

A Letter to Friends About Our Lineage

By Thay Phap Dung



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Dear friends,

There was a letter sent to me by a friend from Holland who asked about our spiritual roots. She wanted to know about the transmission gatha Thầy received from his teacher. This information is available to read in Vietnamese and classical Chinese on our website (www.langmai.org). On our website one can also get in touch with more than one hundred gathas relating to the transmissions of many generations up to our present one.

It is wonderful that despite many years of war in Vietnam, we still have access to this information. I myself was very moved when I learned about these gathas. But my friend cannot read Vietnamese or classical Chinese. I feel therefore responsible for providing reasonable translations for her and especially for those who have received a mindfulness training transmission from Thầy of either the 14 mindfulness trainings of the Order of Interbeing (OI) or the 5 mindfulness trainings. Beside these gathas, there is a lot to discover about our lineage.

I am looking forward to sharing with you, in future letters, some of this history. When we study the lives of our ancestral teachers we can learn so much. Thầy's life is also his message.

In this letter, along with the gatha given to Thầy, I offer a translation⁺ of transmission gathas representing five generations. In addition to this is a list of the teachers dating back to Zen Master Liễu Quán (1670-1742), one of our main root teachers.

Let me begin to explain to you the differences between a lineage name, a Dharma name, and a Dharma title. Each of us, upon receiving the five mindfulness trainings, is given a lineage name (pháp danh, 法名). When one is ordained as a monastic member or an OI-member, one receives a Dharma name (pháp tự, 法字). Some monastic members also have a Dharma title (pháp hiệu, 法號).

Thầy, our teacher, has the lineage name Trùng Quang (澄光), the Dharma name Phùng Xuân (逢春) and the Dharma title Nhất Hạnh (一行). We call him Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh. Thích (釋) is Vietnamese for Sakya, which is the Buddha's family name. Every monastic member in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition has a name which begins with Thích.

Thầy was born in the year 1926 in Vietnam. He entered Từ Hiếu root temple (慈孝寺) in Huế at the age of 16. On May 1st, 1966, ten days before he left Vietnam calling for peace abroad, he received the lamp-transmission in Từ Hiếu root temple.



Zen Master Chân Thật (1884-1968)

His teacher, our Grand-Father Teacher, had the lineage name Thanh Quý (倩季), the Dharma name Cửu Cảnh (究竟), and the Dharma title Chân Thật (真寔, 1884-1968). When he passed away in 1968, his Will gave instructions for Thầy to be appointed Abbot of Từ Hiếu root temple, a position which Thầy still holds. In the lamp transmission ceremony, our Grand-Father Teacher gave to Thầy the following gatha:

⁺ Translation of the gathas are made with wonderful support of Thầy Chúc Thịnh.

Nhất hướng phùng xuân đắc kiện hành
Hành đương vô niệm diệc vô tranh
Tâm đặng nhược chiếu kỳ nguyên thể
Diệu pháp đông tây khả tự thành

一向逢春得健行
行當無念亦無爭
心燈若照其原体
妙法東西可自成

In this gatha, we can read Thầy's Dharma name (Phùng Xuân), which means 'meeting the spring', and his Dharma title (Nhất Hạnh). Nhất means 'one' and Hạnh means 'action'. These are the two first words in the first two lines. We translate the gatha like this:

*When we are determined to go just in one direction, we will meet the spring, and our march will be a heroic one.
Our actions should be free from speculation or competition.
If the lamp of our mind shines light on its own nature,
Then the wonderful transmission of the Dharma will be realized in both East and West.*

Our Grand-Father teacher Zen Master Chân Thật received the lamp transmission from his elder brother in the Dharma, whose lineage name was Thanh Thái (清泰), Dharma name Chính Sắc (正色), and Dharma title Tuệ Minh (1861-1939, 慧明). Zen Master Tuệ Minh gave to his younger brother in the Dharma this gatha:

Chân thật duy tùng thể tính không
Thâm cùng vọng thức bản lai không
Thỉ tri thị vật nguyên phi vật
Diệu dụng vô khuy chỉ tự công

真寔惟從體性中
深窮妄識本來空
始知是物原非物

妙用無虧只自功。

Again, we see our Grand-Father Teacher's name (*Chân Thật, Real Truth*) in the first line of the gatha:



Zen Master Tuệ Minh (1861-1939)

