

## HIẾU NGHĨA TÀ LƠN BUDDHISM - A NEW ENDOGENOUS RELIGION IN THE SOUTH VIETNAM

**Abstract:** *Established in the South in the early 20th century, after more than 100 years of existence, development (1915-2018), Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is a spiritual support for a part of Vietnamese and preserves the cultural diversity of the South. However, according to theory of new religious research, in the first 50 years, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is one of the new religion forms related to the endogenous religions in the South, Vietnam. Based on Functionalism and the comparative study of religion, this article clarifies the characteristics of the Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism, identifies it is a new religion in the endogenous religious line of Vietnamese community in the South.*

**Keywords:** *Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism; new religion; endogenous religion; South of Vietnam.*

### 1. New religions and new religions in the South Vietnam

In order to identify a new religion, researchers on religions agree on the criteria as follows: (1) New religions reflect major changes in the socio-cultural life that they make a group of people being hurt or unable to adapt to those changes; (2) New religions always have a new leader (guru)- the founder has the ability to attract and organize sects; (3) New religions always explain doctrine and precepts differently, even causing “a shock” to traditional culture and religion; (4) New religions are organized into small, relatively independent and unstable groups; (5) Church organization, ritual and worship system is simple, regularly adjusted to secular directions; (6) After a period of adjustment to adapt, be accepted by society, new religion is no longer new<sup>1</sup>.

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Based on the criteria mentioned above, we support the definition of a new religion in Vietnam by researchers of the Center for Religious Studies, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University, Ho Chi Minh City: “New religions are forms of organization and society with different teachings, rituals and beliefs; independence from normal and traditional religions. They reflect great changes in the social- cultural life and the spiritual needs of a group of people”<sup>2</sup>.

There was a new religious movement in the Vietnamese community from the second half of the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. These religions continually acculturated, inherited each other as a spiritual flow with common properties and characteristics such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Ông Đạo, Caodaism, and so forth. Some researchers stated that “these are salvation religions”<sup>3</sup>, “indigenous religions”<sup>4</sup>. In my opinion, “salvation” or “indigenous” is features of these religions. According to the principle of typology, with a broader perspective of human religious life and C. Patridge’s criteria of a new religion<sup>5</sup>, these religions are new forms of religion. However, they are originated from the traditional culture, beliefs and religions of the Vietnamese community in the South, so they are called the new endogenous religious line in the South. Based on criteria, definition, classification as mentioned above, I suppose that Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is a new form of the endogenous religions in the South Vietnam.

## **2. Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism - A new religion of the South**

### ***2.1. Context of establishment***

Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism founded by some “Ông Đạo” in Tà Lơn mountain (Cambodia - which was also the place where the monks cultivated and attained enlightenment) in 1915 and officially established this religion in 1921, at Tân Hội commune, Tân Hiệp district, Kiên Giang province. “Ông Đạo” include Đạo Lập - Ngọc Thanh - Ngọc Minh - Ngọc Đắc - Ngọc An<sup>6</sup>. Ngọc An is Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc An - the founder of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism. According to Nguyễn Xuân Hậu, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is (a branch)

originated from Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương of Tây An Đoàn Minh Huyền Buddha, an outstanding student of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương. Đạo Lập is the “ancestor” (ông Tổ) of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism<sup>7</sup>. Background of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism as well as natural, economic, political, cultural and social conditions, ethnic characteristics, beliefs and religions of the Southern region is just clarified in a deep research project. However, the most important factor leading to the great changes in the economic, cultural and social life of the Southern farmers was the policy of second colonial exploitation of French colonialism from after the First World War to the 30s of the twentieth century. The second colonial exploitation had a fast speed, a large scale and a strong impact on all social dimensions. In particular, the land policy of the French colonialism pushed the Southern farmers to misery because of taxation, land rent, coolies, land lost for plantations, farms and factories of French colonialists. This miserable situation led a farmer to work as a hired laborer for landlords or owners of rubber plantations. In my opinion, this is the greatest impact in the context of the transformation of Southern farmers that lead them to endogenous religions such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa and Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, etc. In addition, the factors of ecological environment, spiritual culture of the Vietnamese people in the South also affected belief in Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism.

