# Buddhist Review Tricycle examines the situation of Buddhism in Vietnam

PARIS, 12 September 2008 (IBIB) - The International Buddhist Information Bureau is pleased to introduce the following article by Jared Roscoe, **“Buddhism, Under Vietnam’s Thumb”**, published online by the Tricycle Buddhist Review in August 2008. The article discusses two different approaches on how to tackle religious repression in Vietnam. On the one hand is the pro-government approach of Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, who has made three visits to Vietnam in recent years. On the other is the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), with its movement for religious freedom, democracy and human rights.

**Tricycle** is a New-York based quarterly devoted to presenting Buddhist perspectives to a Western readership. Launched in 1991, it is now the leading journal of Buddhism in the West, with a circulation of 100,000. For three consecutive years, Tricycle has received the prestigious “Folio Award for Best Spiritual Magazine”. This article can also be found on **IBIB/Quê Me’s website**. There is also a **Vietnamese translation**.

---

## Buddhism, Under Vietnam’s Thumb

**Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam both want the state of religious repression to change. They have very different ideas of how to help.**

By Jared Roscoe

After nearly forty years in exile, the world's second-most-famous Buddhist, Thich Nhat Hanh, returned to Vietnam in early 2005. The international excitement generated by his homecoming—the thousands of Vietnamese who flocked to see him speak, the extensive headlines—overshadowed the criticism that also accompanied his return: strong, unequivocal criticism by the Buddhist church that was Thich Nhat Hanh's spiritual home decades ago. The leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), the traditional independent Vietnamese Buddhist organization that has been under a decades-long ban in Vietnam, attacked the renowned monk, whose books and teachings have influenced generations of western Buddhists. Since the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the subsequent installation of a totalitarian communist government, Vietnam has been one of the world's most egregious violators of basic human rights—including the freedom to practice one's religion. The UBCV argued that the Vietnamese government would sell Thich Nhat Hanh's visit to the international community as a tacit endorsement of the piecemeal reforms undertaken to show improvement in religious freedoms and human rights. Many saw the reforms as unsubstantial, including the Nobel Peace Prize-nominated leaders of the UBCV: Thich Huyen Quang, who passed away in July 2008, and human rights-advocate Thich Quang Do, who has been under house arrest for over twenty years.

Thich Nhat Hanh saw his visit as a chance to help heal divisions in his homeland, decrease tensions between the communist government and Buddhism, and encourage the practice of Buddhism among the youth of Vietnam. *"This meets the needs of Vietnamese people. It's time for reconciliation, for the real unification of the country,"* said Phap An, a monk and top aide to Thich Nhat Hanh. The UBCV, on the other hand, understood Thich Nhat Hanh's visit as politically naïve and even "un-Buddhist." The UBCV's international spokesman, Vo Van Ai, declares that collaboration with the Vietnamese government has the effect of *"helping Hanoi to bury Buddhism alive… reducing a 2,000-year tradition of independent Vietnamese Buddhism to a mere political tool of the Communist Party, and reducing Buddhism's great philosophy of salvation to a litany of quasi-superstitious rites."*

Tibet. The word summons thoughts of a Buddhist homeland, the recent and persistent repression by the Chinese government, and the perpetual exile of the Dalai Lama. And with the recent violence and political unrest in Burma, with the powerful images of the peaceful defiance of Buddhist monks, Burma has become a synonym for the repression of Buddhists, too. But Vietnam? For many Westerners, the associations surrounding Vietnam still revolve around domino theory, communism, and the Vietnam War. Some can still recall the stirring images of self-immolation undertaken by Buddhist monks during the Vietnam War.

Absent from Vietnam today are the wide-scale protests of Burma and Tibet. There are no powerful images of robed monks marching through the streets of Saigon because

the government has limited the number of monks allowed to practice. The oppression in Vietnam is subtler, yet just as real. Since its inception a decade ago, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (UCIRF), the bipartisan governmental agency charged with monitoring religious freedom around the world, has consistently placed Vietnam in the ranks of familiar human rights-violators such as Burma, China, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia.

