
THE HARMONIOUS AGGREGATE OF BUDDHISM AND CONFUCIANISM IN THE WORKS OF ZEN MASTER CHÂN NGUYỄN

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ABSTRACT

Zen Master Chân Nguyên (1647-1726) was a renowned master of Đại Việt Buddhism in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. His extensive body of works reveals many practical thoughts of Buddhism and Confucianism, which were ethical standards of his time. The harmonious relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism was a prominent issue of the era, as reflected in his writings. This was also his perspective, aligning with the common thought of Đại Việt during that period.

Keywords: Chân Nguyên, Confucian - Buddhist aggregate, Three Teachings philosophy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Zen Master Chân Nguyên made significant contributions to the propagation of Buddhism, not only in revitalizing Trúc Lâm Buddhism but also in leaving a literary legacy that greatly influenced both Buddhist literature and Vietnamese literature. In his youth, he was educated in Confucianism by Kǒng's and Mèng's teachings (孔孟之教). As he grew older, he embraced Buddhism, seeking liberation through the study of Buddhist scriptures. This background led to his works, written in both Hanzi and Nôm scripts, reflecting the harmonious integration of Buddhist and Confucian thoughts as a key element in most of his creations.

The principle of Confucian-Buddhist aggregate within the relationship of the Three Teachings is a common phenomenon in East Asian countries such as China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Since both Confucianism and Buddhism are major religions in Asian countries in general and East Asia in particular, their interrelationship has left a significant mark on human history, and Vietnam is no exception. Upon examining the Nôm script works of Zen Master Chân Nguyên, we found that the author used the similarities in the doctrines as a basis for integration and harmony. To fully appreciate the potential value of this thought, we decided to focus on exploring the idea of "Buddhist - Confucian aggregate" in the works of Zen Master Chân Nguyên in the 17th century.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach to examine the harmonious integration of Buddhism and Confucianism, besides the harmonious of these two teachings with Taoism as well in the works of Zen Master Chân Nguyên. Given that the integration of the Three Teachings has long been a prominent research topic with extensive scholarly contributions, the methodology emphasizes synthesizing and critically analyzing existing studies by reputable researchers. By engaging with political philosophy, intellectual history, and sociocultural theory, the paper seeks to provide balanced and unbiased evaluations.

Literary and historical approaches are applied to contextualize Chân Nguyên's writings within the socio-political and cultural environment of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Vietnam, while philosophical and comparative analysis highlights the intersections and divergences between Buddhist and Confucian thought. Content analysis of Chân Nguyên's texts, combined with comparative perspectives from contemporary and modern scholarship, ensures a comprehensive understanding of his intellectual contributions. Through this adaptable application of diverse techniques, the study aims to generate stimulating academic debates and ultimately arrive at impartial and significant findings regarding the cultural and philosophical synthesis embodied in Chân Nguyên's works.

3. LIFE AND LITERARY CAREER

Life - Background

Zen Master Chân Nguyên, whose birth name was Nguyễn Nghiêm, was born in Tiên Liệt village, Thanh Hà district, Hải Dương province. He was born in 1647 and passed away in 1726, living entirely in the latter half of the 17th century and the first quarter of the 18th century. He lived during a period of continuous civil war and power struggles, specifically during the Trịnh-Nguyễn conflict.

In that situation, there were only two choices for young men: either serve the rulers, thereby contributing to the prolonged suffering and misery of the people, or become rebels against the oppressors. Nguyễn Nghiêm, in his youth, was fortunate to come across the story of Zen Master Huyền Quang of the Trúc Lâm Yên Tử lineage. He realized that even the illustrious figures of the past had grown weary of fame and fortune, let alone himself, who was merely an ordinary student (Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, tập 1 2018, p.11). This realization struck him like a thunderbolt, deeply awakening his inner self. Consequently, he decided to renounce the worldly life and became a Buddhist monk at the age of 19. He saw this as the necessary path and the only way to dedicate himself to serving others.

