



## 'PATRIARCH MEDITATION' AND 'TATHAGATHA MEDITATION' IN VIETNAM: A COMPARATIVE INVESTIGATION BASED ON SATIPATTHANA

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received 28<sup>th</sup> October, 2018  
Received in revised form  
03<sup>rd</sup> November, 2018  
Accepted 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2018  
Published online 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2019

#### Key Words:

Tathagatha Meditation,  
Patriarch Meditation.

### ABSTRACT

Buddhist meditation techniques have become increasingly popular in the wider world, with many non-Buddhists taking them up for a variety of reasons. There is considerable homogeneity across meditative practices – such as breath meditation and various recollections. In the Theravāda tradition alone, there are over fifty methods for developing mindfulness and forty for developing concentration, while in the Tibetan tradition there are thousands of visualization meditations. Most classical and contemporary Buddhist meditation guides are school-specific. In this paper, I try to figure out two popular traditions of meditation which Vietnamese Buddhists are following and practicing for the purpose of enlightenment and salvation: 'Tathagatha Meditation' and 'Patriarch Meditation'.

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Citation: Phung Thiet Trinh. 2019. "'Patriarch meditation' and 'tathagatha meditation' in Vietnam: A comparative investigation based on satipatthana", *International Journal of Development Research*, 9, (01), 25161-25165.

### INTRODUCTION

In Buddhism, meditation refers to the meditative practices associated with the religion and philosophy of Buddhism. Core meditation techniques have been preserved in ancient Buddhist texts and have proliferated and diversified through teacher-student transmissions. Buddhists pursue meditation as part of the path toward enlightenment and nirvana. Buddhist meditation techniques have become increasingly popular in the wider world, with many non-Buddhists taking them up for a variety of reasons. There is considerable homogeneity across meditative practices – such as breath meditation and various recollections. In the Theravāda tradition alone, there are over fifty methods for developing mindfulness and forty for developing concentration, while in the Tibetan tradition there are thousands of visualization meditations. Most classical and contemporary Buddhist meditation guides are school-specific. In this paper, I try to figure out two popular traditions of meditation which Vietnamese Buddhists are following and practicing for the purpose of enlightenment and salvation: 'Tathagatha Meditation' and 'Patriarch Meditation'.

**Tathagatha Meditation:** Tathagatha Meditation is understood as a method of meditation which has been given directly by the

Buddha through Samatha and Vipassana in various suttas in Pali Tipitaka, especially Satipatthana Sutta and Mahasatipatthana Sutta. The Satipatthāna Sutta (The Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness) and the Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta (The Great Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness) are two of the most important and widely studied discourses in the Pāli Canon of Theravada Buddhism, acting as the foundation for mindfulness meditational practice. These suttas stress the practice of sati (mindfulness) for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the extinguishing of suffering and grief, for walking on the path of truth, for the realization of nibbāna. Here I just focus on the practice of Satipatthana in Tathagatha Meditation Tradition which is also popular and common in Theravada Buddhist countries. Satipatthāna is a compound term that has been parsed (and thus translated) in two ways, namely *Sati paṭṭhāna* and *Sati-upaṭṭhāna*. The interpretation of the term sati/smṛti has been the source of considerable research, discussion, and debate that can only be touched upon here. Smṛti originally meant "to remember," "to recollect," "to bear in mind"; its religious significance can be traced to the Vedic emphasis on setting to memory the authoritative teachings of the tradition. Sati appears to retain this sense of "remembering" in the Buddhist Nikāyas: "And what, bhikkhus, is the faculty of sati? Here, bhikkhus, the noble disciple has sati, he is endowed with perfect sati and intellect, he is one who remembers, who

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recollects what was done and said long before.” Moreover, the faculties of recollection and reflection are unarguably central to a variety of classical Buddhist practices associated with *smṛti*, including *buddhānusmṛti* or “recollection on the Buddha,” which typically involves some combination of recalling the characteristics of the Buddha, visualizing him, and chanting his name. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, the term *sati* retains a sense of “recollecting” or “bearing in mind.” Specifically, *sati* involves bearing in mind the virtuous dharmas so as to properly apprehend, from moment to moment, the true nature of phenomena<sup>1</sup>.

