

# THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY BUDDHIST REVIVAL MOVEMENT IN CENTRAL VIETNAM



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the Buddhist revival movement in Vietnam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, why did the movement take place, how was it recovered, and the results of revival movement in central region of Vietnam. Buddhist recovery in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was an urgent requirement toward Buddhism not only in Vietnam but also its neighbors in order to satisfy social improvement of the modern time. Moreover, Vietnamese Buddhism itself - Buddhist beliefs and practices had become distorted by corruption, superstition, and spiritual lassitude. Large realities were that Buddhism was not perceived as responding to the crisis of 'westernization' and colonial rule, especially if compared with the nationalist or revolutionary platform. Furthermore, Buddhist temples were also losing supporters and resources to new popular sects or Catholicism. In this context, unless Buddhism could find a way to adapt to new circumstances, it risked losing its mass following. Therefore, this article attempts to discuss about why national aspirations changed, the demands for a renovation became more pressing. If these new social currents were not taken into consideration, it would be impossible for Buddhism to participate in the popular movement, whose momentum was growing exponentially at that time.

*Keywords:* 20<sup>th</sup> century revival movement, Central Vietnam, Vietnamese Buddhism.

## INTRODUCTION

Formed by the Buddha Gautama in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE in India, Buddhism began to spread to all parts of India and many areas of the world by the time of King Asoka, who was the supporter of the third Buddhist council.<sup>1</sup> Historically, Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Since then, it has experienced many ups and downs along with the prosperity and decadence of the nation. Buddhism once strongly flourished and experienced a golden age in Vietnam during Kings Ly and Tran dynasties (10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup>) but it sunk into the darkest plight of Vietnamese Buddhism from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the next century because of several reasons. Firstly, the French authorities seriously intensified their suppression of Buddhism and stepped up their promotion of Catholicism to solidify their colonial rule. This is the beginning of religious discrimination, an idea that cannot be separated from the whole complex drive toward national independence.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, it is painful for Vietnamese Buddhism when there were monks who profess themselves to be wholeheartedly devoted to the cult of Buddha but pay no attention to learn their prayer books. They conduct religious services for the people in exchange for fat rewards. While they wear Buddhist robes, they behave like common people.<sup>3</sup> Lacking the duty of learning Buddhist scripture is one of the reasons to stimulate the recovery of Buddhism. Moreover, the crisis of Vietnamese Buddhism is also evidenced by the proliferation of splinter groups or syncretistic sects which split from Buddhist orthodoxy and mingled Buddhist beliefs with ideas from other creeds. This phenomenon is most pronounced in South Vietnam where many groups sprouted in the late 19th and early 20th century such as Phat Duong, Minh Su, Hoa Hao, and Phat Thay sects. Several decades, around 1925 – 26, Cao Dai religion, which combined elements of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Catholicism emerged. These new religious sects obviously posed a challenge and at some points even threatened to replace orthodox Buddhism. Many Buddhists converted to these new sects, such as: Cao Dai, or embraced Catholicism or

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Geiger (tr.), **Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon**, (London: PTS, 1912), p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Nhat Hanh Thich, **Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire**, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Tai Thu Nguyen (chief ed.), **The History of Buddhism in Vietnam**, (USA: Washington, 2008), p. 269.

agnosticism. Without finding its way to adapt to new Buddhist circumstances, orthodox Buddhism risked losing its followers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because of the change of national aspirations, the demands for renovation become more pressing. If the new social currents are not taken into consideration, it would be impossible for Buddhism to participate in the popular movements. In the 1920s, the impact of agitation for the re-invigoration of Buddhism in China and Japan had strongly influenced over Asia and Europe. Therefore, Vietnamese Buddhist activists worried that Buddhist institutions would lose adherents to other religious groups – not only to such old rivals as Catholic Church, but also to such new heterodox competitors as Cao Dai and Hoa Hao – and that Buddhism was increasingly viewed as backward and as antithetical to modernity.

This movement is a Buddhist revolution which not only saves Vietnamese Buddhism from losing favors from Vietnamese people but also changes it from a traditional religion to a modern one as manifested in some aspects such as the organization of Buddhist orders, the training of monks, and promulgation of the Buddha Dharma. All these aspects have caused Buddhism to get back its influence on the society through many of its practical activities.

