Biographical Sketch of Great Venerable Master THÍCH TRÍ-TỊNH

Abbot of Vạn-Đức Pagoda.

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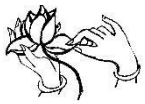

The Great Venerable was born as Nguyễn Văn Bình. As a layperson, he was given the dharma name **"Thiện Chánh".** When he left home, he was given the dharma name **"THÍCH TRÍ TỊNH"** and style name **"Hân Tịnh".** He was born on the 17th of October, 1917 *(lunar calendar: 2nd of September of the year of the Snake),* in Mỹ An Hưng village, Châu-Thành county, Sa-Đéc province *(this area is known today as Lấp Vò county, Đồng-Tháp province, Vietnam).*

The Great Venerable Master was the youngest child in the family of 6 siblings. His father was Mr. Nguyễn Văn Cân, a simple and candid farmer. Mr. Cân died when the Venerable was 3 years old. His mother was Mrs. Nguyễn thị Truyện, who died when the Venerable was just 7 years old. Having lost both parents at a young age, He was raised by the oldest brother, Mr. Nguyễn Văn Đặng. The second oldest brother died at a young age. In addition to the two brothers, He had three older sisters.

In His own words:

"I learned to recite the Buddha name when I was 12 or 13 years old. I read in a book 'Direct Path to Western Land' that one can gain rebirth in Pure Land if he recites the Buddha name 300,000 times. I believed it and followed without question.

"I brought home a medicine ads book from my brother's herbal pharmacy. I kept the book next to my bed. I opened the book when reciting the Buddha name; I flipped one page for every 100 recitations. Everyone thought I read stories in the book. No one in the family knew how I secretly recited the Buddha name like that at home.

"It was around 1928 [11 years old] when I became interested in cultivation. It was the time that construction of the Great Divine Temple started in Tây-Ninh Province. Some of my relatives in the area joined Caodaism, rolling their hair up in a ball [bun] and became vegetarian. I also choose to become vegetarian at home, often eating only rice porridge sprinkled with salt. I couldn't stand meat and fish because they reminded me of how fish is descaled and animals slaughtered."

The Great Venerable didn't start school until the age of ten. He was very smart; what He was learning, He turned around and taught His nieces and nephews. At night, He read Chinese stories to others. At 15, He completed 6th grade. The Great Venerable was too old to enter French-Vietnamese schools [which were tuition free] and couldn't afford to continue middle and high schools elsewhere; So He decided to learn a trade. He learned various trades, from bicycle repair to watch repair to helping out *(and learning herbal medicine from)* his brother at the pharmacy. His Chinese improved greatly from reading herbal medicine books; He also learned Chữ Nôm [an old Vietnamese writing system] from His uncle. In addition, the Great Venerable learned to prescribe and prepare herbal medicines from an older cousin… Witnessing conflicts in the brother's marriage prompted Him to consider the monastic life. The Great Venerable started to explore various religions, such as Catholicism, Caodaism, theosophy, etc. He did not join Caodaism like most locals but often borrowed religious and philosophy books from [school] teachers. Buddhism caught His attention after not completely satisfied with the other doctrines.

He recounted:

"I wanted to leave [home], but it wasn't easy because I didn't have parents and had been living with the older brother's family. In addition, my older sister and I, being the two youngest, were close and depending

on each other; I didn't have the heart to leave her behind alone. I learned trades, preparing for a day when my sister and I had to survive on our own.

"I believe in the Buddha Recitation practice and always have Buddhism in my heart. But I didn't like going to temples because their interior always looked dark and all the statues were covered with a red head scarf and looked spooky with a speck of light coming out from the nose. It sent a chill up my spine. Monks that I saw in the street were usually trailed by a child novice, who balanced a bamboo basket on his head, and within were items such as bell, wooden fish (a percussion instrument shaped like a fish), Buddha statue, and joss papers. I thought this practice was weird and couldn't embrace it."

The Great Venerable continued to quietly practice Buddha name recitation, mantras, and contemplation on compassion.

During his visits to Buddhist temples, the Venerable noticed that the monks focused mostly on rituals, prayers for the dead, joss paper burning, etc. Therefore, He was convinced that true monks cultivated in remote mountains, and was inclined to prefer secluded temples.

