

## The Roots of Interbeing: Buddhist Revival in Vietnam

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### Introduction

To renowned Buddhologist Heinz Bechert, Buddhist modernism was a manifestation of religious revivalism applied to the context of post-colonial society, bearing the following features which are relevant for the current discussion, amongst others: (1) an emphasis on Buddhism as a philosophy, rather than a creed or a religion; (2) an emphasis on ‘activism’ and setting great store by social work; (3) the claim by modernists that Buddhism has always included a social component described as a philosophy of equality...and that a Buddhist society must be democratic; (4) the emergence of Buddhist nationalism; (5) a strong tendency towards the reassertion of women’s rights in contemporary Buddhism and attempts and actions taken to restore the order of nuns; (6) the emergence of a new type of Buddhist syncretism, viz., the combination of various Buddhist traditions (comp. 213-214, Bechert’s Obituary, 2011).

Particularly the last point concerns us here, as discussed by Stephen Batchelor when he cites instances of a ‘reinvigorated Buddhism’ which emerged with a protestant, rationalist flavour, in response to both the challenges posed by Christian missionaries in post-colonial Asian societies, coupled with those of the secular, rational and scientific culture of the West (p. 345).

Vietnamese Buddhism is an excellent example of such a ‘reinvigorated Buddhism’, especially, for the present purposes, as articulated by the emergence of UBCV. Batchelor alleges that this was “...the first time such a feat of reconciliation (of various Buddhist views) has ever been achieved”. In this development, Buddhism was identified as a focus for nationalism offering a grass roots alternative to the competing ideologies of capitalism and communism (ibid, p.357). Far from being an isolated response, however, Batchelor views it in the context of similar displays of Buddhist modernism occurring, for instance, in China with Taixu’s reforms, in Japan with the Nichiren revivals, and in Burma, with its strong Buddhist resistance to British colonialism (p.360). Batchelor’s estimation of the emergence of the UBCV at this juncture of Vietnamese history is undoubtedly based on Thich Nhat Hanh’s own rendition as articulated in his tract *Vietnam: The Lotus in the Sea of Fire*: “Although Southern Buddhism is practised by a minority in Vietnam, it performed an outstanding feat, unmatched anywhere else in the world, when it joined hands with Northern Buddhism in a Unified Church...It may well serve as an example for a Unified Buddhist Church in the future” (1967, p.13).

### Aspects Of The Historical Development Of Vietnamese Buddhism

To trace the roots of Vietnamese Buddhism it is instructive to briefly examine its historical development. Although Buddhism in Vietnam is believed to have dated from the first century AD, by the end of the following century, records attest to the existence of a ‘flourishing Buddhist community’ which appeared to have been Theravada (comp. Thich Thien An, p.22). Thich Quang Lien states that Vietnam, due to the existence of trade routes throughout the region from the earliest period, enjoyed a fruitful contact with

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<sup>1</sup> I hope I will be forgiven for not using diacritic marks when citing words in Vietnamese. This is due entirely to the limitations of my PC’s keyboard.

both China and India in equal measure (com. p.32). However, Chinese Buddhism gradually gained ascendancy especially as Vietnam was subjected to nearly a thousand years of Chinese rule in the course of which the country became a province of China (603 – 939 C.E.). This ushered in Daoism and Confucianism, too, the latter serving as a model of governance and administration for the entire dynastic period, and the former undoubtedly having inspired the tradition of Zen-inspired poetry cited below. However, Thich Quang Lien opines that “Among them Buddhism was the only religion which spread throughout the country” (ibid, p.37).

Chinese Buddhism’s influence eventually culminated in a flourishing of Buddhist civilisation (similarly to the T’ang dynasty in China) during the four Vietnamese dynasties of the Earlier Le, Ly, Tran and the Later Le (980 - 1400). This period was notable as an era of relative peace and stability, with the Ly (1010 – 1225) in particular representing the apex of the development of not only the religion itself, but Buddhist arts, architecture and education. As suggested by Thich Quang Lien, the monarchies were enabled to promote Buddhism (along with Daoism and Confucianism) on the basis of ensuring the prosperity of the country through the construction of dykes to further irrigation and rice cultivation. In summing up this era, this author states “(The influence of) Buddhism... (was) increasing (in the) affairs of state and society. All three dynasties (i.e., Le, Ly, Tran) witnessed the construction not only of dykes, but roads, fleets, fortification, parks, palaces and temples... Buddhist education and culture, literature and art (all flourished).” The fall of the Tran, however, to the Nguyen dynasty led to a civil war over five decades so that the 17<sup>th</sup> century ushered in a decline in Buddhism and the division of the country into north and south, leaving it open to occupation by the French colonial power (comp. 41 – 44). However, prior to that, the founder of the Tran dynasty, the ruling monarch Tran Thai Ton who became known as the Great Monk King, had a distinguished career, according to Thich Thien An, both in a religious and secular sense. He is notable for having written several significant Buddhist tracts including *Lessons in the Void*, *A Guide to Zen Buddhism* and a *Commentary on The Diamond Sutra*, besides having been an accomplished poet as follows:

Wind striking the pine trees, moon lighting the garden;  
This feeling, these pictures, and the melancholy –  
Who knows the Zen spirit is there,  
Awakened through the long night, abiding with the monk.  
(125 – 126).

