



The Assimilation of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) Thought in Truc Lam Yen Tu Philosophy: From India to Vietnam

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Abstract: The article focuses on examining the reception of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) ideology from India to Vietnam, with the emphasis on the philosophical creation process in the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect. Based on the systematization of Nagarjuna's main arguments on "emptiness" and "leaving two extremes", the author argues that when transmitted to Dai Viet, the Middle Way ideology was adjusted to suit the social and cultural context of the Tran Dynasty. The article points out that Truc Lam philosophy not only accepted the core content of Madhyamaka but also integrated it with Confucianism and Taoism, forming a unique philosophy of engagement. From there, Truc Lam Yen Tu both preserved the universal value of Mahayana Buddhism and affirmed the independent identity of Vietnamese Buddhism. The research results emphasize the practical significance and lasting spiritual value of the Middle Way in national life.

Keywords: The Middle Way (Madhyamaka); Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhism; The assimilation of thought; Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy.

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1. Introduction

In the history of Buddhist philosophy, the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) thought initiated by Nāgārjuna is considered one of the most unique and influential contributions. The Middle Way is not only a principle of thinking that goes beyond the two extremes of “permanence” and “annihilation”, but also a methodology for perceiving reality on the basis of emptiness and dependent origination. Thanks to its flexibility, critical spirit and high applicability, this thought has become an important source, spread and adapted in many different cultural and religious contexts in Asia.

In Vietnam, especially under the Tran Dynasty, Buddhism held a central position in spiritual and political life. In that context, the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect founded by Tran Nhan Tong was not only the crystallization of the Zen tradition from China, but also a unique creation of the nation. Truc Lam philosophy inherited the Middle Way ideology of Madhyamaka, while integrating with Confucian and Taoist elements, creating a worldly ideology closely linked to national and social life. This adaptation did not stop at copying, but demonstrated the process of creation, adjustment and

localization to suit the historical, cultural context and practical needs of Dai Viet under the Tran Dynasty.

The study of the reception of the Middle Way thought in the philosophy of Truc Lam Yen Tu is important in many aspects. First of all, it helps to clarify the path of movement and transformation of a great philosophical thought from India, through China, to Vietnam. Second, this study contributes to identifying the identity of Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy: not just passive reception but also creativity, integration and unique contribution to the treasury of human thought. Third, in the current context, when the need to seek a philosophy of life that is harmonious, integrated and engaged in the world is increasing, returning to the Middle Way thought of Truc Lam also has practical reference value.

Based on the above issues, this article sets out the following objectives: (i) To clarify the fundamental characteristics of the Middle Way thought in Indian Buddhist philosophy, especially in the Madhyamaka system of Nagarjuna. (ii) To analyze the process of introduction and transformation of the Middle Way thought in the cultural and social context of Dai Viet during the Tran Dynasty. (iii) To examine the way Truc Lam Yen Tu philosophy adapted and



created on the basis of the Middle Way, and at the same time to point out the theoretical and practical values of this adaptation.

On that basis, the article aims to answer the main research questions: (1) What are the contents and characteristics of the Middle Way ideology in the Madhyamaka system? (2) When it was transmitted to Dai Viet, how was this ideology received and transformed? (3) How did Truc Lam Yen Tu philosophy apply and develop the Middle Way to meet the political, social and religious needs of the Tran Dynasty? (4) What does that adaptation show about the philosophical identity of Vietnamese Buddhism and its significance for the spiritual life of the nation?

Thus, the study of the adaptation of the Middle Way ideology in Truc Lam Yen Tu philosophy not only contributes to identifying an important period in the history of Vietnamese philosophy, but also opens up the possibility of dialogue and comparison with other ideological traditions in the region and in the world.

2. Research methods

This study is conducted on the basis of an interdisciplinary approach between philosophy, history of thought and Buddhist studies. The historical-comparative method is used to examine the formation of the Middle Way in Indian philosophy, the process of its transmission to China and its transformation in the context of Dai Viet under the Tran Dynasty. The analytical-synthetic method helps clarify key concepts such as "emptiness", "dependent origination", "leaving behind the two extremes", and at the same time compares them with the works and poems of Tran Nhan Tong and Truc Lam Zen masters to identify the adaptation. In addition, the method of systematization and philosophical interpretation is applied to highlight the ideological structure, consistency and applied value of the Middle Way in Truc Lam. Thanks to this combination, the study aims to reproduce the process of adaptation in a logical, objective and scientifically based manner.

3. Research content

3.1. The Middle Way (Madhyamaka) in Indian Buddhist Philosophy

3.1.1. Origin and context of the formation of the Middle Way in primitive and developed Buddhist scriptures

The concept of the Middle Way (*majjhima patipada*) appeared early in the early Buddhist scriptures, especially in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, which is considered the first sermon of the Buddha after his enlightenment. In the context of ancient Indian society, religious thought and practice were dominated by two extreme tendencies: on one side was the hedonistic orientation, associated with material life and Brahmanical rituals; on the other side was the harsh asceticism aimed at cutting off desires and the body (Bodhi, 2000, p. 184). After his own practice and experience, the Buddha rejected both extremes, instead proposing the middle way - neither falling into sensual pleasures nor falling into harsh asceticism - as the principle of life and method of practice leading to enlightenment. According to the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Middle Way is the Noble Eightfold Path, which includes right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

In the context of contemporary Indian philosophy, the Middle Way was revolutionary in affirming an independent path,

independent of the Brahmanical philosophical system as well as extreme ascetic movements. It reflected the escape from the dualism of "permanence" and "annihilation" that dominated many Indian schools of thought. However, in the early Buddhist period, the Middle Way mainly meant the practice of ethics and meditation, focusing on adjusting the monastic life to achieve liberation. When Buddhism entered a period of development with the formation of sects, and then transformed into Mahayana Buddhism, this concept was expanded and elevated to a basic philosophical principle.

