

Thinking about the Unificatinon of Buddhism in Vietnam in 1981

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ABSTRACT: The unification of Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha took place first time in 1951 and the second time in 1981 when the Vietnam Buddhist Central Association was consequently upgraded into present Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. The author considers the event in 1981 as the process of unification which based on the process of national and ethnic unity; on basis of Buddha's dharma and the theory of "social engagement". He argues that Vietnamese social context after 1975 has created favorable conditions for the development of Buddhism. The process of Vietnamese Buddhist unification has been implemented at its depth and become a characteristic of this religion in the 20th century.

In the 20th century, Buddhism in Vietnam had its own movements in comparision to the previous centuries. One of the differencies is the nation-wide unification of Buddhism, which based on the national unification, in the form of a "sangha" in stead of the previously existed Buddhist associations before the 20th century.

In terms of its progress, the unification firstly happened in 1951 with the Vietnamese Buddhist Federation, and then the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha in 1981, which has been mentioned by several Buddhist and non-Buddhist writers. This fact occurs to me that the authors published their works in the last centuries (the latest work was *The History of Buddhism in Vietnam*¹ published in 1988 and edited by Nguyễn Tài Thư, that has a short part to analyze the unification process) published in 1988, and that has not had enough time to analyze and evaluate satisfactorily this fundamental change of Vietnamse Buddhism in the 20th century.

In a recent study, I once raised my personal idea of four characteristics of Vietnamese Buddhism and its roles in the 20th century, including a clear indication of main events and progress in the century of the Vietnamese Buddhism through four turning points that cannot be omitted²:

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- The Buddhist Revival Movement started during the 1920s and finished in 1951 with the foundation of the Vietnamese Buddhist Association;
- “The Buddhism suppression” in 1963 and the unite of the Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Church in 1964;
- The establishment of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha in 1981;
- Vietnamese Buddhism after 1990 and the need for a reform at the present.³

Those are the turning points that attribute to the changes of the roles of Vietnamese Buddhism and its characteristics during the last century and the coming 21st century with “new chances and challenges”⁴.

By using the phrase “Vietnamese Buddhism”, the author means to mention the whole Buddhism in Vietnam with its completion and unification with many different ethnic groups in the 20th century, including three ethnic groups that are breeding Buddhism as the Viet, Khmer, and Chinese-Vietnamese, along with Buddhist traces found in the Chăm, the Thái, and the Tày, etc. though historical changes had disabled them to continuously follow Buddhism.

Generally, Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20th century has not only been divided into different sects, but also shown a hidden trend of unification that got to its peak in the middle of the 20th century. The trend had created characteristics of Buddhism specialized in Vietnam that we only need to add the word Vietnamese to Buddhism to become the Vietnamese Buddhism. The unification had been developing in its depth and the process had become a characteristic of this religion in the 20th century.

Changes in political and social life in the 20th century (domestically and abroad) affected significantly to the process of unification of the Vietnamese Buddhism. It is called a process because the Vietnamese Buddhism had been unified twice in the nation-wide scale (1951 and 1981), and once in a half of the country (1964). It is not necessary to go in details to these events but to acknowledge nature of the unification.

The first point needed to address is the unification was firmly based on the unification of the country.

The diversity and unification of Buddhism in Vietnam always follow the historical happenings of different ethnic groups in Vietnam since it was brought into the country. Buddhism in Vietnam reflected the separation and unification of Vietnam seen through Vietnamese history. However, it has never been in history of the country that Buddhism had such a large development as in the 20th century. The development was not only domestically but also abroad. For any reasons, it is obviously not a closed religion and covered a sole region, an ethnic group, or a sect

anymore. It has become the Vietnamese Buddhism with its fullest meanings, though people still can see its complexity hidden inside.

What was the reason for the unification of Buddhism? That was the unification of Vietnam in 1975. The unification was a victory of Vietnam in the modern times but it was not deniable that many ethnic groups and people had to pay a great price for it. More importantly, the unification of the country was accepted by international communities thus Vietnam had gained its own sovereignty in all international relationships. Obviously, not everyone bases on the same reason or idea to evaluate this, but national unification had become reality.

Vietnamese Buddhism, on the one hand, has benefited from the unification, on the other hand, contributed greatly to the national unification. It is important to recognize Buddhist associations' patriotism and will for the national independence. Surely, it could not be said that the whole Buddhists in Vietnam followed the Communist Party, but it could also not be said that those who did not follow the Communist Party were the enemies of the country. The clarification sometimes turned to be complicated in many historical occasions throughout the 20th century. At the present, we have had enough time to think and discuss about this. Some individuals and events made people think that some Buddhists did not agree with the viewpoint of the Vietnamese communists, but in fact, in the condition of the separation of the country, the cold war between the communism and the capitalism, many other religious people had their different viewpoints also.

