



Madhyamaka in the Vietnamese Buddhist stream: From the heritage of wisdom to applicability and cultural expression in modern times

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Abstract

Madhyamaka is not only a distinctive teaching that guides practitioners to liberation in the Northern Buddhist community, but also has the ability to be applied to modern social life. This paper examines the process of reception, transformation and application of Madhyamaka in Vietnam, from Nagarjuna's interpretation and the Prajna literature to Buddhist practice in Vietnam (especially the Truc Lam Zen sect in the past and present). From a religious perspective, the paper approaches Madhyamaka as an interdependent system of wisdom – philosophy – cultural expression, implemented through three dimensions: cognition, practice and organization of life. The paper uses descriptive-analytical methods combining textual and field surveys. Research results show that Madhyamaka is currently being considered as a method to support psychological therapy, liberal education and the development of a culture of mindfulness in the world. In Vietnam, there are also opportunities and challenges in bringing Madhyamaka into monastery environments, lay communities, and modern society. Therefore, we can see Madhyamaka as a living wisdom heritage, which has the ability to accompany Vietnamese people to overcome existential and cultural crises in the era of transformation

Keywords: Madhyamaka, emptiness, applied religious studies, Buddhist culture

Introduction

In the Northern Buddhist tradition, “Madhyamaka” is known as an important wisdom tendency. It was first received and interpreted by Nāgārjuna, (Indian) in his Madhyamaka-śāstra (The Treatise on the Middle Way) (around the 2nd-3rd century AD. In Buddhist life, Madhyamaka is not a unilinear doctrine, but a contemplative method that transcends dualism and attachment, bases on the principles of dependent origination and emptiness – the two central pillars of Mahayana Buddhism (Garfield, 1995: xiii; Williams, 2009: 75–78)^[11, 12]. In its Buddhist form, The Treatise on the Middle Way has been still officially taught at Vietnamese Buddhist academies such as the Vietnam Buddhist Academy in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Hue. However, the influence of Madhyamaka in Vietnam has not stopped at the scope of teaching, but has been also widely accepted, practiced and expressed in the religious - cultural - community life of Vietnamese Buddhism.

In recent years, many international research projects have clearly affirmed the potential application of Madhyamaka wisdom in modern life. It has been not only as a philosophical doctrine but also as a spiritual and cognitive practice. Notably, Zhao (2025)^[55] reinterprets Madhyamaka as a system of wisdom that eliminates suffering and improves the quality of life, while also opens up an integrated approach between Indian and Chinese cultures and contemporary spiritual challenges. Other scholars continue to expand this applied dimension in new directions, such as counter-arguing nihilism with the concept of “unfounded teleology,” integrating Madhyamaka with action ethics (Peirce), or applying emptiness wisdom in the context of the ethics of war and conflict (Taylor, 2021).

In the Tibetan tradition, Fisher (2025) asserts that Madhyamaka meditation is inseparable from the wisdom of dependent origination and is a practical path to practice a non-dual perspective in life. On the other hand, some studies have placed the Madhyamaka dialectic in the field of international relations (Brincat, 2024), suggesting that the globalized world needs to be understood as a network of dependent origination - interbeing, rather than adversarial relations. On a broader level, Westerhoff (2023)^[53] sees Madhyamaka as a cultural philosophy that has the potential to break down the dualistic stereotype between East and West, promoting cognitive dialogue and inter-cultural intellectual contacts.

This study approaches “Madhyamaka” not only as a Buddhist philosophical system, but also as a living expression of religious life – a worldview structure that is capable of shaping cognition, practice, and culture. To clarify the interdisciplinary nature and the applicability of Madhyamaka in modern social life, the paper applies the framework of religious phenomenological analysis (in the direction of Mircea Eliade) and the theory of religious worldview proposed by Ninian Smart. According to Eliade (1959)^[11], every religious tradition was born from the human need to establish a sacred order in daily life, through symbols, rituals and inner experiences. Meanwhile, Ninian Smart (1996)^[35] pointed out that religion needed to be examined within the multidimensional structure of a worldview, including: epistemology (philosophy), spiritual experience, ethical practice, ritual, community, and cultural symbols. Based on this theory, the paper considers Madhyamaka not only as a cognitive spirit of “breaking attachment”, but also as a worldview structure that helps

people re-establish the relationship between oneself, others and reality with a seeing of non-attachment, mutual dependence and emptiness.