*Real truth can only be found in the nature of emptiness.
From the beginning until now, our wrong perceptions are empty.
That is why we know that things are unreal.
The wonderful Dharma is always there, it depends on our practice if we
can get in touch with it.*

Our Grand-Father Teacher was the youngest disciple of the Zen Master, whose lineage name was Hải Thiệu (海紹) and whose Dharma name was Cương Kỳ (綱紀). Zen Master Cương Kỳ (1810-1899) transmitted this gatha to Zen Master Tuệ Minh:

*Chính sắc thể viên minh
Tâm pháp bản tự nhiên
Hư không thu nhất điểm
Kế tổ vĩnh lưu truyền.*

正 色 体 圓 明
心 法 本 自 然
虛 空 收 一 點
繼 祖 永 留 傳。

In the first line one can read Chính Sắc (Color of Righteousness), which is Zen Master Tuệ Minh's Dharma name.

*The color of righteousness is clear and complete in its nature,
The Dharma of the heart is basically natural.*

*The immense space can be compressed into a tiny dot.
Let us continue the work of our ancestors and transmit the Dharma to
the future generations.*



Zen Master Cương Kỳ (1810-1899)

Zen Master Cương Kỳ received the lamp transmission from his teacher, Zen Master Nhất Định (1784-1847), who was the founder of Từ Hiếu root temple. This was the transmission gatha:

*Cương kỷ kinh quyền bất chấp phương
Tùy cơ ứng dụng thiện tư lương
Triêu triêu tương thức nan tâm tích
Nhật nhật xuyên y khiết phạn thường*

網紀經權不執方
隨機應用善思量，
朝朝相識難尋跡
日日穿衣契飯常。

Cương Kỳ means 'discipline' or 'law'. This is the translation of the gatha:

*To apply the law, flexibility should be there and we are not caught in
our means.
In each situation we should make good use of our right thinking.
Every morning we recognize the faces of each other and yet it is difficult
to grasp each others' true nature.
We should apply the practice in our daily life like putting on our robe
and eating our meals.*



Zen Master Nhất Định (1784-1847)

His teacher, whose lineage name was Tánh Thiên (性天) and whose Dharma name was Nhất Định (一定, Concentration on Oneness), received the lamp transmission in the year 1814 when he was 30 years old. He left many wonderful stories about his life, such as taking care of his old mother in a small hut, which later became Từ Hiếu root temple. Từ (慈) means 'loving kindness' and Hiếu (孝) means 'piety'. This was the gatha he received:

*Nhất Định chiếu quang minh
 Hư không mãn nguyệt viên
 Tổ tổ truyền phó chúc
 Đạo Minh kế Tánh Thiên*

一 定 照 光 明
 虛 空 滿 月 圓
 祖 祖 傳 付 祝
 道 明 繼 性 天

*The concentration on Oneness is radiating light,
 Like a full moon in the immense space.
 Generations after generations, our ancestors continue each other.
 Therefore, it is Tánh Thiên who will continue Đạo Minh.*

In the last line, one can read Zen Master Nhất Định's lineage name (Tánh Thiên) and his teacher's lineage name (Đạo Minh, 道明), whose Dharma name was Phổ Tịnh (普淨). Zen Master Phổ Tịnh was the Abbot of Báo Quốc temple (報國寺). He passed away in 1816.



Zen Master Phổ Tịnh (?- 1816)

Zen Master Đạo Minh's teacher had the lineage name Đại Tuệ (大慧), and the Dharma name Chiếu Nhiên (照然), who was the Abbot of both Báo Quốc temple (報國寺) and Thuyền Tôn temple (禪宗寺).

Zen Master Chiếu Nhiên's teacher had the lineage name Tế Ân (濟恩), and the Dharma name Lưu Quang (流光). He was the abbot of Báo Quốc temple.

Zen Master Lưu Quang's teacher had the lineage name Thiệt Diệu (寔妙), and the Dharma name Liễu Quán (了觀). Zen master Liễu Quán (1670-1742) was the author of the gatha you see on your Certificate of Ordination, with the lines '... belongs to the 43rd generation of the Lâm Tế School and the 9th generation of the Liễu Quán Dharma Line.'

