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Buddhism and the Researcher in the Mekong Delta

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Emanating from numerous Mahayana pagodas in the bustling city of Cần Thơ, Việt Nam's largest city in the Mekong delta, are the vibrating sounds of large brass bells being struck before dawn and again after dusk. Traditionally, the striking of the bells was meant to call Buddhist monks, nuns, and followers to enter the *Ch nh diên* (sanctuary) for worship. Yet, according to one monk at Cây Bàng pagoda, the simple act of ringing the bells and the humming sound they produce is a Buddhist gesture of great significance. On one level, the sound is meant to "awaken," within the Buddhist laity, their potential "Buddha nature," a type of positive force that when cultivated by properly following Buddhist concepts of right action, will create better karma and relieve suffering. As a Buddhist gesture, the ringing of the bells is also one example of how the pagoda, the monks, and the nuns seek to help society, reminding Buddhist followers in the range of its sound of their own potential to be released from suffering. Yet, when digging a little deeper, a more profound process is revealed. The action and the sound it produces is believed to travel beyond normal conceptualizations of time and space, to affect those much further from the area in and around the pagoda, and, ultimately, to reach the realms of "the non-living."

This particular multi-level perception of action and reality hints at a sophisticated Buddhist cosmology that stems from the two thousand year history of Buddhism-drawing on both Northern and Southern traditions-in Viêt Nam.¹ My purpose as a researcher, an undergraduate spending her last semester in Viêt Nam studying the language and researching Buddhism, is two fold: first, to contemplate the meaning and the manifestation of Buddhist cosmology within some of the pagodas; and second to contextualize the pagodas within a contemporary urban Mekong delta setting. As I am still in the process of researching Buddhism, this informational piece represents only a small part of my field notes and is meant to be a summary of some of my research findings. Much of the information I have obtained thus far has been through interviews conducted with the help of a translator.

When situating Buddhism within the Mekong delta it is important to note that the region is one of great ethnic and religious diversity. Parts of the Mekong delta have been occupied by the Khmer peoples,² most notably during the Funanese empire (third century-sixth century) and later during the Angkorean period (ninth century-fifteenth century). The Chinese and the Cham presence in the region also pre-dates the arrival of the Vietnamese in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, as a colony of France, the area was further developed and the population continued to increase. One result of these historical developments has been the creation of an environment in which numerous ethnic groups and religious traditions³ have coexisted and, at times, influenced one another.

In the city of C n Th , although there are two Theravada-Khmer pagodas, Mahayana influenced pagodas predominate. They can be found throughout the city on streets, tucked away within the city's markets, or along the *hem* (narrow alley-ways crowded with shops and small living spaces). The most visible pagodas, however, are located on the main thoroughfare of downtown C n Th  city. Next to the Theravada Muniransyarama pagoda (people typically refer to this pagoda as *Ch a Khmer*) is the Mahayana influenced Tin Do Cu Si pagoda.⁴ Directly across the street (next to the newly built Vi tcom Bank) are two more Mahayana pagodas, Ph t Hoc pagoda and Kh nh Quang pagoda, both of which provide housing for monks (*Ty kheo*) and those who are studying to become monks (*Sa d *).⁵ The type of Mahayana Buddhism practiced within these two pagodas is a combination of different meditation techniques (*Thi n t ng*) and the chanting of different sutras, especially those of the Pure Land tradition: namely, the chanting of Amitabha (Ph t A di d ).⁶ Kh nh Quang pagoda is also the home of the government sponsored C n Th  City Buddhist Association which, along with other government sponsored religious organizations, helps administer the pagodas within the city and the province.

