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BUDDHIST ACTION IN VIETNAM:

A Special Assessment of the Situation in the
Light of Events in March and April 1966

The origins of the Buddhist initiatives of March and April 1966 in South Vietnam can be found in three important and inter-related energy-releasing forces: (1) the Buddhists' sense of history and particularly their yearning for a rebirth of Buddhism's "Golden Age"; (2) the Buddhist reform movement which had its beginnings in the 1920's, and (3) the social revolution which was triggered by the revolt against Diem in 1963. The ideological content of these three forces is, in our opinion, guiding and will continue to guide the development of Buddhist action in the political realm in the months and years to come. This paper, therefore, provides a brief analysis of the three forces and speculates on possible political trends resulting from their interplay among themselves and with other forces in the Vietnam situation.

Rebirth of the "Golden Age"

The "new," militant Vietnamese Buddhism of today is not simply the product of the struggle against Diem. To look upon it as such is to run the risk of seriously underestimating the vitality of Buddhism and the sense of purpose of its leaders.

The so-called "Golden Age" of Vietnamese Buddhism which ended five centuries ago offers some insight into current Buddhist thinking. Monk leaders today frequently speak of restoring Buddhism to its "rightful place in society." The standard of measure most often used is the Golden Age.

The monk intellectual and writer Thich Nhat Hanh has described these earlier periods as follows in his bestseller Engaged Buddhism:

Everybody knows that under the Ly and Tran Dynasties, Buddhism played a nation-building role in the realm of literature, morals, arts, education, diplomacy and society. Buddhism during those periods brought progress to Vietnamese society, which demonstrated Buddhist strengths and capacities. According to history, under the Ly Dynasty the most learned persons were Buddhists and monks. The study of Buddhism in those days was a comprehensive and constructive one. It did not bring any social position to anybody. Venerable monks were usually invited to the King's Court to deliver sermons, to discuss cultural, economic, social and even political matters. Monks were invited to receive foreign ambassadors. In spite of that fact, they lived frugally in their pagodas, wore their simple brown robes, and went to the King's Court only at the King's invitation. The intellectuals at that time captured the essence of

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Buddhism (works of art of the time proved that fact). They had a rich, unfettered, surpassing spiritual life and used their knowledge to help society, from architecture to social works.

In his short history of Vietnamese Buddhism, Thich Thien An of Van Hanh University recounts numerous examples of Buddhist influence on the Court and the nation. During the Dinh Dynasty (969-980), Vietnam was pacified and united by King Dinh Bo Lanh, a Buddhist who supported and propagated the faith. This movement to diffuse Buddhist teachings was led by the learned monk Ngo Chan Luu, who was rewarded by the King with the title Khuong Viet Thuyen Su, "The Priest Who Helped Restore the Nation." King Ly Thai To, who founded the Ly Dynasty (1010-1225), is regarded as typifying the virtuous ruler. He was guided in all of his activities by perhaps the most famous monk in Vietnamese history, Van Hanh. During the Tran Dynasty (1225-1400), several kings were either monks before they assumed power or retired to monasteries at the end of their rule. The most revered, Tran Nhan Ton (1278-1293), is reputed to have moved back and forth between the monkhood and the throne, depending on whether the country needed his services to bring it peace. There do not appear to be instances of kings actually ruling as monks, however.

While no monk today has yet admitted to personal political ambition, the historical tradition of monk-kings who assume leadership when the country is in danger and who then return to the temple in times of peace is appealing to some Buddhists. A brilliant, 21-year old monk commented in August 1965:

Although Vietnamese monks have been political leaders in the past, now it would probably be necessary for monks to take off their robes. In the first place, Catholics would oppose monks' holding political office. Also, the recent history of Catholics in Latin America and Makarios in Cyprus demonstrates the difficulties that arise in the contemporary world when an individual holds both lay and clerical power. If monks in Vietnam defrock to enter politics, it would probably be on a temporary basis until certain goals were achieved. They would eventually return to their orders.

The historical precedent for a Thich Tri Quang, for instance, to return to lay life to "save the Nation" is very much alive.