As a disciple of Thầy, your lineage name is e.g., Compassion of the Heart. Heart (Tâm, 心) is the 9th classical Chinese character of Zen Master Liễu Quán's gatha:

*Thiệt tế đại đạo
Tánh hải thanh trìng
Tâm nguyên quảng nhuận
Đức bốn từ phong
Giới định phúc tuệ
Thế dụng viên thông
Vĩnh siêu trí quả
Mật kế thành công
Truyền trì diệu lý
Diễn xướng chánh tông
Hành giải tương ứng
Đạt ngộ chân không.*

寔際大道, 性海清澄
心源廣潤, 德本慈風
戒定福慧, 體用圓通
永超智果, 密契成功
傳持妙理, 演暢正宗
行解相應, 達悟真空



Zen Master Liễu Quán (1670-1742)

This is Thầy's translation of the gatha:

*The great way of Reality,
Is our true nature's pure ocean.
The source of Mind penetrates everywhere.
From the roots of virtue springs the practice of compassion.
Precepts, concentration and insight -
The nature and function of all three are one.
The fruit of transcendent wisdom,
Can be realized by being wonderfully together.
Maintain and transmit the wonderful principle,
In order to reveal the true teaching!
For the realization of True Emptiness to be possible,
Wisdom and Action must go together.*

If you are a Dharma teacher, having received the lamp transmission by Thầy, then your disciple, who receives the 5 mindfulness trainings from you, belongs to the 44th generation of the Lâm Tế School and the 10th generation of the Liễu Quán Dharma Line. He or she bears the lineage name which contains the 10th character of the gatha in it (the 10th character is 'nguyên' (源), the source), e.g., Clarity of the Source.

Zen master Liễu Quán's teacher had the lineage name Minh Hoằng (明弘), and the Dharma title Tử Dung (子融).

Zen Master Tử Dung belonged to the 34th generation of the Lâm Tế (Linji) school.

To end this letter, I would like to tell a story about the encounters between Zen Master Tử Dung and his disciple Liễu Quán.



Zen Master Tử Dung

It was during the year 1702, that the young Liễu Quán met his teacher in Ấn Tôn Temple (印宗寺) at Long Sơn Mountain in Thuận Hóa, Vietnam. Zen Master Tử Dung taught him to contemplate on the koan: "All phenomena rely on Oneness, what does Oneness rely on?" (萬法歸一, 一歸何處).

Liễu Quán practiced sincerely but could not make the breakthrough. One day, while reading Truyền Đăng Lục (Transmission of the Lamp Records, 傳燈錄), and seeing the sentence "Pointing to an object is to transmit the heart of the Dharma. People have difficulty understanding this" (指物傳心, 人不會處), he suddenly understood the koan.

In 1708, he went back to Long Sơn Mountain and told his teacher about his understanding. His master replied:

*"Arriving at a deep hole, yet being able to let go of your self,
It is only you who can bear it.
After your death, you are reborn again,
Who is the one who dares to criticize you?"*

Liễu Quán laughed and clapped his hands, but his teacher said: "You are not yet there!" Liễu Quán replied: "The weight is made from iron." Zen Master Tử Dung was not satisfied with this answer.



Zen Master Nguyễn Thiệu (1648-1729)

The next morning, his teacher told him: "The conversation from yesterday is not over yet, please continue." On this request, Liễu Quán said:

*"If I would have known that the lamp contains its light,
Then the rice would have been cooked a long time ago."*

This time, Zen Master Tử Dung was pleased and gave his approval.

In 1712, they met each other for the third time in Quảng Nam. He presented his "Bathing the Buddha" gatha. Zen Master Tử Dung asked: "The patriarch transmits to the patriarch. The Buddha transmits to the Buddha. What do they transmit to each other?" Zen Master Liễu Quán replied immediately:

*"On rocks the bamboo shoots grow longer than ten meters.
The weight of a turtle hair broom is three kilos."*

石筍抽條長一丈
龜毛撫拂重三斤

Zen Master Tử Dung said:

*"Row a boat on the high mountain.
Ride a horse at the bottom of the ocean."*

高高山上行船
深深海底走馬

Zen Master Liễu Quán replied:

*"Playing on a sitar without strings for hours,
Breaking a clay ox's horns makes him cry the whole night."*

折角泥牛徹夜吼
沒絃琴死盡日彈

Zen Master Tử Dung was very happy with this answer. At this time Zen Master Liễu Quán was 42 years old.

Yours sincerely,

Pháp Dụng