

CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS OF THE LOTUS FLOWER IN VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST CULTURE: A MULTI-LEVEL VIEW OF CONCEPT METAPHOR FROM COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to explore the metaphorical layers surrounding the lotus flower symbol and its conceptualization in Vietnamese Buddhist culture through the lens of multi-level metaphor theory in Cognitive Linguistics. The research methodology integrates the analysis of 113 discourses related to the lotus flower imagery, extracted from 25 prominent works by Zen masters and eminent practitioners. The findings reveal that the lotus flower image not only operates at the abstract religious conceptual level but also permeates the mental spaces of the Vietnamese people as a vivid symbol. Therefore, this article contributes to affirming the role of metaphor in bridging language, cognition, as well as beliefs, while advancing interdisciplinary approaches to religious symbols in contemporary cognitive linguistics.

KEY WORDS: Conceptual Metaphor; Cognitive Linguistics; Four Levels Of Conceptual Metaphor; Buddhism; Lotus Flower.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, Cognitive Linguistics has opened new avenues of inquiry by viewing language not merely as a tool for communication or thought, but also as the means through which humans perceive and categorize reality via unique linguistic codes (Sam, 2002). Unlike traditional models that treat language as an isolated system, Cognitive Linguistics emphasizes its role in shaping human understanding of the world, with conceptual metaphor serving as a central mechanism (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Kövecses (2010, 2015) further develops the multi-layered perspective on metaphor, encompassing Image Schemas, Conceptual Domains, Frames, and Mental Spaces, demonstrating how metaphors function across varying depths.

Consequently, the study of conceptual metaphor must extend to cultural dimensions, particularly within Vietnamese Buddhist culture. Village temples as well as Buddhist-associated festivals have become integral to the spiritual life of the Vietnamese, contributing to the formation of character and beliefs (Nguyen, 2023). Building on multi-level theory, this article analyzes the source domain of the LOTUS in Vietnamese Buddhist culture in order to elucidate the role of metaphor as a bridge between cognition, faith, and religious practice.

The lotus stands as a central symbol in Buddhist philosophy, representing not only purity and enlightenment but also metaphorically embodying the journey of transcending suffering so as to attain wisdom (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2014). From the perspective of Cognitive Linguistics, the lotus flower serves as an imagistic field where spiritual experiences are conceptualized through language, manifested in familiar metaphors such as "*sen trong bùn mà chẳng hôi tanh mùi bùn*" (the lotus in the mud yet untainted by its stench), "*hoa sen nở giữa tâm thiền*" (the lotus blooming amid meditative mind), or "*gieo hạt sen giác ngộ*" (sowing the seeds of lotus enlightenment). These expressions both

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convey doctrinal teachings and reflect profound conceptual systems concerning ethics, cultivation, and human essence in Buddhism.

2. Literature Review

The multi-level view of metaphor in cognitive linguistics is grounded in the theoretical foundations laid by George Lakoff (1987), Ronald W. Langacker (1987), and Eleanor Rosch (1978)—pioneers who established the notion of hierarchical cognition. Rosch's prototype theory, with its three-tier system (superordinate, basic, and subordinate levels), paved the way for graded conceptualization. Provided that, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999) demonstrated that conceptual metaphors operate across multiple levels, from image schemas to conceptual domains. Kövecses (2010) systematized this into four levels: Image Schemas, Conceptual Domains, Frames, and Mental Spaces (Figure 1).

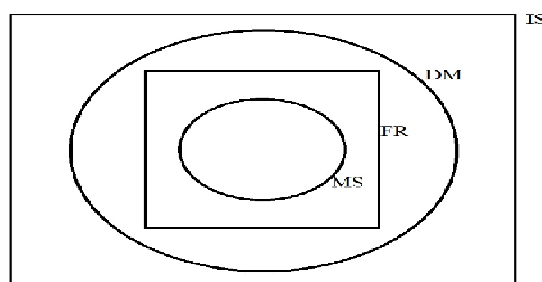


Figure 1. Hierarchical Diagram of the Four Levels of Conceptual Metaphor

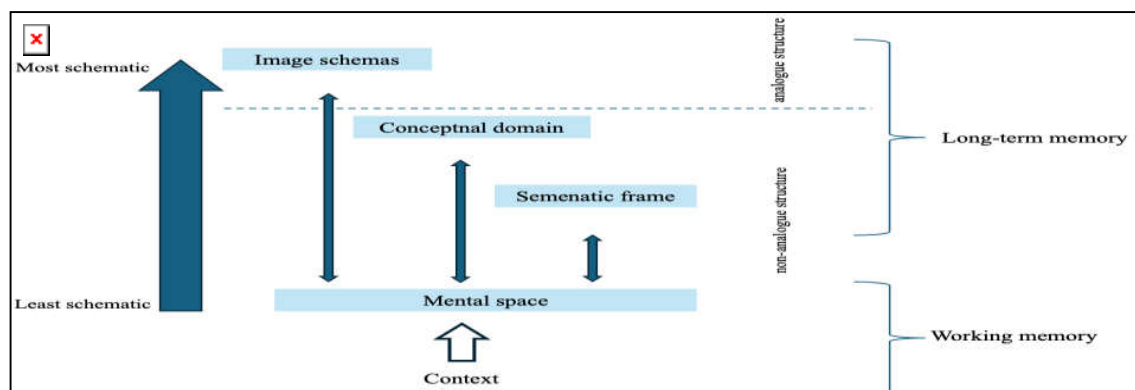
(Source: Kövecses, 2010)

The four-level system in multi-level metaphor theory can therefore be represented in a hierarchical diagram: IS (Image Schemas), DM (Domains), FR (Frames), and MS (Mental Spaces).

