

Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in Norway holds International Conference on Peace through Human Development

I Spiritual leaders, scholars, legislators and human rights activists from Asia and Europe met in Oslo, Norway on 5 May 2007 at an International Conference on "**Peace through Human Development**" organized by Venerable Thich Tri Minh, Superior monk of the Khuong Viet Temple and Head of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in Norway.

Reflecting on ways to "*create a peaceful world through working for justice, sustainable development, non-violent resolution of conflicts and promotion of human rights*", speakers included Dr. Vachaspati Upadhyaya, Vice Chancellor of the Sanskrit University in New Delhi, India ; Dr. S. Ratnayaka, Senior Lecturer at the University of Peredeniya, Sri Lanka ; Dr. Bongot Sitthipol, President of Daen Mahamongkol Meditation Centre, Thailand ; Venerable Mahinda Deegalle, Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and Senior Lecturer at Bath Spa University, England ; Dr. Uttam Baura, senior Consultant Psychiatrist and Director of Clinical Research at the University Hospital Bichat-Claude Bernard, France ; Mr. Eigil Lothe, President of the Buddhist Federation of Norway. Other keynote speakers included the Hon. Dagfinn Høybråten, prominent Norwegian MP and leader of the Christian Democratic Party, Tom Kleppesto, Board Member of the Rafto Foundation, Ms Daniela Rapisarda, Coordinator of the Norwegian Ecumenical Peace Platform of the Christian Council of Norway and Vo Van Ai, International Spokesman of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV).

The Conference was attended by Norwegian, Vietnamese and international participants, many scholars and personalities, Buddhist monks from Norway, Sweden and from chapters of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in Europe, Australia and the USA, including Venerable Thich Phuoc Nhon and Sister Bao Truong of the UBCV in Australia-New-Zealand ; Venerable Thich Giac Dang from the Vietnamese American Unified Buddhist Congress in the USA and Venerable Thich Hanh Tan of the UBCV in Germany.

Venerable Thich Tri Minh

In his Opening speech, Venerable **Thich Tri Minh** explained the aims of this Conference and his expectations on its outcome ;

"The Lotus Sutra, or Saddharma-Pundarîka teaches, "Our world of turmoil is like a burning house". Nothing could be more true today, when the very mention of global warming is enough to ignite fear in all our hearts. Fear of heat waves, of drought and atmospheric pollution. Fear of the rising level of the oceans, which could drown vast areas of our five continents and cause great cities like New York or Bangkok to disappear.

"All these are natural calamities. But alongside them, we also have "human" calamities, those perpetrated by mankind against mankind. Caused by ideology, they lead to clashes between civilizations or oppressive authoritarian regimes. These human calamities are the root causes of war and global terrorism in our world today.

"Our contemporary world is indeed a "world of turmoil", exactly like a burning house. Needless to say, Norway, the peaceful country which hosts this Conference, and its Scandinavian neighbours are exceptions to this rule. They are not like "burning houses", because their governments and spiritual leaders constantly care for each citizens' spiritual, material and social welfare. However, when we look beyond these shores to the Middle East, Asia, or other developing nations, it is clear that the "world of turmoil" is very present still.

"The case of Vietnam, my own tiny country, is but one example. The Vietnam War ended in 1975, but for the past 32 years, the Vietnamese people have lived in poverty and fear, deprived of all their freedoms and ruled by a one-Party State. In Vietnam, the regime cares only about the prerogatives and privileges of the Communist Party, but it does not care for the welfare and happiness of the people. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, founded over 2,000 years ago and adhered to by 80% of the population, suffers continuous persecution, and is banned from exercising religious activities. In the Western press and media, almost all the articles we read about Vietnam describe its economic development. But they rarely mention human development, nor express concern that Vietnamese people do not yet enjoy the fundamental human rights enshrined in the United Nations human rights treaties.

"In our "world of turmoil, just like a burning house", what can we do as individuals, and what can the world community do to extinguish this blazing inferno ? Coming from such a small nation as Vietnam, I am helpless to reply. This is why I decided to take the initiative of inviting spiritual leaders, academics, politicians, and specialists to

examine these questions here in Oslo at this International Conference on "Peace through Human Development" today.

