

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES OF VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM IN RELATION TO CHARITY

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***Abstract:** Religion Organizations' charity work is among the acts that express the spirit of peer salvation and assistance in order to bring a happy life to humankind. Buddhism is not outside the above trend. Entering social life is a major concern of modern Buddhism, and it is that charity work is a way to express the actual practice of Buddhist doctrines in social life and to bring Buddhism to life. Vietnamese Buddhism has become increasingly engaged in social life through various charity activities. This paper aims to describe the kinds of Vietnamese Buddhist charity organizations and work as well since the early 1990s.*

1. Introduction

Buddhism has been in Vietnam for more than 2,000 years, yet the exact period when it was introduced into Vietnam remains a controversy among scholars. Le Manh That¹ believes that Buddhism appeared in Vietnam during the reign of Hung Kings as in the legend of Tien Dung - Chu Dong Tu.² Many other researchers trace the entry of Buddhism into Vietnam to the earliest years of the Common Era (1st or 2nd century C.E) with the formation of Dau Buddhist Center.³ Since its early days, Buddhism has gotten to be accepted and become a dominant ideology in the national culture, especially after it had gotten localized. Over a long period of time, Vietnamese Buddhist activities have exerted important influence on various aspects of social life. As a matter of fact Buddhism has affected all cultural, economic, religious and political life not only in Vietnam but in other countries in the region and in the world where Buddhism strongly flourishes.

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¹ Prof. L e Manh That is one of the famous Buddhist scholar in Vietnam. He is the director of Vietnamese Buddhist Academy in Ho Chi Minh city.

² Le Manh That. *History of Vietnamese Buddhism* (Thuan Hoa publishing house, 1999).

³ Nguyen Lang. *Historical Discussion of Vietnamese Buddhism* (Culture publishing house, 1992); Nguyen Duy Hinh, *Vietnamese Buddhist Ideology* (Social sciences publishing house, 2002).

The study of Vietnamese Buddhist activities is crucial and necessary for the understanding of Vietnamese spiritual life. To contribute to that body of research, this paper explores the social activities of contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism. This study will cover the period from the foundation of Vietnamese Buddhist Church (1981) to the present. However, Buddhist activities only became truly vigorous and vibrant since the “Đổi mới” (renovation), i.e., since the early 1990s. It was the time when not only did Buddhism but also other religions in Vietnam seem to get awakened after a real long sleep. Many researchers say this is “a return to traditions in the comprehensive socio-economic renovation process in Vietnam”, after a time of refrains under socialist collectivism.⁴ Oscar Salemink presents his assessment of this “return to traditions” as “the form and extent of activities do not produce a return to the past; rather, they take place on a larger scale and in a more prominent manner, in more exotic and cumbersome forms, driven by old and new forces, in a changing context.”⁵ This observation captures the on-the-ground situation of how Vietnamese religions functioned during this time.

The spread and growth of Buddhism is influenced by various internal and external factors in contemporary Vietnamese society. Externally, it could be attributed to changes in socio-economic conditions, particularly in Asian countries. As Philip Taylor⁶ puts it, “most Asian economies entered a period of economic boom in the 1990s. All people realized many mistakes of the market economy that can seriously affect their life.”⁷ Internally, Vietnam economy shifted from a centrally-planned to a socialist-oriented market modality. This economic shift created rapid and profound changes in the Vietnamese socio-economic and political life. Precariousness, uncertainties and risks increased, which made people feel as if they were being governed by invisible mysterious forces. Coping with such forces

⁴ Oscar Salemink. *Tìm kiếm sự an toàn tinh thần trong xã hội Việt Nam đương đại*, bài trình bày trong hội thảo “Nhân học về an ninh con người”, đại học Tự do Amsterdam, 29-30 tháng 8 năm 2005. (chưa xuất bản)

⁵ Oscar Salemink. *Tìm kiếm sự an toàn tinh thần trong xã hội Việt Nam đương đại*, bài trình bày trong hội thảo “Nhân học về an ninh con người”, đại học Tự do Amsterdam, 29-30 tháng 8 năm 2005. (chưa xuất bản)

⁶ Philip Taylor. Australia Professor, who spent 7 years in Vietnam to do field work about Vietnamese religions and had written some books about Vietnam.