Image schemas (Johnson, 1987; Lakoff, 1987) are pre-conceptual cognitive structures derived from embodied experiences (motion, space, gravity...). A single schema can project onto multiple concepts, such as the CONTAINER schema applying to BODY, EMOTIONS, and MIND in Buddhism (where the mind is a vessel containing delusions that require purification). Because of this universality, image schemas as the foundation for human conceptualization of the world in language as well as religion.

Conceptual domains (Langacker, 1987) are interconnected conceptual regions, propositional in nature and richer in content than schemas. For instance, the BUILDING domain is conceptualized through multiple schemas (CONTAINER, VERTICALITY, PART-WHOLE), forming a domain matrix. Frames (Fillmore, 1982; Kövecses, 2015) specify domains with roles and relations: within the BODY domain, frames include PERCEPTION ("seeing the issue"), DIGESTION ("digesting knowledge"), and EXERCISE ("training the mind"); similarly, in the PLANT domain of Buddhism, frames encompass SOWING ("planting seeds of mindfulness"), NURTURING ("fostering compassion"), and FLOWERING/FRUITING ("the tree of wisdom blooming"). These frames reflect broader metaphors such as THE MIND IS THE BODY (Johnson, 1987; Sweetser, 1990). The most specific level is mental spaces (Fauconnier, 1994), temporary cognitive "scenes" constructed by speakers/listeners in communication, drawing on context, background knowledge, and emotions to assign specific values to frame roles and generate new meanings. In conceptualizing experiences, the four levels of conceptual metaphor operate in a hierarchical system from abstract to concrete. Image schemas are the most abstract, arising from universal bodily experiences like "in-out," "up-down," "near-far." Conversely, mental spaces are the most concrete, rich in pragmatic information, where metaphors are deployed and interpreted in communicative situations.

Figure 2 thus illustrates this relationship based on Kövecses's model (2010, 2015): semantic concepts are organized hierarchically from abstract to concrete, linked to two memory system long-term memory and working memory.



(Source: Author)

Figure 2. Diagram of Operations and Structural Links Between Levels

In figure 2, the horizontal dashed line at the top delineates two types of conceptual structures: (i) analog structures, such as image schemas, originating from sensory-embodied experiences; and (ii) non-analog structures, like conceptual domains, frames, and mental spaces, which are more symbolic and linguistically encoded. Vertical arrows indicate bidirectional relationships: more abstract structures (image schemas, domains) govern meaning creation at concrete levels (mental spaces), while mental spaces in communication can activate and highlight higher-level conceptual structures in long-term memory. Moreover, the upward arrow from "Context" shows that context exerts the strongest influence at the mental space level, where immediate meaning processing occurs in specific situations.

3. Research Methodology

This study applies Kövecses's (2010) four-level metaphor model to analyze the cognitive metaphors of the lotus imagery in Vietnamese Buddhist cultural beliefs. Additionally, the article employs discourse analysis to process 113 samples related to the lotus flower in Buddhism, drawn from 25 prominent works by Zen masters and eminent practitioners such as Thich Phap Hoa, Thich Nhat Hanh, Thich Nhat Quang, Thich Thanh Tu, and others. On the basis of the examination of these discourses, the research identifies universal image schemas surrounding the lotus symbol, thereby analyzing the conceptual domains, cognitive frames, and mental spaces restructured from specific usage contexts, thereby highlighting the process of inner transformation in Buddhist spiritual practice.

4. Results and discussion

The lotus is a sacred symbol globally, carrying rich meanings across various cultures and religions. Because of its characteristic of thriving in muddy swamps yet remaining pure, fragrant, and rising toward the light makes it an emblematic image for the journey from impurity to purity, and from ignorance to enlightenment.

In Buddhism, the lotus holds a central role, symbolizing liberation, non-defilement, and Prajna wisdom. Indeed, this imagery is tied to canonical texts such as the Lotus Sutra (Namu Myōhō Rengekyō), affirming the lotus as a symbol of enlightenment as well as the path of cultivation. Buddhist tradition also attributes eight noble qualities to the lotus, reflecting the virtues of practitioners (Trinh, 2022):

- *Uncontaminated*: The lotus emerges from muddy swamps but maintains its purity, unaffected by the surrounding environment. This symbolizes the ability to live amidst the world without being entangled in desires or afflictions.

- *Freshness of the world*: The lotus imparts a sense of freshness and clarity, signifying the purity and serenity of the mind when properly cultivated.

- *Patience*: The lotus has a unique growth cycle, embodying perseverance and endurance in the process of spiritual practice.

- *Complete combination*: The lotus's structure, with petals harmoniously layered, represents wholeness and perfection in wisdom and virtue.

