

Văn Đạo

Thiền calligraphy with Quốc Âm Tân Tự (QATT)

Thiền calligraphy is not just writing, it is meditation. The spiritual principles are rooted in **Thiền**, the Vietnamese tradition of Zen Buddhism that was founded by the Emperor Buddha **Trần Nhân Tông**, who abdicated from the throne in the 13th century to become a monk.

Calligraphy has always been an inseparable practise within Thiền. When Vietnam transitioned to the Latin alphabet in the 20th century, it confronted Thiền with an aesthetic crisis. The answer was a radical innovation, the switch to Latin characters but written with traditional asian ink and brush.

Besides Quốc Ngữ and Hán Nôm there is a less known option: **Quốc Âm Tân Tự**, a Vietnamese writing system from the 1840s that was long forgotten until it was rediscovered 140 years later. Paper, brush and ink is all you need to practise mindful Thiền calligraphy. For Thiền calligraphy Quốc Âm Tân Tự is used in a unique way. The characters are organic and flowing and allow for a very expressive writing style.

Principles

Cư Trần Lạc Đạo – The Sacred in the Ordinary

Enlightenment is found in daily activities. Preparing ink, holding the brush, and shaping letters become sacred spiritual practices rather than chores.

Hiện pháp lạc trú – Mindfulness in Action

Total awareness: Every movement of the hand reflects the absolute present moment. Once you begin to write, your mind, body, and breath must merge into a single point of focus. You feel the exact pressure of the brush hairs against the paper. You are entirely in the now.

Tùy duyên – Flow with the circumstance

Accept things to unfold naturally without the urge to force a specific outcome. Once the ink hits the paper, it is not erased. Don't fight imperfections.

Tương tức – Interbeing

The interconnectedness of all things. The calligraphy piece does not exist by itself. In the black ink, you see the water, the cloud that made the rain, the wood burner who made the soot, and the mind of the ancestors who passed down the characters. Everything inter-is on the paper.

The Ritual of the Breath

A calligraphy session in Thiền is a ritual.

According to Thiền Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, it starts with meditation in silence and a mindfully prepared cup of tea. He even put a few drops of the tea directly into the ink (see *Tương tức* - interbeing).

The Preparation: With the same mindfulness, arrange your materials. Align the paper. If you use an ink stone, grind the ink in slow, deliberate circles. Let this rhythmic physical act bridge the silent meditation and the act of writing. Once the mind is calm and anchored in the present, gently pick up the brush.

Calming the mind: Once the materials are ready, pick up the brush but do not yet write. Hold it gently. Breathe. On each inhale, energy flows into your body. Take your time, let the mind settle until only the present moment remains.

- **The Consonant:** Exhale and write the consonant part of the character. The movement of the brush is synchronized with the breath.
- **The Rhyme:** Let the next part of the character arise naturally in the mind. Exhale and write the rhyme.
- **The Tone:** If a tone mark exists, decide on its placement. exhale and place the tone mark.

👉 In Thiền calligraphy, the brush only touches the paper while exhaling, so the energy (Khí) flows from the brush to the paper and not the opposite direction. Never write when inhaling.

The Letters

Note how the dot represents the N coda. When writing requires no coda or a different coda, it is removed or replaced with the necessary coda symbol.

川 𐄢 L•ơn	三 𐄣 ʔ•ươn	𐄤 𐄥 ...i/y	𐄦 𐄧 ...o/u
𐄨 𐄩 Ng•an	𐄪 𐄫 H•oan	𐄬 𐄭 Gh•en	𐄮 𐄯 C/K•oen
𐄰 𐄱 Tr•ưn	𐄲 𐄳 Đ•ươn	𐄴 𐄵 N•ăn	𐄶 𐄷 T•oăn
𐄸 𐄹 Th•ân	𐄺 𐄻 Nh•uân	𐄼 𐄽 Ch•ên	𐄾 𐄿 D•uên
𐄿 𐅀 X•iên	𐅁 𐅂 Kh•uyên	𐅃 𐅄 S•in	𐅅 𐅆 R•uyn
𐅇 𐅈 M•ôn	𐅉 𐅊 B•uôn	𐅋 𐅌 V•on	𐅍 𐅎 Ph•un

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Writing Coda

There are 5 different codas.



瓦 球 照

Shorthand coda forms

These shorthand forms are especially useful when writing in the connected style (*Liên miên*), where often a whole character is written with a single continuous line.

hai



hảo



For comparison the word »hai« in the disconnected style (*độc thảo*)



Be creative when writing coda elements. Just keep in mind that for the I/Y coda you need a wavy line resembling ㄣ and for the O/U coda the line must be crossed as in 又.



Cursive is a very dynamic art form. Make sure to not lose energy (Khí) at the end of a character, keep the energy flowing until the brush is lifted from the paper.