"Materialists argue that spiritual needs are not important. They claim that developing the economy will inevitably bring freedom, democracy and human rights. I do not agree with this theory, for when I look around the world, I see no country where economic development alone has brought happiness and security to its people.

"As a simple Buddhist monk, I believe that spiritual development is vital to elevate the human conscience, and that human development is crucial to bring peace and enlightenment to humankind. I hope that this International Conference will find solutions to the grave problems of our times, and respond to the aspirations and hopes of all those who live in poverty, suffering or under oppression in our world.

"Because I have the good luck to live in Norway, home of the celebrated Nobel Peace Prize, it is my dream to build a Stupa in Oslo dedicated to Peace. It will be called the Lotus Stupa, and the foundation stone will be laid this year. As you all know, in ancient times, Stupas were built in India to contain the relics of the Buddha. Later, on the initiative of King Ashoka in the 3rd Century BC, Stupas were erected everywhere as symbols of the Dharma, of Compassion and of Peace. It in this spirit that the Lotus Stupa will be built in the grounds of Khuong Viet Temple in Oslo. In recognition of this International Conference on Peace through Human Development, organized for the very first time here today, I ask permission to engrave the names of the eminent speakers in the Stupa, so that your names will go down in posterity.

"On behalf of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam in Norway and as Head of the Organizing Committee of this International Conference on Peace through Human Development, I warmly thank all eminent spiritual leaders, academics and personalities who have travelled from Asia and Europe to take part in this event, and kindly welcome all participants at this Conference today".

Dagfinn Høybråten MP and P. Faulkner
Y Lan, Chairperson

I Prominent **Norwegian MP Dagfinn Høybråten**, leader of the Christian Democratic Party stressed the need for solidarity between people of all faiths in order to promote human development :

"To promote this noble cause of human development, education and enlightenment, a personal commitment is necessary. And I must say I highly respect the great contribution of the Buddhist position and practice in this respect. As you may know, I am a follower of Jesus. Jesus said : "Blessed be the Peacemakers". So I feel a strong alliance with you, for I am aware of the great emphasis Buddhism places on the sanctity of life. I highly appreciate the contribution of Buddhism to religious dialogue, both in this country and internationally.

"As you know, I am President of the Christian Democratic Party in this country. For me and for my Party, protection of freedom of religion is a high priority. This is a universal right that all citizens should benefit from, and we should protect it together. Whether you are a Buddhist, a Christian, a Muslim or a Jew, your freedom to practice religion should be the same around the world".

Mr. Høybråten expressed his admiration for the actions of UBCV Deputy leader Thich Quang Do in the movement for democracy in Vietnam :

"You all know the Buddhist monk Thich Quang Do. He has not only the respect and support of Buddhists all over the world, he has my respect and support too. Thich Quang Do has spent a total of 25 years in detention, and many long years under house arrest. But his moral strength is impressive, it's inspiring, and he continues the struggle. As you know, last year he was awarded the highly respected Rafto Prize by the Rafto Foundation in Bergen, Norway. That was a decision I supported very strongly. But he deserves even higher support and respect. For this reason, I have used my privilege as a member of the Norwegian Parliament to nominate Thich Quang Do as a candidate for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize. This not only an expression of support for one person. It is an expression of support for all Vietnamese who are fighting for a peaceful transition to democracy. And it is an act to show the solidarity between people of different faiths. We stand together in the defense of Human Rights, the defense of freedom of religion. We stand together in the fight for reconciliation and peace.

"Some people see religion as a problem and a source of conflict, and it certainly is when it is misused. I see religion as a great source of human development, a moral

commitment, and a help to focus society not only on economic growth and progress, but on morality, on values, on virtues. They are so important, for these are the things that bind people together."

Pr. Vachaspati Upadhyaya

I **Professor Vachaspati Upadhyaya**, Vice Chancellor of the Sanskrit University in New Delhi, India, stressed the importance of spirituality as the foundations of human development : :

"The problems that threaten life on earth today were produced collectively. They affect us collectively. And we must act collectively to change them. Despite political divisions, the world is one, whether we like it or not. In this global world, our ability to bring peace and development depends on our united efforts. That is why we are all gathered at this Conference today to address this crucial question.