⁷ Philip Talor. *Goddess on the Rise* (Honolulu: University Press, 2004), p. 87.

requires mythical powers. While investigating market impacts on Vietnamese religions, Philip Taylor has this to say:

The increase of market relations in the region since the mid-1980 has resulted in the increase of religious entities, which relates to the recognition of individual entities and the need for one's capacity to anticipate events and manage one's concerns. Reflections of the market are transferred to people's life, which leads to the feeling of unrest, powerlessness and obsession as if they were being governed by external, invisible and influential powers. People seek assistance from spiritual forces (powers) [...] Executing these forces has become one of the instrumental ways to success and avoidance of predicted (warned) misfortune.⁸

To satisfy the spiritual need of followers, Vietnamese Buddhism has become increasingly engaged in social life while at the same time its activities have increasingly diversified. This paper is the result of an exploration which aims at describing Vietnamese Buddhist social activities, which are so vigorous in various forms, such as struggles for peace, working as elected members of the National Assembly or People's Councils at various levels, etc. Vietnamese Buddhist social activities can be viewed from different perspectives: politically, culturally, economically, religiously, or socially. Due to several constraints and the limitation of this paper, however, the paper merely addresses the charity aspect of Buddhist social activities in contemporary Vietnamese society, leaving political, economic or cultural aspects for future endeavors. This study merely serves as an initial step to further studies that I envision to conduct in the future.

2. Vietnamese Buddhist Charity – the spirit of current Vietnamese Buddhism

Vietnamese Buddhism entering social life (life engagement) is a major concern of modern Buddhism which was also put into discussion in the solemn Vesak 2008 organized in Vietnam. The spirit underlying the Buddhist life engagement project is also the mainstream ideology of Buddhism which Shakyamuni⁹ wanted to convey to all humankind. For that reason, the presence of Buddhism in life is meant to serve people and society. In other words, the nature of the presence of Buddhism is an

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Shakyamuni is the founder of Buddhism.

engagement and its guideline to bring happiness to human being and life. The purpose of all principles that inform Buddhist social engagement is the expression about compassion to all species. According to Prof. Bhikshu Satyapala, engaged Buddhism may initially appear to be a self contradiction. Isn't one of the distinguishing features of Buddhism focused on the solitary quest for enlightenment? No enlightenment can be complete as long as others remain trapped in delusion. Genuine wisdom is manifested in compassionate action. When we re-examine Buddhism's 2,550 year old heritage, we find that the principles and even some of the techniques that were inhibited in the Modern Asian settings can now be actualized through Buddhism's exposure to the west, where ethical sensitivity, social activism and egalitarianism are emphasized. We believe that Buddhism may have unique resources to offer the west and the world and apply ancient Buddhist insights to actual contemporary problems.¹⁰

Like other religions, Buddhism deals with the issue of two worlds: the actual world and the posthumous one. In other words, all religions deal with the issue of Life and Death. Among various religious theories, ideologies and activities, some focus on Life while others are inclined toward Death. Those aiming at ultimate emancipation or enlightenment, after all, are biased to the afterworld, i.e. Death, whereas those enabling people to find Nirvana right in this contemporary life are Life-centered. The Four Noble Truths and the Eight-fold Right Path, amongst others, help people to escape from darkness and ignorance (*wu-ming*), from the submergence in re-incarnation. According to Buddhist doctrines, this escape is believed to be important for future emancipation. On the other hand, the sense of humanity, equality, fraternity, mercy and salvation spirit lead people to acts that enable them to find peaceful, happy life or Nirvana in their actual life now. We call the acts towards ultimate emancipation and enlightenment the out-of-life acts while those that bring people a happy and peaceful life - Nirvana - in the actual world are called temporalized ones.

Pragmatics is a concept relating to all acts that apply Buddhist viewpoints, ideologies and philosophies to actual day-to-day life. There are a whole variety of

¹⁰ Prof. Le Manh That and Ven. Dr. Thich Nhat Tu (ed.) *Engaged Buddhism and Development* (Culture and Information Press, 2008), p. 23.