Methodologically, the paper combines textual analysis, religious phenomenology, and selective field observation. Textual analysis focuses on classical sources such as The Treatise on the Middle Way, the Heart Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, the Platform Sutra, and the writings and dharma talk of the Truc Lam Zen sect, Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu, extending to Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village community. The phenomenological approach is used to approach Madhyamaka as a lived reality in the practice experience, where wisdom is not only interpreted but also expressed through behavior, symbols, and culture. At the same time, the paper is based on actual observations of Buddhist activities at some Truc Lam Zen monasteries (Tue Duc, Sung Phuc, etc.), the Plum Village community in Thailand and online (2021–2024), and lay Buddhist mediation group in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Within the framework of this paper, the goal is not only to explain Madhyamaka as a wisdom heritage of Mahayana Buddhism, but also to explore the possibility of practicing the cognition - the cultural orientation of Madhyamaka in modern Vietnamese social life.

Madhyamaka - the wisdom heritage of Mahayana Buddhism

1. Madhyamaka in the Treatise of Bodhisattva Nagarjuna

“Madhyamaka” is a concept often associated with the work of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* – “Fundamental verses on the Middle Way”. This is often shortened to the Middle Treatise by Nāgārjuna, an Indian philosopher of the 2nd-3rd century. In the 5th century, Kumarajiva translated this work into Chinese with the name 根本中論 (Fundamental Treatise on the Middle Way), and the Chinese later called it 中觀論 (Treatise on the Middle Way), forming the Madhyamaka school, which had a profound influence in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam (Thich Quang Hop, 2015)^[23].

According to scholar Tue Sy (2017), the three elements “Middle”, “Contemplation” and “Treatise” in “The Treatise on the Middle Way” correspond to three dimensions of Prajna wisdom: “Middle” is the true nature of Prajna (the ultimate wisdom of the Buddhas), “Contemplation” is the contemplation of Prajna (the method of practice), and “Treatise” is the Prajna text (the introductory language). Thus, “Madhyamaka” does not merely denote a theory, but also encompasses the process of enlightenment and the method of practicing that wisdom. According to Zhao Zelin (2025)^[55], the transition from “Middle Way” to “Madhyamaka” also reflects a change in thinking: from ontological awareness in Indian Mahayana Buddhism to emphasis on the enlightened subject in Chinese Buddhism.

Nāgārjuna composed the Middle Treatise in the context of “Prajna wisdom” that had taken shape through sacred texts such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* (The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines) – the earliest text in the Prajñā literature, which appeared from about 100 years BC (Willemen, 2017)^[54]. However, in chapter 15 of the Middle Treatise, he quotes only one Nikāya sutta, the *Kaccānagotta Sutta* – a sutta on the “middle way” and “dependent origination” (SN 12.15; SA 301). This is the foundation that helps Nagarjuna develop his interpretation of Madhyamaka wisdom from two core principles: *pratītyasamutpāda*

(dependent origination) and *madhyamā pratipad* (middle way).

Right in the opening verse, he established the relationship between dependent origination and emptiness: “Dharmas arise from the causes and conditions, I say that they are Emptiness. It is also called a false name. It is also the meaning of the Middle Way” (Nāgārjuna, 1995, 1.1). On this basis, he used negative dialectics to reject the four theories of origination, thereby affirming that all dharmas are selflessness – because they depended on each other to exist, they had no independent nature. This was the basis of cognition that brings the practitioner to a state of non-attachment, eliminating suffering. The dialectic of “eight nos” – no birth, no death; no one, no other – was also deployed to remove all dualistic structures. “Emptiness” was not a real dharma, even not absolute reality. According to Skilton (2025: 144), “emptiness is also empty” – it has no ontology, but is only a means of cognition.

Kumarajiva’s translation of The Middle Treatise into Chinese, along with Sengzhao’s commentary and the development of the Three Treatise School, brought the Madhyamaka spirit into Chinese Zen and transmitted it to Vietnam. The Middle Treatise is, therefore, considered the theoretical axis which connects primitive Buddhism with the Prajna literature, creating the premise for the later Vietnamese Zen tradition.

2. Madhyamaka wisdom is interpreted in the Prajnaparamita literature

The Middle Treatise is largely taught from the Prajnaparamita Sutra (Tue Sy, 2017). After the Middle Treatise was born, Prajna literature developed into a massive system in Mahayana Buddhism, with representative sutra such as the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (often abbreviated as the Diamond Sutra) and the *Prajnaparamitahridaya Sutra* (often abbreviated as the Heart Sutra). Among them, the Diamond Sutra was an outstanding work, which both deeply expressed the spirit of dependent origination and Emptiness of Madhyamaka, and opened up a very practical and close practice method.