Although subscribing in general to Mahayana doctrines, there are some important differences between the many Mahayana pagodas of the city. The pagodas differ in how they practice Buddhism and in how they perceive their spiritual space. For example, in Thi n t ng pagodas, there are men and women who choose to lead a monastic life. The men are called Ty kheo (monks that observes 227 precepts), the women Ty kheo ni (nuns that observes 348 precepts),⁷ within the monastic setting they observe rules that are outlined by the Buddhist Association and those expressed by the Buddha in the Pali Tipitaka and the Mahayana sutras. Monks and nuns

observe a vegetarian diet, shave their heads, wear a certain type and color of robe,⁸ study the sutras, and practice meditation. The general idea is that nuns and monks are removed from the normal day-to-day social concerns in order to cultivate their Buddha nature that will, in turn, enable them to better help society. The pagoda depends on money, food, medicine, and clothing donations made by the laity. Based on my observations and interviews at Phât Hoc pagoda, Khánh Quang pagoda, and Van Hang pagoda (located in the important research and administrative hub of Ho Chi Minh City) many of the Thiên tông pagodas within the region adhere to the same guidelines. Though I would not assert that the pagodas are carbon copies of one another, they do maintain a standard in dress, vows, and time schedule for the recitation of sutras, meditation, and so on.

Within the Dàng Tiên pagoda, and in contrast to the Thiên tông pagodas, the followers assert that, although keeping with the Mahayana traditions, they follow *Tam giáo* (a religion that is influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism). At this pagoda, the followers⁹ belong to the tradition of Cu si tai gia (at home believers).¹⁰ Essentially, followers are still involved in society and take time out from their daily schedule to participate in religious ceremonies several times a week.

During the course of my research, I have noticed three characteristics shared by "at home believers":

1. they consider themselves very devout Buddhist followers, more so than other Buddhist believers;
2. they do not always have a standard body of knowledge, theology, and practice that is honored by several pagodas and, although they may use similar Buddhist doctrines as those found within the meditation sects, they do not go through the same standardized educational and religious training as monks and nuns; and
3. they do not shave their heads or wear special garments (outside of ceremonial occasions).

Some of the Cu si tai gia that I have interviewed, whether it was in their home or at a pagoda, are proud of the fact that they are "a part of society." Some asserted that they demonstrate their religious sincerity and simplicity by not caring about their appearance. Thus, they do not feel the need to shave their heads or wear special clothing.

In terms of religious practice within the Dàng Tiên pagoda, the Cu si tai gia are older (generally over 50) and only a small sector of society attend the ceremonies. In this Tam giáo pagoda, the followers would come to the pagoda only for ceremonies, returning home when they were over. Their ceremonies are complex in that they require numerous ritual acts such as bowing in different directions,¹¹ pouring water, sending sacred messages to the Buddha,¹² and so on. These rituals are also accompanied by chanting, the ringing of a bell, and the burning of incense. They take place in the presence of other sacred objects. According to followers, they attend and perform these rituals because the rituals give them a sense of security and provide them with moral guidance. For one elderly man (over 70 years of age) the importance of the ceremonies

and his desire to be a part of this community are evidenced by his walking about five kilometers in order to participate in the rituals. The irony regarding the Tam giáo pagodas is that although its members consider themselves a part of society, they hold no religious "sermons" nor do they engage in activities that link the pagoda to the "outside" world. The exception here is their performing burial ceremonies upon request. Thus, their religious community is small and private, having little contact with the "outside" world.

In contrast to this and other pagodas constituted by "at home followers," in Thiên tông pagodas, even though a formal division exists between the laity (Buddhist followers) and the monastic community (monks and nuns), the two groups interact and are dependent on one another. For example, the laity comes to the pagoda to seek advice, bring offerings, and attend the morning chanting and evening meditation. The Thiên tông pagodas also perform rituals, though much simpler than those performed in the Tam giáo pagodas, during the chanting and meditation ceremonies and Buddhist holidays.