## ***2.2. Founder of the religion***

Talking about the founder, who initiated of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism, “The founder Nguyễn Ngọc An (1889-1972) enlightened, opened religion of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism, propagated religion for 57 years. He was buried at An Bình Tự Hiếu Nghĩa Kiên Lương Temple”<sup>8</sup>. Nguyễn Ngọc An was a patriot who participated in national affairs, had the spirit of fighting against French colonialism, American imperialism and helped revolutionary. “He died in a bombardment of enemy aircraft, was granted the Second-class Resistance Medal by President Nguyễn Minh Triết in 2008”<sup>9</sup>. As the founder of religion, Professor Nguyễn Ngọc An was considered as a supernatural person by believers when he practiced enlightenedly on the sacred mountain

of Tà Lon where the messianic prophets appeared. He went down the mountain to propagate when he was enlightened (fully understood) the path of the three religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism)<sup>10</sup>. His supernatural power was expressed in faith, obedience and serious practice of his teachings of believers. The pervasive and charismatic power of the professor was also showed in the life of virtue, simplicity, sincerity, closeness to the community; believers always respected, trusted him, called him by his beloved names such as “thầy Bảy”, “Ông đạo Bảy”, “Đức giáo sư”. His lectures were seen as scriptures. He became the main object of worship in the temple and a good example of religious practice for believers of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism.

### ***2.3. Doctrine, rituals, church organization***

All teachings, rituals, canon law, church organization are based on the thoughts, poems and teachings by Nguyễn Ngọc An. They are circulated, disseminated and recorded in the scriptures of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism by followers<sup>4</sup>.

The meaning and practice of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism is different compared to tradition of Buddhism in Vietnam. If Buddhism advocates “Moksa” (deliverance, liberation) and “Compassion”, deliverance from “Raga (greed), Dvesha (aversion) and Moha (ignorance)” to attain “Avabodha” (knowledge, understanding) the highest idea of a monk, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism states that “Dharma, Filial piety, Nation (Phật pháp, Đạo pháp, Hiếu Nghĩa, Dân tộc) with the aim of Peace, Love, Compassion (An bình, Bác ái, Từ Tâm)”<sup>11</sup>.

*Dharma* is cultivating according to the Dharma, the humanitarian method of Avalokitesvara. The Dharma is the way of cultivating based on Buddhist discipline with Vietnamese customs and practices on the basis of Confucian ideology. *Filial piety* means thought, practice according to the virtue of being a person. *Nation* is a traditional cultural identity and customs of the ethnicity. *Peace, Love, Compassion* is fullness of being human, living full of the five cardinal virtues: Benevolence, Righteousness, Proper rite, Knowledge, Integrity (Nhân, Nghĩa, Lễ, Trí, Tín), humanity will be peaceful,

happy”<sup>12</sup>. It can be said that the explanation of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is practice, it promotes practices rather than study of Buddhism, it does not only base on Confucian foundation, but it also takes traditional culture and customs of the Vietnamese people as the core. Therefore, the idea of combining thought and teachings is a great difference compared to traditional Buddhism.

Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism also has a system of doctrines with view of the Universe, view of Human life, basic teachings, precepts and church organization, but it is simple and easy to understand for farmers. The view of the universe includes the tangible and the invisible world. The visible world is all things, the five elements of the life-and-death cycle of the Four Noble Truths and the Hades where enforces the punishment of retribution and samsara-eternal cycle of birth. “According to the seed that’s sown, So is the fruit you reap therefrom, Doer of good will gather good, Doer of evil, evil reaps”. The invisible world is the world of gods, Buddhas, Saints, and Fairy, the eternal realm<sup>13</sup>.