Buddhist Reform Movement

Following the Tran Dynasty, Buddhism entered a period of decline under increased Chinese intellectual influence and the consequent espousal of Confucianism and Taoism by the rulers; and later under the impact of Catholicism imported and encouraged by the French. By the Twentieth Century, Buddhism seemed sterile and moribund in comparison with the Golden Age and also with the influence of Roman Catholicism.

The independence movement against France seems to have been an important factor in the revival of Buddhism in the sense that feelings of nationalism were generated which increased the Buddhists' pride in their heritage and also their shame that their religion had become corrupt. Influences also came down from

China where Buddhism had already undergone a period of reform and revitalization under the aegis of the great Abbot T'ai-hsu.

Little is yet known of this period, but it appears that a small number of scholars and learned monks began actively to promote a Buddhist revival in the 1920's. The widely respected North Vietnamese monk, Thich To Lien, encouraged the reform idea and seems in many respects to have been the architect of the movement. In 1931, a Buddhist Studies Association for Cochin China was established in Saigon, and similar groups were founded at Hue for Annam in 1932 and at Hanoi for Tonkin in 1934. There are indications that French colonial officials encouraged the study and discussion of religious and cultural subjects in the hope of channeling the interests of intellectuals away from the independence movement. Hanoi's Quan Su Pagoda in particular became a meeting place for scholars and intellectuals to discuss the history and philosophy of Buddhism. Professional men, professors and university students began to visit the pagodas which had for centuries been mainly the preserve of old women.

The goals of the reform movement were to restore Buddhist precepts, to reorganize the Buddhist Church* and to build a generation of learned monks. These were to be achieved through the Buddhist Associations. While the programs of the Associations varied from region to region, they generally aimed at tightening up discipline and improving conditions in the monasteries, repairing and reconstructing old pagodas, expanding educational facilities for monks, and increasing social service activities. An important decision made during this period was to propagate Buddhism in the Vietnamese language rather than through the medium of Chinese characters which only monks and a few scholars were able to read. Various periodicals and books on Buddhism began to appear in the language of the common man.

The Second World War and the disorders immediately following it slowed down the reform movement, but by the late 1940's the Associations were reorganized and active again. In 1951, a national Buddhist congress was called and the three regional Associations were unified in a National Association. As had been the practice in the regional groups, the national Association was divided into lay and clerical sections. The clerical section was apparently regarded as a national Sangha (Order of Monks), the first nation-wide hierarchy in the history of Vietnam, and some steps were taken toward internal reorganization and standardization of ceremonies. Following unification of the Associations, the tempo of reform increased. Of particular importance were the establishment of higher training schools for monks and the dispatch of monks abroad for advanced studies.

The leadership of the 1963 Inter-Sect Committee for the Defense of Buddhism was drawn from these regional Associations and the national body, and it is these same groups plus certain independent sects which joined together after the fall of Diem to form the Unified Buddhist Church (UBC).

*The word "church" is not an exact translation of the Vietnamese word but is the version most frequently employed by the monks themselves.

From the above, it can be seen that several decades of continuity in organization, leadership and purpose underlie Vietnamese Buddhism of 1966. Thich Tam Chau was a disciple of Thich To Lien; Tam Chau was also a Vice President, and the present Supreme Bonze of Vietnam, Thich Tinh Khiet, was President of the national Buddhist Association prior to 1963; Thich Tri Quang, at the age of 28, was spokesman of the delegation from Central Vietnam to the 1951 unification congress. Although these relationships have yet to be explored, there appear to be strong "school" ties among monks who were trained at certain Buddhist Studies Institutes. Many of the programs and activities of today's Unified Buddhist Church have roots in this earlier period: the lay Buddhist school system, various social welfare institutions, youth groups such as the Buddhist Families organization and the Buddhist University Students Association.

Monks now in their forties and fifties have within their lifetimes seen the decay of several centuries reversed and Buddhism restored as a vital force in society. Many personally made important contributions to the rebirth. It seems safe to speculate that this experience has helped develop the fierce pride, the intense dedication, and the relative unity which characterize the monk leadership.

We say "relative unity" because the UBC has been troubled by internal factionalism since its establishment. Leading monks, such as Thich Tri Quang and Thich Tam Chau, do not see eye to eye at all times on all issues and on methods to be employed. Some monks obviously are more activist than others. Regional loyalties also have their influence, as do the differences between the minority Theravadans and the majority Mahayanists. When it comes to the basic issues, however, the leaders appear to be able to put up a common front, as happened during the Huong period and also the recent demonstrations demanding early elections and the formation of a constitutional government. On the other hand, victory for the activist group of the Unified Buddhist Church could rapidly lead to factional splits over the goals and methods of running the country.