One thing worth noting was that in the opening of the Diamond Sutra, it described the Buddha’s a very ordinary day: he wore his robe, went begging for food, stopped at each house for the right amount of time to let the family know that there was a monk standing outside the door. When his bowl was full of food, he returned, ate his meal, washed his bowl, washed his feet, arranged his robe, and meditated. There was no mystery or magic here. However, there was a being named Subhuti, known as “King of Emptiness” (one who had enlightened the Emptiness nature of dharmas), who praised the mystery of the Buddha’s ordinary activities as being able to maintain mindfulness for the Bodhisattvas. That was because those activities of His were performed entirely in the light of the illuminating, empty Mind of Emptiness. When Subhuti asked about practice, the Buddha said: “not abiding in form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or dharma”. And that was also the place where the Madhyamaka wisdom opened up for many Zen masters of China and Vietnam to attain enlightenment.

By the time of the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Zen - Hui Neng (638-713), the Madhyamaka spirit stepped out of the scholastic environment and entered life strongly. Hui Neng was just a woodcutter, cutting wood all year round and taking care of his old mother. Because he was illiterate, he

could not read the scriptures - it meant that he did not come from a scholastic environment. Before becoming a layman, when he heard people chanting: “不應住色生心，不應住聲香味觸法生心，應無所住，而生其心” in the Diamond Sutra [Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra], his heart was immediately moved - this was the first enlightenment. This time he saw the door to the Way through the Madhyamika spirit. Later, when he entered the temple of the Fifth Patriarch Hongren, thanks to the Madhyamaka spirit in the Diamond Sutra, he was enlightened two more times. Therefore, even though he had not yet manifested himself as a monk, Hui Neng was given the robe and bowl by Patriarch Hong Ren to become the 6th Patriarch of Chinese Zen. Especially, the foundation of Hui Neng's enlightenment was an extraordinary and sharp intuition, creating a southern sudden-enlightened Zen that both escaped from the Buddhist literature and art that had weighed heavily on the body of Chinese Buddhism, and at the same time opened up a source of practical, simple Zen that could be applied to ordinary life. Since then, it became a pervasive force in Chinese Buddhism and became a source of inspiration for Buddhist practice in Vietnam.

In short, the Madhyamaka wisdom – with its core principles of dependent origination and emptiness – was not only presented as a sharp dialectical system of reasoning, but also interpreted vividly and practically in the Prajna literature, especially through the Diamond Sutra. As Zhao Z. (2025) [55] evaluates, Madhyamaka opens up a deeply transformative practice: when practitioners let go of all attachments to existence and non-existence, abiding in the middle way wisdom of emptiness, they can live a life of peace and freedom, escape from all suffering created by ignorance and attachment. In that spirit, the sutra phrase of “where the mind is without attachment, there the mind appears” becomes a concise expression imbued with Madhyamaka wisdom: Not abiding in any dharma, but still living mindfully, clearly knowing, without attachment – is the foundation of practice leading to liberation in the present moment.

Interpretation and practice of Madhyamaka in Vietnam

1. Interpretation of Madhyamaka wisdom in Vietnam

In this issue, we mainly examine the translation, interpretation, and research of two major texts related to Madhyamaka wisdom, namely Nagarjuna's Treatise on the Middle Way and the Diamond Sutra.

▪ Translation, interpretation and research of “The Treatise on the Middle Way” in Vietnam

The Chinese text of the Treatise on the Middle Way that appeared in Vietnam was the version translated from Sanskrit to Chinese by Kumarajiva. Although there is currently no translation of the Treatise on the Middle Way into Nôm script, perhaps since its introduction to Vietnam, this version has been recited and studied in many temples and monasteries. The reason for not translating the Treatise on the Middle Way in Nôm may be because the ancients did not consider this work suitable for the general public. This was different from the translation of the Diamond Sutra.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the Treatise on the Middle Way has been translated into Vietnamese, mainly through the Chinese translation of Kumarajiva. Some other versions, such as: Thich Thien Sieu (2001) [34, 36] with the Middle Treatise - Destroying the Heterodox and Revealing

the Orthodox published by Thuan Hoa Publishing House, and the translation of the meaning by Thich Khong Hu (2007) [24], published internally at the Ho Chi Minh City Buddhist University. A typical example is the translation by Thich Thien Hanh (2012) [19, 20] published through the Hoa Sen Library website. These translations, despite being brief and lacking a system of in-depth commentary, have created an initial foundation for Vietnamese monks to access the interpretation of Madhyamaka wisdom.