The history of Buddhism in Vietnam is inextricably tied to its political history as a territory under Chinese control for many centuries. This occupation, and contact with the Khmer in the southwest, led to a remarkably diverse religious tradition in Vietnam, one in which Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism have coexisted and mixed for centuries. One of Vietnam's unique homegrown religious traditions, Cao Dai, is a syncretic blend of many of the world's major religions and indigenous practices. (Independent sects of Cao Dai's also face harassment and discrimination from the Vietnamese government.) At many times in the history of Vietnam, religion has played an important role in politics. During Vietnam's golden era in the tenth through fifteenth centuries, Buddhism flourished and many top political advisers were widely respected Buddhists. In the early fifteenth century, however, the Ly dynasty pushed Buddhism aside, forcing those Buddhists who failed competitive civil service exams into lay life. Emperor Le Thai To submitted monks to surveillance and prohibited the construction of Buddhist temples without his authorization. Then, during the civil war of the sixteenth century, the Nguyen dynasty used Buddhism to consolidate Vietnam through popular measures such as the construction of new Buddhist temples.

Buddhism continues to be intimately linked to social and political life. A close associate of Thich Nhat Hanh accused UBCV of hiding "flags of the old regime" of South Vietnam, implying that the UBCV's mission is political and not spiritual. Yet it seems impossible to separate the political from the spiritual when it comes to daily practice. Vo Van Ai responds, *"Practicing Buddhism means implementing Buddhist teachings in one's daily life. This involves (a) developing one's ultimate knowledge to combat ignorance and (b) taking action to save sentient beings from suffering. If one lives these two principles to the full, there is no frontier between faith and politics."*

Indeed, one concept for which Thich Nhat Hanh is particularly well known is "engaged Buddhism," which is the application of wisdom gleaned from meditation and Buddhist teachings to help alleviate suffering in the world, whether political, economic, or social. "Mahayana Buddhism encourages engagement at every level," explains Vo Van Ai. *"This is not a modern interpretation. Early Vietnamese Buddhist sutras such as the Luc Dô Tâp Kinh (Book of Six Ways of Liberation) dating back to the second century A.D., taught these principles of individual engagement: 'When the Boddhisattva hears the cries of his people, he must set aside his own troubles and throw himself into the combat against tyranny, whereby saving the people from suffering.'"* We also must

keep in mind the bodhisattva, who having attained a level of enlightenment, postpones nirvana with the commitment to help all other sentient beings. Vo Van Ai describes the example of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, *"who descended into Hell to save all those in torment and pledged to stay there and renounce becoming a Buddha until the very last person had been saved."*

Today, the Vietnamese government prohibits independent practice of Buddhism; only state-sanctioned Buddhism is allowed. While people are now allowed to attend a Buddhist temple, perform rituals, and burn incense, the intellectual and emotional heart of Buddhism has been cut out by the Vietnamese government. In Vietnam, if you practice the ethical core of Buddhism—right speech, right action, and right livelihood—you will likely end up in jail for *"propagandizing against the state."* The Vietnamese Constitution declares that an individual should have the freedom to worship as one chooses. In practice, this freedom is significantly limited. The Vietnamese government is careful not to allow the growth of centralized, organized religions that could serve as a challenge to the authority of the Communist Party. The Vietnamese government has made the major religions in Vietnam a wing of the Communist Party. Now, you can practice your beliefs—unless you happen to believe in a different path to enlightenment than the one the government offers; or if, for example, you believe that you have a duty to speak out against unlawful government seizures of peasant land, or a duty to participate in a local citizen-organized effort to alleviate poverty or flood damage. The appearance of Buddhism is intact, but the free practice of Buddhism in everyday life outside of the temple is limited. Protests against the official government monopoly on Buddhism, including peaceful demonstrations petitioning for the recognition of Buddhist organizations, have been met with strong resistance and trumped-up charges. In 2007, ten ethnic Khmer monks peacefully seeking independence from state-sanctioned Buddhism were derobed and detained. To name one of many instances of persecution of UCBV members, in 2006 a UCBV leader in Khanh Hoa Province, according the U.S. State Department, *"faced severe harassment [and] reportedly was forced out of the pagoda she founded"* for her association with the banned UCBV. USCIRF Commissioner Leonard Leo, in his testimony before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in late 2007, stated, *"[A]mong the Buddhists, peaceful demands for independence are treated as a threat to government control. In addition, peaceful expression of views or demonstrations for greater religious freedom—and the legal and political reforms needed to ensure it—are treated as a challenge to the government's authority."*