In Mahāyāna, especially through the Madhyamaka system of Nāgārjuna (2nd–3rd century), the Middle Way was redefined not only as a path of practice but also as a methodology for realizing the nature of reality. Nāgārjuna argued that all phenomena are dependently originated and have no inherent self-nature, and therefore are all "empty" (*śūnyatā*). The Middle Way is thus understood as transcending two extremes: the "existence" view, which holds that phenomena exist inherently and unchangingly, and the "non-existence" view, which denies the existence of phenomena. In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, Nāgārjuna writes: "Since there is no dharma that is not dependently originated, there is no dharma that is not empty" (Nāgārjuna, 1995, p. 42). This shows that the Middle Way in his thought is the correct perception of emptiness, while at the same time negating all forms of dualistic attachment. On deeper analysis, it can be seen that the Middle Way in Nagarjuna is not simply a reconciliation of two extremes, but a denial of the absolute existence of any extreme category. Unlike the original Buddhist thought that emphasizes the practical aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Middle Way in Madhyamaka becomes a dialectical tool to criticize and deconstruct all forms of philosophy that fall into dualism.

In addition, the socio-religious context of India in the later period also created conditions for this development. When Mahayana Buddhism was formed, Buddhism was no longer limited to the monastic community but also expanded to the lay masses. The Middle Way in the new philosophical sense became a tool to explain the world, defending the Mahayana position against debates with Brahmanical schools and even other Buddhist sects. Thus, it can be said that the formation and development of the Middle Way ideology reflects the process of transition from the principle of ethical practice in the original scriptures to a profound dialectical philosophical system in Mahayana.

In general, the Middle Way originated from the Buddha's direct experience in the context of ancient Indian society, was affirmed in the original scriptures as the path of practice leading to enlightenment, and was then elevated in Mahayana philosophy, especially through Nagarjuna, to become the philosophical principle of emptiness and dependent origination. This development both shows the inheritance and demonstrates the dynamism and creativity of Buddhism in the process of adaptation and dialogue with other traditions of thought, and at the same time lays the foundation for adaptation in countries where Buddhism spreads, including Vietnam.

3.1.2. Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamaka school

In the development of Mahayana Buddhist thought, Nagarjuna (2nd–3rd century) is considered one of the most important philosophers, who laid the foundation for the Madhyamaka school. If in the early Buddhist period, the Middle Way was mainly understood as a practical principle to avoid falling into extremes of

hedonism and asceticism, then under the creative hands of Nagarjuna, it was elevated to a dialectical philosophical system, having a profound influence on the entire Buddhist thought of East Asia and Tibet.

Central to Nāgārjuna's thought is the concept of "emptiness" (śūnyatā). Unlike the common understanding that "emptiness" is an absolute negation, Nāgārjuna defines "emptiness" as the absence of inherent self-nature (svabhāva) in all phenomena. According to him, all phenomena are dependently originated, so nothing exists independently and absolutely. In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, he writes: "Whatever phenomena are dependently originated, I say that they are empty; they are posited, and this is the Middle Way" (Nāgārjuna, 1995, p. 69). From this, it can be seen that Nāgārjuna uses the Middle Way principle to escape two extremes: existence (holding that phenomena have an unchanging reality) and nonexistence (holding that phenomena do not exist at all).

The method that Nagarjuna uses to develop the Madhyamaka thought is negative dialectics, often called "catuṣkoti". Accordingly, for any proposition about the nature of reality, he will point out that: (1) it cannot be affirmed as "existence", (2) it cannot be affirmed as "non-existence", (3) it cannot be both "existence" and "non-existence", and (4) it cannot be neither "existence" nor "non-existence" (Garfield, 1995, p. 94). This way of reasoning is not aimed at reaching any definitive affirmation, but at removing all attachments, opening up a broad view of reality as the operation of dependent origination without self.

Another important point in Nāgārjuna's philosophy is the distinction between "ultimate truth" (paramārtha-satya) and "conventional truth" (saṃvṛti-satya). According to him, at the level of conventional truth, people use language, concepts, and social conventions to perceive and describe the world; at the level of ultimate truth, all phenomena are seen in their dependent origination and emptiness. These two levels are not opposed but complementary: to reach ultimate truth, one must go through conventional truth, and there cannot be conventional truth apart from ultimate truth (Kalupahana, 1986, p. 147). This idea shows that Nāgārjuna's Middle Way does not deny the phenomenal world, but only rejects the attribution of an inherent nature to it.

It can be said that with the Madhyamaka system, Nagarjuna carried out a philosophical revolution within Buddhism. He transformed the Middle Way from a practical principle into a dialectical method, from an ethical path into a philosophical doctrine with epistemological and ontological depth. Therefore, many Western scholars liken Nagarjuna to the "Aristotle of Buddhism" (Murti, 1955, p. 63), while East Asian Buddhist scholars consider him the second "Great Saint" after the Buddha.