Besides translation, many translated and explained versions have been created for teaching purposes in Buddhist temples, academies and advanced Buddhist studies classes. Most notably, the work of “Commentary on the Middle Treatise” by Venerable Thich Thanh Tu (2008) [46] was compiled in a practical direction, clarifying the Madhyamaka wisdom in mediation studies. The Commentary on the Treatise on Middle Way by Thich Tue Sy (2001) – a work of high academic and pedagogical value, was taught at Buddhist Academies in Ho Chi Minh City, Hue and Hanoi. This version combines Sanskrit-Chinese-Vietnamese textual verification and profound philosophical explanations, demonstrating the translator's independent and sophisticated thinking. Some lecturers such as Thich Thong Hue (2006) and Thich Minh Thanh (2017) [37, 38] also have versions of the chants and explanations, often used as internal materials in monasteries and the applied Buddhism classes.

On the academic side, Nguyen Van Hai (2001) [15] published the work of Understanding the Middle Treatise: Cognition and Emptiness, which studies the relationship between Nagarjuna's dialectics with Buddhist epistemology and Western philosophy. In 2017, he continued to publish The Principle of Sufficient Reason – Dependent Origination, which applied modern logic to explain the principles of the middle way and dependent origination in the Treatise on the Middle Way (Nguyen Van Hai, 2017) [16]. In addition, Vu the Ngoc (2016) [31] with Nagarjuna's Philosophy and The Treatise on the Seven Treatises of Nagarjuna (2017) also deeply analyzed the Madhyamaka ideology and dialectics in the light of Buddhist linguistics and logic. At the general level - instructional research, we could mention the Essentials of the Middle Treatise by Thich Tri Du and Le Hong Son (2019) [9], which provided a systematic summary, supporting learners to approach the full text of the Middle Treatise according to the introductory method. Finally, Richard H. Robinson's translation of the early Madhyamaka School in India and China, translated by Thich Thien Chinh (2022), provided a cross-cultural comparative perspective – from India to China – and is currently used in specialized studies in Vietnam.

Thus, the reception and teaching of the Treatise on the Middle Way in Vietnam not only contributes to enriching the Buddhist academic tradition, but also opens up practical applications for the monastic life of the Buddhist community in Vietnam.

▪ Translation, interpretation and study of the Diamond Sutra in Vietnam

The Diamond Sutra was transmitted to Vietnam quite early, possibly around the 7th-8th century, through Chinese Zen masters during the period when Mahayana Buddhism flourished in Giao Chau. The Chinese translation by Kumarajiva in 401 became the basis for the teachings and

practices of Zen Buddhism in China as well as Vietnam (Nguyen Lang, 1973)^[28].

During the Ly - Tran dynasty (11th - 14th century), the Diamond Sutra became one of the core scriptures of the Truc Lam Yen Tu Zen sect. In the work of Instructions on Emptiness, Tran Thai Tong often quoted sutra from the Diamond Sutra to explain the path of practicing Bodhisattva and the ideal of non-attachment. This is clear evidence that this sutra permeated the spirit of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 13th century (Tran Thai Tong, 2006)^[41]. Next, Tue Trung Thuong Si, Tran Thanh Tong, then Tran Nhan Tong and the following Zen masters of the Truc Lam Zen sect all inherited that spirit (Nguyen Lang, 1973)^[28].

From the 18th century to the early 20th century, many translations such as the Diamond Sutra in National Language;(code AB.567, engraved in the 14th year of Tu Duc [1861]) were compiled to interpret the sutras by using direct interpretation, annotation, or paraphrase. There were two typical versions: a prose translation called the Interpretation of Diamond Sutra; a verse translation called the Diamond Sutra in plain verse (Trinh Khac Manh, 2007)^[29]. These versions used plain verse, the seven-seven six-eight meter, or annotated prose, allowing Vietnamese people who do not know Chinese to still recite and absorb the teachings. According to Thich Hanh Tuan's research, the Institute of Hán Nôm Studies is currently preserving at least 16 copies of the Diamond Sutra, including interpretations such as the Diamond Sutra Interpretation (AC.254, 1745), the Diamond Sutra Direct Interpretation (AC.320, 1822), and the above-mentioned National Language version (Thich Hanh Tuan, 2005: 13–14)^[47]. Such Nôm translation, in addition to demonstrating the localization of Buddhist scriptures in Vietnam, also proved that in the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, there were many people who did not know Chinese characters and had the need to recite, read, and understand the teachings in the Diamond Sutra. The popularity of the Diamond Sutra is, therefore, even wider than that of the Treatise on the Middle Way.