- *Pure*: The gentle fragrance and cooling sensation of the lotus bring peace and tranquility, akin to the mind purified through meditation.

- *Righteous*: The lotus stem grows upright, signifying uprightness and integrity in the behavior and thoughts of the practitioner.

- *Non-persistent*: The hollow core of the lotus stem symbolizes a mind free from attachment and clinging.

- *Reality*: When the lotus blooms, it already contains the seed pod, indicating the simultaneity of cause and effect, and thus emphasizing the intimate connection between actions and outcomes in Buddhist teachings.

In Vietnamese Buddhism, the lotus is a sacred symbol where religious faith converges with local cultural identity. Moreover, the lotus imagery not only holds aesthetic-religious value but also constitutes a multi-layered cognitive structure, organized based on fundamental human embodied experiences such as motion, gravity, elevation, containment, or the journey of transcendence. These experiences form image schemas that shape the meaning of the LOTUS concept within Buddhist ideology.

In Tantric Buddhism, the human heart is likened to a budding lotus, closed and harboring latent enlightenment energy. As Buddha-nature is nurtured through practice, the lotus gradually blooms, symbolizing the process of unfolding consciousness. Thus, the image of the Buddha seated on a lotus throne is not merely a depiction of solemn beauty but rather a visual symbol of a fully purified mind.

This transformative process can be generalized in the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL schema:

- Source: the dark muddy swamp (suffering, ignorance),
- Path: the lotus sprout rising (cultivation, purification),
- Goal: the lotus blooming on the water's surface (liberation, enlightenment).

From this, conceptual metaphors emerge:

LIBERATION IS EMERGING FROM MUD AND BLOOMING,

ENLIGHTENMENT IS THE PROCESS OF THE LOTUS BLOOMING.

Significantly, this metaphor is evidenced in numerous Buddhist discourses:

- "*Tâm như hoa sen... người thực hành tam thiền thanh tịnh như hoa, là xa ác niệm*" (The mind is like a lotus... practitioners of the three meditations are pure like the flower, free from evil thoughts) (*Thiền sư Tăng Hội*).

- "*Suy nghĩ cũng như hành động của chúng ta... trở sen trên bùn*" (Our thoughts as well as actions... bloom lotuses on mud) (*Hoa sen trong biển lửa*).

- "*Nếu muốn trồng hoa sen, mình không thể tránh chỗ bùn lầy... đây là hình ảnh của đạo Bụt nhập thế*" (If you want to plant lotuses, you cannot avoid the muddy places... this is the image of the Buddha's engaged path) (*Bồ tát tại gia, Bồ tát xuất gia*).

- "*Hoa sen trắng tượng trưng cho bản tâm thanh tịnh... tất cả mọi người đều có hạt giống giác ngộ*" (The white lotus symbolizes the pure original mind... everyone has the seed of enlightenment) (*Sen nở trời phương ngoại*).

- "*Hồng liên dũng xuất ngọc lâu đài... tòa lâu đài này là thế giới cực lạc*" (The red lotus surges from the jade palace... this palace is the world of ultimate bliss) (*Sen nở trời phương ngoại*).

- "*Chúng ta, ai cũng là đóa sen sắp nở, một vị Bụt tương lai*" (We all are lotuses about to bloom, future Buddhas) (*Sen nở từng cánh hè*).

In the context of Vietnamese Buddhist cultural beliefs, the lotus flower is not merely a symbol of purity but also a concrete embodiment of the spiritual journey transcending suffering. Accordingly, based on the SOURCE-PATH-GOAL image schema, the cultivation process is envisioned as a

journey beginning from the dark muddy swamp (the origin of suffering and ignorance), continuing with the sprout's ascent (metaphor for practicing mindfulness and inner purification), and finally culminating in the lotus blooming on the water's surface (symbol of enlightenment and liberation). This imagistic structure profoundly reflects a universal conceptual metaphor in Buddhist discourse: LIBERATION IS EMERGING FROM MUD AND BLOOMING, or ENLIGHTENMENT IS THE PROCESS OF THE LOTUS BLOOMING.

This metaphor is not only conceptual but also vividly manifested in Buddhist texts and teachings of Zen masters. For example, *"Tâm như hoa sen, rễ hoa trong bùn... người thực hành tam thiền thanh tịnh như hoa..."* (The mind is like a lotus, its roots in the mud... practitioners of the three meditations are pure like the flower...) emphasizes the coexistence between meditative practice and the process of rising above the roots of suffering. Similarly, in *Lotus in the Sea of Fire*, the image of *"trổ sen trên bùn"* (blooming lotuses on mud) is used as a metaphor for generating wisdom from harsh circumstances, thereby transforming pain into liberating actions, not based on hatred but on *"nỗ lực xuất trí"* (effortful wisdom). Moreover, in *Bồ tát tại gia*, *Bồ tát xuất gia*, Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh affirms that *"nếu muốn trồng hoa sen, mình không thể tránh chỗ bùn lầy"* (If you want to plant lotuses, you cannot avoid the muddy places), illustrating a profound engaged Buddhist perspective that liberation does not exist outside of suffering but right within it, if the practitioner knows how to cultivate the mind.