However, the philosophy of the Middle Way does not stop at theoretical value. Nagarjuna asserts that the understanding of emptiness does not lead to nihilism, but on the contrary, frees people from attachment, creating the foundation for compassion and wisdom. Realizing that all dharmas have no self-nature, the practitioner will let go of craving and ego-clinging, thereby achieving liberation. Thus, the Middle Way in Nagarjuna is still closely linked to the goal of liberation of Buddhism, and does not separate into a purely abstract philosophy.

The historical and social context of India in the 2nd and 3rd centuries also partly explains the formation of the Madhyamaka school. This was the period when Mahayana Buddhism was

developing strongly, competing with the Brahmanical schools and other Buddhist sects such as Sarvāstivāda. Nagarjuna's thoughts, with their sharp dialectical arguments, not only strengthened the theoretical foundation of Mahayana but also helped Buddhism dialogue and defend its position against contemporary philosophical criticisms (Ruegg, 1981, p. 102).

In general, Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka school opened up a new understanding of the Middle Way: not a path of compromise between two extremes, but the denial of all extremes, affirming the dependent origination and selflessness of all things. This system of thought became one of the most important philosophical foundations of Mahayana Buddhism, deeply influencing China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, and later was assimilated into Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy, especially in the thought of the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect.

3.1.3. The philosophical value of the Middle Way thought in the Mahayana Buddhist system

In the history of Buddhism, especially in the Mahayana period, the Middle Way holds a central position, not only as a method of practice but also as a profound philosophical system. The philosophical value of the Middle Way is expressed in many aspects, from ontology, epistemology to ethics and critical methods, thereby affirming its decisive role in shaping the appearance of Mahayana Buddhism.

First of all, in terms of ontology, the Middle Way offers a new conception of reality. Unlike ancient Indian philosophical doctrines that often fall into the extremes of realism or idealism, the Middle Way asserts that all phenomena have no inherent nature, but exist only in a relationship of dependent origination. Candrakīrti, a great Madhyamaka commentator after Nagarjuna, emphasized that "emptiness is not annihilation, but the absence of inherent self-nature" (Candrakīrti, 2008, p. 213). This conception helps free thinking from the tendency to cling to ontology, while avoiding falling into nihilism, opening up a flexible, dynamic ontology that is consistent with the dependent origination of reality.

Second, at the epistemological level, the Middle Way is of great value in proposing the doctrine of "two truths" (satyadvaya). According to this, all cognition operates on two levels: conventional truth and ultimate truth. Śāntideva, in his *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, explains that denying the self-nature of phenomena at the ultimate level does not mean denying their conventional value in everyday life (Śāntideva, 1997, p. 98). This shows that the Middle Way has created a balanced epistemological framework: it allows people to use language and concepts to construct social life, while also aiming for liberation through the direct realization of emptiness.

Third, from an ethical and practical perspective, the Middle Way is the basis for the Bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana. When realizing that all phenomena are empty of self-nature, the practitioner will let go of ego-clinging and develop compassion, because there is no longer an absolute separation between "self" and "other". Hopkins (2003) argues that it is thanks to the Middle Way that Mahayana has developed a unique altruistic ethics, in which the wisdom of emptiness and compassion mutually support each other, becoming the two wings of the Bodhisattva path (p. 142). The philosophical value of the Middle Way is therefore not only theoretical, but also oriented to ethical and liberating practice.

Fourth, the Middle Way is deeply critical and dialectical. Nagarjuna and the Madhyamakas often use the “four-line” to refute all arguments that fall into dualism. This is not to establish any affirmative doctrine, but to break down attachments, paving the way for direct realization. Siderits (2007) asserts that this is the special contribution of the Madhyamaka, because it offers a unique philosophical method: not to build a system in a metaphysical way, but to use dialectical negation to deconstruct all extremes (p. 142). It is this critical capacity that makes the Middle Way an effective tool for Mahayana Buddhism to assert its position against the contemporary Indian philosophical schools.

Finally, the philosophical value of the Middle Way lies in its universality and adaptability. From India, the Middle Way was transmitted to China, Tibet, Japan, and Vietnam, where it was adapted to suit the local cultural context. Robinson (1978) argues that the vitality of the Middle Way lies in its openness, not offering a rigid dogma, but allowing flexible interpretations according to the practical needs of each community (p. 62). Thanks to this, the Middle Way has both maintained its ideological consistency and become a source of inspiration for philosophical and religious innovations in the countries that have adopted Buddhism.

In short, in the Mahayana system, the Middle Way is not only a path to escape extremes but also a philosophical doctrine of profound value: it constructs the ontology of dependent origination and non-self-nature, proposes a balanced two-truth epistemology, shapes Bodhisattva ethics based on wisdom and compassion, and develops a unique dialectical criticism method. These values have helped Mahayana Buddhism both affirm its own identity and have the ability to adapt and spread widely, becoming one of the great pillars of Buddhist thought in particular and human philosophy in general.

3.2 The introduction and transformation of the Middle Way ideology in the cultural context - Vietnamese Buddhism during the Tran Dynasty

3.2.1 The path of receiving the Middle Way ideology from India, China to Dai Viet

The process of introduction and transformation of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) thought into the cultural context of Vietnamese Buddhism during the Tran Dynasty cannot be separated from the path of spreading Buddhism from India to China and from there to Dai Viet. This reception took place in a specific historical, political and cultural context, creating an exchange and selection, thereby forming a unique identity in Truc Lam Buddhist thought.