A further sign of lack of complete harmony in Buddhism as a whole is the existence of a General Buddhist Association, composed largely of southern Buddhist groups, which was recognized by the Huong government apparently in a move to divide the Buddhists. This association claims to have two million members and to have a policy of keeping monks out of politics and of complete tolerance for and cooperation with other religions. We do not expect to hear much from it in regard to political issues in view of its policy of non-involvement.

Finally, it is worth noting that the reform movement did not have grass root origins. It was consciously initiated and has been spread by educated laymen and monks with the latter taking an increasingly important role in recent years. While sociological studies of Vietnamese Buddhism are completely lacking, one can tentatively conclude that the role of the monk in the community is gradually beginning to change from traditional detachment to greater participation and leadership. One of the intriguing questions in

this connection which deserves further study is why Buddhist leadership has centered so strongly in the monks and manifested itself so little in laymen. The almost complete takeover of the UBC by monks when it was formed a few weeks after the 1963 revolution appeared to reflect their disillusionment about the selflessness and honesty of laymen, but additional study may reveal other factors, possibly including scriptural justification.

Having pursued their three goals quietly and tenaciously for over a generation, it is not surprising that the Buddhists are beginning to see some results. The Unified Buddhist Church (UBC) has been formed and a group of well educated and highly motivated monks has been developed. The structure and leadership is, therefore, shaping up. The remaining almost untouched objective is to "purify" Buddhism and strengthen its observance among the people. The monk leadership needs and seeks a calmer atmosphere than that now prevailing in order to pursue this goal effectively.

Social Revolution

The social revolution which is now a major objective of leading Buddhist monks and the UBC finds its origins in the struggle against Diem which began as a defense of Buddhism. All evidence points to the fact that the Buddhists reacted to circumstances without a preconceived plot or plans. As Buddhists, they felt their religion was threatened, and their grievances, whether real or imagined, were emotion-charged and deep. As Vietnamese, they were repelled by the growing harshness and repression of an authoritarian regime. As reformers, they feared their movement to revitalize and modernize Buddhism would fail if the Diem government continued in office.

As the Buddhists gained strength and experience in 1963, the nature of the struggle changed. Buddhist opposition crystallized popular discontent and mounting opposition to dictatorship, and the original cause to defend Buddhism was gradually transformed into the beginnings of a major social revolution.

There is relatively little disagreement among the Buddhists as to what social revolution is or the need for it to occur. It is a frequent theme in the speeches and writings of the Buddhists in the post-Diem period. It is broader than the government's social revolution. Essentially, social revolution in its Buddhist meaning is equated with the popular demands that grew out of the struggle against Diem; namely, a purge of the worst Diemist elements, elimination of corruption, creation of democratic institutions, return to civilian leadership, and improved conditions for the masses. It also seems evident that the social revolution is in the minds of many monks synonymous with the Buddhist reform movement and the restoration of Buddhism to a position of predominance in Vietnam. One of the justifications used by monks for restoring Buddhism is that it is potentially the most powerful unifying force in a badly fragmented Vietnamese society.

Buddhist-led agitation since the fall of Diem has adversely affected both internal security and the war effort, but in most instances the monks have

been able to find justification for their actions either in terms of the Buddhist social revolution or on the basis of self-preservation in the face of what appeared to them to be a threat against Buddhism. Less than two months after the 1963 revolution, Mr. Tran Quang Thuan, then a student leader, warned:

The rural population considers the change in regime just a coup d'etat, not a revolution, because it has not affected them in a favorable way. A revolution must bring about changes at the lowest levels of society, not just in the superstructure. The great difference between the cities and the countryside is still obvious.

Opposition to the Khanh, Huong and now the Ky governments has been motivated, at least in part, by growing disillusionment with the ability of the military or a military-controlled regime to rule justly and with the relatively slow progress toward the goals of the Buddhist social revolution.