Buddhaghosa provides a similar gloss in his *Path of Purification*: “By means of it they [i.e., other dhammas] remember, or it itself remembers, or it is simply just remembering, thus it is *sati*. Its characteristic is not floating; its property is not losing; its manifestation is guarding or the state of being face to face with an object; its basis is strong noting or the *satipaṭṭhānas* of the body and so on. It should be seen as like a post due to its state of being firmly set in the object, and as like a gatekeeper because it guards the gate of the eye and so on”<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, *Satipaṭṭhāna* is the establishment or arousing of mindfulness, as part of the Buddhist practices leading to detachment and liberation. Traditionally, mindfulness is thought to be applied to four domains, “constantly watching sensory experience in order to prevent the arising of cravings which would power future experience into rebirths.”<sup>3</sup> The four domains are: mindfulness of the body; mindfulness of feelings or sensations (*vedanā*); mindfulness of mind or consciousness (*citta*); and mindfulness of *dhammās*. These Arousings of Mindfulness are many as regards objects but are one in the sense of taking place in a single way of quietude charged with insight that leads to *Nibbana*. All the four different objects of mindfulness: body, feeling, consciousness and mental objects, have to be understood before one reaches sanctitude. According to character, temperament and cognizing slant, one can make however only one of these the preliminary object of contemplation. It is often the case that owing to a lack of proper understanding of oneself one has to try all objects before one gets to know what suits one best for the preliminary work. The choice is made more difficult by the fact that most of us have no clear-cut natures and are a mixture of a little of every possible human characteristic. In these circumstances there is no alternative to the method of trial and error. But the earnest ones will find their way with persistence and sustained effort.

**Patriarch Meditation:** It is a not new concept of meditation. The Patriarch Meditation is a kind of meditation taught and transmitted by patriarchs in Buddhism, especially in tradition of Mahayana Buddhist meditation. It can be said that Patriarch meditation is equivalent to Chan in Chinese Buddhism, Zen in Japanese Buddhism, Seon in Korean Buddhism and Bamboo Meditation Sect in Vietnamese Buddhism. In Northern Buddhism, the first patriarch of meditation lineage was Mahakasyapa. Then this lineage was transmitted to the 28th Patriarch Bodhidharma from whom lineage of meditation in India was transmitted to China. In China, Bodhidharma is considered as the first Patriarch of meditation lineage (in patriarch meditation). The earliest lineages described the lineage from Bodhidharma to Huineng. There is no generally

accepted 7th Patriarch. From the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng’s times onwards, Patriarch Meditation had been flourishing, and spread to neighboring countries such as Korea, Japan and Vietnam. According to patriarch lineage of meditation, there are totally thirty three patriarchs. One branch in India, the earliest descriptions of the meditation lineage evolved into a continuous lineage from Śākyamuni Buddha to Bodhidharma. On the other branch in China, the earliest lineages described the lineage from Bodhidharma to Huineng. In the *Song of Enlightenment* (證道歌 *Zhèngdào gē*) of Yongjia Xuanjue (永嘉玄覺, 665–713), one of the chief disciples of Huineng, it is written that Bodhidharma was the 28th patriarch in a line of descent from Mahākāśyapa, a disciple of Śākyamuni Buddha, and the first patriarch of Chan Buddhism.

“Mahākāśyapa was the first, leading the line of transmission;  
Twenty-eight Patriarchs followed him in the West;  
The Lamp was then brought over the sea to this country;  
And Bodhidharma became the First Patriarch here:  
His mantle, as we all know, passed over six Patriarchs,  
And by them many minds came to see the Light”<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, it can be said that the origin of Patriarch Meditation can be traced back Mahākāśyapa. It is in same manner of the Chan tradition which ascribes the origins of Chan in India to the Flower Sermon, the earliest source for which comes from the 14th century<sup>5</sup>. It is said that Gautama Buddha gathered his disciples one day for a Dharma talk. When they gathered together, the Buddha was completely silent and some speculated that perhaps the Buddha was tired or ill. The Buddha silently held up and twirled a flower and his eyes twinkled; several of his disciples tried to interpret what this meant, though none of them were correct. One of the Buddha’s disciples, Mahākāśyapa, silently gazed at the flower and broke into a broad smile. The Buddha then acknowledged Mahākāśyapa’s insight by saying the following:

“I possess the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvāṇa, the true form of the formless, the subtle Dharma gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahākāśyapa”<sup>6</sup>.