Of all the Mahayana orders introduced into Vietnam, many historians believe it was Zen, as can be seen in the above, that resonated the most with the Vietnamese: “...Zen most thoroughly permeated the practise of Vietnamese Buddhism, and its doctrines and methods of teaching, though somewhat nominal today, have continued to exert a creative influence moulding the Vietnamese Buddhist character” (Thich Thien An, p. 23).

Zen was introduced into Vietnam in 580 C.E. by the Indian Dharma Master Ven. Vinitaruci who had entered the country from China and established the first Zen school, followed by the second Zen school some 250 years later, founded by a Chinese monk. However, it was only the establishment of the third Zen school which was considered uniquely ‘Vietnamese’ embodying the fusion of Zen (Vietnamese: *Thien*) and Pure Land (*Tinh Do*), having arrived in Vietnam from China in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, which set the actual tone for its subsequent development (comp. ibid, 125 – 126). This is further elaborated by Thich Quang Lien: “According to Vietnamese Buddhists, when *Karuna* and

*Prajna* are united we notice that little distinction is made between the self-power teaching of Zen and the other-power teaching of the Pure Land school and that although most monks and laymen belong to the *Lam-Te* (C. *Linchi* and J. *Rinzai*) tradition, they practice Pure Land *Niem Phat* (C. *Nien fo*, J. *Nembutsu*) as well as *Koan* meditation, a unification of teachings characteristic of Chinese Buddhism during the late T'ang and Song dynasties introduced to Vietnam through the *Thao-Du'one* school...images of Sakyamuni and Amitabha are (thus) found in every Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist temple” (comp. 101-104, p.186). Thich Nhat Hanh also adds: “Except for the pure Zen monasteries, almost every pagoda in Vietnam practises this combination of Zen and Pure Land” (1967, p.15).

When it came to the establishment of ‘pure Zen Buddhism’, Thich Thien An states “The expansion of Zen Buddhism in Vietnam, especially in the North during the Tran dynasty (1225 – 1400), was due in large part to the Truc Lam (Bamboo Grove Zen) school which...developed and prospered under the leadership of (the first patriarch) King Tran Nhan Ton, his successor, Thich Phap Loa, and finally Thich Huyen Quang...(who) established a registration book for the sangha, built numerous monasteries, and compiled various Buddhist texts...For these reasons the first three patriarchs of the Truc Lam school stand out as the most prominent Buddhist leaders in Vietnamese history” (comp. 135-136, p.147). Thich Huyen Quang, (who was selected by the king on the basis of his exceptional exam results to officiate as ambassador to China and as governor of the National Academy), expressed his yearning to renounce worldliness in favour of a Zen-inspired life in the following poem:

Wealth and fame: how slow and difficult!  
While days flow like water  
And old age rushes toward you.  
Why not meditate alone, near a brook,  
In some far-off mountain,  
Lying on a board in the pine forest wind,  
A cup of tea waiting?  
(ibid, p.134)

### **Vietnamese Buddhist Revivalism**

Commenting on the discourse surrounding Vietnamese Buddhism, T.U.T Anh opines that Vietnamese Buddhism must be viewed as *composite* in nature. He differentiates this from *syncretistic*, adopting Richard Gombrich’s argument that the concept of syncretism may not be useful for analysing variations in Buddhism especially in the area of soteriology, as he indicates that many Buddhists in fact believe that only Buddha Dharma can lead to liberation, despite the incorporation of elements of folk religion into their belief system (comp. Gombrich, 1988, quoted by Anh, p.114). Anh states that although the masses have always tended more towards devotional (specifically Pure Land inspired) forms of practice, “...Zen in Vietnam stems from efforts of the elites eager to bring orthodoxy to Vietnamese Buddhism” (ibid, p.113). This is corroborated in part by Thich Nhat Hanh’s account when he states: “The small village pagoda often does not have a well-qualified Zen master as such because most people, and in particular the villagers cannot practise Zen as taught in the monastery. This must be performed by monks or possibly a few educated laymen. For this reason popular Buddhism in Vietnam is a mixture of some basic Zen elements and many practices of the Pure Land sect (*Amidism*), which is a sect of Mahayana Buddhism that is very popular among the masses” (1967, p.14).