The translation, interpretation and lecturing of the Diamond Sutra in Vietnamese is an important historical process, contributing to making the profound teachings of the Prajnaparamita closer and more practical to Vietnamese Buddhist students. Since the beginning of the 20th century, in the Buddhist revival movement, Venerable Thich Tri Tinh initiated the translation of Buddhist scriptures from Chinese into Vietnamese script. Among them are the following typical translations, interpretations, and lectures on the Diamond Sutra: The version by Venerable Thich Tri Tinh (1956)^[40] was widely used among Vietnamese monks and lay Buddhist; the translation by Venerable Thich Thanh Tu (1997)^[43] explained from the perspective of Zen, helping practitioners observe their minds, “seeing delusions but not following them”. In particular, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (1991)^[17] developed the translation and commentary on the Diamond Sutra in the spirit of mindfulness and Prajna practice. He emphasized that the spirit of the Middle Way - Dependent Origination was not just a philosophical teaching, but a specific guide to contact Emptiness through each breath, step, and mindful life.

Zen Master Bodhidharma (the first patriarch of Chinese Zen) transmitted the four volumes of the Lankavatara Sutra to his disciple Huike as mind transmission, laying the foundation for the sudden enlightenment Zen school in China. However, over time, by the time of Zen Master

Hongren (the fifth patriarch of Chinese Zen), the Diamond Sutra was widely popular because of its direct, simple, and sharp semantics, especially suitable for the spirit of “seeing one’s nature and becoming a Buddha” (Thich Thanh Tu, 1997)^[42]. Even Zen master Hui Neng, thanks to the verse in the Diamond Sutra, attained enlightenment, laying the foundation for the Southern Zen sect of sudden enlightenment that lasts to this day. Since then, the Diamond Sutra has become a central scripture in East Asian Zen, deeply absorbed and applied by Zen masters in their practice and education.

2. Practicing Madhyamaka in Vietnam

In Vietnam, Madhyamaka is rarely systematized as an independent doctrine in Zen practice, but that spirit is deeply and naturally present in the lifestyle of practitioners. It is the expression of wisdom without attachment, without clinging to language, form or conceptual structure – it is true to the spirit of “the middle way without abiding” of Nagarjuna. Vietnamese practitioners do not interpret emptiness as a philosophical category, but practice non-abiding in every step, every word, every contact with life. Thus, Madhyamaka is “realized” rather than “explained.”

In Collection of Outstanding Figures of the Zen Garden, it is written: Zen masters Vien Chieu (999-1090), Zen master Dao Hue (?-1073), and Zen master Tin Hoc (?-1190) were all proficient in the “Threefold Contemplations” in The Perfect Enlightenment Sutra. The threefold contemplations include Emptiness, Existence, and Madhyamaka (Middle Way). Thus, although it cannot be confirmed completely, the spirit of Madhyamaka was practiced by a number of Zen masters under the Ly dynasty (Ngo Duc Tho, 1990)^[38]. However, the Madhyamaka here is mentioned in conjunction with the Perfect Enlightenment Sutra.

During the Tran Dynasty, the spiritual signs of Madhyamaka were mentioned many times with instructions in the Diamond Sutra. At the Zen monasteries of the Truc Lam Zen sect in Vietnam today, such as: at Truc Lam Tue Duc Zen Monastery^[1], the most noble position in the Patriarchal shrine is still Patriarch Bodhidharma, but we can also easily see the image of the Fifth Patriarch Hongren and the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng pushing the boat to the south bank of the Truong Giang River is clearly depicted right behind the main worship hall. That has deep roots from the story of enlightenment of the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng, which has similarities with the story of enlightenment of the later Truc Lam sect members. Fate was related to the spirit of Madhyamaka in the Diamond Sutra like the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng.

In Vietnam, during the Tran Dynasty, Tran Thai Tong (1218-1277) was the first king of the Tran Dynasty (1225-1400). He fled to Yen Tu Mountain because he was forced into the context of a country robbery, heartlessness, and incestuous marriage with his sister-in-law. With the advice of National Master Phu Van, he returned to both fulfill his responsibilities as a king and study Buddhist scriptures. When reading the Diamond Sutra, at the passage “不應住色生心，不應住聲香味觸法生心，應無所住，而生其心”， he immediately attained enlightenment. Along with his strict daily practice, he later compiled the Instructions on Emptiness, laying the first foundation for the Truc Lam Zen sect in Vietnam.

Next, Tran Thanh Tong (1240–1290) was the second king of the Tran dynasty, reigning from 1258 to 1278. After

giving the throne to his son Tran Nhan Tong, he became a monk, taking the name Dai Huong Hai an, and practiced with Tran Nhan Tong at Yen Tu, contributing to creating the foundation for the formation of the Truc Lam Zen sect. In the work of *The Records of the Transmission of the Dharma* – a document recording the background of the three first patriarchs of Truc Lam (Tran Thai Tong, Tran Thanh Tong, Tran Nhan Tong), Tran Thanh Tong was described as a person who firmly resided in meditation, acted flexibly, was not attached to famous sayings, lived a simple and mindful life, clearly showing the demeanor of a practitioner who had let go of delusions and returned to an impure mind (Thich Thanh Tu, 1998)^[45].