One time, He had a dream, in which an elder told Him: **"You have deep cultivation roots; if you seek out religious masters and learn the Way, then you'll accomplish as wished".** The man also hinted that *"when the tiger dies, the snake will return to the mountain".*

In 1937, at the age of 21, the Great Venerable went with a friend to Saigon to work. One day, a member of the house, where they were renting a room, brought back a tiger cub from a trip to Tây Ninh province. The cub died 9, 10 days later. Recalling the earlier dream, the Venerable [who was born in the year of the snake] started arrangements to leave-home.

One day, the Great Venerable headed straight for Núi Cấm [Forbidden Mountain in An-Giang Province] because He had heard stories about genuine monks cultivating up there. Reaching the foothill, He was so excited that He tossed away His sandals and started running barefoot up the mountain. He'd resolved to 'settle' at the first temple that He saw, not knowing its name, nor abbot. Destiny led him to **Vạn-Linh** Pagoda, a Buddhist temple farthest away and at the highest peak of the mountain.

When the Great Venerable reached the temple, the abbot was not there. The abbot was cultivating in a cottage in a forest nearby, and only came out once in a while when there were temple businesses to tend to. The Great Venerable's arrival fell on the 14th of February, the year of the buffalo (1937), which happened to be the mid-month repentance day. After the repentance prayers, the monks invited the abbot to come in. When met, the abbot stared at the Venerable for a while and then told the mass:

"Do not underestimate this lad. He was a respected monk in previous lives and will also become a respected monk in this life. But because He committed the sin of looking at girls, He'll have eyesight problems throughout life."

The next day, Parinirvana Day [this holiday marks the Buddha's death], Venerable Thích Hồng Xứng shaved the Venerable's head, marking the beginning of His leave-home life. The Venerable became a disciple of the late Venerable Master Thích Thiện-Quang, who was the founder of Vạn-Linh Pagoda. Based on Venerable Thiện-Quang's lineage, the Venerable belonged to the 41st generation of the Linji school of Chan Buddhism.

After the ordination, the abbot allowed Him to stay in a small cottage in the temple's backyard. When free from daily chores and prayers, He retreated to the cottage to recite sutras and cultivate other virtues with vigor and diligence. He tried ascetic practices such as strict fasting, and minimal sleep, etc. He was so eager in these practices that the abbot became concerned [for His health]. On one occasion, He was so focused on meditation that He unknowingly dropped His bowl in the middle of a meal.

After reading Từ Bi Âm [Voice of Compassion] magazine, the Great Venerable desired to study the Buddha Dharma more comprehensively.

At the end of 1939, He requested permission from the abbot to return to Saigon to learn the Sutras and Vinaya (i.e., monastic rules of conduct).

In 1941, the Great Venerable received the ordination to be a novice monk at Quốc-Ân Pagoda in the City of Huế. While there, He completed the mid-level Buddhist study in 1942 and the high-level Buddhist study in 1945. In the same year, the An-Nam Buddhism School was relocated to Kim-Sơn Pagoda in Huế, and He was nominated to be the school's supervisor. [To evacuate from war conflicts,] He was later charged with the relocation of monk students to the South. He temporarily stayed in Kim Huê temple *(in the city of Sa-Đéc)* and made arrangements for his retreat later on.

Due to local unrest, the Great Venerable had to temporarily relocate the monk students to Vạn Phước Pagoda *(in Chợ Lớn, Saigon)* in late 1946. He fell ill in 1950 and had to retreat to Linh-Sơn Pagoda *(Vũng Tàu Province)* to recover, and subsequently handed the management of the school to Venerable Thích Thiện Hoa. Below is a brief timeline of His services.