A composite form of Buddhism in Vietnam has, in McHale's opinion, always been inclusive, impregnated with popular beliefs and practices (comp. p.146). This is perhaps not surprising especially when viewed against the background of the striking diversity of religious expression per se in Vietnam, in particular, the syncretistic movements found in South Vietnam unparalleled in the entire Southeast Asian region, mostly emerging in the early 1900s and with a pronounced engaged dimension. This included Buddhist revitalisation movements, notable amongst which is the Hoa Hao, with its emphasis on ritual simplicity, in aiding the poor and needy, and dispensing with wasteful expenditure on ceremonies, offerings and pagoda construction. According to Philip Taylor, this modernist tendency had already become manifest in the 1800s during the Nguyen Dynasty as Gia Long, the first Nguyen king, issued a proclamation decrying the excessive expenditure on rituals in North Vietnam (comp. p. 31). Taylor, in his collection of essays, specifically in his own chapter, 'The Quest for Modernity', seeks to demonstrate the vibrancy and diversity of religion in Vietnam against the background of a more general upsurge of religiosity in the modern world. As regards Buddhism in particular, he states: "A Buddhist revival emerged in the early 1920s as a nation-wide movement aiming to stem the perceived decline in Buddhism by returning to scriptural tenets, the dissemination of key Buddhist texts and commentaries in the Vietnamese language, an attempt to institutionalise a unified Buddhism and involve the laity in Buddhist associations and for passionate social action" (ibid,p.22).

Elise DeVido in her contribution to Taylor's volume describes the Vietnamese Buddhist revival being characterised by 'Buddhism for this world' (comp. p.250). Placing the years of revival from 1920 to 1951, (it) established the foundations of mainstream Buddhist institutional growth and influence from the 1940s to the present'. This includes Mahayana-Theravada interactions (examined more closely below), perhaps in the wake of the revival's overall emphasis on what DeVido describes as "...institution-building (schools, institutes, pagodas, lay associations, publishing, networks of teachers and students, education and promotion of nuns, regional variations of Buddhist belief and practice, social welfareism, the study of global religion and intellectual trends...and network building" (ibid, p.251). One of DeVido's particular focuses is on the inspiration which revivalism in this era derived from the Chinese reformist monk Taixu's (1890 - 1945) innovations, particularly his *renjian fojiao*, 'Buddhism for this world', emphasising the centrality of education, modern publishing, social work and Buddhist lay groups to carve out Buddhism's viable future in the modern world (p.252). DeVido quotes from an article by Do Nam Tu from 1937, in which he states: "Our Buddhist revival is not different from that in China...we agree with renjian fojiao" (p.258).

### **Nuns Arising: The Mendicant Order**

The fact that the revival was launched with a great deal of women's participation, that of nuns and laywomen, is emphasised by DeVido when she indicates that new schools and pagodas were opened for nuns starting in the 1920s. Nuns (*bhikhunis*) were said to have had a long tradition since the 12<sup>th</sup> century, along with laywomen as followers and donors: "As nuns obtained education and training, the numbers of nuns as teachers and leaders grew, ... (which is) today the normal situation throughout Vietnam. One source says that the number of nuns today is ten times that of monks" (comp. 278 – 279).

There is some dispute over whether the Mendicant Order (*Khat Si*) can be considered an example of a composite or as a syncretistic Buddhist movement, as DeVido in particular, has described it as the latter. Founded in 1946 by Master Minh Dang Quang (d.1954) it exemplifies the formation of new, composite Buddhist movements, in which *bhikhunis* figure prominently, their number having increased exponentially in number in

the wake of revivalism as indicated. Khat Si is a unique Buddhist order still thriving in Vietnam today, combining elements of (Chinese) Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism, together with the founder's own ideas, as described in his work *Truth*. Officially recognised only in 1966, it is a little-researched order which has been the focus of two articles in volumes dedicated to Vietnamese nuns. For example, Thich Nu To Lien (the title 'Thich Nu' denoting 'bhikhuni', whereas 'Thich' alone is 'bhikkhu') indicates that whereas before 1975 there were only 72 Mendicant nunneries, presently there are 199 (as of 2009), whereas there are a total of 120 Mendicant pagodas, mostly in the South (p. 247). In her article describing the movement, Nguyen Thi Tuyet writes that whereas like the Theravada sangha, Khat Si sangha wear yellow robes and go on alms rounds, like Chinese Mahayana Buddhists, they are vegetarian and the nuns observe the 348 rules of the Dharmagupta Vinaya. The order is called 'Mendicant' because members of the sangha tend to change their abode every three to six months, in the Theravada spirit of being *Anagarika* (homeless), reflecting the lifestyle of the sangha during its original formation. Notably, too, they prefer to chant in Vietnamese language unlike the Pali normally employed by the Vietnamese Theravada sangha or the Chinese with Vietnamese pronunciation, articulated by the Vietnamese Mahayana sangha. Tuyet further points out that they study both Nikaya and Mahayana sutras, and practise Thathagata meditation (Samatha and Vipassana) in the Theravada tradition, rather than Zen meditation (comp. p.55).

