

## SOME THINGS ABOUT “THE EVENT” IN BÁT NHÃ MONASTERY (BẢO LỘC DISTRICT, LÂM ĐỒNG PROVINCE)

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**Abstract:** *On September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009, in Bát Nhã Monastery (Prajna Monastery) conflicts occurred between groups of Buddhist followers was pushed to the pinnacle. The case has destabilized public order. Although the conflict is due to internal contradictions between two groups of believers, the incident soured also by the distortion of some foreign reactionary forces. This article is to clarify the contents of the case and expose the truth of the founder of the Plum Village Monastery in France, Thích Nhất Hạnh.*

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At the end of September, 2009 many websites of extreme Vietnamese people in foreign countries and opportunists in Vietnam have the information on “the event” in Bát Nhã Monastery (Prajna Monastery). This information attracts attention of people, particularly Buddhist believers at home and abroad. We can say that what we read on the Websites as “Phù sa”, “Pháp nạn”, “Phương bôỉ”, and so forth are false news. That news is aimed to divide united national bloc, to excite violence and slander Vietnamese state’s policy on freedom of religion. What is the truth of “the event”?

First of all we introduce some features on Bát Nhã Monastery and the reasons make two groups contradict each other. They are Plum Village followers and Bát Nhã followers. The pinnacle of their contradiction is conflict happening on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

Bát Nhã Monastery is about 15 km from Bảo Lộc district Lâm Đồng province and about 2 km from Dam b’ri waterfall. This Monastery was established in 1999 by venerable Thích Đức Nghi. At first this Monastery’s area was about 1,440 m<sup>2</sup> and granted by People’s Committee of Lâm Đồng province. The landscape of Monastery has been beautiful. Later, venerable Thích Đức Nghi bought extra land to enlarge Monastery. Now Monastery area has been 149.366 m<sup>2</sup>. According to the old believers, formerly Buddha Hall was a small house. When Monastery was fully built,

this small house became kindergarten for children in area. The first monk of Bát Nhã Monastery has been most virtuous Thích Đông Quang, venerable Thích Đức Nghi's disciple. Thích Đông Quang has contributed such a lot to development of Monastery.

In the first years of development, all things in Bát Nhã Monastery were fine. At the beginning of 2005 monk Thích Nhất Hạnh visited Vietnam. This was his first visiting trip to Vietnam since 1966. Monk Thích Nhất Hạnh was founder of Plum Village Monastery in Dordogne region, South France. In February, 2005 Venerable Thích Đức Nghi agreed with monk Thích Nhất Hạnh to hold practical course according the Plum Village tradition in Bát Nhã Monastery. Basing on the agreement many building constructions were appeared. According to news that we had, among the building constructions were built from 2004 to 2008 there are 22 building constructions invested by venerable Thích Đức Nghi but Plum Village invested in 4 building constructions. Material facilities were built along with new hamlets. *Bếp Lửa Hồng* hamlet was practical place for nuns. *Rừng Phương Bối* was the practical place of monks. In 2007 a new hamlet was built, its name was *Mây đầu núi*. Thanks to hamlets the number of the Plum Village followers increased quickly. This number was sometime about 400 followers. In order to vouch for legal activities of practical courses according to Plum Village tradition on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006 venerable Thích Đức Nghi, director of Bát Nhã Monastery sent a letter to the Government Committee for Religious Affairs for asking permission of this practical course in Bát Nhã Monastery. On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2006 Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha had the official correspondence N<sup>o</sup>. 212/CV/HĐTS which allowed holding practical course according to Plum Village tradition in Bát Nhã Monastery.

Basing on application of venerable Thích Đức Nghi and agreeableness of the Dharma Executive Council of Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha and pursuant to article 36 of *Ordinance on Belief and Religion* and article 31 of Government Decree N<sup>o</sup>. 22/NĐ-CP on *Guidance for Implementation of a Number of Articles of the Ordinance on Belief and Religion*, the Government Committee of Religious Affairs accepted venerable Thích Đức Nghi to organize the practical course according to Plum Village tradition in Bát Nhã Monastery, Bảo Lộc district, Lâm Đồng province. The Government Committee of Religious Affairs sent official document N<sup>o</sup>.

525/TGCP-PG dated July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006 to venerable Thích Đức Nghi. This document was written that “Before organizing practical course, venerable Thích Đức Nghi has to have report on staffs, the method of practical course, time of practical course to send The Government Committee of Religious Affairs and the Local Committee of Religious Affairs. When having difficult problems, Monastery should report to Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha and local power for asking help”. In the process of organization of practical course, Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha, the Government Committee of Religious Affairs and local government created good condition for the believers of Plum Village sect.