The view of Human life of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is Dharma, Filial piety, Peace, Love, Compassion (Phật pháp, Hiếu nghĩa, An bình, Bác ái, Từ tâm), in which Filial piety is the nucleus of the whole teachings. According to Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism, Filial piety is the inevitable principle in the Heaven and Earth, spreading throughout the Three Kingdoms: Heaven, Earth and Human beings. It is Filial piety to the Heaven (Hiếu Thiên); to the Earth (Hiếu Địa); to Humanbeings (Hiếu Nhân). Filial piety is expressed in the believers’ life in 7 criteria”<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, compared to Buddhism, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism has a much simpler and secular and ordinary doctrine. It has a different criterion from a common new religion, its ideology and doctrine is not contrary to the tradition of culture and belief, it advocates the preservation of identity, culture and spiritual values of the nation. This criterion can be clearly seen in the concept of “Righteousness” (Nghĩa). According to Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism, Righteousness has three principles: Righteousness to the Nation; Righteousness to

friends; Righteousness to humankind (Nghĩa với nước; Nghĩa với bạn; Nghĩa với người). “Righteousness to the Nation” means to be devoted to the nation; “Righteousness to friends” must truly believe in each other; “Righteousness to humankind” means make people admire the benevolence<sup>14</sup>.

Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism stated that “Righteousness” is shown in six criteria such as (1) Righteousness to the country means dedication to the nation, preservation sovereignty of the country; (2) Righteousness to monks means good behavior towards monks; (3) Righteousness to friends means do not betray friends; (4) Righteousness to relatives, parents (5) Righteousness to brothers means live in harmony; (6) Righteousness to neighbors in the hamlet”<sup>15</sup>.

The ideal of cultivating of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is human morality, because there are three great religions in the Heaven and Earth: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. However, when believers completely achieve human morality (đạo nhân luân), these three religions will be in bottom of their hearts<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism has three levels of cultivating: Highest level (cultivating follows Taoism - tu theo đạo Tiên); Middle level; Bottom level (humanitarian practice). Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism also has required conditions for new believers: learn by heart the Sutra of Savior (Kinh Cứu Khổ) and chant daily; have a basic understanding of the doctrine and direction of practice; voluntarily convert to religion. On the other hand, the purpose of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is cultivation to help the mind's concentration to reach wisdom. The religious practice of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism mainly prohibits of acts be contrary to human morality, bad habits and superstitions to help believers gain sincerity, goodness and beauty (chân, thiện, mỹ), so believers do not need to separate from society, it is necessary to comply with “Nhơn đạo”: Specifically, believers have four things to keep: (1) Faithful to the religion; (2) Following the precepts of the Buddha taught; (3) Doing good things, avoiding bad things; (4) With eight precepts and 10 commandments and twenty taboos<sup>17</sup>.

*In term of church organization*, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism does not organize a clear hierarchy, no dignitaries and has two levels: central and local levels. The highest organization is the Central Council consisting of 36 members with 5 Boards (the Management Board of the pagodas, the temples; the propaganda of the Doctrine Board; the Ritual Board; the administration Board; the Social Work Board; the Financial Board). Local Management Board of pagodas, temples has about from 7 to 16 members. Currently, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism has 9 pagodas, temples with 6,000 followers in some Southwest provinces such as An Giang, Kiên Giang, Đồng Tháp, Cần Thơ<sup>18</sup>. Local Management Board of pagodas, temples of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism are relatively independent, self-management and self-maintenance and followers in these worshipping facilities are groups of people having family and kinship relations<sup>19</sup>. Organization into small, independent groups of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is also a criterion of the new religion in general.

Based on the context of birth, the holy power of the founder (Đức Giáo chủ); the difference in advocacy, purpose, doctrine, rituals, practice and organization, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is considered as a new religious form.

### **3. Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism - A new endogenous religion of the South**

#### ***3.1. Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism - An endogenous religion of the Vietnamese in the South***

The “endogenous religion” a term used to refer to religions that appeared in the middle of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in the Vietnamese community in the South. These are religions that reflect the specific cultural and spiritual context of the South, a multi-ethnic and multi-religious land. At the beginning, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion was founded by Đoàn Minh Huyền (1807-1856), people called him Phật thầy Tây An. With the policy of “Studying Buddhism- self-cultivating” and practicing “Filial piety”, doing good deeds, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương brought a new wind of spirituality that was simple, easy to understand, to practice and to