Thich Nu To Lien, in her discussion, characterises the prominent Mendicant bhikhuni Thich Nu Huynh Lien, as "...an eminent bhikhuni of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who lived for the development of Buddhism, for the movement of women's liberation, and for peace and freedom in Vietnam" (p. 245). Thich Nu Lien is reputed to be the first nun of this order, having become ordained in 1947, as she had been impressed by the founder's teachings, especially his ecumenical bent. One of her campaigns was directed towards encouraging Buddhist scholarship and study, and the author in consequence, graduated in Buddhist Studies and Asian Philosophy from Van Hanh (Buddhist) University, which had been co-founded by Thich Nhat Hanh in Saigon in 1964. It was the first Buddhist university organised along western lines, having started out with two faculties, Buddhist Studies and the Humanities.

It seems that the greatest thrust of this order was towards translating Buddhist teachings of both schools, whether Pali or Mandarin, into the vernacular. Thich Nu Huynh Lien was reputed to be a great poet, too, and "Her poems help bring Dharma into daily life, send prayers to living beings, invoke the national soul, and remind everyone to live in peace, goodwill and equality for the good of humanity". She also participated in the anti-war movement and mobilised both sangha and laity to hold a hunger strike in front of the Independence Palace for many weeks "...which surprised the world and was the pride of our people at that time, an 'army without hair'" (ibid, p.246). Upon her death in 1987, she received many accolades from the government reflecting both her personal prominence and that of the Mendicant order within Vietnamese Buddhism being characterised by an amalgamation of Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism which is unique in the entire southeast Asian region.

As regards the evaluation of this order for present purposes, its orientation has, for the most part, been directed inwardly, i.e., towards strengthening an exclusively Vietnamese Buddhist view in the interest of spreading Buddhism primarily amongst the Vietnamese (hence its emphasis on translation into the vernacular), rather than attempting to bring its laudable model of the integration of different Buddhist schools to a wider global public. This is in marked contrast to the activities of the founder of the Order of Interbeing, Thich Nhat Hanh, whose strength was increasingly seen to lie in the creation

of a transnational unifying Buddhist view due, at least in part, to his progressive exclusion from his country of birth.

### **Formation And Impact Of The UBCV**

It would appear that the eminent monk, Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926), from the start of his three-year novitiate and once he had received full ordination in 1949, had already laid the spiritual and intellectual foundation for a Unified Buddhist Church. As John Chapman points out, having been ordained by a Zen master hailing from the Lam Te Zen school and also from an indigenous Vietnamese branch of this school, the Lieu Quan school, his studies had included both Theravada and Mahayana traditions (comp. p.299). However, rather than ‘going with the flow’, Sallie King emphasises that already in 1949, he had developed differences with his teachers at the Bao Guoc Institute in Hue as he had asked them to update the curriculum to include more emphasis on philosophy, foreign languages and literature, besides Buddhism. Possibly, as related by Chapman, Thich Nhat Hanh’s inclination towards a more inclusive kind of study had been due to the influence of Taixu on him (ibid, 299 – 300) especially, as indicated, the reformist’s influence had been pervasive throughout the region. As his request was rejected, he left with some other disgruntled monks for Saigon where he studied these subjects at Saigon University. In 1950, they founded the Ung Quang Temple in Saigon which not only became the foremost centre of Buddhist studies in South Vietnam, but also a centre of activism and the Buddhist struggle movement (comp. King, 322).

In the build-up to the formation of the UBCV, DeVido indicates that as early as 1951, Buddhist representatives from all over Vietnam had gathered in Hue, the former dynastic capital, located in central-southern Vietnam, to form the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, proclaiming Buddhism as ‘the national-cultural religion’ of Vietnam. A significant aspect of this development, she notes, was the creation of a characteristically “... ‘Vietnamese’ Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana-Theravada exchanges, and the new syncretistic Mendicant Sangha” (comp. p.282). It is perhaps significant that she does not mention the existence of Mahayana Buddhism – or even Zen - in this context.

Thich Nhat Hanh and his colleagues continued to develop their own ‘progressive’ brand of Vietnamese Buddhism along the humanistic and ecumenical lines envisioned by Thich Nhat Hanh in Hue, and in 1955, he was invited to become editor of the prominent Buddhist magazine, *Phat Giao Viet Nam (Vietnamese Buddhism)*, which became the official voice of the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association. Chapman notes that within two years its ‘publication was suspended because the Buddhist hierarchy disapproved of his articles. Thich Nhat Hanh thought that this was because his proposal for Buddhist unification was unacceptable to the leadership of different congregations’. Finally, in 1957, he decided to found a new monastic ‘community of resistance’, Phuong Boi, ‘Fragrant Palm Leaves’, in the highlands of Central Vietnam near the town of Da Lat, ‘boi’ denoting the kind of palm leaf on which the Buddhist scriptures were originally written down. During this period, he was very active in writing and teaching in order to, as Chapman avers, ‘promote the idea of a humanistic, unified Buddhism’ (comp. p.300). It seems that due to the ‘increasing disapproval of his writings, both by Buddhist leaders and by the dictatorial Diem regime’ (ibid), Thich Nhat Hanh decided to absent himself from Vietnam from 1961 to 1963 to study and lecture at Princeton and Columbia Universities. However, following the downfall of the Diem regime in late 1963, he returned to Vietnam in early 1964 at Thich Tri Quang’s request, who had assumed