- 1951. The Great Venerable accepted the request to serve as the abbot of Linh-Sơn temple.
- 1952. The Sangha of Southern Vietnam was established in Saigon. He was asked to serve as head of two departments, education and jurisprudence.
- 1954. The Great Venerable established Vạn Đức Pagoda in Thủ-Đức, Gia-Định province, where He settled permanently. His reputation and virtues attracted a lot of monks and nuns who gathered around the pagoda and built their own temples or cottages. Gradually, the area turned into the Vạn Đức congregation that is widely known today.
- 1955. The Great Venerable established the Fellowship of Pure-Land Friends to promote the Pure Land School and guide Buddhists' practice in the Dharma-Ending era. Many consider the Venerable a modern-day Patriarch who revived the Pure Land practice in Vietnam.
- 1962. He was selected to be the deputy superintendent of the Buddhist School of Central Vietnam.
- 1964. He was the head of the delegation of the Sangha of Southern Vietnam to attend a national conference to establish the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. At this conference, He was nominated to be the Chief Secretary of Sangha Affairs.
- 1975. The Great Venerable, together with other High Monks, established Pháp Bảo Viện [Institute of Dharma Jewel] in the City of Thủ Đức. The Institute is both a worship and translation center for Tripitaka. He was nominated to be the abbot.
- 1978. He served as the deputy director of the Dharma Propagation Department.
- 1978. The Head Monk of the Sangha of Vietnam bestowed upon him the epithet 'Venerable'. The logo of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam is the Dharma Wheel of 12 spokes, which was based on a suggestion by the Venerable Master.
- 1981. The Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam was established. The Great Venerable was nominated to be Vice President of the Board of Directors.
- 1982. He also took on the role of the President of the Board of Directors [of the City Buddhist Sangha in Saigon].
- 1984. He was selected to be the President of the Board of Directors [of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam].
- 1987. He was elevated to the role of the Head of Sangha Affairs and turned over the role of the President of the Board of Directors [of the City Buddhist Sangha] to Venerable Thiện-Hào.
- 1992. He served as the Deputy Chief of the Buddhist Clergy [until his passing in 2014].

The Great Venerable was well versed in the Tripitaka and highly knowledgeable in Confucianism, Oriental medicine, and other subjects. His translated works are highly praised and widely accepted. His translation focused on accuracy, clarity, simplicity, and flow, which help readers and practitioners easily understand the Buddha teachings and grab their essence. Below are his more popular works.

- 1947. Translated Dharma Flower Sutra, Ratana Sutra, Earth Store Bodhisattva Sutra, the Samantabhadra chapter of Avatamsaka Sutra
- 1951. Translated Brahmajala Sutra (Bodhisattva Precepts)

- 1952. Composed 'Path to Pure Land'
- 1964. Translated Avatamsaka Sutra, Nirvaṇa Sutra, Maha-Prajna-Paramita Sutra
- 1972. Translated Maha Ratnakuta Sutra
- 1978. Translated Majusri Puccha Prajna Sutra, Aksayamati Bodhisattva Sutra, Amitabha Dhyana Sutra, all three of which were added to His earlier translation of Maha Ratnakuta Sutra to avoid seeking separate permits for publication
- Collection of sutras of the Triple Gems (Amitabha Sutra, Buddha Name Repentance, Ulambana Sutra, Universal Door of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva, Diamond Sutra)

Additional translated and composition works

- Brahma Net Sutra
- Thesis on Enlightenment by Bodhidharma
- Shed Doubts on Zen - Pure Land
- Repentance Prayer toward ten directions, ten great vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva
- Essentials of Dharma Flower Sutra
- Path to Pure Land
- Vows to cultivate ten good deeds

Moreover, the Great Venerable also expounded on many Mahayana Sutras to illustrate the Dharma-Character and True-Nature (e.g., Dharma Flower Clarified, Suramgama Sutra - Direct Path, Essays on the Forest of Meanings by Kuiji (treatise on Yogācāra)). The diversity of His writings demonstrates His in-depth knowledge of various schools, from Pure Land to Zen to Yogācāra.

The Great Venerable dedicated his whole life to Buddhism; his primary cultivation centered on learning and reciting sutras, upholding the Buddha name, teaching, and translating sutras from Chinese into Vietnamese. Even at over 90 years of age, He was still mentally sharp and physically strong, and seen constantly reciting the Buddha name; and every 2 weeks He led a one-day retreat for lay people at Vạn Đức Pagoda.

In general, all Vietnamese Buddhists, whether lay people or leave-home, near or far, domestic or overseas… are profoundly indebted to the Venerable. Why? Because He had compassion for and used expedient means to guide the four orders in cultivation. His most significant legacy was an impressive collection of His translations of the Mahayana sutras.

When I first explored the Buddhist path *(and the Pure Land school in particular)* some 50 years ago, his translations, 'Path to Pure Land' and Ratana Sutra, were immensely instrumental to my cultivation. These two books were my spiritual guide and helped rekindle my Buddhist roots in past lives, and strengthen and grow them till this day.