First, Buddhism was transmitted to China from India mainly by two routes: the overland route along the Silk Road and the maritime route through Southeast Asian trading ports. As early as the second century, the Madhyamaka sutras such as Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, the Twelve Gates, and the Hundred Treatises were translated into Chinese by famous translators such as Kumārajīva (344–413). This body of sutras became the basis for the formation of the Sanlun school, an important school in China that emphasized the principle of emptiness and the Middle Way (Lusthaus, 2002, p. 217). Although the Sanlun school did not develop strongly and long-term in China like the Zen or Huayan schools, it played an intermediary role in transmitting the Madhyamaka arguments, including the Middle Way principle, to other cultural areas, including Vietnam.

Next, from China, Buddhism was transmitted to Dai Viet through many channels. On the one hand, through political and cultural relations, Chinese monks came to Dai Viet to propagate the Dharma, and at the same time, Vietnamese monks also went to China to study. On the other hand, the maritime trade route also contributed to bringing Buddhist scriptures and thoughts to our country. Major Zen sects such as Vinitaruci (6th century) and Vo Ngon Thong (9th century) all originated from the direct transmission of Chinese Zen, which was deeply influenced by the Mahayana philosophical foundation, including the Middle Way. As Nguyen Tai Thu (1992, p. 121) has commented, this introduction was not simply a transfer of scriptures, but also a process of cultural integration, in which philosophical elements were selected and reinterpreted to suit the local context.

During the Tran Dynasty (1226–1400), Buddhism became the state religion, as well as the ideological and cultural foundation. This was a particularly important period for the assimilation of the Middle Way ideology. On the one hand, the Tran kings and great Zen masters such as Tran Thai Tong, Tue Trung Thuong Si and Tran Nhan Tong all deeply absorbed Mahayana sutras and treatises from China. Important sutras and treatises of the Middle Way and the Three Treatises were circulated and became reference materials in the process of teaching, learning and practicing. On the other hand, the Middle Way ideology was not only accepted in its original form, but also transformed to suit the spirit of engaging in the world, attached to the fate of the nation in the context of the resistance war against the Yuan-Mongol.

It can be seen that the reception of the Middle Way ideology into Dai Viet during the Tran Dynasty took place through two levels. At the first level, the Madhyamaka sutras and treatises from India were translated and systematized in China, then transmitted to Vietnam. At the second level, the Zen sects and Mahayana ideology in China, especially the Zen sect, played an intermediary role in bringing the Middle Way ideology into the practice and philosophical thinking of Vietnamese Buddhism. This explains why in Vietnam, the Middle Way ideology is rarely presented in the form of a philosophical system of interpretation as in China or India, but is often integrated into the practice of Zen and into worldly thinking.

Thus, the path of receiving the Middle Way ideology from India through China to Dai Viet was not a direct transmission, but an indirect process through translation, cultural exchange and Zen practice. Thanks to this intermediary, the Middle Way ideology when it came to Vietnam took on a new form: it both retained the core of the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness and transcendence of extremes, and transformed to adhere to the practical needs of Dai Viet society, especially the spirit of entering the world and connecting religion with life, which is a prominent feature of the Truc Lam Zen sect.

3.2.2 Cultural, religious and social characteristics of the Tran Dynasty and the need for ideological integration

The Tran Dynasty (1226–1400) marked a brilliant period in the history of Dai Viet, not only because of its glorious victories in the resistance war against the Yuan-Mongol, but also because of the rich development of culture, religion and ideology. In that context, the need to synthesize different sources of ideology emerged as an inevitable characteristic, reflecting both political and social requirements and the internal movement of the nation's spiritual life.

First of all, in terms of cultural and social characteristics, the Tran Dynasty was a period in which the agricultural village structure still played a fundamental role, while the central monarchical power was consolidated and expanded. This combination created a society that was both deeply communal and clearly centralized (Nguyen Tai Thu, 1992, p. 143). In such an environment, any ideology that wanted to exist sustainably had to integrate into practical life, serve the common interest and meet the needs of national solidarity. It was this characteristic that made ideological fusion an objective trend, because only synthesis could simultaneously meet the requirements of the village community, the royal court, and the entire nation.

In terms of religion, the Tran Dynasty inherited the tradition of “three religions working together” from previous dynasties. Buddhism continued to hold the dominant position, was considered the national religion and became the center of spiritual activities of society. At the same time, Confucianism increasingly asserted its role in administrative management and education, while Taoism remained strongly present in folk beliefs and magical practices (Ngo Duc Tho & Nguyen Van Nguyen, 2001, p. 87). Although these three ideological systems had different origins, in the context of Dai Viet, they coexisted, supported and harmonized. It was this state of “three religions working together” that created an environment for ideological dialogue, allowing the selection and integration of superior elements of each tradition.

In particular, Buddhism during the Tran Dynasty not only played a religious role but also became a political and social foundation. During the three resistance wars against the Yuan-Mongol, Buddhism's spirit of compassion, wisdom and engagement became a spiritual strength that united the community, fostering the will to protect national independence. The Tran kings and great Zen masters such as Tran Thai Tong, Tue Trung Thuong Si, and Tran Nhan Tong were both political and military leaders and Zen practitioners (Taylor, 1983, p. 152). This clearly reflects the need for integration: Buddhism was forced to combine the spirit of liberation with the responsibility of engaging in the world, while also resonating with Confucianism in governing the country and Taoism in cultivating the individual.

