



How Does Hoang Phap Monastery Promote the Propagation of Buddhism and its Teaching Towards the Growth of Social Development in Vietnam

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Abstract

Located in Ho Chi Minh City, Hoang Phap Monastery has become a key contributor to the social development of the Vietnamese people. The organization's core mission is to spread the Buddha's religious teaching of unity, peace, and enlightenment and to aid the most vulnerable in society. The Hoang Phap monastery is the very first religious foundation to create a sanctuary to cater for its Pure Land practitioners and for the country's young population. In the last 20 years, it has become the ideal model for other monasteries across Vietnam to copy.

This paper show the many examples the Hoang Phap monastery have made to increase the Buddhist propagation. They've played a vital role in circulating the philosophy of Buddha and in doing so have encouraged people to better themselves. This essay will study the achievement and contribution the monastery has accomplished so far, and in turn, have influenced the social development of the Vietnamese people.

Key words: Hoang Phap monastery, propagation, social development

Introduction

The Hoang Phap temple in Hoc Mon district was founded by the most venerable Ven. Ngo Chan Tu in 1957.¹ With his passion for advocating good causes and helping others, Ven. Ngo Chan Tu align his life purpose to helping orphaned children and homeless regain their identity and purpose in life. In 1971, his disciples offered their property and manpower to help expand the current Buddha hall to an extra 28 meters wide, while using the exact material used on the existing temple. Ven. Ngo Chan Tu passed away in the year 1988 and his student, venerable Thich Chan Tinh, took over the responsibility of managing the ongoing construction of the temple hall. However, his main obligation was continuing his teacher's legacy of propagation of Buddha Dharma to the community.²

By 1995, the rebuild of the Buddha Hall was completed, and the monastery opened its door to the public and its practitioners. The Buddha hall was enlarged to accommodate the ever growing number of followers of the Buddha Dharma from a mere seventy people to 1000 followers. In 1999, Ven. Thich Chan Tinh organized the first seven day retreat within the temple. People are able to come and practice the recitation of the Amitābha Buddha.³ In addition, the temple also offered food, clothing and residency free of charge to all practitioner. In 2005, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, the co-founder of Plum Village, an international monastic Saṅgha in France, selected the Hoang Phap monastery to lead a monastic retreat for bhikkhus and bhikkhū's in Vietnam. The retreat was the earliest to house 1200 monks and nuns in Buddhist history.⁴ As of this year, the monastery will host the first Summer cultivation sanctuary for the young people of Vietnam. Since its beginning, the monastery has gained significant momentum and started to operate worldwide, opening branches in United States of America, Australia, Cambodia, etc. Hoang Phap monastery in Vietnam is the largest and most popular venue for monks, nuns and the public to hold ceremonies, group meeting, lectures and agenda on Buddhist principles.⁵ They house a number of rooms that are equipped with computers, Internet and video production.

¹Thich Chan Tinh. (2008). Hoang Phap monastery Center for Seven-day Buddha Recitation Retreats in Vietnam, HCM: The Eastern Publisher. p.13.

²Ibid., p.13.

³Ibid., p.14.

⁴Thich Nhat Hanh and Plum Village Sangha. (2006). A Special Comeback Trip. *The Letter from Plum Village*. 36 (January). p.4.

⁵Thich Chan Tinh. (2008). Op.cit. p.14.

Organization of Hoang Phap Monastery

Another big aspect of the monastery is its involvement with film and music production. It has made and released a number of Buddhist movies to enrich its people and also open up to the international audience. One of their cinematographic projects, the 'Path to Enlightenment' (Con Duong Giac Ngo, 4 parts) was greatly received by the monastic Saṅgha and Buddhists. The movie depicted the history of Sakyamūni Buddha and his teaching. It also included English subtitles for the global viewers. Significantly, the live music show 'Dieu Am Hoang Phap' (The Marvelousness voice of Dharma propagation) was another success in promoting Buddhism through songs and sūtra chants. This year will mark the show's 10th anniversary. As a result of its growing activity, the monastery has a subcommittee to oversee the temple works. For more information on the temple, people can visit the monastery's website *chuaHoangPhap.com.vn*.⁶ The website was set up in 2006, and in 2009 they had more than 37 million visitors. The monastery Dharma lecture videos are also published on the site and have been seen by 58 million people. Venerable Thich Chan Tinh is recognized as the highest ranking person in the monastery who is ultimately responsible for making the decision within the establishment. He is also in charge of delegating the administrative deputation of the monastery in the country and representing the interests of the Saṅgha to voice its concerns to the government. There is also a vice abbot whose primary responsibility is to act in place of the Venerable Thich Chan Tinh. The other duty of the vice abbot is to manage the five committees, which are appointed to handle the duties in the monastery. They are divided into five Boards:

The main role of the Administration Board⁷ is to coordinate and organize projects to assist those in need. The Charity Society under the administration is the counterpart which works on hand to run the operation. Their role is to organize daily gatherings of the public who wishes to visit the monastery abbot and his disciples, welcoming guests to the monastery and supervising the donation that is received from the public. Once they have been given a charitable contribution from a supporter, they will ask them where they want the proceedings to go, which can be sponsoring a scholarship, feeding the homeless, finding temporary homes for kids from the streets, disaster relief, funds to go on opening

⁶Hoang Phap monastery (2018). General Statistic. Retrieved. April 27, 2009, from <http://www.chuaHoangPhap.com.vn>. Viewed on March 6, 2018.

⁷Sangha of Hoang Phap. (2013). *Manage Board in Monastery*. HCM: Hoang Phap monastery. p.7.

more branches of the organization and much more. Every two weeks, a team of monks and lay people will purchase animals from a market and release the animals back to its habitat. The administrative secretary under the board also assists clerical work of the temple. They arrange guest speakers for the festival, register people who are attending the retreat and organize releasing ceremony. Their service also extends all over the country.

The Sangha management⁸ oversees the participating of members who wish to join the monastery and become monks. The management deals with the day-to-day running of the monastery and is supervised by a Rule Inspector, who is responsible for taking care of each Sangha member or lay person. People who enter the monastery at the beginning of their term are split into four divisions and then again into subdivisions of five laymen. 1) A layman who wishes to join the monkhood will be trained to practice as a lay Buddhist for six months before being accepted permanently. 2) Laymen who want to offer their free time and skills to work for the temple for a short amount of time. They are put to work based on the abilities they possess to help the monastery needs. 3) Elderly laywomen who are homeless and request to stay. 4) Laywomen who have offered their time and talents to work for the sanctuary. 5) Daily practicing laywomen Buddhists: their duties are to guide the heads of each division to join the daily practice to develop their mindfulness in Buddha's name.

Economic and Financial Board⁹ is comprised of two treasurers and five subcommittees. The treasurer's role is to collect and process the donations boxes. Five subcommittees are grouped into: 1. The Construction Division. This department is further divided into teams A, B and C. Team A is in charge of the construction work. They are responsible for hiring a designer and managing employed builders. Team B coordinates burial ground builds in the cemetery. Team C is responsible for supplies that enter and leave the monasteries' warehouse. They perform the ordering of materials needed for construction work and find the necessary companies that will supply them. 2. The second subcommittee is the Auditing Division. They handle the finances before they go to the treasurer. 3. The third subcommittee is the Printing Division. It is divided into Censor group and Design group. The Censor group's duty is to ensure all books published by the monastery are free from grammar, spelling and punctuation errors before passing them onto the Design group. The Design group will then work on incorporating the style, format, design, and sequence of the

⁸Ibid., p.7.

⁹Ibid., p.8.

various components and elements of the temple and its retreat before printing them into the book cover. 4. The fourth committee, the Garment Division, deals primarily with the repairs of ripped clothing worn by monks and nuns. In addition, they also sell Buddhist uniform directly to the lay people. 5. The fifth subcommittee is the Reissue Division which oversees the selling of items manufactured by the monastery. They have three main duties and they are: 1) Counting and storing the books and other items in the warehouse. 2) Checking and packing books, CDs and other religious items before passing them to showrooms and the shop. 3) Lastly, they have a workshop which allows them to make lotus lanterns with the Hoang Phap design for sale.