The examples in *Sen nở trời phương ngoại* further clarify the cognitive nature of the metaphor. Therein, the white lotus is likened to the *"bản tâm thanh tịnh"* (pure original mind) and *"Phật tánh mà ai cũng có"* (Buddha-nature that everyone possesses), affirming that all sentient beings have the potential to become Buddhas, just as the Lotus Sutra calls it *"Nhất thiết chúng sanh giai hữu Phật tánh"* (All sentient beings inherently have Buddha-nature). Particularly, the image of *"hồng liên dũng xuất ngọc lâu đài"* (the red lotus surging from the jade palace) in the same work is a highly symbolic metaphorical expression, where the lotus rising from mud is the practitioner attaining enlightenment, revealing the *"ngọc lâu đài"* (jade palace) as the Pure Land or the exalted spiritual realm. In addition, in a lighter and more intimate context, the phrase *"ai cũng là đóa sen sắp nở, một vị Bụt tương lai"* (we all are lotuses about to bloom, future Buddhas) emphasizes the inherent potential for wisdom in each person, while encouraging practitioners to persevere in cultivation for the mind-lotus to unfold.

Furthermore, in addition to the PATH schemas, the lotus imagery in Buddhist discourse is also deployed through the CONTAINER image schema, a basic cognitive pattern representing bounded space with an interior and exterior. This gives rise to conceptual metaphors such as THE MIND CONTAINS CONSCIOUSNESS, THE HEART CONTAINS THE LOTUS, where the heart or mind is envisioned as a sacred container, housing the lotus as a symbol of awakening, mindfulness, and liberation, which are sown, nurtured, and bloomed. This metaphor appears prominently in teachings: *"Nếu trì danh mà không nhất tâm là trì danh không có nội dung, tức là không gieo được hạt sen giác ngộ vào trong tâm địa của mình"* (If reciting the name without single-mindedness, it is recitation without content, meaning one cannot sow the seed of enlightenment into one's mind-ground). The mind-ground is cognized as a containing land where the seed of enlightenment must be planted to germinate. Similarly, in *Thiền hành yếu chỉ*, practitioners are reminded: *"Hãy hóa sinh trong một bông sen ngay trong mỗi giờ phút hiện tại... thì bạn không còn nghi ngờ gì nữa về sự có mặt của cõi Tịnh độ"* (Manifest in a lotus flower right in each present moment... then you no longer doubt the presence of the Pure Land). Thus, the lotus is no longer external or in a distant Western realm but instead exists right within the mind, containing the Pure Land in mindfulness.

The ability to create a lotus in the heart is also linked to inner creative power: *"Khi Bụt nói đến phương Tây thì đó chỉ là một cách nói mà thôi. Khi bông sen ở trong trái tim ta lớn rồi thì ta bước đi tới đâu là Tịnh Độ hiện ra ở đó"* (When the Buddha speaks of the Western direction, it is merely a way of speaking. When the lotus in our heart grows large, wherever we step, the Pure Land appears there). In these statements, the container schema expands into a flexible cognitive field, where the

mind contains the Buddha-realm space, and when the lotus in the heart blooms fully, the Pure Land manifests everywhere. Moreover, some examples go further in specifying the process of the lotus being "*được sinh ra*" (born), "*tượng hình*" (formed), "*lớn lên*" (growing) in the practitioner's heart: "*Khi sư chú thở vào một hơi thở có chánh niệm... thì búp sen đã nở trong trái tim của sư chú*" (When the novice breathes in with mindfulness... the lotus bud has bloomed in the novice's heart), or "*Đóa sen ở trong tim mình cũng là do tâm tạo ra*" (The lotus flower in our heart is also created by the mind). Thus, the inner space (heart, mind) is cognized as the abode of purification, where the lotus symbolizes enlightenment formed according to the level of cultivation effort. Affirming "*bông sen ấy là để dành cho mình*" (that lotus is reserved for oneself), or "*ta được sinh ra từ bông sen*" (we are born from the lotus) shows that the lotus is no longer merely an external symbol but the birthplace of the practitioner's enlightened essence. That lotus, as a spiritual container, arises from meritorious deeds, matures with mindful power, and opens when the mind is perfected. Indeed, the more single-minded, the greater the accomplishment; the lotus in the mind grows larger, and the practitioner dwells securely in the present Pure Land.

Overall, the surveyed discourses deploy a consistent and pervasive conceptual metaphor, with the lotus playing a central cognitive role, closely tied to foundational concepts such as mind, enlightenment, transformation, and Buddhist practice. By employing the image schema model in analysis allows for clarifying the metaphorical thought process of Buddhist practitioners: from associating inner experiences with concrete images to restructuring spiritual spaces through the lotus symbol. Consequently, this serves as evidence for the effectiveness of the multi-level cognitive metaphor model in explicating Buddhist symbolic systems, as well as in expanding linguistic approaches to local cultural-belief spaces.