Buddhist pragmatic acts. One of the most vibrant and useful of these acts is Buddhism charity, which is identified with the Buddhist spirit of mercy, fraternity and salvation. Buddhism charity is delivered in different forms, most remarkably in the establishment of western and oriental clinics where examination and drug delivery is free to the poor. Other forms are orphanages, care to PLWHA (people living with HIV/AIDS), houses constructed for Heroic Vietnamese Mothers, aid to areas struck by disasters, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.

Buddhist charity work is among the acts that express the spirit of peer salvation and assistance in order to bring a happy life to living people. While Buddhism in its essence is humanism, the nature of charity work means bringing Buddhism to life. The famous declaration of Buddha in the prayer “Serve all living beings means worship Buddha” is the basic principle of the socially engaged Buddhism. Buddha never teaches that humans have to serve him if they want to be happy in Nirvana. He replaces the service to him with that towards all living beings, which means that social benefits are brought to everybody, every species. Buddha’s declaration also connotes equality. It means that the happiness of living beings is as noble as the worship of Buddha and the enlightened ones. Buddha realized that the purpose of his presence in this life was not to serve him, but he hoped that through his lectures humans would serve themselves and bring happiness and goodness to everybody. In other words, the very nature of Buddhism is oriented towards serving humankind.

Charity work, which represents Buddhist Pragmatism, expresses the actual practice of Buddhist doctrines in social life, a way to bring Buddhism to life, to show that Buddhism is life engagement. There are a variety of Buddhist charity acts in Vietnam, and what follows is a mere sketch of the fundamental state of charity organizations and their activities in current Vietnam.

3. Vietnamese Buddhist Charity Organizations

Observing the tradition of mercy, salvation, Anatman and Mudita (egolessness and alius-centralism), life engagement to practice Buddhist doctrines, charity is one among the major affairs of Vietnamese Buddhist Church which has exerted a profound and extensive impact on the social life. According to Ven. Thich Quang Tung, charity work of Vietnamese Buddhist Church is a representation of the Six

Realms doctrines in today's world, and the practice of the Six Realms doctrines in charity work is realized in the practice Dana (Giving).¹¹

Giving means donation that includes material, truth, and peace & protection transfer. Material transfer encompasses self-donation and possession-sharing (internal and external donations), in which a person may donate his/her own body or parts/organs of his/her own body, and gives/shares his/her belongings, properties and products to/with others, respectively. Truth transfer is delivered through communication and advocacy of truths and beautiful lifestyles that bring enlightenment and escape from all physical and mental sufferings to all individuals and communities. Peace & protection transfer is meant to give peace of mind and protection to people in order to free them from fear. Charity has become a way to realize material transfer - one of the three modes of *Dana*.¹²

Throughout the years, the Executive Boards of the Vietnamese Buddhist Church in provinces and urban cities have focused on building charity establishments such as the system of Tue Tinh Clinis Center (TTCs), Orphanages, Houses for the Elderly, vocational training institutions, charity nurseries, etc. These services have been increasingly consolidated and have developed and improved in terms of facilities, human resources as well as quality of performance in various respects.

On the part of the state, the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam has been allowing all religions to practice charity. The Ordinance on Religions and Faiths (2004) represents a major advance in supporting all religions to engage in humanitarian work. In the Ordinance, the State encourages and allows religious organizations to engage in caring for children with special difficulties, supporting health care to the poor, PLWHA, leprosy and mental patients, developing nurseries and kindergartens as well as other humanitarian and charity acts. The Law on Prevention of HIV/AIDS also allows religious institutions to participate in caring for and supporting PLWHA and their orphans. Aligned with the humane, forgiving and loving spirit, and with the Law of the State and stipulations in the Charter of Vietnam

¹¹ Ven. Thich Quang Tung is head of Vietnamese Buddhist Church charity department

¹² Thich Quang Tung. "Buddhist Charity work: An Expression of the Six-Realms Doctrines in Society to day," in *Buddhist and Vietnamese Culture and Society in the Period of industrialization and Modernization* (Hanoi Socio-Science Publisher, 2008), p. 87.