However, the person who had the greatest contribution for development of meditation in China as well as in Patriarch Meditation is Bodhidharma. It was him who made a distinctive aspect for practice of meditation as following announcement:

“A special transmission outside the scriptures  
Not founded upon words and letters;  
By pointing directly to [one’s] mind  
It lets one see into [one’s own true] nature and [thus] attain Buddhahood”<sup>7</sup>.

**Practice of Koan in Patriarch Meditation:** A *kōan* is a story, dialogue, question, or statement, which is used in meditation practice to provoke the great doubt and test a student’s progress in Patriarch meditation practice.

<sup>4</sup> Suzuki, D.T. (1935), *Manual of Zen Buddhism*.

<sup>5</sup> Dumoulin, Heinrich (2005), *Zen Buddhism: A History. Volume 1: India and China*, World Wisdom Books, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Dumoulin, Heinrich (2005), *Zen Buddhism: A History. Volume 1: India and China*, World Wisdom Books, p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> Dumoulin, Heinrich; Heisig, James; Knitter, Paul F. (2005). *Zen Buddhism: India and China*. World Wisdom, Inc. p. 85.

<sup>1</sup> Saṃyutta-nikāya, Feer 1998, pp. 197–98; trans. Gethin 1992, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Visuddhimagga XIV, 141; trans. Gethin 1992, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, Paul; Tribe, Anthony (2000), *Buddhist Thought*, Routledge, p.46.

In another word, the teaching styles and words of the classical masters were recorded in the so-called Koan. Snippets of these encounter dialogues were collected in texts as the Blue Cliff Record (1125) of Yuanwu, The Gateless Gate (1228) of Wumen, both of the Linji lineage, and the Book of Equanimity (1223) by Wansong Xingxiu of the Caodong lineage. These texts became classic Koan cases, together with verse and prose commentaries, which crystallized into the systematized Koan practice. The recorded encounter dialogues, and the Koan collections which derived from this genre, mark a shift from solitary practice to interaction between master and student:

“The essence of enlightenment came to be identified with the interaction between masters and students. Whatever insight dhyana might bring, its verification was always interpersonal. In effect, enlightenment came to be understood not so much as an insight, but as a way of acting in the world with other people”<sup>8</sup> This mutual enquiry of the meaning of the encounters of masters and students of the past gave students a role model: “One looked at the enlightened activities of one’s lineal forebears in order to understand one’s own identity [...] taking the role of the participants and engaging in their dialogues instead”<sup>9</sup> Study of kōan literature is common to all schools of Zen, though with varying emphases and curriculae. The Rinzai-school uses extensive koan-curricula, checking questions, and jakogo (quotations from Chinese poetry) in its use of koans. The Sanbo Kyodan, and its western derivatives of Taizan Maezumi and the White Plum Asanga, also use koan-curricula, but have omitted the use of capping phrases. In Chinese Chán and Korean Seon, the emphasis is on Hua Tou, the study of one koan throughout one’s lifetime. In Japanese Soto-Zen, the use of koans has been abandoned since the late eighteenth and nineteenth century.

### Comparison of Tathagatha Meditation and Patriarch Mediation Based on Satipatthana

**Kāyānupassanā:** In Tathagatha Meditation, a monk practices Kāyānupassanā to remain focused on the body through Mindfulness of Breathing, Mindfulness of the Four Postures, Clear Comprehension, Mindfulness of the thirty two Parts of the Body, Mindfulness of the Four Elements and the Nine Cemetery Contemplations. In this way, he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or externally on the body in & of itself, or both internally & externally on the body in & of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that ‘There is a body’ is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself. In Patriarch Meditation, we often heard that carrying water or cutting firewood is also meditation or picking grass is also meditation. A man asked Zen Master Hue Hai: “How to practice meditation?”. Zen master replied, “When hungry, we eat; and sleep when tired, then!” The man asked: “It is easy! Everyone eats when hungry; sleeps when tired. All of them like that, there is nothing else!”. Zen Master said: “When we

are eating, we know we are eating; when we are sleeping, we know we are sleeping”. Most of people do not realize the present moment. When they are eating, they do not know they are eating but always thinking other things like a monkey mind. We can recognize that this practice is also same as Kayanupassana: “When breathing in a long breath, he knows that he is breathing in a long breath ...” In every movement of the body: walking, standing, lying, sitting, Zen Master are are mindful, not to mind indiscriminately launched under the delusion. It is a same manner with mindfulness of body.

