

PRESIDENT HỒ CHÍ MINH WITH BUDDHISM

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Abstract: *During his life of a revolutionary activist, President Hồ Chí Minh had many deep relationships with Buddhism, not only in the field of ideologies, affection, but also in specific activities. Being clearly aware of Buddhist noble values, Hồ Chí Minh always respected to this religion. The paper deals with Hồ Chí Minh's activities connected with Buddhism since he was in Thailand in 1927, when he came back to Vietnam to lead the August Revolution in 1941, and especially after the success of the Revolution until his death in 1969. Being impressive of the deep relationship with Buddhism during his life of a revolutionary activist, many Buddhist monks and nuns had followed Hồ Chí Minh during the two resistant wars, contributed significantly for the Vietnam's national liberation and construction.*

Studying the revolutionary life of President Hồ Chí Minh we find that he has many close relations with Buddhism. These relations not only reflect on his ideology, sentiment but also on his concrete actions.

On ideological aspect, Hồ Chí Minh's ideology seems to be close to Buddhist doctrine. The essences of Buddhism are joyful and compassionate, no-self and self forgetfulness, saving some one from unhappiness and danger. Hồ Chí Minh wrote that "The main guideline of Buddhism aims at building an aesthetic, intimate, equal peaceful and prosperous life" ⁽¹⁾

With the thirst for liberation of people from miserableness, Crown Prince Siddharata left royal life to become Buddhist monk: "I do not want to live in palace. I do not want to live royal life to rule people. I do not enjoy happy life basing on the sweat of people's brow. I do not want to live in unjust society that I have witnessed. I decide to leave though I have to rush into the wind and dust. I try my best to find a religion to free mankind" ⁽²⁾

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¹ *The appeals of Hồ Chí Minh*. Volume 5. Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, 1958, p. 39.

² Thích Diệu Niệm. "Hồ Chí Minh's Ideology is Close to Buddhist Ideology", Internal journal, Studying Buddhism, Volume 1, Hanoi, 1991, p. 33.

As Crown Prince Siddharata, the patriotic youth Nguyễn Tất Thành, has grown up under the conditions when our country was invaded by French colonialism so he found that

In life, the bitters are legion

But none is better than the loss of freedom.

For this reason, Nguyễn Tất Thành tramped about abroad in search of a way to save the country in spite of hardship. “I would like to go abroad to make a study of France and other countries. After surveying them I should come back to help our compatriots” ⁽³⁾. Nguyễn Ái Quốc lived in Paris and he was encircled by French police inspectors but his ideal on saving his nation and people stood up without flinching: “I like political action so I am not afraid of death and prison. In the world, we have only one time to die why I am afraid of?” ⁽⁴⁾

2.500 years ago, Bhagava dreamed an equal society. He raised the law of society in his famous teaching “There is no caste in red blood. There is caste in tears. No new born baby has a stamp of tilca on forehead and neck lace on neck” ⁽⁵⁾. Buddha taught disciples that “Bhikkhu! you lead religious life because of happiness of people, peace and contentment of people, compassion, happiness and peace and contentment of all the monks and mankind” (Buddhist prayer) “Bhikkhu! Before and now I only say about sufferings and destruction of sufferings”(Buddhist prayer).

According to Hồ Chí Minh “All people are born to have equal right....All peoples are born equal, enjoy the right to happiness and freedom” ⁽⁶⁾. Hồ Chí Minh said that “In any time and in anywhere I only pursuit one aim that is what I should do for beneficialness to our country and people. When our country has not united, my compatriots have suffered misery I have not good appetite and good sleep”.

³ Trần Dân Tiên. *The Short Stories about Active Life of President Ho*, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 1970, p. 11.

⁴ Nguyễn Phan Quang. *Some Documents about the Activities of Nguyễn Ái Quốc in France 1917-1923*, Hồ Chí Minh City Publishing House, 1995, p. 47.

⁵ Võ Đình Cương. *Ánh Đạo Vàng*, The Institute of Buddhism, USA, 1987, p. 92-93.

⁶ Hồ Chí Minh. *Complete Works*, Volume 1, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, 1984, p. 1.

Buddhism thinks that man is the most excellent. According to Hồ Chí Minh “Workers and peasants are origins of revolution” ⁽⁷⁾ and “Charity and justice are people. In the sky there are nothing beautiful than service of people” ⁽⁸⁾.

In Buddhism, Bodhisattvas consider the sufferings of living beings as their sufferings. As long as sufferings of living beings continue they swear not to become Buddha.