However, when comparing the Buddhist revival movements in the North and in the Southern Vietnam we have found that the Buddhist revival movement in the Centre did not only general roles but also special ones as well to the development of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **ORIGIN OF THE BUDDHIST REVIVAL MOVEMENT**

According to Master Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist recovery movement at that time was the international one and initiated in India by a Sri Lankan layman, David Hewavitarane, who later ordained as Bhikkhu Dharmapala in India. He was the founder of Mahabodhi Society Association to publish Buddhist magazines as well as Buddhist centers and monasteries in the effort to restore Buddhism in India. For instance, with the maneuver of Doctor Ambedkar, millions of Indian Intouchables were taking the Three Refuges and followed Buddhism in October, 14, 1956 at Nagpur, and five hundred thousand people took the Three Refuges at the same time. In addition, the visit of World Parliament of Religions (1893) and Dharmapala (1895) to Sanghai had significant repercussions. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a number of Chinese monks traveled to Thailand, Burma,

Sri Lanka, and India to learn more about their Buddhist revivals in order to propagate Chinese Buddhist overseas.<sup>4</sup>

Later in 1908, Dharmapala sent letters to China to invite people for cooperation. As a result, layman Duong Nhan Son founded Ky Hoan vihara and maneuvered monks, nuns, and laypeople to research Buddhism through Chinese, English, and Pāli. This movement with many classes has brought about the dynamic research environments, which creates remarkable results. Since then, in 1914 onwards various propagation centers were established around China, resulting in essential elements for the later Chinese modern Buddhist revival.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in China, the revival began in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a layman who reprinted the suttas (Buddhist discourses) and rebuilt the destroyed monasteries during the Taiping Rebellion. Apart from this, aggressive Christian missionary efforts and the Japanese Buddhist Revival had stimulated Chinese Buddhist scholarship, teaching, and proselytization.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Japan, the new paradigm blew into their traditional Buddhism. Actually, the motives of this recovery start from Buddhist movements in India and China and the Buddhist admiration of Western countries. Thus, in the early century, a number of critical researches on Buddhism by western scholars were discovered profundity of Buddhist thoughts. They showed their attitudes sincerely. This makes western countries take a look at Buddhism and gradually helps get rid of old scorns of the Orient philosophies. Furthermore, the admiration in Buddhism of famous western scholars has caused the self-faith of Buddhist countries to rise up strongly, resulting in the variety of research on the teachings of their own religions enthusiastically. This is one of the essential motives leading to the Buddhist revival of Asian countries.<sup>7</sup>

In light of the initiators of the Buddhist revival movements in Vietnam, there are many different ideas regarding the first initiators of the recovery movement of Vietnamese Buddhism. Normally, some researches often come to the conclusion that Bhikkhu Thien

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<sup>4</sup>Elise Anne Devido, **Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-Revolutionary Vietnam**, (ed.), Philip Taylor, (Singapore: Institute of Southern Asian Studies, 2007), p. 257.

<sup>5</sup>Lang Nguyen, **Historical Interpretation of Buddhism in Vietnam, vols. 1 - 3**, (Hanoi: Hanoi Literature Press, 2000), p. 758.

<sup>6</sup>Xiao Ping, **Chinese Modern Buddhist Revival and Japan**, (Kaohsiung: Foguangshan Wenjiao Jijinhui, 2001), pp. 1- 4.

<sup>7</sup>Lang Nguyen, *op.cit.*, p. 750.

Chieu (in the south), layman Tam Minh – Le Dinh Tham (in the central part), and bhikku Tri Hai (in the north) were three initiators and leaders of the recovery<sup>8</sup>. In fact, the Buddhist recovery in the Centre was initiated by Master Giac Tien but the most significant one was his student, layman Dr. Tam Minh Le Dinh Tham, a medical doctor and also a sinologist. He was one of founders of Annam Buddhist Studies Association for the Centre. Besides, he was considered the key person running this Buddhist association as well as the 20<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist revival movement of the central Vietnam.

## **FIELDS NEEDED THE REVIVAL**

Geographically, the central region is smaller than northern and southern region. The Nguyen Emperors, the last dynasty of Vietnam, held their imperial citadel and court in this region, even when Vietnam was under the French colonial government's domination. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most educated people were trained to pass mandarin examinations to reside and work for the court in the central region. The Nguyen Emperors, members of their royal families, and the mandarins, all supported the Buddhist temples, their eminent monks, and their projects. The virtuous monks were bestowed with honorable titles and invited to give Dhamma teachings to royal families. In general, these conditions have key influence on the development of the Buddhist revival movement in the central region.