**Vedānanupassanā:** In Tathagatha Meditation, Vedānanupassanā is the mindfulness of feeling. The Buddha taught this in Satipatthana Sutta as follows: “There is the case where a monk, when feeling a painful feeling, discerns that he is feeling a painful feeling. When feeling a pleasant feeling, he discerns that he is feeling a pleasant feeling. When feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he discerns that he is feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. “When feeling a painful feeling of the flesh, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a painful feeling of the flesh.’ When feeling a painful feeling not of the flesh, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a painful feeling not of the flesh.’ When feeling a pleasant feeling of the flesh, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a pleasant feeling of the flesh.’ When feeling a pleasant feeling not of the flesh, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a pleasant feeling not of the flesh.’ When feeling a neither-painful-norpleasant feeling of the flesh, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a neither-painful-norpleasant feeling of the flesh.’ When feeling a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling not of the flesh, he discerns, ‘I am feeling a neither-painful-norpleasant feeling not of the flesh.’ In Patriarch Meditation, one learns to just observe emotions and sensations come and go, without judgments and without identifying with them. In other words, it is not “my” feelings, and feelings do not define who you are. There are just feelings. Sometimes this can be uncomfortable. What can come up might surprise us. We humans have an amazing capacity to ignore our own anxieties and anger and even pain, sometimes. But ignoring sensations we do not like like is unhealthy. As we learn to observe and fully acknowledge our feelings, we also see how feelings dissipate. Some Zen masters beat or shout his disciples. Some pushes his students to be broken in feet or hand. It is regarded as a method to help meditators recognize the mindfulness of feeling. In this manner, contemplation on feeling between these two traditions is same in a certain level.

### Cittanupassana

In Tathagatha Meditation, cittanupassana as a mindfulness of mind is taught by the Buddha in Satipatthana Sutta as under:

“And how does a monk remain focused on the mind in & of itself? There is the case where a monk, when the mind has passion, discerns that the mind has passion. When the mind is without passion, he discerns that the mind is without passion. When the mind has aversion, he discerns that the mind has aversion. When the mind is without aversion, he discerns that the mind is without aversion. When the mind has delusion, he discerns that the mind has delusion. When the mind is without delusion, he discerns that the mind is without delusion. “When the mind is constricted, he discerns that the mind is constricted. When the mind is scattered, he discerns that the mind is scattered. When the mind is enlarged, he discerns that the mind is enlarged. When the mind is not enlarged, he discerns that the mind is not enlarged. When the mind is surpassed, he discerns that the mind is surpassed. When the

<sup>8</sup> Kasulis, Thomas P. (2003), *Ch'an Spirituality. In: Buddhist Spirituality. Later China, Korea, Japan and the Modern World*; edited by Takeuchi Yoshinori, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> McRae, John (2003), *Seeing Through Zen, The University Press Group Ltd, p. 130.*

mind is unsurpassed, he discerns that the mind is unsurpassed. When the mind is concentrated, he discerns that the mind is concentrated. When the mind is not concentrated, he discerns that the mind is not concentrated. When the mind is released, he discerns that the mind is released. When the mind is not released, he discerns that the mind is not released..."

The "mind" in this foundation is called *citta*. This is a different mind from the one that thinks thoughts or makes judgments. *Citta* is more like consciousness or awareness. *Citta* is sometimes translated "heart-mind," because it has an emotive quality. It is a consciousness or awareness that is not made up of ideas. However, neither is it the pure awareness that is the fifth *skandha*. Another way of thinking of this foundation is "mindfulness of mental states." Like sensations or emotions, our states of mind come and go. Sometimes we are sleepy; sometimes we are restless. We learn to observe our mental states dispassionately, without judgment or opinion. As they come and go, we clearly understand how insubstantial they are. In Patriarch Meditation, there is a famous story as to the second patriarch Huike's enlightenment through method of pacifying mind by Bodhidharma. Legend has it that Bodhidharma initially refused to teach Huike. Huike stood in the snow outside Bodhidharma's cave all night, until the snow reached his waist. In the morning Bodhidharma asked him why he was there. Huike replied that he wanted a teacher to "open the gate of the elixir of universal compassion to liberate all beings". Bodhidharma refused, saying, "how can you hope for true religion with little virtue, little wisdom, a shallow heart, and an arrogant mind? It would just be a waste of effort."<sup>10</sup> Finally, to prove his resolve, Huike cut off his left arm and presented it to the First Patriarch as a token of his sincerity. Bodhidharma then accepted him as a student, and changed his name from Shengguang to Huike, which means "Wisdom and Capacity"