Within the Cultural Board¹⁰, there are five subdivisions that run the social side of the temple. The first subdivision is the Dharma Propagation Division. This team is responsible for A) The Dharma talks, where the senior monks organize the seminars for Dharma Masters to impart their knowledge. This can be held within the monastery in Hoc Mon district or across the country. They also run a speaking class every week, where new monks can learn to practice public speaking. B) The Guiding for helping other monasteries: this is where they are on hand to help other monasteries set up their own retreats or ceremonies. The Buddhist Culture subdivision deals with four areas within the temple which are: A) The Internet room: to manage the Wi-Fi throughout the building and to update the monastery's website *www.chuahoangphap.com.vn*. B) The Films room: this team records video clips and take pictures of retreats, ceremonies or Dharma-talk seminars; furthermore, they are in charge of maintaining the camera equipment. C) The Computer room: here they work in teams to produce documents or books to be published; they also use it as an area to provide training on basic computer skills. D) The Recording Studio: this group works to record audio, for example, for the Hoang Phap radio program. The Communicate Information Division has four parts: A) Library: there is a team who is in charge of ordering selected books from the publishers to be put on display in the library; they record books that are borrowed or returned, and help transcribe important documentation. B) Audio room: for audio equipment management and audio processing for the retreats and ceremonies. C) The Exhibition room: there are two exhibition rooms for general practices of Buddhism, which are used by the abbot or people of the monastery to do activities in. D) LED screen management room: to control and design programs to show at retreats and ceremonies; this team also provides live streaming of Dharma talks and Buddhist programs. The fourth subdivision is the Event

¹⁰ Ibid., p.9.

Organization Division and has three parts: A) Retreats: this team supervises the program and staff organization to run the retreat, takes care of the retreats in general. B) Ceremony and C) Programs of Buddhism. Lastly, the fifth subdivision, the Research and Translation Division, branched into two groups. One group is researching new techniques of Buddhist practice and is looking into ways to grow the organization. The second group works to translate foreign books and films into Vietnamese.

Logistics Board¹¹ with fifteen subcommittees:

-1. Buddha Hall Division -2. Hygiene Division -3. Kitchen Division -4. Gauss commemorate building Division -5. Photo commemorate building Division -6. Drinking water Division -7. Supportive recitation Division -8. Electricity Division -9. Transport Division -10. Parking Division -11. Security Division -12. Sound Division -13. Public order Division -15. Health Division -16. Outside lay people group Division

All activities of the monastery held by the members of different divisions are governed by the head of their own division. Each head of the division answers to the head of the board, who ensures the affairs of the temple are running smoothly. Members have to work together in harmony and must follow the Saṅgha rules (vinaya and sīla) and the 42 monastery rules. The daily rules the members follow are taught by the abbot. Since members work as a close team, disputes can arise within the group as members misunderstand each other if communication is not carried out properly; they also may feel humiliated and as a result disregard orders given by a senior person. To combat this, the monastery holds meetings every week to discuss and solve the problems. Members are given specific jobs based on their skills to complete projects. Members who do not have necessary skills will attend training courses to learn. Work is always continued by successive generations of monks. The monks may change but the project should always run on time to be completed. The workers carry out their duties with full power to show their dedication to the Saṅgha and others in running the monastery and collecting merits. This is one of the training ways in the monastery and also a basic way to become a senior monk in the future. This comes from the idea of the Bodhisattva path in Mahāyāna Buddhism.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., p.9.

¹² Daisetz Tei Suzuki. (1973). *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*. New York: Schocken Books. pp. 277-310.