cultivate at home for the farmers in the Southern region. Therefore, Phật thầy Tây An is considered as the founder of the indigenous religious line with cultural identity and values of the Vietnamese community in the South. After the establishment of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion was founded in Châu Đốc in 1867 by the monk Ngô Lợi - a disciple excelled in the spiritual practice and basic doctrine of Phật thầy Tây An. Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion has received more followers, expanded the scope of activities, set up many new villages and more clearly expressed the appearance of the endogenous religious line of the Vietnamese community in the Southern region. Promoting the spirit and identity of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion and Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion, appearance a series of Ông Đạo created the endogenous religious system of the South: Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Khất Sĩ; Đền religion in the Cấm mountain; Dừa religion in Cồn Phụng Bến Tre; Khùng religion in Cao Lãnh, Đồng Tháp; Nổi religion; Sáu religion, Tướng religion in An Giang, etc. These religions have the common characteristics and of the endogenous religions in the South Vietnam.

### ***3.2. Characteristics of religious tolerance***

The openness and religious tolerance of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is clearly shown through the policy of three religions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism; it is also the basis of teachings, canon law as well as cultivation contents of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism.

Religious fusion is a common phenomenon in human religious life, which is the harmony, mixing components, elements of many different beliefs and religions forming a synthetic religion. The phenomenon of Three religions fusion is a form of combining religion expressed specifically in East Asian countries and Vietnam. The Three religions fusion consists of three elements: Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and they are bound by local beliefs and folk culture. Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is also a form of Three religions fusion consisting of three components: Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and traditional beliefs and culture of the South Vietnam. Characteristics of the Three



Religions fusion in Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism expressed in worship: worshipping Buddha, Sages, Gods<sup>20</sup>.

In addition, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism also contains traditional local belief and culture of the Southern region.<sup>21</sup>. It can be said that Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism appreciate preservation the traditional culture and human morality demonstrating in the practice of ancestor worship, filial piety for parents, living in harmony with neighbors. In “Chiết Thánh đạo”, Mr. Nguyễn Văn An wrote “... Talking about the Three Teachings: Buddhism teaches how to cultivate the mind to become a Buddha. Taoism teaches how to train personality to become a Fairy. The Confucianism teaches loyalty, filial piety, contingency, righteousness (Trung, Hiếu, Tiết, Nghĩa)”<sup>22</sup>. Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism considers the Three Teachings is one with convergence in ethics, filial piety. Research on the other endogenous religions in the South, such as: Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion and Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Khất Sĩ, etc. have the characteristics of harmony, combination. Thus, it can be said that the openness and religious tolerance of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is also a common characteristic of the endogenous religions of Vietnamese people in the South.

### ***3.3. Characteristic of locality, ethnicity***

Characteristics of locality of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism are firstly expressed within the scope of religious activities. Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism has existed for nearly 100 years, however, religious activities and followers are still concentrated mainly in Kiên Giang province, Kiên Lương district is the center of religion. The propaganda of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is only within family and clan, so it does not develop as quickly as Hòa Hảo Buddhism and Caodaism. There are some temples in An Giang, Cần Thơ, Đồng Tháp<sup>17</sup>. Currently, the number of followers is about 6.000, all of them are the Vietnamese. On the other hand, language expressed in the doctrine, rituals are local language of Vietnamese people such as: “human morality” (nhân luân); “humanitarian” (nhân đạo); “Goodness” (tính thiện); “Five Constants” (tam cương, ngũ thường);

“câu bảy”<sup>18</sup>, etc. In addition, “speaking by poetry”, “reading by poetry”, “telling stories by poetry” (nói thơ, đọc thơ, kể chuyện bằng thơ) in the Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism teachings is also a characteristic of traditional culture and beliefs of Vietnamese people in the Southern region. It helps believers to understand, remember easily implement<sup>19</sup>. We also see this characteristic in comparison with other endogenous religions of Vietnamese people such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, etc. It can be said that it is one of the characteristics of the endogenous religions of the Vietnamese in the South.

### ***3.4. Characteristic of popularity***

Derived from ecological environment, spiritual culture, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion and Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism express the popularity in religious practice, combination between the religion and life (studying Buddhism, self-cultivating), in which the filial piety is the center, the precepts are not strict, rituals are simple, everyone can participate, easily practice. On the other hand, Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion and Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism have no dignitaries, so there is no distinction or hierarchy in the community of followers. All believers are equal, behave like a family. Therefore, there is no difference between people who cultivate at temple and people who cultivate at home.