In addition, the ideological fusion also originated from the internal movement of Vietnamese Buddhism. From the 6th to 9th centuries, Zen sects such as Vinitaruci and Vo Ngon Thong received the influence of Chinese Zen Buddhism - where the Middle Way ideology of Madhyamaka played a fundamental role (Nguyen Dang Thuc, 1992, p. 245). During the Tran Dynasty, when Buddhism achieved the status of the national religion, the process of fusion between Zen sects, between Madhyamaka ideology and indigenous spirit became inevitable. The birth of Truc Lam Zen sect is a clear proof: this is a system of ideology that both carries the depth of Mahayana philosophy and is closely linked to the national spirit, combining all three traditions of Buddhism - Confucianism - Taoism.

In terms of politics, the Tran Dynasty was a prosperous period, with a lenient policy, respecting the people, promoting agriculture and focusing on building national unity. To consolidate that stability, an ideological system was needed that could reconcile the needs of governing the country and liberation, between the individual and the community. The Middle Way of Mahayana Buddhism, with its nature of transcending extremism, provided a suitable theoretical basis for this process. The Middle

Way ideology not only transcended the opposition of existence and non-existence, but also created the premise for integrating different philosophical traditions into a unified whole, meeting the requirements of the times.

In short, the cultural, social and religious characteristics of the Tran Dynasty – with the foundation of villages, the three religions coexisting, the status of Buddhism as the state religion and the political context requiring stability – created the need for ideological integration. This was not a random phenomenon, but an inevitable historical choice, both ensuring the sustainability of the nation and paving the way for the formation of a unique ideological system of the Truc Lam Zen sect, where the Middle Way spirit of Mahayana was deeply assimilated and localized.

3.2.3. The Middle Way's Reception through Vietnamese Zen before Truc Lam

Before the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect was formed under the Tran Dynasty, Vietnamese Zen had undergone a process of assimilation of the Middle Way ideology through Zen schools imported from India and China, especially Vinitaruci, Vo Ngon Thong and Thao Duong. This reception did not take place in its entirety, but through a process of localization, integration with folk beliefs and the needs of Dai Viet society, gradually shaping a Zen tradition with its own identity.

First of all, the Vinitaruci Zen sect (6th century), introduced to Vietnam by Vinitaruci after receiving teachings from the Third Patriarch Sengcan of China, is one of the first Zen sects to carry the Middle Way element of Madhyamaka. The direct experience and the idea of “not relying on words” in Zen originate from the principle of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*), and at the same time reflect the Middle Way stance when denying both extremes of permanence and annihilation. Vinitaruci's deathbed verse: “The mind is like emptiness, the sun of wisdom shines on itself” clearly evokes the spirit of the Middle Way: wisdom does not come from clinging to dharma existence, nor from denying nothingness, but from the illumination of the unobstructed mind.

Next, the Vo Ngon Thong Zen sect (9th century), brought by a Chinese Zen master, flourished in the North of Vietnam. This Zen sect emphasized the method of “mind-to-mind transmission”, with the spirit of transcendental silence (no-word) as a way to overcome conceptual language to directly realize the truth. It is here that the influence of the Middle Way manifests in the criticism of clinging to metaphysical reasoning, instead affirming direct experience. “No-word” does not mean the absolute denial of language, but points out the limitation of all dualistic categories, which is an inevitable consequence of the “conventional-true two truths” perspective in the Middle Way. As Murti (1955) commented, this position is the implementation of the Middle Way into practical Zen: language is valuable at the level of conventional truth, but the ultimate truth can only be realized through transcendental intuition (p. 180).

In the 11th century, the Thao Duong Zen sect was born in the context of the Ly dynasty, directly influenced by Chinese Zen, especially Cao Dong and Lam Te. This sect strongly combined the elements of Zen koan and direct pointing to the human mind, but still imbued with the spirit of the Middle Way in not being attached to form, not falling into extremes of gradual enlightenment or sudden enlightenment. Zen koans such as “Original Face” or “The Cypress Tree in the Yard” inherently reflect the negative stance of

the Middle Way: breaking the attachment to self, breaking the attachment to dharma to lead practitioners back to non-dual reality (Sasaki, 2009, p. 74). Thanks to that, Thao Duong Zen expanded Zen activities, contributing to preparing the premise for the birth of Truc Lam later.

In addition to the direct influence of Zen sects, the Middle Way was also adapted through the fusion with folk beliefs and Confucianism - Taoism. Zen master Khuong Viet (Ngo Chan Luu) of the Tien Le dynasty was both a national teacher and a shaper of social spiritual life. In the Zen writings of the early Ly - Tran dynasties, the presence of the Middle Way spirit can be seen through the fusion: not separating religion - life, leaving the world - entering the world, but blending the spirit of liberation and community responsibility (Nguyen Lang, 1973, p. 214). This spirit prepared for a higher synthesis in Truc Lam's later thought, where the Middle Way was not only a philosophical concept but became a principle of life.

In general, the process of acculturation of the Middle Way in Vietnamese Zen before Truc Lam has three characteristics. First, it is the "shift" from the philosophical level to the practice of meditation, emphasizing direct evidence rather than theory. Second, the Middle Way is localized in Vietnamese cultural and social life, integrated with folk beliefs and the spirit of engagement. Third, this acculturation is preparatory, laying the foundation for the Truc Lam Zen sect to inherit and elevate into a comprehensive system of thought, both imbued with the spirit of the Middle Way and closely linked to national identity.