The road to the unification of Vietnamese Buddhism was not flat and without any ups and downs. Each sect or each ethnic group with its own regulations and practices had long to reach an agreement on the common practices. A typical example was the unification in 1951. We could see that the will to willingly and consciously unify to a single Buddhist organization from the six contemporary Buddhist sects did not need any more discussion. However, if we look at it more closely, the unification was only within the Việt Buddhist sects only, excluding the existence of Theravada of the Viet and of Khmer ethnic (founded by the Great Master Hộ Tông and the retired scholar Nguyễn Văn Hiếu), Chinese Buddhism, Khất Sĩ (Medicant) Buddhism founded by the monk Minh Đăng Quang in 1940. For the Chinese Vietnamese, it was understandable that the difference and self-containedness of their communities regarding origin made them separated from others. In the documents we have about the unification in 1951, it was quite obvious that the Khmer Buddhism was not intently brought together with Vietnamese Buddhism. However, the trend to use Pali prayer books had been increased in combination with Sanskrit and Chinese prayer books for references in order to find

correct explanation of Buddhist enlightenment. On the other hand, there appeared books and documents to promote Buddhism in Western samples. We even had use Vietnamese to interpret Tripitaka, but traces of the Chinese system have still engraved deeply in Vietnamese Buddhist publications. Does it mean that the trend to reuse the Buddhist Southern school's prayer-book did not originate from Buddhist Northern school among the Việt but was influenced by the Western way in Buddhist studies? It is possible to come to the right answer for the question if we study this issue further more. However, looking from phenomenological perspective, thanks to materials we have obtained about Buddhism during that time in all the three regions, there was not really any linkage between Vietnamese Buddhism and Khmerian Buddhism. However, we can see one or two exceptions among the Vietnamese: a small part follow Theravada of the Khmer, while or another group applied the original explanations of Buddhism like Theravada of the Viet or Khất Sĩ Buddhism by Minh Đăng Quang to practice and promote their faiths but the point is they cannot break with Mahayana tradition only because of the fact that they could not take the Khmer to be the subject of faith propaganda.

The above-mentioned differences among different Buddhist sects in Vietnam only came together gradually during the resistance wars against foreign invasion. Not until six years later after the unification of the country in 1975 had the comprehensive unification of different Buddhist sects which were then classified by the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, namely Theravada, Mahayana, and Khất Sĩ Buddhism (Medicant Monk).

However, the unification of Buddhism as a nation-wide organization has caused many internal issues that any organizations when first unified have to face. Personally thinking, we must consider issues arose because of the unification its self in the new situation of the country, and carry out necessary reform.

The second point is that the unification of the Vietnamese Buddhism in 1981 was firmly based on the Buddhist dharma.

However, one question would be raised was that why the unification had to base on the Buddhist dharma but on different groups? The question itself partly embraces the answer.

We have already known that during over 2,500 years, Buddhism has existed in "differences", resulting in the breakage with Buddhist tradition when it came out of a country - the old India - where debates about commandment and tensed discussions about Buddhist explanations had led to significant dissociation of the Sangha. The only explanation for not seeing it is non-historical viewpoint. However, historically, anyone who made use "the differences" as reasons to explain for his own Buddhist

theory is also opportunistic and non-historical. Such differences could not prevent the convergence of Buddhism since 1950 internationally. However, in spite of the differences and convergence, people can see that Buddhist dhama is basically unique despite of the fact that it could be changed so significantly by each Buddhist school that some non-Buddhist people may think that is the main characteristic of Buddhism.

Reality of history of the 20th century helped the human beings realize a fundamental issue, that basic human right should be respected despite the varieties of politic and social conditions. Every politic conspiracies had evidently broken up and were replaced by human rights at universal level. Buddhism has contributed greatly to the unification by its dhama. The dogmas embrace a clause that encourages people to consciously liberate themselves from temptation and erroneousness in term of awareness of their own life and of their fellow-creature. This could be done not by physical power but by individual's adjustment to overcome rigid customs, faith, and material worships. Obviously, this should be done by a "non-violent" method, without relying on external factors but by one's own efforts only.