Buddhist Church (VBC), a good number of charity institutions under the VBC have been established.

3.1. Medical centers

3.1.1. System of Tue Tinh Clinic

To maintain and continue the traditions initiated by the Great Medicine Man - Zhen Reverend Tue Tinh, intensive efforts were made in implementing the guidelines of VBC Central Board on the establishment of Tue Tinh clinic centers (TTCs) System throughout the country with a view to "serving all living beings means worshipping Buddha," thus resulting in the extensive development of TTCs system nation-wide.

Statistics from the Central Charity Division of VBC reveals that currently there are about 126 TTCs and 115 traditional medicinal dispensaries and acupuncture venues operating efficiently throughout the whole country. Most remarkable are the training classes on Traditional Medicine by Hanoi City Buddhist Society, TTCs of Phap Hoa and Tinh Xa Pagodas in Ho Chi Minh City, Dieu De Pagoda in Thua Thien-Hue, and in many other cities. These entities examine and deliver drugs to thousands of patients, not to mention that their service is worth hundreds of millions of VND. In the period from 1997 to 2002, their service was worth 9 billions VND, and in the period from 2002 to 2007 it increased to 35 billions VND (Dong Nai: 11.921.956.000 VND; Ho Chi Minh City 6 billions VND and Hue city 3.852.337.920 VND).¹³

The Central Charity Division of VBC has trained 250 monks and nuns to complete Elementary level in Health Care and 98 traditional apothecaries for TTCs in order to improve the effectiveness of healthcare service and share the burden with people and the society, as Buddhism has taught them.¹⁴

3.1.2. Centers for Counseling and Care to PLWHA

In keeping with the spirit of life engagement, Vietnamese Buddhism has contributed likewise to solving a number of social issues. Joining hand in hand with the entire humankind in the prevention of the century pandemic HIV/AIDS and consoling the unfortunate infected victims, Vietnam Buddhism has established many institutions to care for PLWHA and counseling centers on HIV/AIDS.

¹³ Reports from Vietnamese Buddhist Conference IV, V.

¹⁴ Reports from Vietnamese Buddhist Conference V.

In Hanoi, Phap Van pagoda in Hoang Mai district and Bo De pagoda in Gia Lam district are centers where PLWHA are given good care. Huong Sen Counseling Center on HIV initiated by Ven. Thich Thanh Huan of Phap Van pagoda, Hoang Mai district is one of the earliest among the pagodas to offer counseling and care to PLWHA. On March 24, 2004, the Hanoi City Buddhist Society opened a community venue for counseling, assistance and care to PLWHA in Phap Van pagoda, Hoang Mai district. The center is served by 10 counselors, including 6 monks, 2 PLWHA and 2 volunteers. This was the result of the efforts by Venerable Thich Thanh Huan and others. Eighteen months earlier, he had met with PLWHA and their families, and having witnessed old people breaking down for the loss of their children, children losing their parents, or spouses losing each other, and community stigma against PLWHA, he and other monks decided to gather and discuss ways to help them.¹⁵

Six months prior to its establishment, the Phap Van pagoda had served as the meeting venue for 50 PLWHA. The monk and volunteers had paid several visits there, given out gifts and encouragement to those under hospital treatment, and provided educational aid to 4 children of PLWHA (100,000VND/month each). A reading room was also opened to disseminate HIV/AIDS-related information and knowledge to the pagoda's visitors as well as Buddhist followers. In order to offer more extensive assistance, Ven. Thich Thanh Huan proposed opening the counseling office to the City Buddhist Society, which was eventually approved. The office focuses on intensification of prevention counseling to families of PLWHA, paying visits, providing assistance, inviting apothecaries to advise on traditional medicinal recipes so that they can maintain their health, treat and prevent opportunistic infectious diseases. The office also intends to help in income-generating activities for PLWHA. Bo De Pagoda in Gia Lam district, Hanoi, managed by Nun Thich Dam Lan, sister of Ven. Thich Thanh Huan, also takes care of HIV/AIDS-infected children.¹⁶

Apart from these, the Vietnam Buddhist Academy in HCMC is one of the effective counseling centers on HIV/AIDS partly funded by foreign assistance. The main activities of the Center include giving advice to PLWHA and community to help them understand the disease they are suffering from and how they can integrate themselves with the community, and doing communication work for the elimination

¹⁵ Report of Ven. Thich Thanh Huan, Phap Van pagoda.