Underlying the desire for social revolution are deep sensitivity and concern for the masses. Of all of the organized groups in Vietnam, the monks are undoubtedly in closest touch with the villages. The UBC has provincial and district committees which are staffed by monks and laymen with direct village connections. They have assumed the role both of interpreter of the aspirations of the people and of protector of the welfare of the masses. Their concern for the masses is certainly genuine, but it is not always clear whether the monks are reacting to the will of the people or are attempting to direct it. In October 1964, Thich Quang Do (a spokesman for the UBC) said: "[The monks] are simply conscious of the aspirations of the people...We know that dictatorship is contrary to the will of the masses, whether it be that of Diem or that which Khanh may be tempted to establish." Thich Tri Quang commented in August 1965 that "...the Vietnamese government does not offer anything to rely on...there is absolutely nothing in common between the people and their government," and in April 1966 he explained, "The population has been made miserable by the war and so they earnestly want an election."

There is certainly strong and sincere conviction among the Buddhists that the message of Buddhism is relevant to the needs of the modern world. While this has enabled them to accept the thesis growing out of the reform movement that Buddhism has a social role to play and to identify with the idea of social revolution, very few have been concerned with the theological and philosophical justifications for their action. In this connection, the work of Thich Nhat Hanh is of interest. Educated in the best Buddhist schools in Vietnam and at the Princeton Theological Seminary and Columbia University, the 40-year old Nhat Hanh is a deeply religious social revolutionary. He is in the forefront of monks who have sought to expand Buddhism's social role, but at the same time he is aware that this could lead to oversecularization and dilution of the religious force of Buddhism. Most of the dozen or so books he has written in the past ten years have dealt with the problem of retaining the purity of Buddhism while at the same time relating Buddhism to the needs of

the contemporary world. The following passage, written in late 1965 or early 1966 is representative of Nhat Hanh's thinking:

[Buddhism in Vietnam believes in] the self determination and the will of the people...Self-determination is the determination to do what we can today...There is a big gap between the authorities and the people...We must try to make the people believe that politics is not the only means to democracy and peace...The people must recognize this fact and start doing things for themselves by whatever means they possess...As he does not expect aid or grace from anyone or anywhere, the Vietnamese should start making revolution in his own life, a revolution from the lower to the upper level, and should abandon his passive attitude of wait-and-see...Materials needed for the social revolution are love, responsibility, and sacrifice...We must fight against poverty and illness and its allies, ignorance and anarchy. We will use both the technical knowledge that we have acquired from Western nations and the heritage and knowledge handed down from our ancestors to our peasants... We should not put our hope of peace and happiness in Vietnam in money, dictatorships and hatred because experience has shown us that these only bring unhappiness to the people. The potentiality of Buddhism in Vietnam is immense. If we know how to utilize it, we could use its force for the reconstruction of our country.

Buddhism and Politics

Any consideration of Buddhism in politics is complicated by the monks' consistent denial of political goals in the face of reality of their political involvement. Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University spent a month in Vietnam in the summer of 1965 systematically interviewing the top Buddhist leadership and found no monk or layman who advocated political action except in extreme cases where it would be necessary to protect or defend Buddhism. In March 1965, Thich Tri Quang said:

We never want to direct nor to take any part in government. If the government is working for the interests of the country, then we will exhort the faithful to support such a government. If, on the other hand, the government is inefficient and weak, and tries to discredit the Buddhist faith, then we have no choice but to tell our people to be on their guard.

He defined politics as:

...genuine goodwill which works for the interests of the nation. I visualize it as a revolutionary force (not any one political party) that should help better the people's standards of living and preserve their spiritual values.

This discrepancy between theory and action may be partly a question of semantics. Buddhist writers and spokesmen have tended to use the word social, as in social revolution, in the broad sense of all affairs of human society. In their minds, it seems that the concept of guiding or influencing government policy in a pattern similar to that of the Golden Age is not political. When the word politics is used by the Buddhists, it appears to be meant to convey the narrow concept of partisan political involvement. Probably more to the point, however, the Buddhists are prevented from admitting to political goals by the disagreement within the Unified Buddhist Church as to the nature and degree of Buddhist involvement in political affairs. Also, the Buddhists would obviously be unwilling to spell out any political plans they might have as this would forearm other elements in society which oppose them.