This article only dealt with some features on monk Thích Nhất Hạnh because his life and his activities have been dealt with on many websites. The first time the author of this article knew Thích Nhất Hạnh through reading *Việt Nam Phật giáo sử luận* written by Nguyễn Lang. On the occasion of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s first visiting trip to Vietnam on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, Plum Village delegation visited an Institute of Scientific Studies in Hanoi. The Plum Village delegation had 190 members belonging to 30 nationalities... It was the first time I have met Thích Nhất Hạnh.

After the first visiting trip, monk Thích Nhất Hạnh not only consolidated material facilities in Bát Nhã Monastery in order to create position for Plum Village followers in Vietnam, but also helped many people to come home in the capacity of visiting family and traveling, but their aims were teaching and guiding Zen classes following Plum Village tradition in Vietnam. Monk Thích Nhất Hạnh very took care of the youths; he set up a plan called “Hiếu và Thương” (Understanding and Loving). After some years, Plum Village attracted hundreds of the youths. They were taught by tens of teachers of Plum Village.

On the first visiting trip to Vietnam Thích Nhất Hạnh tried his best to make use of civil services and Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha to create position for Plum Village followers in Vietnam. He began to combine religious activities with political ones and he gave leaders of Vietnamese state a proposal with 7 articles.

On February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2007 Thích Nhất Hạnh visited Vietnam for the second time. His delegation consisted of 150 members with different nationalities. Under the pretext

of religion to carry out political purpose of Plum Village organization showed clear in this visiting trip. The writer does not forget Thích Nhất Hạnh's image on TV when he organized atonement ceremonies in three regions in Vietnam. Through his words, he denied the active contributions of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in organizing atonement ceremonies. When receiving by the leaders of Vietnamese state, Thích Nhất Hạnh did not hesitate to make 10 proposals. Among these proposals there were asking proposals "to change the name of Vietnamese Communist Party, to dismiss the Government Committee for Religious Affairs..." When dealing with the relation between Plum Village organization and Bát Nhã Monastery, Thích Nhất Hạnh proudly said that "Plum Village organization, himself appoints his staff, propagates, ordains, elects Monastery, new venerable Abbot... These actions no need to be accepted by Vietnamese State and Vietnam Buddhist Sangha". Before leaving Vietnam, Thích Nhất Hạnh publicly stated that "Plum Village is the independent church of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. The internal affairs of Plum Village do not fall within the competence of Vietnamese State and Vietnam Buddhist Sangha".

I should think that we do not need to comment on Thích Nhất Hạnh's perverse and wrong statements when he spoke about Plum Village organization in Vietnam but not he spoke about his Plum Village organization in France. When commenting this problem, correspondent of *An Ninh Thế giới* (the world security) newspapers took a lively image: "He takes his members out in other house, he occupies a corner of house for cooking, sleeping, washing... Then he says this corner is independent of this house and his activities are "the internal affairs" so that household has not right to intervene. Who can sit down under his action?"

Before visiting Vietnam for the third time, Thích Nhất Hạnh distributed a document called "the letter of Plum Village N<sup>o</sup>. 31". In this letter he brought up many untruthful problems on Vietnam situation and he expresses his wish to "recover" the pagoda where he had sat in meditation.

On the problem of Bát Nhã Monastery, first of all, we deal with the *written proposal* of venerable Thích Đức Nghi on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008 sends to The Dharma Executive Council of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha; the Buddhist Management