The path to monastic life and enlightenment

Initially, Nguyễn Nghiêm had the opportunity to become a disciple and study under Zen Master Chân Trụ, the abbot of Hoa Tiên pagoda, and was given the Dharma name Tuệ Thông. However, after his master passed away, he and his fellow monk Như Niệm traveled to seek Buddhist teachings, practicing asceticism and not settling in any one place. Later, Như Niệm gave up and returned to Cô Tiêu pagoda. Tuệ Thông then went to Côn Lương mountain in Phù Lãng village, where he visited Zen Master Minh Lương at Vĩnh Phúc pagoda. Minh Lương, a disciple of Zen Master Chuyết Chuyết, gave him the name Chân Nguyên. The character "Chân" was taken from the second character in Zen Master Minh Lương's Dharma transmission verse:

*Pure and serene wisdom
Perfectly radiant virtue
The ocean-like nature of ultimate reality
Universal quiescent illumination.*
"Trí tuệ thanh tịnh
Đạo đức viên minh
Chân như tính hải
Tịch chiếu phổ thông."

(Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, tập 1 2018, p.27)

However, before seeking guidance from Master Minh Lương, Chân Nguyên had already practiced meditation extensively, possibly following the koan meditation -method of

Zen Master Bách Trọng (724-814): He asked to be told about the original face one had before being born. This background enabled him to attain enlightenment during his later studies with Zen Master Minh Lương. Minh Lương left the following Dharma transmission verse for Zen Master Chân Nguyên:

*Precious jade hidden in stone
Lotus blooms from mud
Seek enlightenment
In the cycle of birth and death.*
“Ngọc xinh ẩn trong đá
Hoa sen nảy từ bùn
Nên biết tìm giác ngộ
Nơi sinh tử trầm luân.”

Thanks to his tireless practice, passionate dedication to studying, and years of introspection, Zen Master Chân Nguyên revealed the profound and marvelous path. This enlightenment came from his encounter with Zen Master Minh Lương, whose piercing gaze swept away all the “rubbish” hidden in the deepest corners of ignorance. At that moment, Zen Master Chân Nguyên comprehended the entire realm of birth and death instantly, without needing to go through stages, as the entire universe, reality, illusion, enlightenment, and delusion were all contained within his eyes, ready to be used. Seeking enlightenment outside was futile, like trying to cook sand into rice. After receiving the mind seal, Zen Master Chân Nguyên took the Bhikkhu precepts. Later, he inherited the robe and bowl of the Trúc Lâm Zen lineage and became the abbot of Long Động pagoda (also known as Lân pagoda, now named Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen monastery) and Quỳnh Lâm pagoda (Đông Triều, Quảng Ninh), two major temples of the sect.

Literary Career

Zen Master Chân Nguyên was a prominent author in the latter half of the 17th century and the early 18th century. According to literary and historical researchers, he was the first to write stories in the lục bát (six-eight) verse form, paving the way for the emergence of numerous narrative poems in Vietnamese literature. This observation was made by Lê Mạnh Thát in “Toàn Tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng, tập 1, 2, 3” (The Complete Collection of Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng volume 1, 2, 3). Thus, he held a significant position in the history of Vietnamese literature and thought. His body of work was quite extensive, and the following works have been identified in Lê Mạnh Thát’s work named “*Toàn Tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng, tập 1*” (The Complete Collection of Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng volume 1, 2018, p.22-23):

1. “An Tử sơn Trúc Lâm Trần Triều thiền tông bản hạnh” (The Fundamental virtues of Trúc Lâm Zen Buddhism of the Trần Dynasty at An Tử Mountain) - reprinted three times, in 1745, 1805, and 1932
2. “Nam Hải Quan Âm bản hạnh” (The Ethical Practices of Avalokiteshvara of the South Sea) printed in 1850
3. “Ngộ đạo nhân duyên” (Realization of the Causes and Conditions of Enlightenment)
4. “Đạt Na thái tử hành” (The Virtuous Practices of Prince Đạt-na) in 1838
5. “Hồng mông hạnh” (The Virtuous Practices of the Primordial Era) during the “Minh Mạng vạn vạn niên” Minh Mạng empire period.
6. “Thiền tịch phú” (Zen Tranquility Ode) in 1932

These are the works written in the national language. The following are the works written in Chinese:

7. “Tôn sư phát sách đăng đàn thọ giới” (The Master bestows the scriptures and ascends the platform to confer precepts) printed in 1748
8. “Tịnh độ yếu nghĩa” (The Essential Meaning of the Pure Land) printed three times in 1747, 1851, and 1860
9. “Nghênh sư duyệt định khoa” (Welcoming the Master to review and approve the ritual ceremony) reprinted in 1887

Additionally, he wrote prefaces for several other Buddhist scriptures that he either authored or were printed by others, such as:

- “Long thư tịnh độ văn tự” (The pure land writings of Longshu)
- “Trùng san Long thư tịnh độ luận hậu bạt tự” (The postscript to the reprinted edition of Longshu's pure land treatise)

These are the works that have been discovered so far, and there may be more that we have yet to uncover. In 1850, the printed version of “Nam Hải Quan Âm Bản Hạnh” was discovered. There are also two anonymous works, “Quan Âm tống truyện” and “Phạm Tải Ngọc Hoa”, which, after extensive research, analysis of data, language, imagery, and ideas, were believed to be authored by Chân Nguyên.