Huike said to Bodhidharma, "My mind is anxious. Please pacify it."

Bodhidharma replied, "Bring me your mind, and I will pacify it."

Huike said, "Although I've sought it, I cannot find it."

"There," Bodhidharma replied, "I have pacified your mind."<sup>11</sup>

Through this, we can realize that the mindfulness of mind in Patriarch Meditation is also in a certain manner same as Cattanupassana. Bodhidharma ask Huike to bring his mind out so that he can pacify mind. It is a great story on contemplation of mind in the patriarch meditation history.

**Dhammanupassana:** "And how does a monk remain focused on mental qualities in & ofthemselves? "There is the case where a monk remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the five hindrances...the five clinging-aggregates... the sixfold internal & external sense media...the seven factors for awakening...the four noble truths... "In this way he remains focused internally on mental qualities in & of themselves, or externally on mental qualities in & of themselves, or both internally & externally on mental qualities in & of themselves. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to mental qualities, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to mental

qualities, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to mental qualities. Or his mindfulness that 'There are mental qualities' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on mental qualities in & of themselves with reference to the four noble truths. In Patriarch Meditation, the mindfulness of dharma is understood as contemplation or realization of daily life activities and things such as hearing the sound of raining, seeing the blooming of flower or like such. Here we open ourselves to the whole world, or at least the world that we experience. This foundation is sometimes called "mindfulness of mental objects." That is because all of the myriad things around us exist for us as mental objects. They are what they are because that's how we recognize them. In this foundation, we practice awareness of the inter-existence of all things. We are aware that they are temporary, without self-essence, and conditioned by everything else. This takes us to the doctrine of Dependent Origination, which is the way everything inter-exists.

## Conclusion

In short, Patriarch Meditation is renowned as the "meditation" school of East Asia. Indeed, it actually is also arguably close to Tathagatha Meditation or original method of meditation from Lord Buddha. Scholars typically date the emergence of this Patriarch Meditation to the early Tang dynasty (618–907), although it did not reach institutional maturity until the Song period (960–1279). In time, this kind of meditation spreads throughout East Asia, giving birth to the various Zen, Sōn, and Thien lineages of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, respectively. Today these traditions continue to promote, at least in theory, meditation practices, and these have been the subject of considerable scholarly interest. It may then come as a surprise to learn just how little is known about the meditation techniques associated with the "patriarchs" of this tradition - the masters associated with the nascent (or proto-) Patriarch Meditation lineages of the seventh and eighth centuries. It was during this fertile period that the lineage myths, doctrinal innovations, and distinctive rhetorical voice of the Chan, Zen, Soen, and Thien schools first emerged. Although hundreds of books and articles have appeared on the textual and doctrinal developments associated with Patriarch Meditation, relatively little has been written on the distinctive meditation practices of this movement. On basis of Satipatthana, it can be said that Patriarch Meditation and Tathagatha Meditation is not conflict at all but supporting each other. Satipatthana is the basis of Vipassana in specific as well as of meditation in general. The Patriarch Meditation has been using Satipatthana's method in a little different way as compared to Tathagatha Meditation. However, in aspect of true nature of meditation, Patriarch Meditation is always connected to basic practices mentioned in Pali Tipitaka, particularly in the two suttas of Satipatthana practice.

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<sup>10</sup> Cleary, Thomas (1999) *Transmission of Light: Zen in the Art of Enlightenment* by Zen Master Keizan, North Point Press, p. 136.

<sup>11</sup> Ferguson, Andy (2000) *Zen's Chinese Heritage: the masters and their teachings*, Wisdom Publications, p. 20.

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