Committee of Lâm Đồng province Association, the Buddhist Representative Committee of Bảo Lộc district: “I enthusiastically stood security for Plum Village followers to practice in Bát Nhã Monastery three years ago. At first I thought Plum Village respected Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and Decree N<sup>o</sup>. 22 of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs. I think Plum Village followers will respect my proposal in Plum Village in 2006; my proposal in Từ Hiếu pagoda in 2007 and my proposal in Bát Nhã Monastery in 2008... Plum Village church was not allowed to carry out his activity in Bát Nhã Monastery. I only asked for holding the practical course according to Plum Village tradition so I was answerable to Sangha and State for everything happened... I made many criticisms of violating the Charter of Sangha and the Decree N<sup>o</sup>. 22 of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs three years ago, but now I have no more power to stand security Plum Village followers to practice in Bát Nhã Monastery... As from today is September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, I withdraw all letters that asked for Plum Village followers to gather. I do not stand security and take responsibility for Plum Village’s actions in Bát Nhã Monastery in next time” Because of this proposal, on October 10<sup>th</sup> The Dharma Executive Council of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha had official document N<sup>o</sup>. 427/CV/HDTs to send The Government Committee for Religious Affairs. On October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008 The Government Committee for Religious Affairs sent official document N<sup>o</sup>. 1329/TGCP to The Dharma Executive Council of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. This document pointed out “According to invitation of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, Zen Buddhist Thích Nhất Hạnh and the Plum village followers (in France) visited Vietnam for three times and carried out Buddhist practice in Vietnam. The visiting trips of Zen Buddhist Thích Nhất Hạnh and Plum Village followers met with approval of our State so we can find that Vietnam State’s religious policy is right, it thinks highly of the spirit of national unity and the spirit of unity of overseas Vietnamese at the same time it thinks highly of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha’s position at home and abroad”. The official document N<sup>o</sup>. 1329/TGCP-PG also pointed out that in the visiting trips to Vietnam Plum Village followers had wrong actions and their actions violated law, for example “They themselves set altars and organized the meditation courses, appointed abbots and performed ordination ceremony without permission from the

Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. They supplied wrong information on political problem of our country. In the Plum Village website there was some untruthful news about Vietnam realities..." Their actions create condition for bad men at home and abroad to distort the religious policy of our state and to make adverse effects on national unity in general and the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in particular. Because the dispute between Plum Village followers and the Bát Nhã followers, the Government Committee of Religious Affairs proposed some concrete solutions to "this event" and suggested the Dharma Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha guiding local Buddhism to treat "this event" in order to guarantee peace and social orders, Buddhist activities in region". On January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2009 The Dharma Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha had Announcement N<sup>o</sup>. 37/CV/HDTs on the event of Bát Nhã monetary. The Dharma Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha affirmed that "The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha has not recognized the actions of Plum Village church of France in Vietnam yet. The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha only has recognized the practical course of abbots and followers according to Plum Village tradition... This practical course is allowed organized within 3 months. When completing practical course, Plum Village organization has to ask permission for reorganization and Plum Village organization is not allowed to last their actions in 2010... When resolving the questions relating to Bát Nhã Monastery needs to have Venerable Thích Đức Nghi's unified opinions. On legally, the written texts of The Government Committee for Religious Affairs and the official documents of The Dharma Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha are very clear. In fact "the event" of Bát Nhã Monastery becomes more and more complex from May, 2008 to September, 2009.

Under the guarantee of venerable Thích Đức Nghi the number of members who practiced meditation according to Plum Village tradition increased. In Bát Nhã Monetary there were about 330 members in September, 2009. They came from 35 provinces and towns. Besides, many Plum Village followers who have different nationalities have registered their temporary residence, there were many Plum Village followers fail to register their temporary residence in accordance with Vietnamese law. Their actions violated the regulations on administrative procedures

of Vietnam and influenced badly mediation course and social order in Bát Nhã Monastery. Because of the above statement of Thích Nhất Hạnh before leaving Vietnam, some Plum Village followers, in particular the youths in Bát Nhã Monastery expressed unfriendly attitude to Bát Nhã followers. They disregarded and outraged Bát Nhã monks and followers. According to *report* of venerable Thích Đồng Hạnh, manager and head of Bát Nhã Monastery which dated August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008 sent to Lâm Đồng government at various levels: “Plum Village followers who came back Vietnam disregard us and not to obey the Charter of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and law of Vietnam... We are monks, we unable to accept and sit down under their actions. We shall present thoroughly what are happening in Bát Nhã Monastery”. Venerable Thích Đồng Hạnh, manager and head of Bát Nhã Monastery and governing body of An Lạc pagoda consisting of Thích Đồng Tâm, Thích Đồng Bồn, Thích Đồng Châu, and Thích Đồng Đức do not accept Plum Village followers to continue to practice meditation in Bát Nhã Monastery. Sometime the reactions of Bát Nhã monks and followers were extreme, in particular younger followers. The event which was happened on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009 is an example. Because of thinking that the Dharma Executive council of Lâm Đồng Buddhism upholds Plum Village followers so some members of The Buddhist Management Committee of Lâm Đồng province came to Bát Nhã Monastery to survey the situation, then some Bát Nhã followers disregarded these members. The Bát Nhã followers and Plum Village followers began to contradict on another. As first they disputed then they clashed against each other.