"What we need today is a spiritual view of the Universe. I believe that human development should not be reduced only to the physical level. It should also consist of a spiritual level, an emotional level, an intellectual level. Economy alone cannot bring human development".

Dr Mahinda Deegalle

I **Dr. Mahinda Deegalle**, Sri Lankan Buddhist monk, Senior Lecturer in the Study of Religions at the University of Bath, England, posed the concrete problem of Sri Lanka, where a violent conflict raging between the majority of Buddhists and the ethnic Tamil minority has caused the deaths of over seventy thousand people. Both sides want peace, but each side is afraid of losing their identity, their interests, their integrity if they give in. Norway has played a leading role in seeking a peace solution, but has failed to bring both sides to make concessions. Venerable Deegalle concluded with a question that raises a fundamental challenge to all Buddhists today :

"The concept of peace in Buddhism is primarily a notion of inner peace and harmony. Attaining inner peace is an individual effort, an internal struggle. The conflict in Sri Lanka today sets a real challenge to Buddhists. How can we translate this notion of inner peace and put it into practice to solve external problems, such as the ethnic conflict with the Tamils ? How can one influence others with one's own inner peace ? How can you share this inner harmony with extremist groups, and use it to transform them ? Is Buddhism just a path to individual peace, or can it be a means of resolving conflicts and bringing peace to society and humankind ?"

Ms Daniela Rapisarda

I **Ms Daniela Rapisarda**, Coordinator of the Norwegian Ecumenical Peace Platform, Christian Council of Norway, made a penetrating critique of concepts of theology, their links with colonialism in the past, and their prevailing harmful influence today :

"Hierarchical dualism rooted in Christian theology and in western culture has not only substantiated sexism and the submission of women. It has provided ideological support to colonialism, racism, exploitation of nature and all those systems that see white man placed at the top of the pyramid of power relations. Much of our thinking continues to be dominated by binary concepts hierarchically ordained (spirit over matter, God over nature, soul over body, man over nature, man over woman, white over black, rich over poor, powerful over dis-empowered, centre over peripheries).

"In our search for the spiritual fundamentals of a culture and praxis of respect for all, we need to question the legitimacy of oppressive structures and power relations, and we need to unmask and question theories, theologies and ideologies that legitimise the superiority of one gender over the other, of one race over the other, of men over nature and so forth...

"Peace for me depends on the relation I have to my neighbour. Peace for my neighbour depends on me as much as my peace depends on him or her. The concept of Shalom – Peace contains a dimension of reciprocity, interconnection, interdependence. This is already the case as far as earth environment is concerned. Our planet is on the edge of collapse. We need to reduce consuming, adopt life-styles more respectful of the environment. Looking for solutions to the serious environmental issues we are facing can be a way to prevent future conflicts. My well-being and that of all people are strictly interrelated and interdependent..."

Tom Kleppestø, Board Member of the
Rafto Foundation

I **Mr. Tom Kleppestø**, Board Member of the Rafto Foundation, spoke on behalf of Rafto Chairman **Arne Lynngård**, who was held up by a last-minute engagement. Mr Kleppestø described the Rafto Foundation's work to promote democracy and human rights worldwide, inspired by the life work of Professor Thorolf Rafto. Recalling the situation of the 2006 Rafto Prize laureate Thich Quang Do, who was not allowed to travel to Bergen, Norway, to receive the prize, he reported on the arrest of Therese Jebesen, Rafto Foundation Board Member who was intercepted by Security Police when she visited the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon in March 2007 to hand the Rafto Diploma to Thich Quang Do.

I **Mr. Vo Van Ai**, Director of the International Buddhist Information Bureau and UBCV International Spokesman presented a Vietnamese Buddhist perspective of human development and peace, explaining the thinking and engagement of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). Mr. Ai analysed the failure of Peace Movements in the world, Hanoi's unfounded accusation that the UBCV is "political", and described the modern vision of democracy inherent in Buddhist teachings and practices. The full text of his presentation is as follows.

