

“ A CHANT ON THE MUSTARD HUT ”
By Trần Minh Tông

Introduction

As Đại Việt grew in the central delta, its population and prosperity increased greatly. This drew maritime trade, particularly from Song China, up from the lower delta and the coast. Through the twelfth century and into the thirteenth, this coastal region gained greatly in wealth and power. From it, there arose a new power, the Trần (of Chinese descent), which was able to overpower the Lý, seize the capital of Thăng Long (Hà Nội), and integrate the upper and lower delta regions politically. This new royal family brought into the capital both scholars of classical Chinese learning (Confucianism) and Buddhism of a more Chinese style (Chan, Việt, Thiền).

The crisis of the thirteenth century came in the second half as Đại Việt and the Trần princes faced the Mongol threat and defeated it in the 1280s. Thereafter, in the early fourteenth century, the royal court and the Trần kings worked to integrate their realm more strongly by means of their Trúc Lâm (Bamboo Grove) sect of Thiền Buddhism. The Trần ruler Minh Tông (1300-1357; r. 1314-1329) was an adept, and his poetry reflects both the beliefs held and the efforts at consolidating his realm with its orthodoxy.

Selected Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpt from “A Chant on the Mustard Hut”
By Trần Minh Tông

The sutras! Do not read them. The “Buddha nature” is not delineated there.
Why treat one’s eyes? They are of entirely trifling value.
When a visitor comes and one asks who he is, he is simply a man.
To recognize by sight depends on the past, which is entirely unreal.

Questions:

1. Where did reality lie in the Buddhist description?
2. According to the poem, how does a person “see”? And gain knowledge?
3. What is the relationship between present and past suggested here?

Longer Selection

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The Mustard Hut is extremely small. Barely room for the knee.
Peaceful and drowsy, the day moves on by itself.
Animals do not come. The spring day is tranquil.
Suddenly the four walls in reality are without substance.
When substance is not an object of knowledge, the walls do not stand.
In illusion’s darkness, how is the Mustard Seed entered?
Who can by stealth make one’s way into the interior of the Mustard Hut?
Losing the Way causes the Deva Maro to weep.

When hunger comes, eat one’s fill and drink from a begging bowl.
Fresh water poured into a pitcher slakes the thirst.
Sleep at high noon on the pillow of a wicker bed.
Truly, here is utter happiness.
The sutras! Do not read them. The “Buddha nature” is not delineated there.
Why treat one’s eyes? They are of entirely trifling value.
When a visitor comes and one asks who he is, he is simply a man.
To recognize by sight depends on the past, which is entirely unreal.

Desist from making an effort to seek what is outside.
When a gentle breeze blows on one’s nostrils, past and present are the same.
The Mustard Hut, after all, is not an extraordinary effort.
I am simply an ordinary old man.

Questions:

1. In the Thiền (Zen) Buddhist belief system, what was time and space?
2. Was this merely the personal expression and belief system of the king?
What might have been his goals/intentions in writing this poem?
3. How would these beliefs of the king have affected his rule over his realm?