

Freedom from Fear : Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang issues Vesak Message to Buddhists in Vietnam - UBCV leaders Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do hold new talks in Ho Chi Minh City

In his traditional Message to Vietnamese Buddhists on the 2547th Anniversary of the Vesak (Birth of Buddha) on 15th May 2003, the Most Venerable **Thich Huyen Quang**, Patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) has launched a pressing appeal to monks, nuns and lay-followers to free themselves from fear in order to overcome injustice and *“rescue our people and humanity from the terrible disasters that confront them”*.

86-year-old Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang, who is still under *de facto* house arrest despite a landmark meeting with Prime Minister Phan Van Khai on April 2nd 2003, told Buddhists that freedom from fear was the essence of Lord Buddha’s teachings delivered over 2,500 years ago. *“Buddhism is the doctrine of liberation and enlightenment, the path towards absolute knowledge...”*. *“But how can we fulfil Buddha’s teachings of salvation if we are crushed by innumerable obstacles, oppressed and intimidated?”* ... *“By developing Fearlessness (Intrepidity), we mobilize all our resources to free others and help them confront the dangers and upheavals of society. Liberating humankind from fear means realizing to the very full the spirit of absolute knowledge, which has deeply impregnated Vietnamese Buddhism over the past 2,000 years”*.

Fearlessness, explains Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, is part of the concept of Buddhist “charity” which entails three kinds of offerings, all aimed at liberating humankind. By offering humanitarian aid, food or medicine, we can liberate others from poverty and sickness. By offering knowledge and fighting disinformation, we can liberate them from ignorance. By offering our wholehearted commitment to protect the truth, what is right, to promote happiness and welfare, we can liberate them from suffering. These three actions, rooted in the spirit of Fearlessness, constitute the ultimate offering – the offering of freedom from fear. The Buddhist will brave any danger, even that of losing his/her life, to protect Buddhism, justice and the truth, and this spirit of sacrifice inspires others to face violence and oppression with unshakeable courage.

The UBCV Patriarch noted the central importance of Absolute Knowledge in today’s society of high technology and the knowledge-led economy. *“2547 years after Lord Buddha discovered the Path to Absolute Knowledge, the world acknowledges that the key to solving social injustice, inequality, conflicts and hatred is Absolute Knowledge,*

nothing else... No weapon is more effective than Absolute Knowledge to liberate human beings from social injustice and deliver them from ignorance..” All Vietnamese Buddhists, he said, have the duty “to practice and spread the doctrine of Absolute Knowledge within every individual, throughout the whole country, and across the globe – thus, Vietnamese Buddhists may realize their mission to extinguish suffering on our earth”.

I The Vesak Message arrives at a time when UBCV Patriarch **Thich Huyen Quang** is holding important talks with his Deputy Venerable **Thich Quang Do**, the U.S. Consul General and top government officials in Ho Chi Minh City for the first time since he was sent into internal exile in the central province of Quang Ngai in 1982.

On **Monday 12th May** at 8.00 a.m., Venerable Thich Huyen Quang held an important meeting with Venerable Thich Quang Do at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery where he has been held incommunicado since June 2001 for launching an *“Appeal for democracy in Vietnam”*. This is the third time the two popular UBCV leaders have met to discuss UBCV affairs since Thich Huyen Quang arrived in Ho Chi Minh City on May 2nd 2003. Their first meeting was on May 5th, and they met a second time last Friday (May 9th).

Venerable Thich Huyen Quang told International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB) Director Vo Van Ai by telephone yesterday that he intended to spend one or two days at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery before returning to Binh Dinh Province. However, it is unclear whether the authorities will accept his decision. Yesterday, as he set out for the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery at 7.00 a.m. in a private car, he was stopped by Security Police and Religious Board officials who insisted on escorting him in an official car. Thich Huyen Quang’s two previous visits to the UBCV Deputy took place without any interference by government officials or Police.

During his talks with Thich Quang Do on May 9th, Venerable Thich Huyen Quang discussed the meeting he had had two days earlier (on May 7th) with Le Thanh Hai, Chairman of the Ho Chi Minh People’s Committee. The UBCV Patriarch told Vo Van Ai that the meeting with Saigon’s top Communist official had been cordial. Thich Huyen Quang reminded Le Thanh Hai of the government’s systematic persecution of the UBCV, and asked what crime the UBCV had committed to merit such ruthless repression. Mr. Hai declined to comment. Venerable Thich Huyen Quang then recalled the recent promise of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai to *“gradually solve the problems”* facing UBCV Buddhists. He stressed that the UBCV had been persecuted and banned for the past three decades, and was indeed still outlawed by the regime. UBCV clergy and followers needed time to meet together and review their internal structures, he said. Mr Hai replied : *“Reorganization is an internal Buddhist problem. We have no objection to that”*.

During their discussions, the UBCV leaders agreed on the need to review UBCV structures, but decided to postpone this until after June 1st 2003, when Venerable Thich Quang Do will have finished his 2-year “administrative detention” sentence.

I The two monks also discussed what concerns they would put forward to the U.S. Consul General, Ms Emi Yamauchi, who was to visit Venerable Thich Huyen Quang on the same day (May 9th at 4.00 p.m.) at the An Quang Pagoda, headquarters of the State-sponsored VBC in Ho Chi Minh City. Venerable Thich Huyen Quang asked Ms Yamauchi to convey the UBCV’s warm thanks to the American government and people for their tireless campaigns for the release of detained UBCV clergy and followers. Answering the U.S. Consul General’s inquiries into the significance of his recent meeting with the Vietnamese Prime Minister, Thich Huyen Quang said he had appreciated the opportunity for dialogue with the authorities. However, the UBCV was determined to remain independent of political control, and would never become the instrument of any political power. Specifically, he told Ms Yamauchi that the UBCV intended to call on the government to return the **Viet Nam Quoc Tu Pagoda**, which was the UBCV’s headquarters in Saigon before 1975, and allow UBCV dignitaries full freedom to meet and discuss the future of Buddhism without official interference. He asked the U.S. Consul General to help the UBCV retrieve its right to freedom of expression, and the right to meet openly with foreign diplomats and international organizations to discuss issues of Buddhism and religious freedom in Vietnam.