The revival movement in central region is different from the other two regions, the northern and the southern regions, because it does not have pre-movement activities. The senior monk Giac Tien took care of the Southern Buddhist Studies Association at Linh Son temple in Saigon and its Buddhist revival activities for the southern region. Giac Tien then instructed his student, Dr. Le Dinh Tham, to establish a similar association for the central region.

The Buddhist revival movement in Vietnam actually took place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Firstly, it happened in the South and spread to the Centre and then to the North of Vietnam. This led to the founding of such many Buddhist associations as Buddhist Institutes of the South (1930), The Annam Buddhist Studies Association (1932), the Northern Buddhist Association (1934), and Vietnam Buddhist Youth Association, and so on. After the establishment of these Buddhist organizations, many Buddhist magazines

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<sup>8</sup>Elise Anne Devido, *op.cit.*, p. 262.

written in Quoc Ngu (Vietnamese) were also published. They are powerful medium in Buddhist education, namely, Phap Am (the Sound of Dhamma), Vien Am newspaper, Touch of Wisdom, and so forth. One of the most important things in the revival movement is the Buddhist education reform. That leads to the training of monks and nuns, and later on becomes systematic organization. Many Buddhist schools were built up across the country to help monks and nuns cultivate and improve their knowledge. It could be said that these changes within Vietnamese Buddhism are momentous turning points of Vietnamese development of Buddhism.

## **ANNAM BUDDHIST STUDIES ASSOCIATION**

After three years of learning Buddhism with Most Venerable Phuoc Hue in Binh Dinh province, from 1929 to 1932, and approaching ideas of the Buddhist revival movement of China initiated by Master Taixu, doctor Tam Minh Le Dinh Tham looked back on Vietnamese Buddhism, which was believed to be in a long sleep, towards a contemporary situation. Then he started to gather many intellectuals who had the same viewpoints about the destiny of Buddhism in Vietnam in order to move forward the plan of establishing a Buddhist association for Buddhism of the Central. In 1932, Doctor Le Dinh Tham and other twenty-eight Buddhist intellectuals joined together to establish Annam Buddhist Association; he was selected to be the head of the association. Truc Lam temple was the first headquarter of the association, but it was moved to Tu Quang temple after restoration of the temple.

Annam Buddhist Studies Association constantly developed its branches in many different areas of the central regions of Vietnam such as Da Nang, Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, and so forth. In other words, the association is the first organization which made a firm foundation for the recovery of Vietnamese Buddhism.

The association was divided into various administrative positions within organization. In the first year of the Annam Association, Tam Minh Le Dinh Tham held the Chairman position; in subsequent years, other members of the group took turns in handling these responsibilities. In addition, Annam Buddhist association received permission from the Governor General of Indochina on 30 June 1933 to publish a monthly magazine called 'Vien Am' (Sound of Perfection). For the first several years of its operation, the administrative regulations and rules for members of Annam association underwent several revisions.

The Administrative Regulations of Annam association stated that the highest commands were in the hands of the senior monks. However, the Committee of General Management handled the most important administrative functions. For the 1935 fiscal year, this Committee consisted of lay elites who were trained by traditional examination education while some were trained by the French educational system.

The practice of having lay people to fill personnel positions in the Annam Association was introduced to the central region and later became the basic norm of all three regions. The Northern Association imitated Annam Association and lay followers managed the activities of their Association from the beginning, while in the Southern Association, monastic members held important positions in its Association structure from the very beginning. It is interesting to note that operations in both Central and Northern Associations ran smoothly while Khanh Hoa and his group constantly struggled with problems raised by Tran Nguyen Chan, the lay elite and “permanent” second chairman of the Southern Association. In fact, the format that Sangha members hold important positions in the Buddhist Association became the standard of all three regions after 1950s. The smooth operation and the success of Annam Association in regard to fulfillment of its missions of reformation of Buddhism in the central region were accredited to Le Dinh Tham. He was one of the founder of the association, the director of *Vien Am* magazine, the founder of Buddhist youth group, and a teacher at the Buddhist Studies Institute.