It can be seen that before Truc Lam Yen Tu appeared, the Middle Way had already permeated deeply into the Vietnamese Zen schools, from Ty-ni-da-luu-chi, Vo Ngon Thong to Thao Duong, and through that was localized, adapted to the social context. It was this preparation that created the "fertile ground" for Tran Nhan Tong and the Truc Lam Zen masters to continue developing the Middle Way, creating a philosophy that was both Mahayana in scope and Dai Viet in identity.

3.3. The Middle Way Thought in Truc Lam Yen Tu Philosophy and Its Meaning

3.3.1. Tran Nhan Tong and the formation of Truc Lam philosophy based on the spirit of the Middle Way

In the development of Vietnamese Buddhist thought, Tran Nhan Tong (1258–1308) played a central role in shaping the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect. He was not only a wise king who led Dai Viet through three wars of resistance against the Yuan-Mongol, but he was also an enlightened practitioner who founded a Zen system with a strong national identity. The philosophical foundation of Truc Lam, under the guidance of Tran Nhan Tong, was built on the spirit of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) of Mahayana, but was localized to simultaneously meet the needs of individual liberation and national stability.

First of all, in terms of ideology, Tran Nhan Tong directly received the Madhyamaka heritage through Zen schools from China, which had strongly influenced Vietnamese Buddhism since the Ly dynasty. However, he did not stop at repeating the teachings of the Middle Way, but created them by integrating them with the historical and cultural experiences of Dai Viet. In works such as *Cu Tran Lac Dao Phu* and *Dac Thu Lam Tuyen Thanh Dao Ca*, we clearly see the spirit of "hoa quang dong tran": living in the world without being tainted by it, practicing Buddhism right in social life

(Nguyen Tai Thu, 1992, p. 257). This is the manifestation of the Middle Way in Vietnamese practice – neither extreme in the world nor extreme in the world, but harmonizing the two aspects to attain liberation right in everyday life.

Second, Tran Nhan Tong used the Middle Way as a principle to transcend dualism. In the poem "*Cu tran lac dao*", he wrote: "*Cu tran lac dao, tha tinh duyên. Co tat xan he khong tat me*" - a concept that shows the transcendence of all constraints of existence and non-existence, practice and mundane. Here, the Middle Way is no longer just a philosophical category of Nagarjuna, but becomes a flexible attitude of living in harmony with nature and society (Nguyen Lang, 1973, p. 318). This statement recalls the principle of dependent origination: all phenomena arise depending on conditions, therefore practitioners should not be stubborn in any extreme. Tran Nhan Tong's Middle Way is therefore practical in nature, emphasizing "depending on conditions" to be at peace in all circumstances.

Third, on the philosophical-political level, the Middle Way was transformed by Tran Nhan Tong into a principle of ideological synthesis. He did not deny Confucianism or Taoism, but skillfully combined the quintessence of all three traditions. Confucianism provided a model for governing the country, Taoism brought elements of health preservation and natural harmony, while Buddhism, with the Middle Way as its core, brought the spirit of liberation and compassion. Through this combination, Tran Nhan Tong created a synthetic ideology, suitable for the political and cultural needs of the time. As Taylor (1983) commented, this synthesis was a turning point, helping Buddhism change from being a purely state religion to becoming "the spiritual foundation of the nation" (p. 155).

Fourth, the Middle Way under Tran Nhan Tong also had ethical and social values. His renunciation of the throne to become a monk was not an escape, but a way of entering the world in the spirit of Bodhisattva: using wisdom and compassion to serve humanity. After founding Truc Lam, he often went to preach and teach morality to the people, and at the same time advised the king and his successors to maintain morality and loyalty. This event shows that Truc Lam's Middle Way was not separated from practical life, but on the contrary, was closely linked to the interests of the community. Hopkins (2003) emphasized that Truc Lam is a typical example of how Mahayana Middle Way was localized into a "ethical and social ideal" of Dai Viet (p. 167).

Finally, the philosophical value of Tran Nhan Tong's shaping of Truc Lam based on the Middle Way lies in the fact that he transformed an abstract philosophical category into a practical principle of life, suitable for Vietnamese culture. From Nagarjuna's "non-attachment to permanence and cessation" perspective, Tran Nhan Tong developed it into the concept of "living in the world and enjoying the path", a philosophy of harmony, integration, and at the same time upward and worldly. Thanks to that, Truc Lam is not only a Zen sect, but also a national philosophical ideology, where the Middle Way becomes the guiding principle for both spiritual life and social practice.

In short, Tran Nhan Tong shaped the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect based on the Middle Way spirit of Mahayana Buddhism, but at the same time created and localized it, turning the Middle Way into a philosophy of life and action for both individuals and communities. This is an outstanding contribution, creating the unique identity of Vietnamese Buddhism in the historical process,

and affirming the unique position of Truc Lam in the flow of world Buddhist thought.

3.3.2. The Middle Way and the Synthesis of Confucianism – Buddhism – Taoism in Truc Lam Philosophy

Truc Lam Yen Tu philosophy was formed in a special context: Dai Viet under the Tran Dynasty was a society where many ideologies coexisted and collided. Confucianism played a leading role in the political and educational institutions, Buddhism had taken deep roots in the spiritual life of the masses, and Taoism was present as a cultural flow with localization, close to folk life. In that situation, the fusion of ideological traditions became an objective need. However, fusion does not mean mechanical mixing, but requires a philosophical mechanism capable of resolving contradictions and creating a whole. It is here that the Middle Way principle (Madhyamaka) plays a core role, acting as a connecting axis and creating a unique identity for Truc Lam philosophy.