The clash of two groups of Buddhist followers happened on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009 in Bát Nhã Monastery. When the event happened, the local authorities have tried to maintain law and order to avoid clashes and ensure the absolute safety of citizens' life and property in Bảo Lộc district as well as in Lâm Đồng province.

One of many reasons that increases the implicit conflict between Plum Village followers and Bát Nhã followers was distortion of foreign reactionary power. Some members purposely bring false news on question regarding dispute at Bát Nhã Monastery. They turn this dispute into political problem. They said that “government suppresses religion”, “venerable Thích Đức Nghi's actions are defended by

government”, “many groups of hooligans and hundreds of policemen suppress Plum Village followers”...

After the event of September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009 many Plum Village followers left the Bát Nhã Monastery to return their localities or their residences. 192 Plum Village followers (according to statistic data of Lâm Đồng People’s Committee dated October 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009) are moved to take temporary residence in Phước Huệ pagoda when waiting for the resolution of the official document N<sup>o</sup>. 429/CV-HDTS dated October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009 of Dharma Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. These Plum Village followers have to obey Vietnamese law. “The Vietnam Buddhist Sangha does not allow unanimously the illegal gathering and members in Phước Huệ pagoda, the office of Buddhist representative committee of Bảo Lộc district”. Formerly, The Government Committee for Religious Affairs sent official document N<sup>o</sup>. 984 dated September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 to propose The Dharma Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha to direct the Buddhist Management Committee at various levels in combining with local government to “propagate the regulations of law relating to practicing meditation and registering residence of the above followers, to help them understand, realize the regulations of law and return their former pagodas for continuing their religious practice. If followers have not their teacher but they want to practice meditation, they must find their teacher or they have to be accepted by the abbot of Monastery. There they must guarantee administrative formalities according to the regulations of law”.

Although the resolution of Bát Nhã event was clear, on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2009 some men in the name of Lâm Đồng young monastics wrote “a letter in blood” to threaten that they will “decide to die for co-religionists”. They considered themselves as “young monks and nuns who have wide knowledge, political views and love according to Buddhist law”. They also considered themselves “not to be excited and superficial men” but they petitioned for what is not accepted in country where every citizen lives and works according to law. They asked “not to absolutely touch Plum Village followers... by any form” and “not to coerce, intimidate, obstruct and impact Plum Village followers”. There is a question that what countries in the world do not intervene when two groups of their people clash each other and destroy property of

the others? When Plum Village followers perturbed the peace, local government had to prevent their actions to ensure social order, they said “they will decide to die” or “consequence is unestimated”. What extremely odd ideas!

The spacious houses in Bát Nhã Monastery were built for Plum Village. The report of Thích Đồng Hạnh, Thích Đồng Tâm, Thích Đồng Bồn, Thích Đồng Châu, and Thích Đồng Đức on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008 wrote that “from 1997 to 2005, our Monastery has not received any material and spiritual supports of Plum Village followers. In 2005 many Plum Villagers came to live in Bát Nhã, so some material facilities were built for Plum Village followers...”

However, Phu sa website spread such untruthful pieces of news as: “Venerable Thích Đức Nghi received 10 billions VND of Plum Village”, or “the event of Bát Nhã Monastery aimed to appropriate Plum Village property”

The view of the Dharma Executive Council of Vietnam Buddhist Sangha on the event of Bát Nhã Monastery has presented obviously in the official document N<sup>o</sup>. 429/CV/HDTs dated October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2009 to send the Buddhist Management Committee of Lâm Đồng province: “The construction of houses and purchase of land in Bát Nhã Monastery belong to internal affairs of venerable Thích Đức Nghi and most venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh, so two sides discuss and resolve affairs together. Because of having a concern with the Buddhist Management Committee and Lâm Đồng government, they take part in the process of settlement”.

In short, the event in Bát Nhã Monastery was the disputed between the two groups of Buddhists, and then they clashed each other on September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2009. Although this event was their internal affair, it influenced public order. Hence, State and Vietnam Buddhist Sangha should avoid and resolve this event. Although the websites as “Phu sa”, “Phap nan”, “Phuong boi” spread wrong news on event in order to vilify government and excite Plum Village followers to return Bát Nhã Monastery, these websites could not deny that the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam resolved Bát Nhã event in conformity with sentiment and reason. /.