Probably one of the most interesting and yet difficult ideas to comprehend is that of religious space within the pagoda. Depending on who I spoke with, the definition of religious space would differ. For example, my initial approach in trying to understand the religious space of the pagoda was to ask questions regarding the physical appearance of the pagoda and its contents. Cu si tai gia, and perhaps the Buddhist laity, orient themselves within the pagoda based on, at least on one level, the physical appearance or the symbolic nature of the pagoda: knowing which room is more sacred, which statue to pay homage to first, when to bow or prostrate one's self, when to chant, when to use incense, and so on. Thus, performing ritual actions are one way religious space is created within the pagodas. Of course the relationship between the religious symbol and the ritual act is not uni-directional because the symbol also gains sacred legitimacy through religious/ritual action.

Having asked monks and nuns similar questions about physical space, I felt they were more apt to regard the relationship between symbolic and ritual action as only one aspect of the Buddhist/religious space created within the pagodas. For many, especially with monks and nuns, the philosophy of the Buddhist doctrines is also an important tool that orients their religious actions and creates religious space within the pagoda. For example, I have learned from my interviews that a part of both monk's and nun's religious training is to contemplate the physical reality around them as impermanent in order to help release them from ideas of attachment associated with suffering and, thus, free them to help others. According to one monk, it is only when you see the true emptiness (impermanence) of the physical reality, including the Dharma, the statues, and the pagoda, that one is able to practice the Buddha's teachings. Due to limited space I am unable to describe the depth of this idea. Essentially, for the meditation sects, it is developing this kind of wisdom which enables them to fulfill their Bodhisattva vow to help those who come to the pagoda seeking their advice. Thus, Buddhist religious space is cultivated on many levels, two of which are linked with ritual actions produced by the followers and oriented by the physical appearance of the pagoda and another that is linked intimately with the philosophy of the Buddhist doctrines.

Notes

1 Typically Mahayana sects incorporate Theravadin and, of course, Mahayana Buddhist doctrines and ideology many of which are borrowed from China. Yet, in the Mekong delta the Theravadin school of thought is also important which is seen within the Khmer Pagodas and within the newly developed Theravadin Vietnamese pagodas (around fifty years old). In addition to these two sects is a third, the Vietnamese Mendicant sect (*Khat si*). The Khat si which developed in 1944 in Vinh Long province, honors both the Theravadin and Mahayana doctrines. But unlike the Mahayana sects, they seek alms and advocate living a lifestyle that is closer to the historical Buddha.

2 For example, in the province of Tra Vinh there are currently over 300,000 ethnic Khmer.

3 The Department of Religion for Cần Thơ province has, for example, informed me that the five most "popular religions" in its province are: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Cao Đài, and the Hòa Hảo.

4 This pagoda follows a Mahayana sect called Tu Tai gia, which means at home Buddhism. The people here are essentially devout Buddhist followers and do not shave their head. Their main purpose is to help the sick and needy with traditional Vietnamese medicine combined with Buddhist teachings.

5 There are a few Mahayana Buddhist pagodas for nuns and women studying to become nuns, one of which I was able to visit. Called Buu Ân pagoda, it was used as a handicraft shop by the government from 1975 until it was returned to the Buddhist Association six years ago.

6 Amitabha is a Buddha associated with the Pure Land school of Buddhism. It is believed that by chanting the name of Amitabha one can ensure entrance into the Western Paradise. The chant is: "Nam mô A Di Đà Phật (I call on the name of Amitabha)."

7 There are other titles such as *Sa di*, those who observe 10 precepts and are on their way to becoming a monk or nun, as well as *Hóa thượng* (most venerable). To be a *Hóa thượng* one must have studied for over 40 years, have a university education, and be at least sixty years of age.

8 Typically, gray is worn when in the pagoda, dark brown when traveling outside the pagoda, and bright yellow during Buddhist ceremonies.

9 Males are called *Uu bà tạc* and females are called *Uu bà di*.

10 This is not to say that followers practice only in their homes. In some cases "home" is, in fact, within a person's living quarters, in other cases it is located within a pagoda.

11 This is done in order to pay homage to the numerous statues: the past, present, and future Buddhas, Quan Am and other Bodhisattvas, the Jade Emperor, Confucius, and Lao Tzu to name just a few.

12 This was done by putting sacred words in a box and then burning it sending the messages on their way.