By the time of Tran Nhan Tong (1258-1308, reigned from 1278 to 1293), people saw a way of life that was extremely close to everyday life - non-abiding, leisurely, free, not attaching to famous-sayings or form. Through Living a contented and joyful life amidst the mundane world, one sees the expression of a way of contemplation that transcends both object and means. This is the Middle Way as lived wisdom – not in texts, but in daily spiritual life.

Since the mid-20th century, the Truc Lam Buddhist stream has been revived by Venerable Thích Thiện Hoa, Venerable Thích Thiện Hòa and Venerable Thich Thanh Tu. Despite not mentioning “Madhyamaka”, the current Truc Lam Zen monasteries all practice a way of not clinging to words, not dwelling on situations, not tying oneself to any fixed model – this is the spirit of Madhyamaka in practice. The religious practice of “seeing delusions and not following them” and “returning to the unmoving awareness” is a typical practice of no-thought and no-abiding. In meditation courses at Truc Lam Yen Tu, Truc Lam Tue Duc, Truc Lam Bach Ma, practitioners learn how to live directly with reality, not to explain it, not to turn meditation into philosophy, but to let meditation permeate into behavior - speech - life.

Besides the Truc Lam Zen sect, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh teaches and guides Madhyamaka to the Plum Village community and outside of Plum Village. Through his wisdom and teachings, many meditators practice direct contact with reality without falling into discrimination, attachment or delusion. Madhyamaka, in his understanding, was not a denial of the phenomenal world, but a means to “break the solid blocks of ignorance in cognition” – it meant, to break down fixed views, dualistic notions of self and other, right and wrong, eternalism and annihilation (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2011: 11)^[42]. For Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, this was not just a thinking tool, but a contemplative capacity to transform suffering in daily life, especially when practitioners identified and looked deeply into mental formations such as anger, anxiety, and fear (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2011: 28)^[42]. Madhyamaka in Plum Village thus not only broke down the notion of object, but also disintegrated the seeing of subject – it meant, “The person who was contemplating must also be let go”, because “we could not bring the ego to seek enlightenment” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2011: 32)^[42]. As a result, practitioners could practice wisdom that transcended discrimination, reaching the seeing of “all is inter-being,” “all is dependent origination and has no self-nature” – the foundation for establishing a compassionate, non-attachment lifestyle with the ability to heal, not only for the Sangha and lay people, but also for those who were not part of the Buddhist community (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2011: 38–39)^[42].

Thus, the Madhyamaka spirit has permeated the life of the Vietnamese Buddhist community, not only through doctrinal texts such as the *Treatise on the Middle Way*, but also through experiential and empirical practical instructions such as in the *Perfect Enlightenment Sutra*, the *Diamond Sutra*, and the *Heart Sutra*. Through the process of localization, this wisdom gradually separated from Indian and Chinese culture, and gradually created the quality and spirit of the Buddhist tradition with Vietnamese culture.

The possibility of applying Madhyamaka in life in modern Vietnam

1. Demand from modern society

In the context of modern society, people increasingly face many forms of insecurity: psychological disorders, feelings of isolation, identity crisis and dependence on an appearance – consumerist lifestyle. This condition largely arises from clinging to the ego – a fixed and distinct ego, and from the habit of seeing things in dualistic opposition: right/wrong, me/you, the sacred/the profane. Therefore, the need for a method to help remove these sufferings from the root is becoming increasingly urgent.

Madhyamaka wisdom – particularly the Middle Way approach of observation, looking deeply into the dependent origination and non-self of all dharmas – offers a unique and profoundly transformative approach. By practicing the attitude of “not clinging to the two extremes,” the practitioner not only escapes the suffering caused by attachment, but also opens up a new direction: living in inner freedom, awareness, and connection without dependence.

Recent international research in psychology also confirms this urgency and potential. Watson’s (1998)^[52] research showed that the concept of Emptiness could be effectively integrated into modern psychotherapy as a source of inner healing and ego reshaping. Similarly, Van Gordon *et al.* (2016) pointed out that the theory of Emptiness was not only philosophically valuable, but also had positive psychological effects such as reduced anxiety, increased compassion, and reduced ego-clinging. Another experimental study (Van Gordon *et al.*, 2019)^[50] also demonstrated that Emptiness meditation helped practitioners achieve a stable mental state, less shaken by negative circumstances and emotions.

