring for soldiers, and setting up a National Academy (国学府) to train and examine talents (Shi, 1963, pp. 52-53). Among the suggestions made by Most Venerable Dashan, some were considered and adopted by Lord Nguyen Phuc Chu.

Conclusion

The event of the delegation led by Most Venerable Dashan and his disciples coming to propagate the Buddhism in Cochinchina of Dai Viet brought a new breath of life, stirring the somewhat gloomy Buddhist life at the time. His Buddhist activities partially met the essential religious and spiritual cultural needs of a segment of Bhikkhus, Buddhist followers, and the public man including the royal family, officials, and intellectuals of the period. In terms of sectarian transmission and academic study, propagation of Most Venerable Dashan Dharma played an important role in spreading the official Caodong Chan sect of China into Cochinchina. This propagation made Caodong Chan sect more widespread compared to his disciple, Chan master Xinglian Guohong, who had

come to propagate the Buddhist doctrine earlier. The event has been proven by records and recognition in the historical books of both countries.

Although due to historical limitations, the existence, development, and influence of the Caodong Chan sect in Cochinchina of Dai Viet did not experience the same long-term development in the lineage as the Caodong Chan sect in Tonkin, nor did it have the widespread dissemination, profound localization process, and developing to this day as the Linji Chan sect in Cochinchina, it cannot be denied that it left a deep impression and played an important role in the development of Cochinchina Buddhism in particular as well as Vietnamese Buddhism in general. Additionally, this event also holds significance as a representative case of cultural and ideological exchange between Dai Viet and China during that time. To a certain extent, the arrival of the Most Venerable Dashan to propagate the Buddha teachings in Cochinchina of Dai Viet became a notable example of the appeal, intrinsic strength, and influence of the essence of Chinese Chan on Vietnamese Buddhism throughout history.

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