Understanding it that way, separation and conscious isolation are only the issues of outer world and in the formal manner. Buddhism aims at human beings to help them to liberate themselves, and it does not tie anyone to any regulations or rules when he or she wants to completely realize that goal. According to the Buddhist dogmas, human beings' ultimate goal is to self-liberate. There would be a question that all religions aim human beings, why does only Buddhism have the ability to do this? Buddhism does not discuss the beginning or the end of every process but encourages people to think of changes in each second of any process. Buddhism encourages people think deeply into themselves and understand that they can only get to the internality not in any other worlds but in this very world. Thus, it requires followers not to lean against and hold on to external factors to explain for their behavior and endure the situation. In another way, it encourages a high sense of self-awareness of each individual, making them responsible for their own actions and not blamed for any external reasons.

Thus, Buddhism dhama suits every living situation, individual, and any social classes. It encourages followers to the highest level to lead a positive and optimistic life as long as they follow exactly what they are self-aware and guide others to follow them. Buddhism encourages real actions rather than thinking and discussing. Thus, it should not be concluded that it can not improve living conditions. In fact, it helps improve human sins in very details. There are much more to discuss about Buddhism, a over 2,500 year-old religion, but within this article, it is limited in

discussing about its flexibility of the religion to every single human being in every nation, thus helps people to get together rather than separate them.

The unification of Vietnamese Buddhism has some aspects that integrated deeply, but still implies many differences due to the various traditions that, therefore, could contain certain risks. This is inevitable during its long history. Having understood the issue but having not done anything to mitigate the differences is a very negative option. The more important meaning of understanding the issue is to practice the issue so as to achieve a better one. The effort and achievement of many Buddhist generations perhaps lay in the practice of Buddhist dhama in all changes of the world, living environment, during the rapid development of the material world at the present, and possibly in the future.

Buddhist Unification is Based on “Social Engagement”

The unification process of the Vietnamese Buddhism is not a single phenomenon in the current era. It happens in the context of globalization which is an effort that every country tries to do in order to improve living standards of its people. According to many analysts, the trend could not be reversed despite the differences among religions and cultures, starting points of a national establishment, or politic trend of a country. People recognize more and more its active role in developing a better world. But one existed issue that globalization cannot do well is the firm foundation of human equality, even though the awareness of the inequality has shown that it was the cause of many disputes. Equality seems to be a dream rather than lively reality, a scenario to which people are looking forward.

There are mainly two attitudes towards the issue of inequality. Firstly, the inactive attitude which waits for external granted, and secondly, the active attitude that fight for equality in every condition. Buddhism is among the second attitude. This religion shows that the liberation of each individual, as mentioned above, is the quickest way to gain equality. Sakyamuni encourages people to liberate themselves by a saying “I have been a Buddha already, human beings are Buddha-to-be”. However, the self liberation is not associated with the nihilism and anarchism but with conditions: liberate (escape) one’s self and liberate (escape) others (in broader manner, liberate all living creature). The liberation should be done under the light of “harmonization” (Principle of six harmonies) and of “abstinence” (in this context, “abstinence” means not only regulation, but also boundaries that people should overcome to achieve liberation).

In such a condition, although Buddhism is considered the same to many other religions, its solution to the concerning issue is different in terms of principle and

subject. Buddhist principles are non-violent and can adapt to any situation. This sometimes made people to think that it is an opportunistic and trendy attitude. However, this does not mean anything because Buddhism is not a political ideology. It does not plan to aim at managing any country but aiming at each individual with their own shortcomings and imperfections. It gathers each individual's self-improvement to reach to a collection of self-liberated people. It aims at the inner self to manage instead of the outer self.

In terms of this matter, Buddhism provides bases for scholars around the world to address one of human characteristics as "religion" or "religiosity" which are their speciality and in the condition that they are aware of their subjective role in looking for a common place of living instead of being separated. Religion, under its fixed form, is not a sole solution to save human beings from sins and imperfection. In spite of its characteristic as a "faith", each religion with its existing form as a collection of human beings still could not exceed its weaknesses that every organization places before its members. It is easily vulnerable because of an individual's management, even though he or she is a practitioner. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize religion as "religion" and "religiosity" to understand that human beings need to observe themselves from inside out instead of being regulated by external organizations despite of the fact that any legal system always wants the justification and voluntary obeysity by each member of a society or organization. Distinguishing right from wrong in this world is fairly relative, especially in the moments when a standard is considered to have a stable role for judgment. In another way, individual and society are relatively not agreeable in their relationship. The society always wants to take the private part of individuals away and pose responsibilities for them while individuals always want to go into the opposite direction: to mitigate the society's indifferent rigidity to satisfy their own needs. Whenever responsibilities are not built on self-awareness, it tends to be easily ignored, resulting in personal rebellion and stalemate thus individual nihility seems not to be impossible. Consequently, conflict between individual and society is not easily avoidable.