¹⁶ Ven. Thich Thanh Huan and Nun Thich Dam Lan, interview with the author, Hanoi, December, 2008.

of community stigma against PLWHA. The 2008 Report of the Board for Receiving and Coordination of HIV/AIDS Prevention Projects can provide specific figures on the Center's activities.¹⁷

3.1.3. *Yoga and Fitness Clubs*

At Ky Quang II Pagoda, the Fitness Club is one of its social charity organizations, which started in January 2007 and has gradually evolved into a stable operation. Members of the Club mostly consist of people with difficulties, people whose relatives are being detoxified, women somehow involved in sex industry earlier, released prisoners, and PLWHA themselves. They take part in regular activities of the Club, such as exercises, talk shows and discussions (every Sunday) or provide mutual help to overcome difficulties.¹⁸

In response to the "Post-Detox" program on 13 April 2008, the Club organized Job Day to help them find a job, or gathered them to work in incense production in the district. In 2008 alone, 3,200,000 incense sticks were produced, generating 26,650,000VND as profit after production costs.¹⁹

3.1.4. *Center for Nurture and Care to the AO-affected (Agent Orange)*

Though years of fierce, grievous and brutal war are a thing of the past, its consequences are still felt in the country today in terms of the suffering it has brought on the people. Many of them who had sacrificed their youth for the country were affected by AO, including not only the courageous soldiers but also their offsprings who have been experiencing physical and mental pains. Thousands of children are born deformed, and therefore are deprived of a normal life since their parents are AO-affected. Such pitiful lives require care and sharing from the whole society. The Party and Government of Vietnam have launched various specific policies to assist them, yet due to budget constraints, supplies fall short of their demands. To help share the burden, various charity centers in pagodas have been welcoming and caring for such people.

In the North, the Hong Duc Charity Center founded by Nun Thich Dam Duoc at Ngoi Pagoda, Luong Tai District, Bac Ninh province, is a place where many AO

¹⁷ Report of Vietnamese Buddhist Academy in Ho Chi Minh city, the Board for receiving and Coordination of HIV/AIDS Prevention Projects.

¹⁸ Annual Review Report of Ven Thich Tue Tam on charity activities 2008.

¹⁹ Annual Review Report of Ven Thich Tue Tam on charity activities 2008.

victims are taken care of. Life support, care and functional rehabilitation are provided to over 120 children-victims and 30 adult-victims in Luong Tai district and vicinities.²⁰

The Center also provides free examination and treatment in collaboration with sponsors to organize social events and present gifts to AO victims. Visitors to the pagoda call it “revival place for the unfortunate”. Apart from the medical treatment, psychological therapy is provided to those children. Nun Dam Duoc has confided that “Illness originates from your heart; when your heart is at peace, you will grow less animate and more human.” Allowing them to sit in meditation, contemplating on Buddha's mercy, taking traditional herbs and health food (like mushrooms, beet, carrots, and other tonic foods) that help eliminate intoxicants, improve circulation and flow of Q'i, together with physical therapy and activation devices, her method has proven to be effective as shown by the number of children who were able to recover.

Currently in collaboration with the Red Cross of Luong Tai district, she is working as well to establish Hong Duc Healthcare Center, with 100 patient rooms totally separated from the Pagoda. Once completed, it will provide the children with better facilities and living conditions.

3.2. Education centers

3.2.1. *Kindergartens and Charity Classes*

As has been said, by 2008, there were over 1,500 charity classes in the whole country. However, there are still a limited number of nuns and monks who can be subject matter teachers. The Central Social Charity Division of VBC organized a refreshment course on childcare for 92 learners who are monks and nuns.²¹

While socio-economic life is still difficult, poor families with children of schooling age who are unable to afford their education at public or private schools can resort to such charity classes as their most suitable choice. Ky Quang II pagoda in Go Vap district, HCMC has been conducting such charity classes for children. For the last two years, in fact, six classes in the primary level catering to 119 children have been operational.²²

²⁰ Nun. Thich Dam Duoc, interview with the author, Bac Ninh, August 2007.