It is noteworthy that this need not only appears in the West, but has been also identified in Vietnamese Buddhist communities. Like Truc Lam, Plum Village, and many current Zen monasteries are gradually shifting their focus from formal practice to deep inner experience, aiming at liberation from all attachments – even attachments to the idea of practicing religion. This is also a sign that Madhyamaka is not only a philosophical theory but has actually entered the applied religious life.

2. Applying the practice of Madhyamaka in personal and social transformation

From a philosophical system developed by Nagarjuna in the context of Mahayana Buddhism, Madhyamaka has not stopped at epistemological criticism or breaking metaphysical attachment, but also opened up a possibility of living practice – removing the root of suffering with the very seeing of the middle way. In this, the focus has been on contemplating the dependent origination and selflessness of all dharmas, while at the same time abiding in a non-

attached seeing – not falling into the two extremes of permanence and annihilation, existence and non-existence, attachment and rejection.

When approached as a way of life, Madhyamaka helps people restructure their perception, freeing them from the pressure of distinguishing between right and wrong, gain and loss. Especially in modern society, where individuals are easily caught up in identifying themselves with roles, achievements, and status, Madhyamaka allows practitioners to realize that: There is no fixed “self” to protect, and no entity that needs to be completely eliminated. It is this letting go that forms the basis for an inner life that is free, flexible, tolerant without being sentimental, alert without being extreme.

Madhyamaka is not limited to the Buddhist clergy or intellectuals. Recent studies have demonstrated that the Emptiness meditation – the practical foundation of Madhyamaka – can be widely applied to the general public. Research by Van Gordon *et al.* (2019)^[49] showed that: Emptiness meditation helped practitioners significantly reduce negative emotions, increase compassion, and reduce ego attachment – even in those with advanced practice. Watson (1998)^[52] asserted that Emptiness could become the fulcrum for modern psychological therapies, helping people to remove the layers of the ego and reach the foundation of deep inner mindfulness. Since then, Madhyamaka was seen as a spiritual-mental therapeutic foundation that was both philosophical and capable of transforming individual and community life.

In Vietnam, many modern Buddhist traditions have also put this wisdom into the living practice. The Truc Lam Zen sect with its Zen monasteries from the time of Venerable Thiệu Hoa to Venerable Thanh Tu continued the spirit of “seeing delusions and not following them”, “seeing the nature and letting go”, emphasizing the ability to see and know without attachment. At the same time, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village community developed a gentle, simple approach to the Middle Way that can be practiced in everyday life, in every step, breath, and mindful way of living – whether that person was a monk, a layperson, or a person of another religion.

From the perspective of applied religious studies, it can be said that: Madhyamaka is a kind of cognitive map – helping people “see the world as it really is” without having to construct any fixed paradigm. This uncertainty does not confuse people, but on the contrary, opens up the possibility of living with reality in a more flexible, responsible and compassionate way. Thus, Madhyamaka is not just a theory to understand, but a method to live by.

3. Cultural characteristics forecasting when applying Madhyamaka

Culture is not only a consequence of community behavior, but also a reflection of collective cognitive structure. A society that tends to cling – whether cling to identity, ritual, ideology or prejudice – is prone to forms of cultural antagonism, polarization and over-consumption. In that context, Madhyamaka – with its ability to deconstruct dualism and break with all fixed forms – can become a new cultural orientation: depth, tolerance and non-extremism.

If the Madhyamaka spirit is permeated into cultural life, it will contribute to reducing dependence on formalities, cumbersome rituals or the “festive” mentality that easily leads to a lifestyle of religious consumption. Instead,

Madhyamaka encourages a return to the inner self: living mindfully in simple things, seeing clearly the nature of suffering, and at the same time opening up the possibility of living together without excluding each other. This is not a new cultural declaration, but a return to the essence of Buddhism – “Buddhism is in the world, not separate from the world to awaken” (Platform Sutra).

A culture with the application of Madhyamika practice is a non-confrontational culture, in which people do not need to “win the argument” to assert themselves, but can learn to live in uncertainty, see impermanence without panic, see selflessness without coldness. In education, this opens up the possibility of reflective education, where students are not forced into preconceived stereotypes, but are guided to see clearly without clinging to what they see. In therapy, this is the basis for healing models that are non-imposing, non-negating, and do not attempt to restructure the ego, but help the patient observe and resolve suffering from a cognitive basis.

On that basis, as Barua (2009)^[4] suggests, Madhyamaka can become an interdisciplinary – intercultural foundation: applied in science, education, ecological ethics and spiritual therapy. The “emptiness” of dharmas does not lead to nothingness, but opens up the possibility of interbeing – connection – empathy. Culture is, then, no longer a defense of identity, but becomes an open space of dialogue, both inheriting and liberating.