Every two weeks, a meeting is held to discuss any repairs that need to be done before the retreat. For ceremonies, the members meet once a week to go over the schedule of repairs or works to be done. Firstly, the vice abbot notifies everyone about the retreat or a ceremony, step by step, from the head of organization to the head of the board or division section. The vice abbot will show the plan of the ceremony for members to follow what he will be discussing. Secondly, the team head will ask what duty they are responsible for and for it to be arranged and completed on time. The team head can also give in a suggestion to the abbot regarding their duty. Thirdly, members will be asked if they would like to change their position in the event. Once everything has been decided upon, the meeting will end with the approval of the abbot. While the meeting is taking place, any suggestions or comments will be taken in consideration. This is one of the ways the Saṅgha members help each other and offer their power to improve the monastery.¹³

Contribution to Propagating the Buddha's Teachings

Giving Dharma teachings in the Hoang Phap monastery is a way to preach the Buddha Dharma to many people around the country. With many kinds of retreats, Hoang Phap monastery has established the Dharma cornerstone for many people in Vietnam: pupils, students, general workers, officers, and other members of society. This step is organized very carefully to disseminate the Buddha's teaching in Vietnam. The Hoang Phap monastery divides the retreats into sections to accommodate the participants from different backgrounds. For example, student retreats are only for students. The Dharma teaching aims to guide students in topics such as love, the nature of love, real love, and the basic understanding of family life. Students are also offered information and help on job searching, environment protection and how to act as a responsible adult in the society.

One of the most important features of Dharma talks is to avoid any discussion and negative comments about other monks, the monastery as an organization, and politics. Sensitive topics regarding the country's human right policy and its corrupt government members are also avoided. If anyone is caught breaking the rules, they will have to answer

¹³Thich Chan Tinh. (2018). *Hoang Phap monastery's information data yearbook 2017*. HCM: Hoang Phap monastery publisher. p.12.

before the Charter of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha Council.¹⁴ Those who are found guilty of breaking the regulations will be judged by the council. Both the Charter of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha Council and Government may be involved if it was a more serious offense.

Retreat organization: Hoang Phap monastery in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, is the first monastery to establish the Seven Days of Buddha's Name Recitation Retreat. It also offers seven-day student cultivation retreats, one-day retreats for busy practitioners, retreats for children, and other. There is also a retreat for cancer patients and the blind.¹⁵ The seven-day retreat normally has 2000 to 4000 participants. While one-day retreat hosts more than 10.000 practitioners. Retreats for children and students usually have about a thousand participants. Participants did not pay any fees for the retreats; donations were accepted from those willing to donate.

Organization of ceremonies and festivals:¹⁶ Ceremonies are one of the most important activities in Hoang Phap monastery and are held every year. The festival is a vacation day for the lay people to visit the monastery, pay respect to the Triple Gem and see the abbot and other monks. There are two kinds of ceremonies: Buddhist festivals and monastery ceremonies. A Buddhist festival is a special day in the Buddhist calendar that celebrates an event of the Buddha's life. There are many festivals that are celebrated around the world, such as the Vesak Day (honoring the three significant events of the Buddha's life — his birth, his Enlightenment and his Parinirvana) and Amitābha Buddha birthday. The monastery ceremony is a special day for the foundation and is held on an important day. For example, the anniversary of the founder, commemoration day, Lunar new year, full moon night in the first month of the year, the commemoration of Avalokitesvara, and Ullambana festival. There were more than 10.000 participants in each ceremony the monastery has hosted and is by far the largest turnout of the participants in Vietnam.

Buddhist Media Production:¹⁷ Every year, CDs, videos, and DVDs are produced by the monastery for the Buddhist community and people around the country. It can also be seen or purchased on the Internet. The monastery was also the first place to produce and publish the DVD of Buddha's birthday ceremony, the Ullambana festival, and the ordination

¹⁴ Vietnam Buddhist Sangha Council. (2008). *The Charter of The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha Council*. Hanoi: Religion Publishing House. pp.12-35.