²¹ Social Charity Division of VBC, Annual Review Report 2008.

²² Ven. Thich Thien Chieu, Annual Review Report 2008.

In Thua Thien-Hue province there are 212 classes for 6,107 children taught and served by 336 teachers and 74 caregivers, including 155 classes of 4,422 semi-boarding children. A number of them enjoy good quality facilities, such as Quang Te, Phuoc Van, Hong Duc, Dieu De, Ngu Binh, Pho Quang and Dieu Nghiem nurseries and kindergartens. In fact many of them, like Quang Te and Phuoc Van, have been awarded the title "Kindergarten of the Year" by Hue City People's Committee and Department of Education.²³

3.2.2. *Vocational Training Establishments*

To help people have a stable means of livelihood, some of the Province-based and City-based Buddhist Churches have organized many schools and vocational classes free of charge for children of Buddhist families, poor families, and people with disabilities. At present there are about 10 vocational schools in the country that offer trainings in haircut, dressmaking, mechanics, electrician, and computer repair. Tay Linh pagoda, Hue city is managed by Nun Thich Nu Nhu Minh while Long Tho pagoda, Hue city is managed by Nun Thich Nu Minh Tanh. There are two courses per year with each course lasting for 6 months and with about 130-160 children attending. From the date of establishment to now, nearly 1,000 children have studied embroidery, knitting, garments, computer and office. After graduation, depending on what they have learnt, they are introduced to work in garment companies in Ho Chi Minh, Thuy Duong weaving and embroidery factory in Hue or counterfeit goods in the home.²⁴

In Ky Quang pagoda II, Go Vap district, HCMC, vocational training and career counseling services are offered. According to Annual Review Report 2008, a graduation ceremony was held on 27 June 2008 for vision-impaired learners of Cohort III (2006-2008) of Japanese massage and reflexology techniques. During summer, the institution in collaboration with the Institute of Medicine and Pharmacy offered another elementary course on massage-reflexology techniques to vision-impaired children to, thus far, the sixth batch of enrollees. Sixty children, coming both from the pagoda itself and neighboring provinces, were registered in the course.²⁵

²³ Social Charity Division of VBC, Social Division of VBC Report: 2002-2007.

²⁴ Report by Mr. Nguyen Huu Toan, official of Religious Department in Hue city.

²⁵ This number was statistic by the Ven Thich Thien Chieu on Annual Review Report 2008.

3.3. Others

3.3.1. Orphanages:

The love for human beings in Vietnamese Buddhism is also expressed through care towards orphans. Currently there are many Buddhist orphanages in the country attending to the needs of the orphans or unfortunate children who consider these centers their own sweet home. In the country, there are 36 orphanages and care centers which cater to around 20,000 children with disability.²⁶

A list of orphanages with such a mission shows the following orphan-population: Duc Son, Hue city - 201 children; Uu Dam, Hue city - 34 children; Dieu Giac, Ho Chi Minh City - 100 children; Ky Quang II, Ho Chi Minh City - 120 children; Long Hoa, Ho Chi Minh City - 100 children; and Phap Vo, Ho Chi Minh City - 160 children.

3.3.2. Houses for the Elderly

Care for the elderly is an important social activity of the Buddhist Church. In a modern society where the average life expectancy has increased attending to the needs of the elderly is a sore issue. In many countries in the world the system of nursing home (both state and private) is so developed that it can effectively respond to the needs of the elderly. In Vietnam, the system of nursing home is poor, hence woefully inadequate to serve the elderly. And because social needs are increasing, the nursing home system of the Vietnamese Buddhist Church certainly contributes towards addressing the problem. The system, in fact, has contributed to the reduction of the social burden of the State. A report summarizing the activities of Vietnamese Buddhism for the period of 1986-1991, 1992-1997 and 1997-2002 unfortunately offers no statistics. However a summative report of the activities of the Buddha covering 2002-2007 shows that in the country there were 20 nursing homes that fed 1,000 elderly people. In Ho Chi Minh City over 500 elderly people were taken care of by many Buddhist pagodas. In Thua Thien - Hue province, Tinh Duc nursing home cared for 60 elderly people while another pagoda Dieu Vien attended to 25 elderly people. These two centers spend around 250 million VND a year for their works.²⁷

²⁶ Reports from Vietnamese Buddhist Conference V.