Given the foregoing factors plus the limited knowledge we have of Vietnamese Buddhism and its leaders, it is impossible to predict precisely the future course of the Buddhists in politics. One can, however, point to certain characteristics, trends and signs which seem likely to influence the development of the political side of Vietnamese Buddhism.

Throughout the post-Diem period up to the formation of the Ky government, the Buddhists had a minimum political demand, although it was not usually articulated as such: a government which in no way threatened or opposed Buddhism. This required that they be given what from their point of view was an adequate voice in any government, whatever its form. They believed they were entitled to this right because they represent the majority of the Vietnamese people and because they led the revolution against Diem. While there were certainly other considerations and complications, the Buddhists opposed Khanh and Huong because they felt the gains they had won in the 1963 revolution were in jeopardy. They took to the streets after Khanh moved toward dictatorship at Vung Tau and returned to the streets when Huong's policies in their view threatened to weaken their voice in government and also to split their still fragile internal unity. Both the Khanh and Huong governments were frequently and strongly criticized by the Buddhists for not purging Diemist elements and permitting them to continue their evil, presumably anti-Buddhist, ways particularly on the local level and in the countryside.

To the Buddhists, the Ky government represented the continuation of an unsatisfactory situation. It must be recognized that civilian, representative government was an ideal that arose out of the revolution against Diem. A common theme in Buddhist thinking and writing is the importance of reformed government and constructive government programs in winning over the people and thus minimizing the fratricidal war. That the Ky government did not fit this image was evident from the beginning. Opposition to the Ky government erupted briefly in Central Vietnam in the summer of 1965 and has since bubbled just beneath the surface; also present were the frustrations and social and economic problems growing out of the intensified war effort.

The ouster of General Thi provided a focus for Buddhist discontent. Thi was, in effect, the Buddhists' voice in the National Leadership Committee, the junta ruling Vietnam. As a revolutionary who had participated in a coup

attempt against Diem and who took pains to identify himself with the common man, he was also in tune with Buddhist thinking. However, there was little pretense that Thi was the main issue. While the Buddhists criticized the Ky government for corruption, mismanagement and ineptness and were also uneasy that the Chief of State was a Catholic, the overriding issue was who would run the government. The monks were simply through with military rule.

In looking ahead to elections, the Buddhists have decided advantages in leadership and organization. One of the remarkable phenomena of the emergence of Buddhism as a social and political force in Vietnam is the caliber of its monk leadership. Little is known of the internal functioning of the Sangha, but it is clear that monks with ability and intelligence are identified early, trained, and moved into positions of leadership. While not all monks are in agreement with Thich Tri Quang's politics, he is widely respected in the Sangha as an intellectual. Thich Ho Giac, co-chairman of the struggle committee against the Ky government, distinguished himself as a brilliant monk student ten years ago in Phnom Penh. Generally, the component bodies in the Unified Buddhist Church seem to be staffed more on the basis of pertinent experience, training, and intelligence than on traditional factors of seniority, devoutness, or nepotism. An additional advantage the monks have as opinion makers is their presumed lower class origins and nationalistic fervor. They are identified neither with foreign powers nor with the privileged groups of previous regimes. They seldom speak anything but Vietnamese. In some cases, monks are known to hide upper class origins in order to increase their appeal to the masses.

The network of Buddhist organizations throughout Vietnam is complex and of questionable efficiency, but it undoubtedly will be used as a mechanism to influence the electoral process. Under the Supreme Bonze, Thich Tinh Khiet, the Unified Buddhist Church is guided by two national bodies, the High Council of the Buddhist Hierarchy and the Institute for the Execution of the Dharma. The High Council, composed of sixty senior monks, deals exclusively with religious matters and regulation of the clergy. It has appeared relatively inactive, but it has given its Secretary General, Thich Tri Quang, both stature and a channel of access to and influence over the more than twenty thousand monks and nuns of Vietnam.