In the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, this spirit has not been strange. From Tran Thai Tong, Tran Nhan Tong to Le Manh That, Zen Master Nhat Hanh, Venerable Thanh Tu. All emphasized that practicing religion - and more broadly, Buddhist culture - could not be separated from life. Therefore, applying Madhyamaka in culture is not an intervention from outside, but a restoration of the depth of living mindfulness - non-attachment - flexibility of a spiritual heritage that once existed in Vietnamese life.

4. Opportunities and Challenges in applying Madhyamaka in Vietnam today

The application of Madhyamaka – with its focus on the wisdom of Emptiness, dependent origination and non-attachment – is opening up many valuable opportunities for spiritual life, education, therapy and culture in Vietnam.

First, Madhyamaka has the ability to help practitioners escape from dualistic thinking. This is especially necessary in a society that is influenced by value polarization, pressure to succeed, and ego identification. When properly applied, Madhyamaka wisdom not only deepened the meditative life, but also helped people overcome psychological suffering with a correct seeing of reality (Watson, 1998; Van Gordon *et al.*, 2019)^[50, 52].

Second, Vietnam has a foundation for accepting Madhyamaka thanks to the long-standing tradition of Buddhism, especially the Truc Lam, Lam Te, and Cao Dong Zen sects, and the influence of the Prajnaparamita Sutras, the Diamond Sutras, and the Flower Ornament Scripture in monastic life. Additionally, many modern Buddhist institutions such as Truc Lam Zen Monasteries, Plum Village communities, and urban lay meditation groups are gradually introducing Madhyamaka practice in an accessible form, connecting with the community of teachers, therapists, business people, and young people.

Third, Madhyamaka can play a guiding role in the development of applied culture – mindfulness –

interdisciplinary dialogue, contributing to building a society with richness in compassion, reflection, reducing antagonism and dependence on superficial forms of belief. This is very consistent with the trend of educational innovation, mental health care and development of modern spiritual culture.

However, the process of applying Madhyamaka also faces many challenges both cognitively and practically. Firstly, Madhyamaka is a profound, multi-layered system of reasoning that requires a solid foundation of philosophical thinking and meditation experience. Without proper guidance, Madhyamika practice can easily be misunderstood as nihilism or simplified into meditation techniques that are not connected with wisdom. This has been warned about in many clinical studies and classical teachings (Garfield, 1995; Thich Nhat Hanh, 2002)^[11, 12, 17]. Secondly, the current popular practicing learning environment in Vietnam, according to our observations, still leans heavily towards chanting, rituals, folk beliefs, etc. - therefore, introducing Madhyamaka in the true spirit of “not clinging to the dharma” may encounter obstacles in terms of acceptance among the public. Without proper guidance, it is easy to end up in a state of “breaking attachments but still clinging to the breaking of attachments”, or using the language of Emptiness in a dogmatic way.

Thirdly, from the perspective of religious sociology, the transformation of Madhyamaka into a living cultural form requires perseverance and connection between communities of practitioners – intellectuals – educators – therapists, to avoid being isolated in the academic sphere or separated from practical needs.

Conclusion

Madhyamaka – with its core being the Middle Way view, contemplating Emptiness and Dependent Origination – is not only a transcendent Buddhist theoretical system, but also a method of religious practice and cognitive orientation which is capable of profoundly transforming individual and communal life. The Madhyamaka spirit, when approached from the perspective of applied religious studies, is not only for Zen or Buddhist intellectuals, but can also open up practical possibilities for education, psychotherapy, building a culture of mindfulness, and renewing social life.

Madhyamaka can help to remove all forms of attachment from the root – the source of suffering, antagonism and crisis of values. In the current context of Vietnam, when society is facing manifestations of dependence on form, spiritual consumption and dualism in thinking, Madhyamaka can act as a liberating cognitive map, helping people clearly see the empty nature - dependent origination of phenomena, thereby behaving more flexibly and compassionately in relationships and life choices. In other words, Madhyamaka does not make people become nihilistic, but helps them live fully, present, but not bound to any identification, opinion or emotion.

From the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition – especially the Truc Lam Zen lineage – to modern practice communities like Plum Village, Madhyamaka wisdom has been present and quietly nurtured a Buddhist culture that is informal, non-extremist, full of vitality and a spirit of dialogue. However, making Madhyamaka become the basis of mass awareness still faces many challenges in terms of communication methods, reception ability, and the risk of

misunderstanding (falling into eternalism, nihilism, or dogmatic linguistics).

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