Buddhism has become an effective solution when it doesn't pose the conflict between individual and society as a focal point of the distinguishment. It, however, starts with the inner liberation to harmonize among individuals, and between individual and society based on the non-violent solution. Only when two forms of existence of the self and the society within a person are unified into one, individual and society would be interrelated within the constant changes of the world and see no more conflict. Buddhist dharma aims at finding meanings of life right in the reality. Thus Buddhism is not a conservative religion that nostalgically concentrates on the

past, nor “interferes” to the present, but engages in real life. That is when Buddhism steps out of theory to become a non-formula religion which is then known as “folk Buddhism”. Therefore, Buddhism was unified basing on “entering life” instead of escaping from it. But in order to engage with the society, Buddhism should rely on Buddhist dharma, should be updated to fit development of the society, and needs to overcome its shortcomings by organizing its self into a sangha. If Buddhism cannot do this, everything should be delusion.

Regarding Buddhism in Vietnamese society for the last century, how far are the above-mentioned issues present? It is necessary to mention to the Buddhist revival through in the condition of unsettled war, poverty, separation, and discrimination. Thus, although Buddhism declares itself to be unified, the unification process has not actually been completed.

In other words, what Buddhism has been aware of has not been done properly. All what I have analyzed above about “engaged Buddhism” had gradually applied but unfortunately did not last long. From 1975 to the end of the 20th century, in a peaceful context, Vietnamese Buddhism has more concentrated in its inner affairs instead of opening to the outer world. However, we believe that the stable development of Vietnam creates good environment for the development of Buddhism. Buddhism can fit in any environment, but I believe that the more being in a developed social condition, the more Buddhism has chances to develop.

It is only a personal thinking of the unification of Buddhism in Vietnam in 1981. I believe that there are more to talk about it from various standpoints. Personally, I have expressed my idea of the unification with the only purpose of objectively understanding more about the development of Buddhism in relation with the development process of Vietnam.

Reference:

¹. Regarding to the unification of Buddhism in Vietnam, refer to:

- Mật Thể. *Brief History of Vietnamese Buddhism*, Huế, 1943, electronic version, website: www.thichquangduc.com, section: History of Buddhism;
- Trí Quang. *Monastic Buddhism in Vietnam*, Đuốc Tuệ publishing house, 1952.
- Thích Thiện Hoa. *50 years of improvement of Vietnamese Buddhism*, Saigon, The United Association of Buddhism in Vietnam, 1970.

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- Văn Thanh. *Brief history of Vietnamese Buddhism throughout eras and the origin of Buddhism*, published by Buddhist and Temple University, Saigon, Winter in the year of Tiger (1974).
 - Nguyễn Lang. *Vietnamese Buddhism History and Discussion*, Volume 3, Lá Bối publishing house, 1985.
 - Nguyễn Tài Thư (ed). *History of Vietnamese Buddhism*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1988.
 - Thích Đồng Bồn. *Bibliography of monks in the 20th century in Vietnam*, Volume 1 and 2, Hồ Chí Minh city General Publishing House, 1996 and 2003, respectively.
 - Thích Hải Ấn and Hà Xuân Liêm. *History of Buddhism in Huế*, Hồ Chí Minh city Publishing House, 2001
 - The Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha. *20 years of harmonization and development*, in the occasion of 20-year establishment of Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, Giác Ngộ publication, 2001.

Obviously, it is not excluded Buddhist magazines like *Từ Bi Âm*, *Viên Âm*, *Đuốc Tuệ* founded by Buddhist organizations throughout three areas in Vietnam during 1930 of the last century.

². A study of Vietnamese Buddhism's Characteristics and Roles in the 20th century that has been reviewed and approved.

³. This turning point was selected due to the occasion the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam passed its Decree no. 24/TW, including important clauses that emphasize ethnically the long-term and beneficial characteristics of religions in the development of a new society. Buddhism is associated with religions born and existed in different periods in Vietnam. For the researchers, the fact that it is appropriate or not, needs to be discussed more, though, the association of Buddhism with other religions shows the acceptance of religion, in general, and Buddhism, in particular, in our society, which previously was reluctantly recognized, and even denied as considered as a social consciousness that needed to be erased.

⁴. Extracted from the International Buddhism Workshop titled *Buddhism in the new era: Opportunities and Challenges*, in the Vietnamese Institute of Buddhist Studies and the Vietnamese Institute of Buddhism in Hồ Chí Minh city in July 2006.