From basic image schemas, a rich conceptual domain matrix can be established surrounding the lotus imagery. In natural conditions, the lotus rhizome can lie deep in cold mud for extended periods, silently accumulating vital energy without hastening growth. From this image, we derive the conceptual metaphor: CULTIVATION IS ACCUMULATING INNER STRENGTH IN STILLNESS. This is a specific instantiation of the image schema ENLIGHTENMENT IS THE PROCESS OF THE LOTUS BLOOMING, where spiritual development is cognized similarly to the lotus plant's growth process, starting from the rhizome in mud (metaphor for potential and roots of cultivation), rising to the water's surface (metaphor for diligent practice and transformation), and finally blooming in light (enlightenment, unfolding wisdom). This unique survival law becomes a profound metaphor for the Buddhist practitioner's journey: silently nurturing, steadfast amid adversity, and only when conditions converge does the "*hoa tâm*" (mind-lotus) unfold like a complete lotus blooming in life. Without forcing, without striving, but fully aligning with the principle of non-action, harmonizing with the natural growth cycle yet with heightened awakening.

Since the lotus is a plant entity, when used as a metaphorical symbol in Buddhist discourse, it naturally activates the PLANT conceptual domain as the source domain for cognition and meaning construction. This choice of domain is not only fitting in terms of the lotus's biological essence but also pragmatically appropriate, as language users draw upon the vivid characteristics, growth, and biological cycles of plants to model abstract concepts like cultivation, inner transformation, enlightenment, and liberation. Particularly, with the lotus as a plant species tied to traits like growing in mud, rising through water, and blooming in light, world knowledge related to plants is naturally and consistently mobilized in establishing metaphors. From this PLANT conceptual domain, language users can deploy various specific cognitive frames, depending on expressive purposes and contexts where the lotus serves as a highly symbolic image, including the following frames:

LOTUS PARTS:

Focusing on symbolic components of the lotus, reflecting spiritual and ethical values.

- Enlightenment lotus seed (symbolizing inherent Buddha-nature potential in everyone);
- Joined hands as lotus bud (gesture of reverence expressing sincerity and respect);
- Lotus throne of awakening (seat of Buddhas, symbolizing purified consciousness);
- Seed of peace (implying wholesome causes sown for enlightenment fruit);
- Hollow lotus core (symbolizing non-attached mind, free from clinging).

BLOOMING:

Reflecting the process of unfolding the inner mind, transforming suffering into awakening:

Unfolding the mind-lotus, blooming in the heart (opening compassion and wisdom);

- Blooming amid afflictions (enlightenment right in suffering - spirit of "afflictions are Bodhi");
- Flower blooms, see Buddha (ultimate symbol of enlightenment when the mind unfolds, revealing Buddha);
- Lotus blooming in silence (enlightenment occurring in stillness, deep inner tranquility).

SOWING AND PLANTING:

Expressing the accumulation of merit, building cultivation foundations.

- Sowing enlightenment lotus seeds, planting wholesome roots, sowing seeds of understanding;
- Nurturing mindfulness sprouts, sowing wisdom causes (metaphor for cause-effect in cultivation actions);
- Planting lotuses in the mind-ground (mind as soil; lotus as virtues nurtured).

In Buddhism, ponds and lakes are not only cognized as natural habitats for the lotus but also carry profound symbolic functions as spaces of tranquility, purification, rebirth, and spiritual liberation. Particularly in Pure Land Buddhism, the lotus ponds in the Western Paradise are often called seven-jewel ponds, not only containing sacred flowers but also serving as places where beings are reborn in purity, transcending suffering and afflictions. From the POND conceptual domain, three main cognitive frames can be identified based on excerpts from sutras and Zen masters' teachings: TRANQUILITY, TRANSFORMATION, and REALM OF ULTIMATE BLISS.

TRANQUILITY:

The pond as an inner space of calm and coolness. This frame illustrates the soothing effect on the mind and the state of inner abiding in coolness and peace. In the work *Sen nở trời phương ngoại*, the image of a cool lotus pond is used to describe the harmonious mind-ground of those practicing compassion.

“Cái biển lửa đỏ, đối với Bồ Tát, giống như một ao sen, rất là trong mát. Có lòng thương thì tất cả mọi thứ đều trở thành tươi mát.” (That sea of fire, for the Bodhisattva, is like a lotus pond, very clear and cool. With love, everything becomes refreshing).

“Nếu có chất liệu của tình thương ở trong trái tim thì tất cả những ngọn lửa đỏ đều tắt, và tự nhiên mình thấy được mát mẻ như đang ngâm mình trong một hồ sen.” (If there is the substance of love in the heart, all those flames extinguish, and naturally one feels cool as if immersed in a lotus lake)

Fire symbolizes anger, suffering, afflictions, representing a turbulent mind. In contrast, the lotus pond is an emblematic image for a still and liberated consciousness. This frame reflects the pacifying and purifying power of compassionate mind, which is the condition for accessing wisdom.

TRANSFORMATION:

Moreover, the TRANSFORMATION frame in the same text is clearly expressed through the metaphor: "Turning hellfire into lotus pond," from Lotus Blooming Beyond the Sky. Reciting Avalokitesvara's name can transform calamities (hellfire) into pure realms (lotus pond). This highlights the pond's role in recreating mindscapes—from infernal fire to cool Paradise, symbolizing consciousness shifting from delusion to awakening.