Hồ Chí Minh wished that “I have only one desire, a most earnest desire - to achieve complete independence for our country, complete freedom for our people, and opportunities for all our countrymen to have adequate food and clothing and education” ⁽⁹⁾. According to the way of Buddhist speaking “Hồ Chí Minh is crystallization of compassion, intelligence and fearless. This crystallization leads living beings to attain Enlightenment and liberation. This crystallization helps living beings to change Svaha into Pure land and miserable life into happy life” ⁽¹⁰⁾

Hồ Chí Minh knew clearly lofty and beautiful values of Buddhism so he always respected Buddhism “The base and tradition of Indian philosophy is Buddhist ideal and scientific art of India have had spreaded out everywhere in many centuries” ⁽¹¹⁾. In 1958 Hồ Chí Minh visited India, he said “we are very glad to visit homeland of Buddha, the homeland of one of the oldest civilizations in the world” ⁽¹²⁾. Huy Cận poet wrote that “All his life Hồ Chí Minh always venerates and admires Gautama Buddha who founded Buddhism as well as the founders of great religions. Hồ Chí Minh realized that Gautama Buddha had felt pity for the fates of living beings and wanted to reject miserableness of human in the world” ⁽¹³⁾.

Hồ Chí Minh had many actions which were closely connected with Buddhism. According to Thailand Member of Parliament, Siphanon Vishit Vararon, in 1927 Hồ Chí Minh took part in revolutionary activity, at that time he built the largest Buddhist Hall in Phothisom pagoda, Udon province in North-East of Thailand. President Hồ

⁷ Hồ Chí Minh. *Complete Works*, Volume 2, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, 1984, p. 197.

⁸ Hồ Chí Minh. *Development the Progress-Seeking Spirit*, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, 1960, p. 62-63.

⁹ Hồ Chí Minh. *Complete Works*, Volume IV, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, 1984, p. 100.

¹⁰ Thích Đức Nghiệp. *Hồ Chí Minh - A Vietnamese Symbol in Vietnamese Buddhism*, Hồ Chí Minh City, Publishing House, 1995, p.318.

¹¹ Hồ Chí Minh. *Stories and Memoirs*, Literature Publishing House, Hanoi, 1985, p. 201.

¹² Hồ Chí Minh. *Ibid.* p. 208.

¹³ Cù Huy Cận. “*Hồ Chí Minh - A Great Cultural Celebrity, A Talented and Righteous Man in our Time*”, People Newspaper, September 1st, 1989.

Chí Minh mobilized overseas Vietnamese to take part in building the Hall and he preside over of building this Buddhist House. In this time Lokanukho pagoda (Bangkok) had been an active base of Hồ Chí Minh. Here, Superior Buddhist monk Thích Bình Lương helped Hồ Chí Minh with all his heart.

When our county achieved independence, Superior Buddhist monk Thích Bình Lương returned his country. President Hồ Chí Minh visited him when he was received medical treatment in Vietnam-USSR hospital. When Superior Buddhist monk Thích Bình Lương died, President Hồ Chí Minh sent a mourning wreath to his funeral. On the mourning wreath there were words “Paying respects to Superior Buddhist monk Thích Bình Lương - comrade Hồ Chí Minh”. Professor Trần Văn Giàu told that Hồ Chí Minh lived very simply and hardly as a monk when he took part in revolutionary activity in Thailand.

In 1941 Hồ Chí Minh went back his country, he lived in Pac Bo Mountain and forest with difficult condition but he drew a picture of Buddha, it was hung on cliff for grassroots to pay homage to the memory of Buddha on Tết occasion.

After the August Revolution in 1945 although Hồ Chí Minh was busy with may works he spent time in visiting Quán Sứ and Bà Đá pagodas. When talking to Buddhist followers, Hồ Chí Minh affirmed that: “Our government always respects religious liberty. Vietnamese Buddhism and Vietnamese nation are inseparable like a body and its shadow. I hope superior Buddhist monks, nuns and Buddhist followers actively realize spirit of Compassion, No-self, Self-forgetfulness in the cause of defense of nation and religion so all people live in independence, Freedom and Happiness” ⁽¹⁴⁾. According to Hồ Chí Minh, if we are able to do that we “imitate great mercy and great pity of Buddha” ⁽¹⁵⁾

Over long period of time from 1954 to his death (1969) President Hồ Chí Minh visited many pagodas and Buddhist organizations in the North. He was in contact with monks and Buddhists. On May 19th, 1960 while Superior Buddhist monk Thích Thanh Chân, head monk of Hương pagoda was preparing to get in the Presidency to wish Hồ Chí Minh longevity on the occasion of Hồ Chí Minh’s birthday, Hồ Chí

¹⁴ Thích Đức Nghiệp. *Hồ Chí Minh - A Vietnamese Symbol in Vietnamese Buddhism*, Hồ Chí Minh City, Publishing House, 1995.

¹⁵ *The Letter of Hồ Chủ tịch Send to Society of Vietnamese Buddhists*, August 30th, 1947.

Minh visited Hương pagoda at 5 am in that day. In Hương Pagoda, Hồ Chí Minh instructed local government to repair boats way and erect new bridges so Buddhists went to Hương pagoda easily.

When Ngô Đình Diệm government carried out the policy of religious discrimination and the scheme of national division in the South, Hồ Chí Minh called upon Buddhist monks and followers “Let’s help officers, carry out ardently all the works of our government, execute rightly the policy on respect for religious liberty, forbid America- Diem scheme of ethnic dissension, try our best in the struggle for national liberation and national unity” ⁽¹⁶⁾. Ngô Đình Diệm government carried out the policy of Buddhist destruction. In 1963 Ngô Đình Diệm government forbade our people to hang Buddhist flag on the occasion of Buddha’s birthday. The Buddhist monks and nuns in the South rose to struggle against Ngô Đình Diệm government fiercely.