The popularity of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism is also expressed through propagandized methods, easy to remember by “Poetry”. In the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a movement of telling stories by poetry, reading poems and literature with rhyming in the Southern region and it was favored by people. According to Sơn Nam, a writer, the inhabitants of Six Southern provinces called it “Bổn thơ”. This is also a common feature of the endogenous religions of the Vietnamese people in the South. The way of lecturing, teaching, and preaching of Professor Nguyễn Văn An as well as the other founders such as Phật Thầy Tây An, Ngô Lợi is “Poetry” (Bổn thơ). The rules of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lon Buddhism are also taught by poetry. The Hiếu

Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism's scriptures, exception the poems in the book "Religious History" (Lịch sử tôn giáo), most of the book "Discussion on the Dharma: Questions and Answers" (Bàn luận đạo pháp vấn đáp) is poems such as how to dress and to cultivate, vegetarianism, ancestral worship, etc., Two books "Chiết Thánh Đạo" and "Canon law" (Luật Đạo) are poems that easy to remember.

In addition to propaganda, teaching followers with popular poetry, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism used the popular form in the ancient South as "saying Confucianism" (nói Nho). These are the verses, the ideas are considered as the truth to be taken from the book of the "Ancient Sages" (Thánh hiền), the Confucians used them to teach morality. This form is also used by Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism to teach believers, especially the "Human morality" (Nhân đạo) cultivation. The statements and ideas of Confucianism were often cited and interpreted as the key to teach followers to practice "Human morality". It can be seen in the book "Chiết Thánh Đạo" to cultivate "Human morality", there are always three parts in the same content to convey or teach: ideas of Confucianism, interpretation them in Vietnamese language, the poems, the verses (that have the rhyme easily to remember). Perhaps, this is the most convenient way for people to understand this religion and religion can be accessed to meet the spiritual needs of the public at that time.

A prominent feature of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is its close kinship relationship. Research on Management Boards of large worshiping facilities such as Tiên An Tự; An Bình Tự showed that the managers of these worship places are relatives. For example, Mr. Nguyễn Văn Bảy, the manager of An Bình Tự, is also the Head of the Council (the leader of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism at present who collects, compiles and is in charge of printing documents on history, scriptures, teachings of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism. He is a grandchild of the founder Nguyễn Văn An. Mr. Phùng Ngọc Lợi, the managers of Tiên An Tự, is grandchild in law of the founder Nguyễn Văn An. In addition, a number of members in the Boards such as the propaganda of the Doctrine Board; the Ritual Board; the administration

Board; the Social Work Board; the Financial Board are family members or relatives<sup>23</sup>. This feature maintains and strengthens the durability and solidity the religious life and activities of the community.

### Conclusion

Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is a new endogenous religion in the South. It has inherited, promoted the doctrinal thought of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương religion, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa religion and it was based on the combination Three Religions with the traditional culture and beliefs in the locality. The policy of taking “Filial piety” as the center of the doctrine and the nucleus of studying the Buddhism, cultivation, Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism has appreciated the cultural and spiritual values of the South; preserved and promoted the Southern cultural and belief traditions. It has become one of the reliable spiritual bases of a part of Southern farmers. The teachings are simple, easy to understand, canon law is suitable for the Southern farmers. Although Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism is a local religion, is not widespread, it has been existed for a century, attracted working classes with the number of 6,000 followers<sup>28</sup>, it is not a small number compared to some religions that appeared in the South later. Researching and clarifying the characteristics of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism in relation to the new endogenous religions in the South such as Đạo Đền (Phật Trùm) in Cẩm Mountain; Đạo Dừa in Cồn Phụng, Bến Tre; Đạo Khùng in Cao Lãnh, Đồng Tháp; Đạo Nổi; Đạo Sáu; Đạo Tưởng in An Giang, etc. We need a deep research on historical, doctrinal, ritual dimensions and the relationship of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism and social life and other religions in the region in order to more understand, clearly identify the nature, functions and features of Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn Buddhism. /.

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