¹⁵ Thich Chan Tinh. (2008). Op.cit., p. 43.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 53-90.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 91.

ceremony. This is to show the community and let them understand more about a monk's life and what those ceremonies entail. This is the basic foundation for other temples to follow in the production of Buddhist DVDs. The Hoang Phap continues to make an increasing number of movies. The abbot has been producing many chronicles of ancient temples around Vietnam, for example, the *Que Huong Dat Viet (Vietnam's Homeland)* in 4 parts. Another documentary, the *Ve Tham Dat Phat (A Visited Buddha's Land)* in 4 parts, is a journey to Lumpini, Bodh-Gaya, Sarnath and Kusinagara; *Nhung Neo Duong Tay Tang (Tibet's Plateau)* is about Buddhism in Tibet today; the *Dharmakaya An Tuong Kho Phai (Impression of Dhammakaya)* is about Dharmakaya foundation, practice, and teaching; the *Vuong Quoc Chua Thap (The Kingdom of Temples and Towers)* is about Buddhism in Cambodia; the *Luong Duyen Viet Han (Vietnam and South Korea in Connection)* is about Buddhism in South Korea, the *65 Ngay Du Hoa Tren Dat My (65 Days of Propagation in United States of America)* is about two months of Ven. Thich Chan Tinh giving Dharma talks and visiting temples in United States of America. All of the films have English subtitles.

Contribution to Social Development

Charity and scholarship foundation:¹⁸ Charity and scholarship foundation in Hoang Phap monastery is there to assist people in dire need of help and operates 7 days a week. In case of floods, plagues, accidents and other hardships, the Hoang Phap monastery will send charity teams to help. The charity team in the monastery works very hard to offer a solution to the problems, for example, by taking the victims of floods to seek medical care, finding homes for poor families and trying to prevent the spread of diseases by offering medicine and information on preventing the illness. The charity team consists of 30 to 100 members who are the main people in line to assist the victims of disasters. The foundation also has up to 1000 volunteers in major cities and provinces. Activities also include releasing captured animals, i.e. fishes, birds, frogs and others back into their environment every week. There are two kinds of scholarship in Hoang Phap monastery which were established by the most venerable Thich Chan Tinh, the abbot of this monastery. The first is Uom Mam Tri Tue scholarship, established in 2013, which is intended for university and college students who have poor families, but are diligent, receiving high grades, of good character, and not

¹⁸Chua Hoang Phap. (2018). Program of Charity. Retrieved December 19, 2017. From <http://www.chuahoangphap.com.vn/tu-thien-xa-hoi/tin-tuc/danh-muc-ke-hoach-tu-thien-phong-sanh-4/>.

discriminative against religions. This scholarship is given twice a year to more than 300-500 students per year. The amount of money students receive is based on their university tuition fee. The second is the Ngo Chan Tu scholarship and it was established in 2017; this scholarship is intended to sponsor the many Buddhist colleges around Vietnam (currently there are 19 Buddhist Colleges on the list). The grant is there to support monks and nuns who study abroad. The conditions to obtain the grant are: A) the student cannot afford the fee to study, and B) the student has a talent in learning and has received high marks previously.¹⁹

Propagation of Buddha's teaching to the community: When the Buddha's teaching was introduced to human beings, there was a change for spiritual practitioners. With the Buddha's eye, the Blessed One could look deep into human beings of many kinds to see their different backgrounds. It meant that their abilities to understand and practice the Dharma are different. That is why the Sakyamūni Buddha had been teaching various practices for many diverse groups of people. And the recitation of the Buddha's name is one of them practiced to attain freedom of life.

One way to preach the Buddha Dharma to many people in order for them to approach the understanding of life is to understand their background. The monastery also rewards many of its practitioners with Dharma gifts, which are given out by temples that organize the retreats. The abbot is invited to give Dharma talks in state schools, prisons and public institutions. The first Summer cultivation retreat was opened in Hoang Phap monastery in 2005. The purpose was for young people and students to begin the new era as the new generation who will be going to the monastery and represent the new face of Buddhist believers. For a very long time, Buddhism in Vietnam was mostly followed by senior citizens of the country and had a lack young people attending the monastery. Most people thought that Buddhism is for moribund people instead of those who are young and full of energy, which explained why many young people did not come the monastery. This is why Buddhism in Vietnam changed its values in the late 19th century. The summer cultivation retreats for young people and students began to develop in the background of the opening of Vietnam government to adhere the organization of World Trade Organization (WTO). Following the changes in regulations in Vietnam, any monastery which intends to

¹⁹Chua Hoang Phap. (2018). Uom Mam Tri Tue Scholarship Ninth Award. Retrieved December 31, 2017. From <http://www.chuahoangphap.com.vn/uom-mam-tri-tue/tin-tuc/chi-tiet-9th-awarding-ceremony-of-buddy-talent-scholarship-35/>.

conduct retreats, ceremonies or festivals has to request the local government's agreement letter and its many permits.