The Middle Way, which originated with Nāgārjuna, was shaped in the Madhyamaka system. According to it, all phenomena exist in a relationship of dependent origination, completely lacking a fixed “self-nature”. All extreme views – whether eternalism (holding an eternal essence) or nihilism (holding everything as nothingness) – are rejected (Murti, 1955, p. 214). This dialectical negation does not lead to nothingness, but opens up a logic of compromise: instead of falling into two extremes, people can see reality in emptiness, which is also dependent origination. This is the theoretical basis for the possibility of ideological fusion, because it affirms that no system holds the absolute truth, and all traditions can interact and complement each other.

In Truc Lam philosophy, the Middle Way was developed by Tran Nhan Tong and Zen masters as a principle of life and practice, and also as a methodology for accepting and restructuring Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Thanks to this principle, Confucianism was liberated from rigidity, Taoism was freed from extreme escapism, while Mahayana Buddhism could be more deeply connected with social life.

Confucianism, with its ideals of “self-cultivation, family harmony, governing the country, and world peace”, played an important role in building the institutions and discipline of the Tran Dynasty. However, if it fell into monopoly, Confucianism could easily turn into political dogma. Truc Lam, thanks to the Middle Way, accepted Confucianism in terms of social responsibility and morality, but reinterpreted it on the basis of compassion and selflessness. “Cư trần lạc đạo” is a clear demonstration: monks can still participate in governing the country, but not for fame, profit or power, but for the benefit of the community (Nguyen Lang, 1973, p. 326). Thus, Confucianism was integrated not by imposition, but by regulation, so that it became a means rather than an end.

Taoism, on the other hand, brings to the spiritual life of the Vietnamese people closeness to nature and a lifestyle in accordance with nature. However, if the ideal of “inaction” and seclusion is absolutized, Taoism can lead to an attitude of escaping social responsibility. The Middle Way in Truc Lam has adjusted this point by affirming that the purity of nature is not separate from the obligation to enter the world (Nguyen Tai Thu, 1992, p. 260). In Dac Thu Lam Tuyen Thanh Dao Ca, Tran Nhan Tong expressed his joy of being in harmony with nature, but it is not a way to escape from society, but a means to nourish the soul to serve life. Taoism

is thus integrated as a complementary element to inner cultivation, not a rejection of society.

The center of the fusion is of course still Buddhism. But Buddhism in Truc Lam is no longer just a religion of personal liberation, but a philosophy of worldly life. It is the principle of the Middle Way that allows Truc Lam to overcome the polarity between the worldly and the worldly, between the “temple” and the “dynasty”. Thanks to that, Buddhism is not alien to political life, but becomes a spiritual resource that contributes to the strength of national unity. The role of Truc Lam in the resistance wars against the Yuan-Mongol shows that the Middle Way does not lead to passivity, but encourages action associated with the spirit of selflessness and compassion.

The key point is that the synthesis in Truc Lam takes place not only at the practical level, but also at the philosophical level. The Middle Way creates a metaphysical principle capable of reconciling all differences. Confucianism provides social discipline, Taoism nurtures natural harmony, Buddhism brings liberating wisdom – but all three only reach unity when placed within the dialectical negation principle of the Middle Way. This can be seen as a form of “three religions with the same origin” with Vietnamese creativity, in which the Middle Way plays a fundamental role, not imposing but regulating, not homogenizing but harmonizing.

The significance of this synthesis is not limited to the Tran Dynasty. Philosophically, it demonstrates the ability to turn a metaphysical principle into a tool for social regulation, demonstrating the flexible vitality of Madhyamaka thought when localized. Culturally, it contributes to the construction of Vietnamese identity, both accepting foreign traditions and creating to suit specific historical circumstances. Politically and socially, it ensures the Tran Dynasty a spiritual foundation to maintain stability and encourage community strength in a challenging context.

It can be seen that the Middle Way is the key to the synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in Truc Lam philosophy. Thanks to this principle, Truc Lam can avoid all three extremes: the political dogma of Confucianism, the extreme escapism of Taoism, and the absolute renunciation of Buddhism. The three traditions are no longer antagonistic, but meet in a new whole, which is both liberating and worldly, both metaphysical and political and social. This achievement proves the creativity of Vietnamese thought, and at the same time affirms the role of the Middle Way as a principle of harmony and philosophical creation with timeless value.

3.3.3. Practical value of Truc Lam Middle Way

The Middle Way in Truc Lam Yen Tu's thought not only has a metaphysical philosophical meaning, but also contains a special practical value, closely linked to the political, social and cultural life of Dai Viet during the Tran Dynasty. The application of this principle has created a practical orientation for individuals and communities, while opening up the possibility of reconciling seemingly opposing value systems, forming the Vietnamese ideological identity in a turbulent historical context.

The first highlight is that the Middle Way is developed as a balanced philosophy of life, helping people overcome both extremes of asceticism and hedonism. When Tran Nhan Tong affirmed “living in the world and enjoying the path”, he turned the

Middle Way into a daily motto: not leaving the world but also not being bound by greed, keeping a peaceful mind while still fulfilling responsibilities to family and society. According to Nguyen Dang Thuc (1992), this is a unique form of “engaged Buddhism”, because it allows each individual to find liberation right in reality, instead of searching in a transcendent world. This practice has created a moral model close to the people, both simple and profound, nurturing a balanced lifestyle in the community.