leadership of the 'radical' Buddhist wing, and requested him to help rebuild the sangha (comp. King, 322-333).

The UBCV was formed on the basis of the holding of a Vietnamese Buddhist Reunification Congress at a pagoda in Saigon which resulted in the creation, according to Chapman, of the Unified Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (the word 'sangha' having subsequently been changed to 'church' possibly to include lay people) on 13 January 1964 (p.301). Topmiller explains that "Recognising the need to project a united voice opposing the war and carrying out political and religious activities, they announced in January (1964) the formation of a national association, the Unified Buddhist Church (UBC), which combined elements of eleven different sects and the Theravada and Mahayana streams of Buddhism". However, as the author further relates, some southern Vietnamese Buddhist groups were not included. He concludes: "Buddhism...never spoke with once voice in Vietnam, particularly given the myriad attitudes within its organisations" (comp.6 -7). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that the UBCV did not enjoy unrivalled success, despite its considerable contributions to the reinstatement of Buddhism following Diem's repressions and subsequently, its anti-war efforts. Due to what Thich Nhat Hanh describes as 'internal rivalries', in particular, between a progressive faction of the youth and intellectuals (like himself), and the conservatives, which he describes as 'stuck in dogmatism and a fear of change', it could not ultimately succeed in its stated aim of unifying all Buddhist schools under its own umbrella (comp. 1967, p.59). Increasingly with time, the UBCV came to be associated with anti-communism, as noted by Thich Nhat Hanh as follows: "The struggle for peace led by the non-communist forces (under the UBCV's umbrella) should be regarded as reflecting the hope and consciousness of the whole Vietnamese people" (bid, p.104). Even in exile, Thich Nhat Hanh continues to represent the UBCV overseas which publishes most of his writings.

This period was a time, according to King's account, of tremendous creative activity for Thich Nhat Hanh: he planned the establishment of Van Hanh Buddhist University, incorporating the kind of broad curriculum he had wished for when he first embarked on his own studies. In this period, Thich Nhat Hanh also founded the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS) initially as a branch of Van Hanh University, as one of the primary vehicles for engaged Buddhism. He established an underground pacifist press led by his co-worker Cao Ngoc Phuong (Thich Nhat Hanh's chronicler writing under her ordained name Sister Chan Kong), the La Boi Press, which grew quite large and influential during the war, enabling him to produce a steady stream of articles, books and poems calling for peace and reconciliation. Finally, in 1965, he founded Tiep Hien, the 'Order of Interbeing', as a new branch of the Lam Te school of Zen Buddhism, designed as an expression of engaged Buddhism, composed of lay people and sangha. Its four principles were: 1. Non-attachment to views, the 'most important teaching of Buddhism'; 2. Direct practice leading to realisation; 3. Appropriateness as conformity to the basic tenets of Buddhism while being engaged to 'truly help people'; 4. The employment of skilful means to achieve this (comp. King, 325 - 326).

Thich Nhat Hanh's subjective vision for the SYSS as an expression of his view of engaged Buddhism emerges in his journals dating from February 1964: "We now have an infrastructure of volunteers who can help develop self-help villages. They are equally knowledgeable about social concerns and religious teaching, and they understand effective methods to combat poverty, disease, ignorance, and misunderstanding. They do not work for wages or power, but with love and awareness. The spirit of self-help motivates them. These are young people who are peace-loving and faithful and reject a life based on materialism. They seek only the happiness that a life of service can bring.

They have the right kind of spirit to succeed. Vietnam does not lack such young people. There are...perhaps hundreds of thousands of them. Their eyes shine with faith.” Thich Nhat Hanh, in the same breath, expresses his hope that the ‘Buddhist hierarchy’, once they see what a difference such a united corps of young people can make, would support his efforts and thereby adopt Thich Nhat Hanh’s brand of engaged Buddhism in place of their own conservative one (comp. 1998, p.150).

Thich Nhat Hanh was forced to flee Vietnam after a failed attempt on his life in 1966, and proceeded to visit 19 countries, talk with numerous world leaders about passing a UN resolution against the Vietnam war, and was even nominated by Martin Luther King Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize (comp. Topmiller, p.138). Chapman relates that it was at the end of this peace tour that he wrote the influential tract, *Vietnam – The Lotus in the Sea of Fire*, ‘to sum up his proposals and the Buddhists’ political stand’. This, however, put him into the unfortunate position of being labelled a ‘traitor’ and a ‘communist’ by South Vietnam’s government, while being condemned for being ‘pro-American’ by the North, which culminated in his exile lasting until January 2005 (comp. p.304).