²⁷ Avenue report of Hue Buddhist Church 2008.

3.3.3. *Other Charity Activities*

So far, Vietnamese Buddhist dignitaries and followers in the whole country have been actively engaged in various fund-raising movements. They provided billions of cash assistance to people in flooded areas, returned gratitude to families of soldiers and martyrs by building schools and houses for them, given support to soldiers at the borders or on the islands, paid visits and support to the wounded, sick and poor soldiers in various hospitals, to places for leprosy or mental patients, to houses for the elderly, contributed to Support Fund for the Old, and granted bursaries to students of poor families. Furthermore, the group has contributed to the construction of 12 primary schools and kindergartens, to the construction of houses for families of dead soldiers with 5.4 billion VND, to the care of Vietnamese Heroic Mothers with 2.25 billion VND, to bursaries with 2.43 billion VND, to nurturing unsupported children and old people with 5.5 billion VND, to aid to poor and disaster-stricken people with 52.554 billion VND, and to the Fund for Poverty Reduction with 6.351 billion VND.²⁸ Venerable Thich Quang Tung provided the following statistics on VBC's involvement in the last 27 years: 950 billion VND in social charity, and in 2006 alone, 295 houses were built, 24,500 kg of rice were delivered, 8,400 cases of eye operation were subsidized, 15 bridges were built, 57 wheelchairs were presented to people with disability, 163 water wells were dug, an undertaking which entailed a total of 141.64 billion VND.²⁹

In 2008, the following were conducted by the Central Charity Division of VBC:

- Mid-Autumn Festival's Gifts to poor children in various venues and provinces like Dong Thap, Vinh Long, Soc Trang, Dong Nai, Lam Dong, Da Te, Da Lat, Binh Thuan, Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Dak Nong, the Blind Association, Phu Yen, Quang Nam, Ben Tre, Quang Chanh pagoda, Tanh

²⁸ Luong Phan Cu. "Social Policies and Buddhism From the Perspective of the Construction of Legal Systems on Social Management," in *Buddhism and Vietnamese Culture and Society in the Period of Industrialization and Modernization* (Hanoi: Social Sciences Publisher, 2008), p.74. The author is the Vice Chair of the Parliamentary Commission on Social Affairs.

²⁹ Thich Quang Tung. "Buddhist Charity Work: An Expression of the Six-Realms Doctrines in Society Today", in *Buddhism and Vietnamese Culture and Society in the Period of Industrialization and Modernization* (Hanoi: Social Sciences Publisher, 2008), p. 87.

Linh, Thanh Duc pagoda, Duc Trong, Cat Tien. It was reported that 4,725 children received a total amount of 100,881,000VND.

- Gifts to 150 blind people in Thong Nhat district, Da Nang, totaling 23,470,000VND.
- Support to the blind; wheelchairs to PLWD (people living with disability); bursaries to good students; support to poor people in provinces throughout the country; support to 661 poor vision-impaired patients from Ninh Thuan, Binh Thuan, Dong Nai, Ba Ria-Vung Tau, HCMC, Long An, Tien Giang, Dong Thap, An Giang and Ben Tre; support to Trung Vuong Hospital in District 10, HCMC for eye operation and lens replacement; payment for well construction; and monetary support to charity institutions, drug delivery to poor patients. All the services involved a staggering amount of 506,240,000VND.