In order to protest unjust and cruel policy of Ngô Đình Diệm government, Superior Buddhist Thích Quảng Đức poured gasoline all over his body and set himself alight on November 6th, 1963.

Hồ Chí Minh was extremely moved by extraordinary and brave sacrifice of Superior Buddhist Thích Quảng Đức. He wrote parallel sentences to pay his respects to Superior Buddhist Thích Quảng Đức:

“Vị pháp thiêu thân vạn cổ huy thiên nhật nguyệt

Lưu danh bất tử bách niên chính khí địa sơn hà”

(It means the extraordinary and brave sacrifice of Superior Buddhist Thích Quảng Đức will leave good name for along time).

In the small hours of August 18th, 1963, Ngô Đình Diệm carried out *Kế hoạch nước lũ* (it means *urgent plan*) to attack almost pagodas in the South. Then Ngô Đình Diệm put down ruthlessly the struggle movements of students and pupils in Sài Gòn which protested Diem’s policy of religious repression. On August 25th, 1963, a female student - Quách Thị Trang, was shot dead in Bến Thành market crossroad

¹⁶ *The appeals of Hồ Chí Minh*. Volume IV, Truth Publishing House Hanoi, 1958, p. 39.

(Sài Gòn). On August 28th, 1963, Hồ Chí Minh promulgated strict statement to condemn Ngô Đình Diệm authority that suppressed savagely Buddhist monks and nuns and terrorized professors, students in the South: “Recently, South people have suffered great misery, Ngô Đình Diệm government has burnt and destroyed pagodas, suppressed savagely Buddhist monks and nuns and Buddhist followers. Ngô Đình Diệm government has closed schools and arrested professors, students and pupils. Our people have hated his crimes. All the world peoples have protest Ngô Đình Diệm government, American progressive people are also dissatisfied with the actions of Ngô Đình Diệm government... Before that situation, South compatriots unite regardless workers, peasants, traders, religions to fight for democratic liberties and religious liberty”. President Hồ Chí Minh affirmed that the struggle of South people will certainly be successful: “Under the leadership of National Front for Liberation, the just struggle of South people with the support of peace loved people in the world will certainly be successful”. President Hồ Chí Minh expressed his deep gratitude to peoples in the world who supported the fight of Buddhist monks, nuns and followers against violent regime of Ngô Đình Diệm: “On behalf of Vietnamese people, I express heartfelt thanks to compatriots and governments of Buddhist countries, socialist countries, peace-loved people in the world, I thanks to American progressive people who condemned severely Ngô Đình Diệm government and supported South people with enthusiasm”⁽¹⁷⁾.

President Hồ Chí Minh thought highly the contributions and sacrifices of Buddhist monks, nuns and Buddhists in two resistances. In the letter that sent to 3rd Congress of Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Association, he wrote that “Formerly, Buddhist monks and nuns and Buddhist followers had deserved well of resistance, they have made their contributions to construction of the North and struggle for peaceful national reunification”. Superior Buddhist Thích Đôn Hậu (Linh Mụ pagoda, Huế) took part in war of resistance when South people and troops opened general offensive in Tết 1968. It was right for him to affirm that “Hồ Chí Minh’s knowledge is erudite. He not only gets good hold of patriotic history of Vietnamese Buddhism in the past but also knows patriotic actions of Vietnamese Buddhism at

¹⁷ “The Appeals of President Hồ Chí Minh about the Situation of South Vietnam at Present”, People Army Newspapers, August 8th, 1963, p.1.

present”⁽¹⁸⁾. Once meeting President Hồ Chí Minh when he visited India (1958), Mr. Srivalisnha, president of Society of Buddhist propagation in India stated his opinion “We have a deep respect for President Hồ Chí Minh who had left the splendor... As Asoka Emperor, a merciful Buddhist, President Hồ Chí Minh raised high ideal that is carried out by a man to be believed... President is revolutionary intellectuals to have a benevolent heart. We, Indian Buddhists, pride of you, a man of country which has had close connection on cultural and belief levels with India for more than two thousand years”⁽¹⁹⁾.

These above documents help you to understand more completely and clearly the close relation of Hồ Chí Minh and Buddhism in his process of revolutionary activities. These documents explain why in two wars of resistance Buddhist monks and believers followed the path which was chosen by President Hồ Chí Minh. Formerly, they had great contributions to the cause of national liberation and reunification of Vietnam. Now they have joined forces and relied on the whole people for the defense and building homeland so Vietnam has become “*ever more beautiful and ever more dignified as president Hồ Chí Minh once wished.* /.

¹⁸ *Uncle Hồ in Huế people's heart*, Huế City Committee of the Party.

¹⁹ *Hồ Chí Minh - National Hero, A Great Cultural Celebrity*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1990, p. 30.