When I (Velvet) returned to Vietnam in early 1993, after 20 years away, I went to Vạn Đức Pagoda to pay respect to the Great Venerable Master. During our conversation, I described the Buddha works that I had been doing [in America] and the general status of Buddhism overseas. When discussing the Maha Ratnakuta Sutra, He appeared pensive for a short while, but His face lit up. He stared at me and said in a solemn voice:

"The Maha Ratnakuta Sutra was the last sutra that I translated in 1987. In its first publication, the publication unit of the City Buddhist Sangha was not thorough, resulting in many errors. I was greatly disappointed when I painstakingly and slowly traced every word with my poor eyesight. I'm saddened every time I think about the mishap. Since then, I've been waiting for a great benefactor [to pick up the publication]. I'm very pleased to meet you today; you are the one that I've been waiting for. I'll hand over to you (the draft of) the Maha Ratnakuta Sutra to take care of its publication."

Without waiting for me to answer yes or no, the great Venerable told two monks, Hoằng-Tất and Hoằng-Tri, to retrieve the draft for me, right then and there. I was 'sweating' when I saw stacks of notebooks that the monks kept piling on. The notebooks altogether could fill up a large three-wheeler. It was an enormous responsibility, especially for a woman who lives overseas, while the draft is in Vietnam. I picked up and examined the old, fading notebooks; I saw another challenge which was reading the great Venerable's rough

scribble. I came up with a divide-and-conquer plan: two local monks, Thích Thiện-Minh and Thích Đồng-Bổn, would lead the editing and typesetting; Thích Hoằng-Tri [the Venerable's assistant] would be responsible for proofreading and publication; and I would raise the needed money after my return to the USA. It took 3 years to publish the complete Maha Ratnakuta Sutra, which comprises 9, 700-page books with gilded hardcovers. To propagate the Dharma, I sent one complimentary set each to Vietnamese temples everywhere.

The great Venerable Master led by example. He was diligent in the daily prayers, spent little time for sleep/rest, did not eat past lunch time, and boiled his own carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables. He strictly adhered to precepts and engaged in only Dharma-related conversations. The great Venerable was always seen with a rosary and never missed a repentance session or a retreat, even when weak and at old age. When people sought guidance, He responded in accordance with their capacity. Despite the solemn appearance, the great Venerable was very pleasant and approachable; all in contact with Him were impressed by His preaching and occasional reveal of divine power. Of all congregations throughout Vietnam, His pagoda probably hosted the largest gathering of monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists. Since the day He founded Vạn Đức Pagoda, the surrounding area has seen more than 40 various temples, prayer halls, retreat cottages added by his followers. It's not an overstatement that those who had an opportunity to meet Him revered His saintliness.

The great Venerable's passing was an enormous loss for Vietnamese Buddhist communities in the country as well as abroad, and mourned by monks, nuns, and faithfuls all over the globe. We sincerely bow to his casket and pray for Him to be reborn in the golden lotus of the Western Pure Land.

The great Venerable Master was regarded as an enlightened monk, an incarnation of a Bodhisattva, a Tripitaka scholar, and a shining star of Vietnamese Buddhism. He was widely recognized for His virtues, devotion, cultivation and knowledge. He was also credited for the successful revitalization of the Pure Land school in Vietnam.

Our indebtedness to Him is taller than mountains and deeper than oceans. Even though we recognize that death is part of life, we can't help but feel choked with emotion when the Venerable left this impermanent world to enter nirvana. On behalf of all the faithfuls at the Dharma Flower Temple in Tucson, Arizona, I, Bảo-Đăng, respectfully prostrate to the Great Venerable Master and see Him off to the Buddha Land.

Namo Vạn Đức Great Patriarch

Great Venerable Master THÍCH TRÍ-TỊNH passed away at 9:15am on March 28th, 2014
(February 28th, Chinese Calendar) **Age: 98; left-home life: 69 years**

I sincerely pray to Buddhas to bless the Great Venerable Master's disciples, and wish many of them to excel in virtues and talents like He, in order to lead us in the cultivation path. I dedicate the following poem to the Great Venerable Master.

Bảo-Đăng's wish today to saintly master:
Venerable cultivated deeply and achieved great compassion
[Because] Six Letters constantly resided in heart,
Achieved enlightenment and rose above the physical world.
Be ambassador of the Thus Come One,
***Trí-Tịnh** returned to the Buddha Nature.*
When life completed here, returned to Pure Land,
Reborn in the gold lotus of nirvana.

We respectfully bow to the Patriarch of Vietnam's Lotus School, the promoter of the Pure Land Door, the accomplished tripitika dharma master,

Great Venerable Master THÍCH TRÍ-TỊNH, style name "Hân Tịnh",
the abbot of Vạn Đức Pagoda and Vạn Linh Pagoda.