## **RESULTS OF THE REVIVAL MOVEMENT IN CENTRAL REGION**

One of the most visible achievements of the Buddhist revival movement in central region of Vietnam is the establishment of educational system from the primary to university level for monks and nuns. And the first success of the movement is to create a series of well-learned Buddhists who later became excellent leaders of Vietnamese Buddhism during its historically darkest days of being discriminated and suppressed by the Republic of Vietnam, under the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. They were Most Ven. Thien Sieu, Master Tri Quang, Master Thien Minh, Most Ven. Thien Hoa, Most Ven. Tri Tinh, Master Nhat Lien, and so forth.

Furthermore, together with Buddhist Sangha in Hue, Annam Buddhist Studies Association has founded Vinaya Council including the Vinaya masters to solve problems among the Sangha. The purpose is to purify the Sangha and made it pure in order to serve as respected place for laypeople to refuge and practice. More importantly, it also organized

an administrative board of monks who specialized in making ceremonies or Buddhist rites so that they could do their duties well.

Due to the opinion that Buddhism could not develop firmly without the teaching about the right understanding of Buddhism to the youth who are expected to be the powers of the nation and the leaders of Buddhism in Vietnam, in the autumn of 1940, the Buddhist Youth Association was founded by Doctor Tam Minh – Le Dinh Tham. The association is considered one of the most important success of the Buddhist revival movement of central Vietnam. Also, it has been the best-organized youth organization across the country with 1,000 units comprising 70,000 young people and 3,000 leaders.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, though Central Vietnam is not the place that initiated Vietnamese Buddhist revival movement, it played an important part in the movement process through the career of education and training as well as establishing good organizations. As of 1937, Annam Buddhist Studies Association had 3000 members from every province of central Vietnam, including ethnic minority areas.

As the Buddha in the Dhammapada says, “Happy is the harmony of the Sangha, Happy is the practice of those in harmony” (*sukhā saṅghassa sāmaggī, sāmaggānaṃ tapo sukho*),<sup>10</sup> the unity of Buddhist Association idea appeared at the end of 1920,<sup>11</sup> but the need for the unification of the Buddhist organizations continued to be agitated well after 1945. Buddhists of the whole country are jealously to have the United Buddhist Association. This desire was really proposed and carried out effectively after the 1950 First World Buddhist Conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka, and the establishment of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in which Vietnamese Buddhism became an official member with the considerable contributions of the North Buddhist Association, especially the important role of Most Venerable Thich To Lien.

After the Colombo Conference, venerable Thich To Lien, in his capacity as a leader of the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation, the founder of the World Fellowship of Buddhist, actively campaigned for the unity of Buddhist associations in the whole country. His activities were supported by the World Fellowship of Buddhists and the contemporary

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<sup>9</sup>“Buddhism for Buddhist Youth Association”, **Phap Loi**, vol 1, BE 2546/ 2003): 2.

<sup>10</sup>**Dhp** 194.

<sup>11</sup> Dai Dong Nguyen and Tam Dac Le, “Monk Tam Lai and the Mobilization for Buddhist Revival in Vietnam at the Beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century”, **Religious Study Review**, no. 6, (2007): 31- 40.

Buddhist Associations in the Centre and in the South.<sup>12</sup> The supports of the Vietnamese Buddhist associations as well as the World Buddhist associations held the National United Buddhist Conference from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> of May, 1951 in Tu Dam pagoda, Hue province. The Conference unanimously adopted regulations of the Vietnamese Confederation of Buddhist Associations as well as the organization system of National Buddhist Association.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Buddhist revival movement in central Vietnam played important roles in the Buddhist recovery across Vietnam in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. With the management of Annam Buddhist Study Association, Buddhism in the central region proved its success in the mission of getting back Buddhism's influences on Vietnamese society through such remarkable achievements as Buddhist education system reform, Buddhist organizations for the youth, and Buddhist promulgation through modern methods. These establish a close connection of Buddhist network in every different area. Thanks to Annam Buddhist Study Association and its effective methods, Buddhism in the central region could cultivate its strong influences on the Buddhist revival movement around the country. Not only has it stimulated the interest of intellectuals from other parts of the country, but also the restoration of the position of Buddhism in Vietnamese society and the nation.

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<sup>12</sup>Tam Dac Le, "Most Venerable Thich To Lien and the Establishment of Vietnamese Confederation of Buddhist Associations in 1951", **Religious Study Review**, no. 3, (2007): 19-33.

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