The Middle Way also plays a key role in forming social norms. The principle of negating all extremes helps to foster the spirit of compassion, tolerance and selflessness, thereby minimizing ideological conflicts and class contradictions. Thanks to that, Truc Lam Buddhism is not only limited to the Zen monastery but also permeates civil life, creating a force that unites the community. Tran Van Giap (1970) commented that Buddhism in the Tran Dynasty became “a bond that connects people's hearts”, contributing to maintaining social consensus in difficult times, especially during the resistance wars against the Yuan-Mongol. This proves that the Middle Way not only guides individual practice, but also operates as a social principle, building a collective moral foundation.

The practical value of the Middle Way is also reflected in its ability to harmonize the three religions. In Dai Viet society, Confucianism was the political ideology, Taoism was a popular cultural stream, and Buddhism had taken root deeply in spiritual life. Without a philosophical principle capable of harmonizing, these three traditions could develop in competition or opposition. The Middle Way, with its spirit of avoiding extremes and affirming dependent origination, opened the way to harmony. Confucianism was accepted in terms of discipline and social responsibility, Taoism added the spirit of following nature and tranquility, while Buddhism played a central role in providing liberating wisdom. The result was a model of “three religions with the same origin” with Dai Viet identity, both maintaining political stability and nurturing a rich spiritual life (Le Manh That, 2002, p. 412). This fusion is not a mechanical blend, but a restructuring on the basis of the Middle Way, allowing ideologies to promote positive values without falling into exclusivity or extremism.

In the political field, the Middle Way is applied as an orientation for governing the country. The image of Tran Nhan Tong, after becoming a monk, still holding the role of a royal advisor is a testament to the ability to combine “renunciation” and “engagement”. Here, the Middle Way principle helps the country's governance not fall into harsh dogma, but is associated with the spirit of compassion and tolerance. Research by Phan Huy Le (1999) shows that the political stability and spirit of tolerance of the Tran Dynasty are closely related to the influence of Truc Lam Buddhism, in which the Middle Way plays the role of a regulating principle between power and morality. This shows that the Middle Way is not only a philosophy of practice, but also the foundation of national governance.

The cultural influence of the Middle Way cannot be ignored. Works written in Nom script such as *Cu Tran Lac Dao Phu* or *Dac Thu Lam Tuyen Thanh Dao Ca* have conveyed the Middle Way's ideology to the general public. Simple language and familiar images have made philosophical principles become popular mottos for life, deeply imprinted in the folk consciousness. According to Nguyen Hue Chi (2001), this is evidence of the ability to “nationalize” Buddhist philosophy, when abstract concepts are transformed into living cultural standards. Thus, the Middle Way

does not only exist in the intellectual or religious circles, but is deeply ingrained in the national culture, contributing to the formation of Vietnamese identity.

Another important aspect is the methodological value. The Middle Way encourages critical and flexible thinking, rather than absolute affirmation. This attitude helps people perceive the relativity of all phenomena, avoiding falling into ideological extremes. In a diverse society like Dai Viet, this ability becomes a condition for maintaining dialogue and consensus. On a longer scale, this is also a legacy that can be promoted in the modern context, when global society faces many ideological and religious conflicts.

From all the above aspects, it can be seen that the practical value of Truc Lam Trung Dao does not stop at the personal or religious scope, but covers politics, society and culture. It shapes a balanced lifestyle, nurtures community ethics, harmonizes the three religions, guides the governance of the country, and spreads into a national cultural standard. At the same time, Trung Dao also opens up a way of thinking that is capable of transcending time, continuing to suggest meaning in the modern context.

Conclude

The survey of the reception of the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) ideology from India through China to Vietnam shows a creative process of movement, in which Truc Lam Yen Tu Buddhism holds a key position. Originating from the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path, elevated by Nagarjuna into a dialectical philosophical system of emptiness and dependent origination, the Middle Way became the core principle of Mahayana. When transmitted to Dai Viet, this ideology was no longer a repetition of the original, but went through a process of localization to adapt to historical, cultural conditions and practical needs.

During the Tran Dynasty, the spirit of the Middle Way was realized through Truc Lam philosophy with three outstanding characteristics: the harmony between religion and life, the integration of the three religions into a unified whole, and the close connection with the destiny of the nation. Tran Nhan Tong and the Truc Lam Zen masters transformed the Middle Way from an abstract philosophical principle into a practical philosophy of life - “living in the world and enjoying the path” - which both nurtured the spiritual life of the individual and created an ethical and political foundation for the community. Thanks to that, Buddhism not only maintained its position as the national religion but also became the “national spiritual foundation”, contributing significantly to the stability and development of Dai Viet.

The value of this adaptation is not limited to the past. On the philosophical level, it affirms the ability of dialogue and integration of the Middle Way, a principle capable of resolving polarities and creating harmony. On the cultural and social level, it demonstrates the creativity of the Vietnamese people in receiving and restructuring foreign ideas, transforming them into a heritage bearing national identity. In the modern context, when humanity is faced with ideological conflicts and value crises, the Truc Lam Middle Way still retains its evocative power: a philosophy of reconciliation, balance, both worldly and upward, which can become a source of inspiration for building a harmonious and humane life.

In short, the adaptation of the Middle Way in Truc Lam Yen Tu philosophy is a typical example of the process of creating

Vietnamese philosophy: both inheriting the quintessence of humanity and affirming its own identity. This is an important contribution not only to the history of Buddhist thought, but also to the world's philosophical treasure.

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