The national body dealing with the lay affairs of the Unified Buddhist Church is the Institute for the Execution of the Dharma (IED). Under the overall guidance of its chairman, Thich Tam Chau, the IED is led by a Leadership Committee of monks composed of two Vice Chairmen, a Secretary General, a Treasurer and seven Commissioners heading General Commissions for Monk Affairs, Propagation of the Faith, Education, Social and Cultural Affairs, Youth, Lay Affairs, and Finance. Each General Commission is divided into several sections and it is here that the day-to-day affairs of the UBC are carried on. The IED functions through eight regional representatives each embracing several provinces and committees of representatives on the provincial and district levels. The IED organization can and sometimes does extend downward to the villages and city wards which are considered the basic units of the UBC. The internal structure of the IED is based largely on the pattern of the Buddhist Associations in the 1931-1964 period, and this in some cases has provided continuity in leadership and organization.

Within the general sphere of activities of the Institute for the Execution of the Dharma are several monk-run groups whose relationships to the IED are either unclear or imprecisely defined, such as the Chaplain Corps, the Young Monks and Nuns League, and the School of Youth for Social Service. There are also numerous lay organizations usually grouped by occupation--for example, the Buddhist Cyclo Drivers of Hue, the Buddhist Plantation Workers of Banmethuot--but it is difficult to assess their influence or their responsiveness to UBC control. Several Buddhist sects and organizations exist over which the UBC exercises no formal control. However, the degree of mutual cooperation at any given time seems to involve the nature of the issue, and in the event of an election some of these groups would almost inevitably make common cause with the UBC.

The Buddhists are thus approaching elections with a numerical advantage, relative strength in leadership and organization, and a nationalist image of considerable appeal to the common man. Yet they have expressed no demands other than for elections, and they have put forth no national program or objectives. To many foreign observers this has seemed an abdication of responsibility, but the Buddhist leadership in the past has not concerned itself with sophisticated platforms and it may feel that it needs no other program than that of wanting what the people want as expressed through leaders elected democratically.

While Thich Tri Quang recently denied that the Buddhists aim to dominate in the election, he at the same time admitted that they are preparing themselves. If and as the government and other competitive forces, such as the Catholics, undertake political activity on their own behalf the tempo and tone of Buddhist activity may well increase to meet the assumed threat. The Buddhists are undoubtedly already taking steps to identify "good" candidates and will pass the word through the network of Buddhist organizations that these are the ones to be supported. If they are true to past pronouncements, the typical candidate will be young, nationalistic and untainted by foreign influences or close associations with old regimes. A "good" candidate would also be known for his probity, as a strong streak of puritanism runs through modern Vietnamese Buddhism.

The role of the monks in elections and government will probably be indirect. They not only are aware that they lack experience and expertise in government, but they also recognize that Catholics and other elements in society would strenuously object to the open participation of monks. Thich Tri Quang has admitted as much. It is conceivable that monks would leave the Order in order to take active political roles, but thus far there have been no indications of this happening. It also seems doubtful at this stage that a strong effort will be made to create a Buddhist state or make Buddhism the state religion. To some extent, the Buddhist attitude, normally one of tolerance toward other religions (although undoubtedly individual monks are anti-Catholic), may be governed by the amount of resistance put up by Catholics and others to an essentially Buddhist-run state.

Without fuller knowledge of the programs and leadership of a Buddhist-dominated government, its form and political orientation are difficult to foresee

If the IED can be taken as a model, it would have a strong executive but at the same time make allowance for the regional, ethnic and religious diversity of Vietnam. It is possible that an effort will be made to develop and instill a Vietnamese Buddhist ideology; occasionally monks, particularly the younger ones, refer to the need for a new ideology which synthesizes the best of Eastern and Western political thinking, Vietnamese culture and Buddhism. More realistically, Buddhist concern for the welfare of the people will probably initially result in a political philosophy akin to democratic socialism aimed at preventing exploitation of the masses.

It is equally difficult to be certain of the attitude of a Buddhist government toward the war and the United States. Certainly the ambiguity of Thich Tri Quang and his followers is cause for concern as is Viet Cong infiltration into Buddhist organizations, but it is worth noting that the Buddhist leadership as a group in the past has supported neither neutralism nor a communist victory. Similarly, while the American presence in Vietnam has given rise to unpleasant incidents and misunderstandings, there is no indication of general agreement among the Buddhists that the United States should be invited to leave before the situation has improved. Until further evidence is available to the contrary, the more real problem for the Vietnamese will be Buddhist overconfidence in their ability to deal with the Viet Cong; for the Americans it will be the inevitably stronger pride and nationalism of a Buddhist-dominated government.

April 29, 1966