In sum the amount of funding for charity work coming from the Central Charity Division of VBC in 2008 was 630,591,000 VND in total.³⁰

4. Impact of Vietnamese Buddhist Social Activities on Community Life

Buddhism, a religion of mercy, happiness and salvation for all human beings, always applies its Rules to serve the nation and humankind. Along this line it has traditionally been actively engaging in charity work, thus highlighting its adherents' religious spirit. Indeed the charity work of Vietnamese Buddhism has exerted substantial impact on social life. In healthcare, Buddhist TTCs have contributed to enhancement of local healthcare systems so as to provide better healthcare and protection services to local people, to reduction of burdens on State Healthcare system in its effort to meet increasing healthcare needs of people, particularly poor people and children with disability (cerebral palsy, polio, mentally retarded) who need functional rehabilitation, and PLWHA who need counseling. Owing to their charity work which is given for free thousands of people have been examined and treated, dozens of children with disability have been rehabilitated, which cost hundreds of millions of VND (including both inside and outside clinics). Moreover extra-clinical activities to remote or poor areas and places of difficulty have

³⁰ Annual Review Report 2008 of Central Social Charity Division of VBC.

improved people's access to healthcare services so that illness can be detected early, which helps ease the overload problem in State healthcare institutions.

In education, since State funding to facility development and salary payment to nursery and kindergarten teachers remain limited, Vietnamese Buddhism's social participation in nurseries and kindergartens is extremely critical and meaningful, such as construction, repair and upgrading of schools and supplementation of facilities in order to provide children with better care and education. Pre-school classes organized by Buddhism, as well as by other religions, especially in remote, poor and difficult areas, have helped increase the number of children having access to pre-schooling, satisfied parents' demands, and improved primary school performance of children.

Indeed by and large charity institutions established by Vietnamese Buddhism have been operating quite effectively: children are well nurtured physically and spiritually in a healthy environment and many of them, in fact, have matured to become good citizens well integrated in the community. Vocational training venues, like civil and industrial garment making, IT, embroidery, etc.), founded by religions have attracted a good number of learners who have special difficulties. Upon completion of the training, many of them have acquired excellent job skills and have been able to produce value products. These institutions have joined hand in hand with the Government to solve issues of social security and, more importantly, contributed to reduction of expenses for State Budget.

To sum it up, the Vietnamese Buddhist charity work in the different areas of education, healthcare, care to the old and children, vocational training, aid and relief has brought about significant and positive impacts on the society, in effect, responding to the Party and Government's policies on poverty reduction, solution of social security issues, and social mobilization in education and healthcare.

5. Conclusion - A Preliminary Assessment

In spite of the achievements cited above, the State management authorities have acknowledged that there are still some shortcomings to be addressed. A number of clinics, for instance, have not observed well operational procedures in controlling infection, safe drug use, and periodical reporting. Drugs courtesy of free-of-charge

dispensary mostly come from foreign humanitarian organizations, overseas Vietnamese, or other sources, so their quality may be suspect (some may have expired) or does not meet pharmaceutical standards. In terms of extra-clinical work, particularly those conducted by foreign humanitarian delegates in remote areas, there has not been close collaboration with the local authorities to ensure security. Facilities in a number of kindergartens do not meet the standards; some take in more children than permitted by Charter on Kindergartens; and some are taught by teachers who do not meet qualification requirements, even the headmaster. Vocational training institutions remain scattered, small in size and poor in facilities, focusing mainly on short courses and simple jobs. Also trainers' technical and pedagogical skills are still limited, which prevent them from producing a highly-skilled workforce that is able to compete in the labor market.

Despite its weaknesses, Vietnamese Buddhism deserves high appreciation for its positive contributions to the society in reference to its multifaceted social charity works. In the first place Vietnamese Buddhists who engage in social work are working with all their hearts, with committed volition and enthusiasm inherent in Buddhist practitioners hoping to bring happiness to people while being informed by the maxim, “serving all human beings means worshipping Buddha.” It is worth reiterating that all Buddhist practitioners voluntarily serve and collaborate with people with all their minds and hearts. Secondly, they always try to comply with Buddhist rules and existing laws of the State. Though there is room for improvement, most of them do not work for personal interests. Everything contributed by charity organizations, benefactors or people themselves return to people's service, i.e. they work as “an intermediary, taking from the *have's* to give the *have-nots*.” And lastly, Vietnamese Buddhism is a religion with considerable positive influence on the religious life of the Vietnamese, thus its charity has been well supported and enthusiastically embraced by the people. /.

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