REALM OF ULTIMATE BLISS:

Finally, the REALM OF ULTIMATE BLISS frame, where the pond manifests the ideal realm. This frame depicts the pond as a visual element constituting the Pure Land, reflecting idealized traits where suffering ceases, replaced by pure bliss, Dharma sounds, and exalted forms. In excerpts from *Thiết lập Tịnh độ*, ponds are described as: "*Các hồ sen có nước tám công đức...*" (Lotus ponds with water of eight merits...); "*Ao sen bảy báu, cành vàng lá ngọc...*" (Seven-jewel lotus ponds, golden branches, jeweled leaves...); "*Ao hoa... trồng sen xanh, đỏ, trắng, hồng... bờ ao đắp bằng vàng, bạc, lưu ly, thủy tinh...*" (Flower ponds... planted with blue, red, white, pink lotuses... pond banks built with gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal...). These descriptions shape the lotus pond as a sacred space, where supernatural beauty and Dharma merits converge. In this frame, the pond is no longer a natural space but a Buddha-natured one, specifically incorporating physical elements (water, flowers, jewels) and sacred qualities (merits, purification, rebirth). The presence of lotus ponds in the Realm of Ultimate Bliss evidences the great compassion of Buddhas and serves as the spiritual convergence point for practitioners seeking liberation.

Continuing from the conceptual domain of POND, where the lotus blooms in a serene and sacred space, the GROWTH conceptual domain offers a dynamic perspective on the process of spiritual development in Buddhism. Unlike the stillness of water bodies, growth is an internal force-driven process. In contemporary Buddhist discourses, particularly in the works of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, the image of the lotus emerging from mud has become a prominent metaphor for the path of cultivation that transcends suffering, leveraging adversity to nurture wisdom and compassion.

Mud is often associated with images of suffering, sin, and afflictions—not as something to be eliminated, but as essential material for nourishing and supporting the lotus's bloom, symbolizing happiness, insight, and liberation. As stated in *Bồ Tát tại gia, Bồ Tát xuất gia*: "*Chính trong thế giới phiền não chúng ta mới đạt tới giải thoát và Niết bàn*" (It is precisely within the world of afflictions that we attain liberation and Nirvana). The cognitive metaphor SUFFERING IS MUD, ENLIGHTENMENT IS THE LOTUS FLOWER thus not only reflects the Buddhist principle of cause and effect but also reveals the dialectical depth of transformative thought, where delusion and awakening, afflictions and Bodhi are inseparable and mutually supportive. Representative examples such as "*Tuệ giác là một đóa hoa nở trên mảnh đất của phiền não*" (Insight is a flower blooming on the soil of afflictions) or "*Không có bùn thì làm sao có sen*" (Without mud, how can there be a lotus) both affirm that spiritual development cannot occur without the experience of suffering and inner refinement. Therefore, growth is not merely a biological act but a profound spiritual journey, where the practitioner learns to accept, transform, nurture, and unfold the self like a lotus plant from imperfect soil. From this conceptual domain, cognitive frames are formed to illustrate the stages, conditions, and motivations of internal growth, namely the process of transforming consciousness into enlightenment.

Among the frames deployed to elucidate this domain is the SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT frame. This frame reflects the inner transformation from ignorance to awakening, through the vivid metaphor of the lotus growing from muddy soil, representing the path of cultivation and liberation. In this frame, spiritual development does not occur instantaneously but unfolds as an extended journey through stages: sowing seeds - sprouting - rising upward - blooming, corresponding to levels of consciousness transformation. In *Bồ tát tại gia, Bồ tát xuất gia*, Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh writes: "*Chính trong những ao bùn mà những bông sen đẹp nhất có thể nở được. Chính trong thế giới phiền não chúng ta mới đạt tới giải thoát và Niết bàn*" (It is in the muddiest ponds that the most beautiful lotuses can bloom. It is precisely within the world of afflictions that we attain liberation and Nirvana). This constructs the cognition that mud is not an obstacle but a foundation, an environment from which the seed of enlightenment can form and ascend.

Similarly, in *Cho đất nước mở ra*, he affirms: "*Những khổ đau, những tội lỗi là bùn mà nếu biết sử dụng cho khéo léo thì từ bùn, từ đất mình có thể làm nảy sinh ra bông sen*" (Sufferings and sins are mud, and if used skillfully, from mud and soil, one can give rise to the lotus). Thus, this imagery reinforces the metaphor SUFFERING IS THE CONDITION FOR ENLIGHTENMENT, and the SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT frame serves as a cognitive framework enabling practitioners to clearly perceive the gradual and necessary role of suffering in the journey to awakening. The final stage is the unfolding of consciousness, where "*tuệ giác là một đóa hoa nở trên mảnh đất của phiền não*" (insight is a flower blooming on the soil of afflictions) (*Sen nở trời phương ngoại*). This is the moment when the "*hoa tâm*" (mind-flower) ripens, meaning consciousness has transcended afflictions and attained the truth of cessation.