True to the UBCV's predictions in 2005, the state-controlled Vietnam News Agency issued a statement trumpeting the long-exiled monk's return: *"Thich Nhat Hanh praises Vietnam's open-door policy on religious beliefs."* Not long after Thich Nhat Hanh's visit, the United States government lifted the designation of Vietnam as violator of religious freedom due to perceived improvements in religious freedom in

Vietnam—despite the opposition of the USCIRF and many members of Congress. Washington then normalized trade relations with Vietnam and cleared the path for Vietnam to join the World Trade Organization—a longstanding economic goal for the country. Since then, the direction of human rights reforms in Vietnam, once seen by some as improving, has reversed itself. *"Now we have a situation where Vietnam has obtained the sought after trade benefit, but continues to abuse human and religious rights of its citizens who are peaceful democracy advocates or who wish to worship as their beliefs dictate,"* says Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren (D-San Jose), co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam. *"The Bush Administration surrendered the most effective tool America had for obtaining compliance with internationally recognized human rights."*

At the outset of his 2005 trip, Thich Nhat Hanh explained to Agence French Presse that he and his group *"want to listen carefully to understand the reality."* His aim is to interact directly with all sides of the debate. *"Our policy,"* he continued, *"is to listen to everyone, the Buddhists who are not happy and the governmental agents who are facing difficulties. Sometimes, one needs months to sit down and talk."* But Vo Van Ai and the UBCV do not see how reconciliation is possible with a brutal regime. At the recent World Movement for Democracy's 5th Assembly in Kyiv, Vo Van Ai invoked Mahatma Gandhi, saying, *"If you see a madman attack someone with a knife, you must seek not to kill the madman, but to remove the knife from his hands."* He elaborated further, saying, *"The UBCV's engagement for human rights is simply a positive interpretation of the Five Precepts. UBCV Buddhists promise not to kill. But when Vietnam arbitrarily puts its citizens to death, they oppose state repression. They promise not to lie, but when Hanoi stifles free speech, muzzles the media, and imprisons journalists who speak the truth, Buddhists engage in the battle for freedom of expression and the press."* Thich Nhat Hanh continues his popular tours in Vietnam—most recently in May 2008—accompanied by many headlines but few stories about the repression of human rights.

For its part, UBCV continues its struggle to promote religious freedom and human rights in Vietnam, knowing full well that its actions draw the ire of the Vietnamese government. In 1995, for example, Thich Quang Do was sentenced to five years in prison for organizing a UBCV rescue mission for flood victims. The Vietnamese government does not officially allow the UBCV to operate, but the UBCV organizes local chapters that pursue humanitarian, educational, and informational activities in poor areas of the country. Each time a new chapter is set up, the UBCV sends a letter of notification to the local arm of the Vietnamese government. The Vietnamese government responds by kicking monks out of their pagodas and harassing local Buddhists and board members of the UBCV, threatening their jobs and organizing Soviet-style "denunciation" sessions. *"There is no such thing as 'dissidence-lite,'"* insists Vo Van Ai. Local sections of the UBCV act as a skeleton form of civil society,

which Vo Van Ai believes will be a “vehicle [for] the people’s demands for greater freedom and human rights.”

Despite pressure from the Vietnamese government, the UBCV has been able to bring relief aid to flood victims, support farmers and peasants expelled from their lands, and inform people of their rights by distributing Vietnamese translations of key international conventions. Thich Quang Do helped the UBCV start a microcredit initiative to help Buddhists and others in financial trouble because of their activism. Undoubtedly, the Vietnamese government will continue to suppress the UBCV and religious freedom because they see the threat that an informed public would pose to their oppressive rule. *“At the bottom line, in Vietnam, like in any other dictatorship, there is no easy way to advocate human rights without exposing oneself (and one’s family) to reprisals,”* says Vo Van Ai. Nevertheless, *“the commitment of every Buddhist to ‘right speech’ is not a rule that one can bend to live a quiet life. A Buddhist who holds convictions must be ready to take the consequences.”*

***Jared Roscoe*** *attends New York University School of Law and blogs for No Record Press*

http://www.tricycle.com