In Vietnam, there was ‘brutal suppression’ after 1966 of the UBCV, mainly by the American-backed South Vietnamese government, the GVN, which however, did not deter the UBC from continuing its non-violent anti-war efforts. The anti-war movement in Vietnam also spawned repeated self-immolations in protest - DeVido cites a total of 57 – (p.251), many of them by nuns, but also by monks and lay people. The first of these had been the venerable 67-year old monk Thich Quang Duc: “In the morning of 11 June 1963 (he) sat down in a meditative position at a busy intersection in Saigon and burned himself to death, shocking Vietnam and the world. His motivation was to ‘startle awake’ sentient beings, to enlighten all to the repression of Buddhism and Buddhists under the Diem regime” (ibid, 250-251). However, the subsequent self-immolations which continued throughout the war were clearly in protest against it. In explanation of this act of self-immolation, Thich Nhat Hanh comments: “Like the Buddha in one of his former lives...who gave himself to a hungry lioness which was about to devour her own cubs, the monk believes he is practising the doctrine of highest compassion by sacrificing himself in order to call the attention of, and to seek help from, the people of the world” (1967, p.119).

In trying to raise international awareness of the need for a ceasefire, the UBCV launched a Buddhist Peace Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks in 1969, headed by Thich Nhat Hanh. Finally, as Topmiller relates, in 1974, one year prior to the end of the war, the UBCV inaugurated a ‘Do not shoot your brother’ campaign in an effort to prevent pro- and anti-communists from killing each other, which contributed to the final defeat of the Americans in 1975 and the reunification of the country, under communist rule. However, as the author points out, far from acknowledging their contribution, the communist government, ‘fearing the UBCV’s broad appeal’, gradually and progressively repressed Buddhism and other religious organisations and ‘raided pagodas, closed down orphanages, disbanded religious organisations, and placed prominent Buddhist leaders under house arrest or imprisonment in remote locations’. It eventually established a government-controlled Buddhist church which excluded the UBCV, but included others like the Mendicants, Hoa Hao and Theravada Buddhists, alongside the more common Vietnamese and Zen Buddhist groups (comp.149 – 151). The communist government also banned Thich Nhat Hanh’s books and tapes, though, according to Chapman, they were still widely distributed underground (p.304).

Taylor relates that the state’s continued non-recognition of the UBCV has not prevented, in his opinion, an upsurge of Buddhism in recent years: “A significant sea change in official policy towards religion has occurred in tandem with recent major

changes in economic policy and social relations. The party now sees in religion a source of inner strength that might aid in the development of a prosperous, orderly and wholesome society". He indicates that the communist government acknowledges in particular the valuable role religious organisations play as regards their charitable and community development activities (p. 8, 32-33). It also appears significant that in 2006, Vietnam was removed from the US State Department's list of countries of particular concern as regards religious freedom (ibid, p.53).

DeVido, apparently sharing Taylor's opinion, indicates that senior monks and nuns who had graduated from Buddhist institutes in Vietnam now lead the Buddhist establishment. Buddhist studies in Vietnam had been greatly expanded with the Vietnamese Buddhist Studies Institute having held its first international conference in July 2006. Scholars and monastics are active in the fields of publishing and research and Dr. Le Manh That (ordained name: Thich Tri Sieu), who had served a long jail sentence for his (former) anti-government stance, has recently been made head of the Vietnamese Buddhist Studies Institute in Saigon, with land granted by the government, planning to reopen and expand Van Hanh Buddhist University to be renamed after the renowned martyr-monk, Quang Duc University. Despite their avowedly anti-folk religion and anti-superstition views, the government has recently acknowledged the veracity of certain Buddhist miracles, specifically, Thich Quang Duc's heart relic, having been the only part of his body to have remained unburned, and the 'mummified monks' of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, whose bodies became mummified on the basis of the strength of their Zen meditation practice and remain so to the present day (comp. DeVido, 283 -284).