Promotion of energy conservation and environment protection: Saving energy comes from personal behaviour and awareness in daily life; the smallest action can save energy and help the environment. Ven. Thich Chan Tinh, the abbot of the Hoang Phap monastery, has brought awareness on saving energy in the daily routine. In his mission to promote energy conservation, the abbot has stopped using electrical appliances such as an air conditioner, fridge, television or computer in his room. Since Ven. Thich Chan Tinh is the top master of Hoang Phap monastery, he is being given the luxury of having furniture for his convenience. However, he refused the treatment and instead dedicated his life to be an example for the monasteries monks and lay people to follow. He will often teach participants the ways of saving power and protecting the environment. Because everything is interconnected – “this is because that is, this arises because that arises, this ceases because that ceases” – saving power means to protect the environment, and protecting the environment is protecting people's lives. This is what the Buddha taught in his Dharma talks in every retreat and daily sessions at the monastery. This is a key note for every monk and lay person in the monastery to have awareness of energy conservation. Such as turning off the lights and electric fans before going out and closing the taps to save water.

The most Venerable Thich Chan Tinh, the abbot of the monastery, has been placing emphasis on the close relationship between the human and environment. This is one of the basic teachings of the Buddha: *paticcasamuppada*, which is understood as “this is because that is, this arises because that arises, this ceases because that ceases”,²⁰ or all things are interrelated. It means that protecting humans is also to protect what is not human. The humanity cannot survive without water, food, and air; protecting those elements is protecting humanity from going extinct. This teaching is very important in this technical era when people are exploiting the oceans and forests, depleting the world of its natural resources. Large numbers of practitioners visit the Hoang Phap monastery to learn how to save power and protect the environment. Exhaust fumes and the release of CO₂ contributes to air pollution in the country, due to 90 percent of cars and motorbikes being driven on the road. Another big polluter are the breeding farms that rear animals for meat. The data is found on the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) National Greenhouse Gas Inventories

²⁰ CBETA, VOL. T02, no. 0099-012. p. 0085C10.

Program of World Meteorological Organization.²¹ Making people become aware of how they use energy, gas, and livestock produce has caused a change in the environment for the better. The monastery is prompting the good of becoming a vegetarian and helping reduce the effect of greenhouse gases by eating only vegetables. The program of environmental awareness is promoted not only by Mahāyāna tradition but is also the century goal of the United Nation to save the planet.

Conclusion

Hoang Phap monastery has been a centre of Pure Land practice for 20 years, with its first retreat opening in 1999. Since then, many of its activities have helped spread the Buddha Dharma to many communities in Ho Chi Minh city and around Vietnam, with further expansion into other countries. The Hoang Phap monastery makes a valuable contribution via the retreats (divided into many kinds, e.g. for common people, youth and students, cancer patients, blind and handicapped people), celebration of Buddhist ceremonies and festivals, and offering of sūtras, books, and Buddhist CDs to temples and lay people. We can say that the activities of Hoang Phap monastery during the many years it has been operating have contributed to the campaign of sharing the Buddha's teaching to many followers and helping them build a better life. It has changed people's perception of Buddhism being a religion that only caters to a minority of people and instead brought in a younger generation to learn the teaching. This monastery has proved that Buddhism is not only intended for old and moribund people, a common cognition of lay Buddhist community in Vietnam for a long time. There are thousands of young people and students who come to practice retreats and attend the festivals in Hoang Phap monastery. The enlargement of this monastery's practical method of Buddhism has been very common in Vietnam and other countries in the ways of organizing traditional retreats. It is a kind of a monastery that has enrolled Buddhism into contemporary Vietnamese society.

²¹ WMO&UNEP. (2006). IPCC Guidelines for National Greenhouse Gas Inventories. Retrieved 2006. From <https://www.ipcc-nggip.iges.or.jp/public/2006gl/vol1.html>

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