Thinking Peace : the challenges of dogmatism and promoting democratic advancement worldwide

Võ Văn Ái

"Venerable Members of the Sangha, Distinguished speakers and guests,

I am honoured to speak at this International Conference on Peace through Human Development, and I congratulate Most Venerable Thich Tri Minh, Abbot of the Khuong Viet Temple for organizing this important event. Since he came from Vietnam as a "Boat People", he has worked miracles, and developed here in Norway one of the most active Vietnamese Buddhist communities in Europe.

I am especially moved to be speaking here in Norway, the first country to recognize the contribution of Vietnamese Buddhism by awarding the prestigious 2006 Rafto Prize to the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, who is also a Nobel Peace Prize nominee this year, for his role as a *"unifying force in the movement for democracy in Vietnam"*.

I too am from Vietnam, and it is on this simple word, Vietnam, that I will focus my presentation today. For many people, Vietnam is synonymous with War – the devastating Vietnam War that wreaked unspeakable destruction and death. But Vietnam is also synonymous with Peace – in the 1960s, the slogan of "Peace for Vietnam" drew millions of young people to the streets in Oslo, Stockholm, Paris, Rome, Washington, Tokyo and around the world.

The Peace Movement brought an end to the Vietnam War in 1975. But it failed to bring peace to Vietnam. It brought "Peace without Joy" – a peace justified by ideology, by history, a Communist Peace, a peace for the politicians. Indeed, be it intentionally or unwittingly, the Peace Movement failed not only in Vietnam, but also internationally. In the cold war climate, each side claimed the monopoly of peace, yet in reality, each sought to fulfill its own political or ideological ambitions. The Soviet Union claimed that their nuclear weapons were "Peace Bombs", whereas the US's weapons were "Bombs of Imperialism"... Each side sought "Peace for Oneself". But no-one sought "Peace for the Other" or "Peace in Itself" – a universal, just and lasting peace for all humankind.

This "Peace without Joy" has had disastrous consequences for Vietnam. Today, my country is a one-Party, Communist State. All opposition parties, civil society movements, and independent religions are banned. Human rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined in the United Nations Bill of Rights are denied.

Our majority religion is Buddhism, followed by three quarters of our 84-million population, yet the traditional Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam is cruelly repressed. After the end of the Vietnam War, the authorities tried to suppress Buddhism by force. When this policy failed, in 1981 they set up the State-sponsored Vietnam Buddhist

Church (VBC) to keep Buddhism under Communist Party control. Today, the VBC is the only Buddhist organization recognized by the government, whereas the traditional Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam is banned.

The very architect of Hanoi's religious policies, former top Communist Party official Do Trung Hieu, later denounced this forced "unification of Buddhism" as a move to "*transform Vietnamese Buddhism into a puppet of the Communist Party of Vietnam*". In an underground essay, he revealed that Hanoi's intent was to reduce the activities of the State-sponsored Buddhist Church to prayers and religious ceremonies, prohibiting all contact with society or the people. Do Trung Hieu was later arrested for his criticisms. But his essay reveals clearly the Government's policy of tolerating superficial **freedom of worship**, whilst maintaining true **freedom of religion** under strict control.

Since the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam refused to join the State-sponsored body, the government launched a systematic campaign of persecution, arresting and harassing UBCV members. Patriarch **Thich Huyen Quang** and his Deputy, the Most Venerable **Thich Quang Do**, are both under house arrest today, isolated and forbidden even to teach their disciples. They have both spent almost thirty years in detention simply for their nonviolent appeals for freedom of religion and human rights for all the Vietnamese people.

The government claims the UBCV is repressed because it is "political". But by peacefully advocating freedom, Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do are simply perpetuating a tradition of social activism and engagement which dates back over 2,000 years, since Buddhism was first introduced to Vietnam.