In the wake of the UBCV's non-recognition, Thich Nhat Hanh was, as indicated, barred from re-entering his country and was only granted permission to return in 2005 after an absence of nearly 39 years, followed by another visit in 2007. As related by Chapman, these were very high profile visits as Thich Nhat Hanh was accompanied by an international contingent of supporters and sangha with each stage of the journey punctuated by Dharma talks held in front of a variety of audiences, which had to be approved and supervised by the government. The author indicates that one of Thich Nhat Hanh's stated aims in returning was to try to reconcile the conflict between the state-recognised Buddhist sangha and the UBCV (p.306), the latter still active in its campaign for democracy and free elections, freedom of religion and human rights, despite its banned status. Chapman indicates that the government's policy of *Doi Moi* (economic progress, Vietnamese style) had led to a marked increase in social inequality, especially in the area of health and education. In response, the government adopted a policy of encouraging religious organisations of shouldering more responsibility in caring for the casualties inflicted by *Doi Moi*, although the UBCV's attempts in this direction were, as predicted, not welcomed. Chapman, however, avers that at the same time, Buddhists, including some former SYSS members, had for years been quietly involved in welfare activities and overseas Vietnamese have also been performing their part in contributing to welfare and educational projects. He concludes: "One consequence of Thich Nhat Hanh's visit may be to increase the visibility of such meritorious activities and help propel forward their official normalisation" (p.335).

### **Thich Nhat Hanh's Contribution To Vietnamese Buddhism**

In this discussion, the preference is on considering aspects of Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy as a whole, rather than restricting it to the concept of 'Interbeing' alone, although this may be said to be its defining characteristic. Thich Nhat Hanh's system of thought and action is at least partially based, as suggested by Christopher Queen, on the Avatamsaka ('Flower Garland') sutra concerning the co-arising and co-existence of all

beings, sentient and non-sentient, and his attendant ethical non-dualism is said to embrace both the victims and the oppressors in situations of great social suffering (Comp. Queen, 334 – 335). However, he also quotes Thich Nhat Hanh as stating: “Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not the absolute truth” (ibid, p.330).

In fact, in the preface of one of Thich Nhat Hanh’s earliest and greatest works, *The Miracle of Mindfulness, A Manual on Meditation*, the translator, Mobi Ho, (as the book was originally written in 1975 in Vietnamese as a long letter to Brother Quang, a leading member of the SYSS) indicates that “American Buddhists have been impressed by the natural and unique blending of Theravada and Mahayana traditions, characteristic of Vietnamese Buddhism, which the book expresses” (p. xii). The book is essentially a discussion of the application of mindfulness to one’s daily actions based on the discourse surrounding interdependence: “The contemplation on interdependence is...intended to remove the false barriers of discrimination so that one can enter into the universal harmony of life...(it) is to help one penetrate reality in order to be one with it, not be become caught up in philosophical opinion...The raft is used to cross the river (and not) to be carried around on your shoulders...The essence of Mahayana Buddhist teaching lies in this...When reality is perceived in its nature of ultimate perfection, the practitioner has reached a level of wisdom called non-discrimination mind...in which there is no longer any discrimination between subject and object” (55-57). This is, however, not to detract from what is expressed in the book’s title as forming its main focus, which is a discourse on mindfulness. In fact, a translation of the *Satipatthana Sutta (The Foundation of Mindfulness)* from the original Pali is included at the end of the book, in a *Selection of Buddhist Sutras*, as a testimony to its pivotal importance for Thich Nhat Hanh. In Batchelor’s opinion, the Satipatthana Sutta is “The most important discourse ever given by the Buddha on mental development” (p. 341).

The beauty of the book lies in the fact that, while reconciling various Buddhist views, its aim is to utilise skilful means (i.e., mindfulness) when it comes to solving the original problem identified by the Buddha, that of human suffering, besides in the practice of engaged Buddhism. In the words of Mobi Ho, “Thich Nhat Hanh wrote to Brother Quang to encourage the workers (of the SYSS during the dark days of their persecution, kidnapping and even murder)...(as he) wished to remind them of the essential discipline of following one’s breath to nourish and maintain calm mindfulness, even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances” (p.viii). As the book became more widely translated and had an ever greater international circulation, it inspired many people, for example, young Buddhists in Thailand who, too, ‘wished to act in a spirit of awareness and reconciliation to help avert the armed conflict erupting in Thailand’ and even ‘A young Iraqi student in danger of being deported to his homeland, where he faces death for his refusal to fight...he and his mother have both read (the book) and are practising awareness of the breath’ (p.ix, p.xi).

It is perhaps instructive to mention Thich Nhat Hanh’s overall impact, in this context, on practitioners of Buddhism globally: “Already internationally famous as a peace activist while still residing in Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh has become, since his departure from Vietnam in the late 1960s, one of the most prolific and widely-read authors on Buddhism. Versions of his books have been translated into many languages and millions of copies have been sold internationally. His Order of Interbeing is a major transnational movement and his meditation retreats have been opened up in many countries. Lay Buddhists and monastics in many of the world’s wealthiest and powerful nations have found his teachings of mindfulness to be an effective method to cope with the stresses and dilemmas of life in a consumerist, materialist world. A further measure of

his success and adaptability of his ideas is that for many years, these texts have filtered back informally to Vietnam, proving immensely popular among Buddhists there” (Taylor, p.26). Chapman mentions that he has published over 85 books, more than 40 of them in English, and that there are about 300 of his local lay practice centres worldwide (p.305).