4. THE THOUGHT OF “CONFUCIAN - BUDDHIST AGGREGATE” IN CHÂN NGUYỄN'S WORKS

The thought of “Confucian-Buddhist aggregate” began to emerge in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. By the Lý-Trần period, this thought was strongly supported and embraced by intellectuals such as kings, officials, and scholars (both Zen masters and Confucian scholars). During the Lê-Nguyễn period, besides the strong influence of political factors, spiritual and mental life, as well as literary and artistic activities, were other important elements that influenced the creative trends. Therefore, many Buddhist literary authors and their works appeared with the aim of propagating the faith. This thought remained the main intellectual trend in religious literature, including Hanzi poetry, Nôm narrative poetry, and Hanzi Nôm prose. In that time atmosphere, Chân Nguyên authored many works that conveyed the religious rhythm of life, embodying the content of Confucian-Buddhist aggregate.

Facing the concerns of an era marked by chaos and the influence on traditional culture from various sources such as the introduction of Western culture, the spread of Catholicism, and the consequences of power struggles and wars, Zen masters, as prominent representatives of Buddhism, expressed their support for the idea of aggregating the Three Teachings. They advocated for the peaceful integration of the teachings of ancient Eastern sages to strengthen and protect traditional cultural values. This is clearly reflected in their works. From an ontological perspective, the issue of Confucian-Buddhist aggregate is demonstrated through the integration and harmony of both teachings, as they inherently share the same principles:

I have heard that Confucians prioritize the principles of fundamental principles, while Buddhists prioritize the precepts. Without fundamental principles, how can rituals and music flourish? Without the precepts, how can morality be expressed? Whether in the world or beyond, the two schools are united. Confucianism and Buddhism share the same path. Reflecting on the past to gauge the future, all rules follow the examples of the ancients, and it is appropriate to advise future generations. (Lê Mạnh Thát, *The Complete Collection of Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng* volume 1, 2018, p.63)

“Từng nghe, nhà Nho lấy cương thường làm đầu, họ Thích lấy qui giới là trước. Không có cương thường thì lễ nhạc làm sao hưng thịnh, chẳng do qui giới thì đạo đức không thể biểu dương. Tại thế hay xuất thế, hai phái hợp chung. Không

gia hay Phật gia, một lẽ cùng đường. Nghiệm lấy điều xưa đã qua, để phỏng chừng việc nay sắp tới. Phép tắc đều bắt chước mẫu mực tiền nhân, lẽ đáng để khuyên răn hậu tiến” (Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn Tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng* tập 1, 2018, tr.63)

Thus, this perspective was clearly affirmed by Zen Master in the “Tôn sư phát sách đăng đàn thọ giới thể thức” (The Master bestows the scriptures and ascends the platform to confer precepts). This shows his concern about the decline of the era, reflecting on the signs that people of his time were gradually neglecting and abandoning the teachings of the Buddha and the Confucius, the sages. Therefore, he expressed his views on the miraculous nature of the relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism. What Chân Nguyên desired most was to help people attain enlightenment, awaken their Buddha nature, and restore their true nature. With this truth, they could truly escape the suffering of worldly troubles, cultivate the qualities of the Buddha and the Confucius, and achieve the realm of liberation and freedom.

Beyond the realm of Confucian-Buddhist aggregate and integration on an ontological level, there is also the harmony between Confucianism and Buddhism through the concept of karmic retribution. With the compassionate and egalitarian virtues of Buddhism, combined with the noble and exemplary qualities of Confucianism, the Zen master demonstrated the harmonious integration of these two religions. This integration is clearly reflected in the aspects of “teaching”, “education” and “instruction” regarding the retribution of cause and effect, good and evil in each religion. This also represents the unity of Confucian-Buddhist thought, from theory to practical monastic life, as reflected in his works. In *Thiền tịch phú* he highlighted the prominent relationship between Zen-Buddhism and Confucianism as follows:

Happy is the one who follows the Buddhist path / Not needing to be in the city / Not minding the streams and rocks / Whether sitting in scenic places / Or in ancient temples / Everywhere is adorned with the stream of blessings / This is also the practice of Zen tranquility. - (Buddhist perspective) (Lê Mạnh Thát, *The Complete Collection of Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, volume 2, 2018, p.725)

“Vui thay tu đạo Thích/ Lộ phải thành đô/ Nào nề tuyền thạch/ Dù ngồi nơi cảnh trí danh lam/ Hoặc ở chốn chùa chiền cổ tích/ Đâu cũng dòng phúc đức trang nghiêm/ Đây cũng vốn tu công Thiền tịch” (Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, tập 2, 2018, tr.725)

The noble master plants bamboo and parasol trees / The virtuous disciple plants pines and cypresses / Hundreds of flowers bloom by the eaves / Seven treasures fill the crevices / The scent of musk orchid pervades / The fragrance of white sandalwood. - Confucian perspective (Lê Mạnh Thát, *The Complete Collection of Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, volume 2, 2018, p.726)

“Sư quân tử cấy trúc ngô đồng/ Đệ trọng phu trồng thông tùng bách/ Trăm thứ hoa đua nở kẻ hiền/ Bảy giống báu chất đầy kẻ nghịch/ Ngào ngạt mùi xạ lan/ Thơm tho hương trầm bạch” (Lê Mạnh Thát, *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, tập 2, 2018, tr.726)

More importantly, traditional Vietnamese culture has always deeply believed in karma, good and evil, and retribution. They believe that “Ở hiền gặp lành, ở ác gặp dữ” - *Good deeds bring good fortune, evil deeds bring misfortune* / “Làm phúc được phúc, làm ơn được ơn” - *Doing good brings blessings, doing favors brings gratitude* / “Ai ăn mặn nấy khát nước” - *Those who eat salty will thirst* / “Có chí thì nên” - *Where there's a will, there's a way*, etc. Therefore, *karma* is a truth deeply ingrained in the Vietnamese way of life, strongly influencing actions, speech, and general ethics. With this cultural background, Chân Nguyên extensively discussed good and evil, and *karmic* retribution in his works: *Good deeds lead to heaven / Evil*

deeds easily lead to hell - “Ổ lành sinh thiên đường nay/ Ổ dữ dễ rày địa ngục khôn dung” (lines 833-834) in *Nam Hải Quan Âm bản hạnh*¹; We have been in rags for a long time / Extreme poverty and suffering / Day and night in misery, who will feed us - “Chúng tôi đói rách vậy thì đã lâu/ Cơ hàn thâm thiết cực âu/ Đêm ngày khốn khổ ai hầu cho ăn (câu 45-48)²... / Due to past lives or current lives / If one does not accumulate virtue or cultivate humanity / Or does not respect the Buddha, one will suffer / Moreover, if one does not understand the Buddha's nature / Reincarnation for countless lives will be even more pitiful - “Duyên vì tiền kiếp hay rày hậu thân/ Dầu chẳng tích đức tu nhân/ Hay chẳng kính Bụt phải thân khốn đài/ Lại thêm muội tính Như Lai/ Luân hồi muôn kiếp rạc rài càng thương” (lines 56-62)... in *Đạt Na thái tử hạnh*³.

According to the Nho - Phật - Đạo dictionary: *Karma* is the Buddhist term, refers to the principle of cause and effect, which serves as the fundamental theory of Buddhism to interpret all relationships in the world and sustain its religious system. He further noted that Buddhism teaches how every thought or action inevitably produces corresponding consequences, and that good or evil deeds will lead to good or evil outcomes, a process known as karmic retribution. (Lao Tử - Lê Thịnh 2001, p.997). Inheriting the idea of the relationship between Heaven and humans from previous eras, Dǒng Zhòngshū 董仲舒 (179 BCE - 104 BCE) further developed it by combining the theory of the Mandate of Heaven with the theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, establishing the concept of the mutual influence between Heaven and humans, emphasizing that there is a responsive relationship between Heaven and humans, meaning that Heaven and humans are united. The Confucian scholars of the Song Dynasty further argued the idea of the unity of Heaven and humans from the aspects of Principle, Nature, and Destiny (Lao Tử - Lê Thịnh 2001, p.1443). This was an accidental integration when various philosophies merged with the existing traditional culture of the nation. It includes the Confucian philosophies of “karmic retribution”, “unity of Heaven and humans”, and “mutual influence between Heaven and humans” with the Buddhist philosophies of “karmic retribution”, “dependent origination” and “all sentient beings have Buddha nature”, blending with the noble humanistic beliefs of the Vietnamese people.