This tradition of engagement is inscribed in Vietnamese Buddhist sutras such as the "Luc Do Tap Kinh" (Book of Six Ways of Liberation) which, as early as the 2nd Century AD, defined the Vietnamese Buddhist vision of "politics" through individual engagement : "*[Each one must say to himself], if the people are unhappy, it is my own fault*", or "*When the Boddhisattva hears the cries of his people, he must set aside his own troubles and throw himself into the combat against tyranny, to save the people from suffering*". This early sutra also articulated the Buddhist vision of an ideal society with modern concepts such as protection of the environment, social equality, the promotion of universal education. It also defined the Buddhist spirit of liberation, which includes the combat against obscurantism (liberation from ignorance), for social justice (liberation from suffering) and the struggle for national independence (liberation from foreign occupation - not only occupation of Vietnamese territory, but occupation of people's minds by imposed, alien ideologies). The Buddhists current struggle to preserve the Vietnam's cultural identity against the monopoly of Marxist-Leninist thinking reflects this fundamental principle.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam's movement for religious freedom, human rights and democracy is rooted in these principles of engagement. Thinking peace, under a politically repressive regime like Vietnam, means "positivizing" Buddhist ethics and bringing them into people's daily lives. Observing Buddhist precepts and practicing Compassion is fundamental. But it is not enough. Buddhists must realize Compassion by actively engaging in society. Instead of merely practicing forgiveness or acceptance, Buddhists must transform Compassion into a dynamic, driving force for the salvation of humankind.

What Hanoi denounces today as Buddhism's "political activities" is no more than a positive interpretation of the "Panca sila", or Five Precepts, which all Buddhist lay-followers pledge to observe. The Five Precepts are not commandments, nor orders to be blindly followed, but simply educational principles laid down by Lord Buddha to help Buddhists live happier lives, and for the betterment of society.

The Five Precepts include the undertaking to refrain from : **Killing** (destroying life) ; **Stealing** (taking what is not offered) ; **Sexual misconduct** (e.g. rape, exploitation etc) ; **False speech** (lying, harsh words, idle gossip) ; **Using intoxicants** (which lead to heedlessness). But for Buddhists in Vietnam, the problem is not just to passively refrain. Beyond the promise not to kill, we must engage to stop the killing. As Mahatma Gandhi said, if we see a madman attack someone with a knife, we must seek not to kill the madman, but to seize the knife out of his hands.

The UBCV's positive interpretation of the Five Precepts has profound political implications in Vietnam, and explains why Hanoi is so determined to stifle and suppress the UBCV. We UBCV Buddhists undertake **not to kill**. But when the regime arbitrary kills its citizens, we resolutely oppose state repression. We undertake **not to steal**, but when the state steals our people's lands, their freedom and their identity, we stand up to defend their rights. We undertake **to refrain from sexual misconduct**, but when corrupt Communist Party officials and policemen organize trafficking of young girls for sexual exploitation, subjecting them to worse treatment than animals, we challenge the government to cease such abuses. We undertake **not to lie**, but when Hanoi publishes false information, stifles free speech, muzzles the media, and imprisons those who speak the truth, Buddhists engage in the battle for freedom of expression and the press.

Hanoi denounces these acts as "political", and warns the international community that Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do are "*threats to the regime*". But this is wrong. Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do are simply realizing Buddhism's Five Precepts in a society wracked by injustice and disorder, and encouraging all Buddhists to observe these Five Precepts too, as a means of solving the nation's grave problems and eradicating the root cause of violence and State terrorism in Vietnam.

Over 50 years ago, the historic 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia united Asian and African nations in a common quest for cooperation and peace. The Conference adopted Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence – another "Panca Sila", establishing the principles of independence and integrity between states. This was a landmark step forward, but, India apart, it fell into the cold war dichotomy of opposing one ideology against another. Again, it was "Peace for Oneself", but not "Peace in Itself", or "Peace for the Other". Moreover, the very principles of mutual non-intervention approved in Bandung were later invoked by Asian dictatorships to justify "Asian Values" and claim Asia's exception to universal human rights.