### **Buddhism In Present Day Vietnam**

As regards the present state of Buddhism in Vietnam, it is striking that an international conference devoted to women in Buddhism, Sakyadhita, was invited by the Vietnamese government (through its department of religious affairs) to hold one of its regular two-yearly conferences (in 2009 – 2010) in Ho Chi Minh City, the largest metropolis in Vietnam - far larger and more significant, as it is Vietnam’s ‘economic capital’ - than the actual capital of Hanoi, in the north. This itself would appear to bear witness to the government’s growing awareness of needing to be open to both unifying and occasionally antagonistic Buddhist views, as well as to international Buddhist discourses per se, even in relatively sensitive areas like those of female ordination and women’s rights in Buddhism. China - to which Vietnam is often compared as they share a common border, historical ties, and both have communist governments - in contrast, could hardly be expected to act as host to a conference of this nature and significance. Sakyadhita, it must be remarked, has among its founders the prominent American nun, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a prolific writer, university professor and outspoken proponent of freedom of religious expression, who was instrumental in leading the delegation in their encounters with the religious affairs department in Vietnam. Far from keeping a low profile as regards their hosting of this conference, we (the participants) were the subject of extensive media coverage and were escorted, as guests of the government, to a number of nunneries both in and around Saigon, but also in Hue, the former dynastic capital, and even to Da Lat, where we were guests at the nunnery serving as the headquarters of the Truc Lam school of Vietnamese Zen Buddhism. The nunneries which we visited were visibly involved in charitable activities like orphanages, refuges for the poor and disabled, administering HIV treatment and free medical care, etc.

As regards the question of religious freedom, there is no doubt, however, that Buddhist organisations must still conform to the government’s expectations: “Legally, the Vietnamese constitution provides for freedom of worship. In practice, however, official government recognition is still required for all religious groups to operate legally. Also, even if they are officially recognised, religious organisations must consult with the government about their operations, including leadership selection, and are supervised by the Office of Religious Affairs. The government significantly restricts the activities of religious groups that it does not recognise, or that it declares to be at variance with state laws and policies” (Chapman, p.311). The continued ban of the UBCV, therefore, undoubtedly accounted for the fact that the participants of Sakyadhita were not escorted to any of Thich Nhat Hanh’s monasteries, one of which was the object of particular contention during our stay, as the authorities had cut off its access to water and electricity probably as a way of warning the sangha to fall into line as regards accepting the government’s choice of abbot against their own and Thich Nhat Hanh’s choice.

In reference to the activities of the predominant Vietnamese Zen school, that of Bamboo Grove, its current patriarch, Thich Thanh Tu, has obviously become increasingly successful in globalising Vietnamese Zen Buddhism and simultaneously widening its appeal amongst the Vietnamese both in Vietnam and abroad. As related by Alexander Soucy in Taylor’s volume, while Thich Thanh Tu’s aim is to attempt to rival Thich Nhat Hanh’s own influence globally, in Vietnam in particular, Truc Lam seems to provide a bridge between the westernised traditions that stress meditation on the one hand, and

more traditional Vietnamese Buddhist practices on the other, by appealing to nationalism and formerly elite views regarding authentic Buddhism (p.366). While Soucy discusses the growth of this group in North Vietnam to encompass more contemplative practices alongside the devotional, I had occasion to visit what is probably his biggest nunnery which is located in the south and can testify to the fact that in the south, too, Zen, alongside other contemplative practices like those of Theravada Buddhism, are growing in popularity, especially amongst the (western educated) and professional classes.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The attempt has been made in the above to demonstrate how ‘unifying Buddhist views’ in Vietnam originally developed in the wake of historical, socio-political events, particularly those surrounding modernisation. This development culminated not only in the creation of a new composite-cum-syncretistic school of Vietnamese Buddhism, that of the Mendicant Order, but also in the formulation of a unifying view as articulated by Thich Nhat Hanh. Though based on fundamental Theravada teachings (particularly those of Mindfulness), his system could successfully integrate aspects of Mahayana teachings to arrive at a unified view which has resonated with people all over the globe. This not only has relevance when it comes to one’s individual practice, but is also seen to have promoted engaged Buddhism, facilitating its authentic response to situations characterised by suffering in whatever form it may take.

In the final analysis, it would appear that the development of various kinds of Buddhism –whether syncretistic or composite in nature, unified or not – is essentially a dynamic, ongoing process, which, as the present study has hoped to demonstrate, can not be viewed in isolation from its socio-political context. At least in the case of the unifying view underlying Thich Nhat Hanh’s system of practice, the ultimate ramifications of such a development can be far-reaching and universal, rather than merely particularistic and limited to one national configuration. In this process, having been excluded from benefitting a few, this particular unifying view has undoubtedly been catapulted to the benefit of many – with perhaps many more to come.

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