Through the use of colloquial language in the above verses, it is evident that this form of language is commonly employed to speak about the people in their daily lives. The distinctive feature of this narrative style is its ease of memorization, making it very convenient for conveying meanings. Additionally, it reflects the integration and blending of elements such as religion and local culture, aligning with the Vietnamese national identity and catering to the spiritual and mental life of our people.

In addition, the Zen master utilized the belief in the relationship between Heaven and humans from folk religion to reaffirm the concept of the mutual influence between Heaven and humans. This is a belief that Vietnamese people have always held and lived by:

I am grateful to Buddha and Heaven / Serving the imperial throne and all the people / Leaving the civil and military officials / Returning to maintain the far and near plans - “Trẫm rày ơn Bụt ơn trời / Phụng các long đài thiên hạ vạn dân / Để mặc văn vũ quần thần / Trở về giữ lấy xa gần quy mô” (lines 1543-1546) in *Nam Hải Quan Âm bản hạnh*⁴; *The Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors of ancient times / The cycles of change over many generations / Also relied on the*

¹ “Nam Hải Quan Âm bản hạnh.” In *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, volume 2, p.637, Hà Nội: Hồng Đức.

² “Đạt-na thái tử hạnh.” In *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, volume 2, p.840, Hà Nội: Hồng Đức.

³ “Đạt-na thái tử hạnh.” In *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, volume 2, p.841, Hà Nội: Hồng Đức.

⁴ “Nam Hải Quan Âm bản hạnh.” In *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, volume 2, p.669, Hà Nội: Hồng Đức.

blessings of Heaven / Prosperity, decline, adversity, and peace come and go in the world - “Tam hoàng ngũ đế đời xưa / Lũn lần thay đổi biết qua mấy đời / Cũng nhờ uy phước ơn trời / Thịnh, suy, bĩ, thái vãng lai sa-bà” (lines 127-130)... in Thiên tông bản hạnh⁵; Thinking that the world is well-fed / Unexpectedly, the thirst and hunger are now at peace / This compassion reaches Heaven / Bringing blessings and peace to the country - “Nghĩ là thiên hạ no say / Chẳng ngờ cơ khát nước rày bao an / Thương này cảm đến thiên nhan / Cho trời xuống phước nước an thái bình” (lines 129-132),... in Đạt Na thái tử hạnh⁶.

These verses highlight the integration of folk beliefs, Buddhist teachings on karma, and Confucian philosophy of the unity between Heaven and humans. With this inclusive faith, Chân Nguyên created characters with strong individual voices, asserting their freedom and clearly expressing their aspirations and ambitions. However, these individual voices still adhered to ethical standards and continuously promoted the righteous path. As a result, he built the ideal person, the noble and virtuous individual in life. This is the exemplary model that throughout Vietnamese history, our nation has aimed to praise, promote, and consider as the standard to be achieved.

Therefore, when applying this to himself, the Zen master was determined to pursue a noble ideal by becoming a monk, following the practices of the sages. He clearly understood that in times of chaos, he had only two choices: either to assist the rulers, thereby perpetuating the suffering of the people, or to become a rebel against the oppressive forces causing such misery. Ultimately, the Zen master renounced all worldly attachments and became a monk at the young age of 19. This was the only way to achieve inner happiness and peace. Through the characters of Prince Đạt-na and princess Quan Âm Diệu Thiện, Chân Nguyên conveyed his own views, aspirations, and desires.

Chân Nguyên also reiterated the issue of harmonizing Buddhism and Confucianism with an unbiased perspective, supporting the view of Master Viên Chứng. This involved applying Confucian principles for governing the world and practicing Buddhist precepts to cultivate moral virtues, thereby serving the country and the people in the spirit of Confucianism while providing a spiritual foundation for the people in the spirit of Buddhism:

Now I seek refuge in the mountains / Practicing to become a Buddha without any other intentions / The master sees the king and is moved / Zen points out the highs and lows of the heart / The mountain inherently has no Buddha / Buddha is in the heart, Buddha is in the mind... Winning the hearts of the people is the true measure: To be a ruler, one must align one's heart with the hearts of the people, and one's desires with their desires. Now that the people wish to welcome you, may Your Majesty return to them, but do not forget to cultivate your mind and nature. (Complete Collection of Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng volume 2, p.785-787. Ho Chi Minh city: Hồng Đức Publishing House)