While the SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT frame focuses on the sequence of inner evolution, the NURTURING CONSCIOUSNESS frame addresses the conditions and materials that foster consciousness growth, akin to soil, water, light, and fertilizer in lotus cultivation. In the Buddhist context, the "*đưỡng chất*" (nutrients) that nourish consciousness are mindfulness, compassion, wisdom, and daily practice. In *Con đường chuyển hóa*, the image of the entire lotus plant permeated by water describes the unified state between happiness and consciousness: "*Rễ sen, ngó sen, lá sen và hoa sen đều thấm nhuần chất nước... Như thế, niềm hạnh phúc phát sinh... thấm nhuần vào toàn thân vị khát sĩ...*" (The lotus roots, stems, leaves, and flowers are all imbued with water... In the same way, happiness arises... permeating the entire body of the mendicant...). The lotus plant becomes a metaphor for the integration of body and mind, where mental content (joy, peace) diffuses throughout the entire system of existence. This frame is also evident in the view that suffering nourishes wisdom: "*Phân rác tuy hôi nhưng chính nó có thể nuôi được những bông hoa*" (Manure may stink, but it is precisely what can nourish flowers) (*Cho đất nước mở ra*).

Therefore, it affirms that the negative is not negated but redefined as essential material to enrich consciousness. This is a form of transformative metaphor with profound inner educational value. Furthermore, in *Con đã có đường đi*, the Zen master expands this frame with the principle of interbeing: "*Vừa có bùn, vừa có sen; vừa có rác, vừa có hoa*" (There is both mud and lotus; both garbage and flower). Nurturing in Buddhism is not a mindset of denial or erasure of suffering but one of accepting it as part of reality, while learning to transform it into the substance of happiness.

In the four-level hierarchical system of conceptual metaphor, mental spaces represent the most specific and context-rich level, where temporary cognitive domains are established to interpret abstract experiences in particular situations. According to Fauconnier (1994, 2007), mental spaces are temporary cognitive constructs that humans build during thinking and communication to facilitate on-the-spot understanding and action. In these spaces, elements from real life are rearranged, reframed, and metaphorically assigned meaning to create new insights, such as concepts of self, enlightenment, or spiritual transformation in the context of Vietnamese Buddhist culture. These spaces both reflect how communicators conceptualize reality and demonstrate the systematization of symbols in engaging with the world.

In Buddhist discourse, particularly through the lotus imagery, mental spaces function as a powerful cognitive tool, manifesting mental processes, expressing transcendence from defiled reality, and constructing models of an enlightened world within the practitioner's consciousness. The following examples illustrate how mental spaces are established and operated to generate profound meanings via the lotus symbol.

The "*lò lửa - hoa sen*" (furnace fire - lotus flower) mental space symbolizes enlightenment amid afflictions: "*Thân tứ đại, các hiện tượng, hoàn cảnh bên ngoài, Thiền sư nói như lò lửa, còn ánh giác có trong thân này là hoa sen*" (The four-element body, phenomena, external circumstances—the Zen master says are like a furnace fire, while the awakening light within this body is the lotus flower) (*Vườn Thiền*). In this example, the author of the work establishes two overlapping mental spaces: the

base space is the real world—the physical body (four-element body), illusory realms (phantom scenes) → conceptualized as a furnace fire, metaphorically representing unrest and afflictions. Alongside this, the target space is the indestructible awakening nature within the body, symbolized through the pure, enduring, and transcendent lotus image. This is a counter-structural space, where the burning imagery (furnace fire) and purifying imagery (lotus) coexist to emphasize that enlightenment does not exist outside suffering but as an inherent force unaffected by circumstances. In Buddhist thought, enlightenment is not escaping the world but existing within it with a mind unburned.

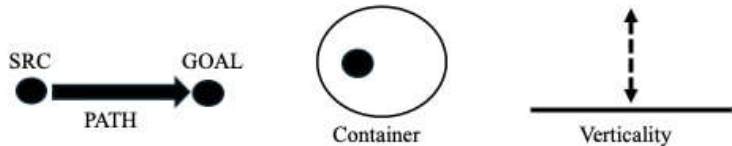
The next space is "*sen nở trong lửa*" (lotus blooming in fire) through the following example: "*Ngài thấy ngay nơi thân tứ đại có tánh giác bất sanh bất diệt đỏ, cũng như trong lò lửa hoa sen đang nở thật xinh... chúng ta tha hồ thưởng thức sắc ngọc trong núi cháy*" (He sees right in the four-element body the indestructible awakening nature, just as in the furnace fire, the lotus is blooming beautifully... we can fully enjoy the jade hue amid the burning mountain) (*Vườn Thiền*).

In this example, the mental space continues to establish a paradoxical domain. Specifically, the physical space is the furnace fire, burning mountain—symbolic images of suffering, afflictions, and finite body. Meanwhile, the transcendental space is the blooming lotus, jade hue, representing the unfolding of awakening nature amid suffering, unchanging peace. The coexistence of the two layers—fire and lotus, suffering and awakening nature—creates a reverse cognitive space, where the practitioner can "*thưởng thức sắc ngọc trong núi cháy*" (enjoy the jade hue amid the burning mountain) upon realization. This expresses a state of enlightenment unconditioned by external factors, a form of "*ngộ trong mê*" (awakening within delusion), "*hoa trong rác*" (flower within garbage). Delving deeper, the "*đống rác và hoa sen*" (garbage pile and lotus) space is analyzed through the following sentence: "*Chỗ ấy hoa sen nở, thơm sạch đẹp lòng người, từ những chỗ rác rưởi đó, hoa sen mọc lên... Đó là giai đoạn mình chiến thắng ngũ dục, thành tựu công phu viên mãn*" (There the lotus blooms, fragrant, clean, delighting people, emerging from those garbage places... That is the stage where we conquer the five desires, achieving perfect cultivation) (*Vườn Thiền*).