Bandung established the principles of independence and integrity. Today, we must go beyond Bandung to establish the principles of peace and justice for all humankind. Our modern world is shaken by violence, terrorism and free-market dictatorship. For those of us who read the Internet each day, we are inundated by news of horror and destruction. Today's world is witnessing a globalization of hatred, the mobilization of human energy to fuel conflicts and war. This global assault can be stemmed only by global initiatives, by a common determination to push back this rising tide of violence. If we passively stand by, we shall witness the destruction of our earth.

In Vietnam, this mobilization of violence is the driving force of the regime. Communism is based on hatred, the class struggle and the division between friend and foe. The regime teaches our children to worship hatred, to realize hatred in their daily lives. Buddhism, on the contrary, is based on Compassion, understanding and love. This is why, for members of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, realizing compassion means standing up for freedom, human rights and ultimately, for democracy in Vietnam.

Democracy is not alien to Buddhism. On the contrary, it is rooted in the teachings of Lord Buddha, pronounced over 2,500 years ago. Buddhist democracy springs from the "**Six Harmonies**" (Luc Hoa in Vietnamese), or principles for maintaining harmony and understanding within a group. Practiced by the Sangha (community of monks and nuns) and by lay-followers, the Six Harmonies are : "**Living together as a group ; speaking without conflict ; sharing the same viewpoint (reaching consensus within the group) ; observing the same precepts ; experiencing Joy in the Dharma ; sharing benefits (material possessions)**". "The keeping of all these rules ensures that harmony will prevail". The Six Harmonies teach the basic rules of democratic living, based on the practice of mutual respect. I call this the "democracy of sharing", and it is complimentary, not contradictory, with the Western concept of "democracy of expression", based on universal suffrage and the individual voice.

Advancing democracy and dispelling tyranny, I believe, are the keys to human development. For tyranny is the enemy of peace. Under dictatorships, the State

controls people in all aspects of their lives. They direct their thinking, suppress their beliefs, rule over their spiritual lives. Regulations, decrees and directives replace the rule of law. Fear, starvation and humiliation replace dignity and justice. Society is ruled by orders, threats and hypnosis. In brief, dictatorships maintain people in ignorance and illusion – the very opposite of Buddhism, which shows the path to enlightenment and emancipation for each and everyone.

Human development is impossible without concerted efforts to eradicate poverty. In Asia, many authoritarian have booming economies, and they are claiming economic development alone will bring human development. This theory is wrong. Since Vietnam opened its economy to the “free market economy with socialist orientations” – economic liberalization under authoritarian control – state corruption is rocketing and the gap between rich and poor is growing wider every day. Without a process of democratization and political reform, there can be no sustainable human development in Vietnam. And without human development, there can be no spiritual advancement or enlightenment.

In conclusion, I would like to make a proposal to this Conference. I call upon all the eminent specialists gathered here today, to join together to form a **"Committee of Ethics"** to work together for World Peace through human development. This "Committee of Ethics" would bring the combined wisdom and experience of many different currents of thinking from the world's great civilizations to build peace, justice and happiness for humankind. In face of the wars, terrorist attacks and conflicts that shake our planet every day, the Committee of Ethics could launch appeals, offer advice and devise strategies to address these problems. It could be the voice of the millions of people whose voice is suppressed, echoing their deep hopes and aspirations, and pushing back the advance of tyranny and violence.

I believe that such a Committee of Ethics could have real influence. Today, international institutions of power and wealth such as the World Bank, the World Economic Forum and the United Nations are seeking dialogue with spiritual leaders and paying serious attention to them, for they recognize the strength of religions in the world.

The Western hemisphere has the United Nations as a forum for democratic expression. But Asia, which is home to three fifths of humankind, has no forum to reflect this essential voice. On the contrary, the dictatorships of Asia are forming powerful alliances to extend their powers in the international arena. It is time for Asian and world peacemakers to unite, and give a voice to the victims.

Three thousand years ago, Lord Buddha, Socrates, Confucius, Lao Tse raised their voices to defend and advance human development. Today, whilst we wait for a new

Quê Me

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<https://queme.org/en/>

voice to emerge, this Committee of Ethics, founded at this Conference in Oslo, could be the Harbinger of Peace, the herald of a new era of justice, compassion and peace through human development on our earth".

Vo Van Ai

Oslo, 5th May 2007