“Nay trẫm tìm vào lâm sơn / Tu cầu làm Bụt chẳng toan sự nào / Thầy thấy vua thốt cảm sao / Thiên tông trở bảo thấp cao sự lòng/ Sơn bản vô Phật làm song/ Bụt ở trong lòng Phật tại hồ tâm... Được lòng thiên hạ mới lường rằng bay: Phù vi nhân quân giả, dĩ thiên hạ chỉ tâm vi tâm, dĩ thiên hạ chỉ dục vi dục. Kim thiên hạ dục ngênh, nguyện bệ hạ quy chi, nhiên nội điển chi cứu, vô vọng tu tâm luyện tính nhĩ.” (Lê Mạnh Thát, Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng, tập 2 2018, tr.785-787)

⁵ “Thiên tông bản hạnh.” In *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, volume 2, p.781, Hà Nội: Hồng Đức.

⁶ Đạt-na thái tử hạnh.” In *Toàn tập Chân Nguyên Tuệ Đăng*, volume 2, p.843-844, Hà Nội: Hồng Đức.

This thought also carries the element of universal salvation, similar to the Bodhisattva ideal, entering the world with the vow to save others. The combination of the Buddhist concept of Buddha within and the ideal of serving sentient beings with the Confucian concept of putting people first is the right direction, in line with the principles of Buddha and Confucius. To break free from the rigid and discriminatory constraints of Confucianism, Chân Nguyên emphasized social individualism in the spirit of harmonizing Buddhism and Confucianism in *Nam Hải Quan Âm bản hạnh* and in *Đạt-na thái tử hạnh* such as the issue of individual freedom of princess Diệu Thiện and Prince Đạt-na. Notably, he opposed the negative and rigid aspects of Confucianism, such as male chauvinism and imposed ideologies. Therefore, Chân Nguyên adopted a combined religious thinking based on integration, tolerance, and equality, deeply rooted in Vietnamese cultural traditions. He understood that this was the only way to achieve inner cultivation and a happy life on the path of the Dharma.

When studying the aspect of religious pluralism, author Charles Taliaferro stated: “The increasing interest in religious pluralism has led to extensive reflection on the compatibility and synthesis of religions”⁷. Due to the diverse and complex nature of life, different religions provide us with a broader perspective or partial access to reality. Looking back at history, it is evident that many generations of Vietnamese intellectuals have skillfully borrowed from both Buddhism and Confucianism to serve the cause of national salvation and the welfare of the people. They were individuals deeply versed in both Confucianism and Buddhism, such as Mậu Tử, Khương Tăng Hội, Lý Thánh Tông, Khuông Việt, Pháp Thuận, Vạn Hạnh, Trần Thái Tông, Trần Nhân Tông, Nguyễn Trãi, Hương Hải, Chân Nguyên, Toàn Nhật, and others.

In his era, Zen Master Chân Nguyên did not stray from the historical lessons of his ancestors. Through his characters, he conveyed progressive messages about life while maintaining traditional values. This made Chân Nguyên an ideal Buddhist model: “At home, one can serve their parents; ruling the country, one can govern the people; standing alone, one can cultivate oneself” (Lê Mạnh Thát, *Nghiên cứu về Mậu Tử*, 2008, p.289). Indeed, the two religions have different approaches, perspectives, philosophies, and practices, but their ultimate goal is to serve the happiness and peace of humanity, as well as to promote ethics and spirituality in society.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the concept of Confucian-Buddhist aggregate in the relationship of the Three Teachings is one of the essential thoughts in Zen Master Chân Nguyên's works. It is a characteristic manifestation of the integration between Buddhism and Confucianism, existing throughout the history of Vietnamese thought. This harmony is achieved through ontological philosophy, karmic retribution, the concept of mutual influence between Heaven and humans, an egalitarian perspective, and unlimited potential. Its value in the spiritual and religious realm lies in ontology and liberation theory, in the realm of social ethics in compassion and benevolence, and in the cultural realm, in inclusivity, compatibility and unity. Ultimately, the integration of the teachings, educational goals, and practices of Buddha and Confucius is equally important in serving life. The Zen master simply wanted people to return to morality, encourage good and punish evil, abandon evil and do good to lead a happy life.

⁷ Taliaferro, Charles, "Philosophy of Religion", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/philosophy-religion/>: “The expanded interest in religious pluralism has led to extensive reflection on the compatibility and possible synthesis of religions”.

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