The mental space established here specifically features a base space as the garbage pile, roadside, pits—symbolizing lowly, overlooked, defiled spaces (metaphors for the five desires, ignorance, vices). Simultaneously, the transformative space is the lotus emerging, fragrant, clean, delighting people—the result of diligent cultivation effort. From this, the author establishes a trajectory of spiritual transformation in the imagistic space: from the garbage foundation (unnoticed places) to a fragrant manifestation (blooming lotus). This space not only illustrates the process of "*thành tựu công phu*" (achieving cultivation) but also highlights the cognitive contradiction that the most defiled serves as the foundation for the most pure.

Through mental space theory, it is clear that the lotus imagery in Buddhist discourse is not merely a static symbol but is activated and recreated across various cognitive spaces: "*sen nở trong lửa, sen mọc từ rác, sen hiện giữa cõi trời, sen nở trong thân tứ đại...*" (lotus blooming in fire, lotus emerging from garbage, lotus appearing amid the heavens, lotus blooming within the four-element body...) Each space is a specific cognitive map where enlightenment, liberation, and transformation are manifested through the structuring of reality via symbolic imagery. This exemplifies the highest level in the conceptual metaphor hierarchy, where language, imagery, and consciousness converge to create profound meaning in religious experience.

LOTUS FLOWER	CONSCIOUSNESS
IS	- ENLIGHTENMENT IS THE PROCESS OF THE LOTUS BLOOMING - LIBERATION IS EMERGING

			FROM MUD AND BLOOMING	
DM	PLANT	POND	GROWTH	- Serenity - Enlightenment - Virtue - Purity - Samadhi - Practice
FR	SOWING	LOTUS PARTS	BLOOMING	- Blooming amid afflictions - Sowing enlightenment lotus seeds - Turning hellfire into lotus pond - Planting lotuses in the mind-ground
	SPIRITUAL	REALM OF ULTIMATE BLISS	TRANQUILITY	
MS	I gaze at the lotus buds still shyly nestled in their green silk husks. (Tôi ngắm nghĩa những búp sen còn e ấp trong vỏ lụa màu xanh). (Souces: Trương Thúy (Hai Duong News))			There the lotus blooms, fragrant, clean, delighting people, emerging from those garbage places... That is the stage where we conquer the five desires, achieving perfect cultivation. (Souces: Vườn Thiền)

(Source: Author)

(Source: Author)

Figure 3. Structure of Conceptual Metaphors on LOTUS FLOWER and CONSCIOUSNESS Across Four Levels in Multi-Level Metaphor Theory

5. Conclusion

By applying the multi-level metaphor model from Cognitive Linguistics, this study has elucidated how the lotus flower is conceptualized in Vietnamese Buddhist culture not merely as a symbolic image but as a rich cognitive structure spanning from universal image schemas to specific, personalized mental spaces. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that the lotus not only represents ideals of purity and liberation in Buddhist doctrine but also serves as a vivid metaphor for the process of cultivation, transcendence, and inner transformation. Furthermore, this imagery is structured through conceptual domains, frames, and mental spaces activated in daily life via emotionally resonant discourses, thereby reflecting the profound spiritual depths of the Vietnamese people. In doing so, the article contributes to affirming the role of conceptual metaphor as a bridge between language, cognition, and cultural beliefs, while also suggesting an interdisciplinary research direction for exploring religious symbols in contemporary contexts.

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**Ẩn dụ ý niệm về hoa sen trong văn hóa Phật giáo Việt Nam
nhìn từ lí thuyết đa cấp độ ẩn dụ trong ngôn ngữ học tri nhận**

Tóm tắt: Bài nghiên cứu này nhằm khám phá tầng nghĩa ẩn dụ xoay quanh biểu tượng hoa sen và khái niệm hóa trong văn hóa Phật giáo Việt Nam thông qua lăng kính của lí thuyết đa cấp độ ẩn dụ trong Ngôn ngữ học tri nhận. Phương pháp nghiên cứu được triển khai kết hợp giữa phân tích 113 diễn ngôn liên quan đến hình ảnh hoa sen được trích từ 25 tác phẩm nổi bật của các thiền sư và bậc chân tu. Kết quả cho thấy, hình ảnh hoa sen không chỉ vận hành ở cấp độ khái niệm tôn giáo trừu tượng mà còn len lỏi vào không gian tâm thức của người Việt như một biểu tượng sống động. Qua đó, bài viết góp phần khẳng định vai trò của ẩn dụ trong việc kết nối giữa ngôn ngữ, tri nhận và tín ngưỡng, đồng thời tiếp cận hướng nghiên cứu liên ngành về biểu tượng tôn giáo trong ngôn ngữ học tri nhận hiện đại.

Từ khóa: Ẩn dụ ý niệm; ngôn ngữ học tri nhận; bốn cấp độ ẩn dụ ý niệm; Phật giáo; hoa sen.