

THE ROLE OF BUDDHIST REVIVAL MOVEMENT IN NORTHERN VIETNAM TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Lê Tâm Đắc (*)

Abstract: *In the first half of the 20th century, a Buddhist revival movement took place in Vietnam. Overall, the objectives of the movement occurred in the North, Central and South are closed to three contents: religious organizations of Buddhism, training of monks and nuns, and promulgation of Buddha Dharma. However, Buddhist revival activities in every area have its own contribution to the whole movement. This article refers to the three contributions of Tonkin Buddhist Association for Vietnamese Buddhist revival movement, which is giving prominence to idea of renjian fojiao (Buddhism for this world); the Vietnamese Buddhism's position and role was enhanced in the international Buddhist arena; the considerable contributions to reunification of national Buddhism in 1951.*

The Buddhist revival movement took place in the first half of the 20th century in Vietnam in general and in Northern Vietnam in particular. It was a momentous turning point of Vietnamese Buddhist development. This movement was the Buddhist revolution, so it changed Vietnamese Buddhism from traditional religion into modern one as manifested in some aspects: the organization of Buddhist orders, the training of monks and the promulgation of Buddha Dharma....

ON THE ORGANIZATION OF BUDDHIST ORDERS

It was the first time in history, the organization of Vietnamese Buddhism was changed radically. The traditional forms of Buddhist orders as *Tổ đình* or *Sơn môn* which were on equal in practicing the Dharma and training monks, and Buddhist organization was the transverse model, but now Buddhist associations divided into many levels from high to low level and from central to local organizations. At that time “Buddhist organization was vertical model”, Buddhism not only attracted monks, nuns and Buddhist believers but also the others. Before 1945 the French

*. Ph D. Institute of Religious Studies, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences.

colonialists did not allow to establish the Vietnamese Confederation of Buddhist Associations, but the births of the Vietnamese associations in the North, the Center and the South, and Buddhist local branches contributed an important part in development of Vietnamese Buddhism for the better.

ON THE TRAINING OF MONKS AND NUNS

With the Buddhist revival movement, the educational cause of Vietnamese Buddhism not only has trained monks and nuns in Buddhist orders or in *Vassa* (The three months of summer retreat every year (from 15th of the fourth Lunar month to 15th of the seventh Lunar month)) but also established Buddhist Schools for teaching monks and nuns according to a new system and method from primary education to high school, in which monks and nuns were taught Buddhist sutras and other religions' sutras. In order to serve Buddhist revival as well as the long-term development of Buddhism, Buddhist schools paid attention to teach monks and nuns many secular occupations. Many monks and nuns were appointed to study in foreign countries ⁽¹⁾.

ON THE PROMULGATION OF BUDDHA DHARMA

In the period of Buddhist revival, the promulgation of Buddha Dharma was helped by newspapers, publishing houses. Many Buddhist publications were printed in national language so these publications became easily understandable. Promulgating Buddhist dogmas by national language contributed to impulsion of learning national language among Buddhists and the masses.

It was noticeable that the contemporary Buddhist revival brought about a wide and ebullient debate exchange of opinions about philosophical ideas and Buddhist dogmas with knowledge of life and social reality in books and newspapers. This debate contributed to promoting the academic activities and argument in society. Essentially, the debate and exchange of opinions was 're-explaining' of some Buddhist dogmas accordance with the development of modern society. This 're-explaining' basically followed two directions; firstly, to reject elements in Buddhist dogmas which were considered not to belong to Buddhism, to abolish the wrong opinions and misunderstandings which thought that Buddhism was superstition and

¹. See Lê Tâm Đắc. "The Education of Monks and Nuns in the Northern Buddhist Association", *Religious Study Review*, N^o. 5. 2006, pp. 35 - 42.

diverging from life; Secondly, to prove that Buddhism has some elements accordance with modern science in examining natural and social phenomena.

When comparing the Buddhist revival movements in the Center and in the Southern Vietnam ⁽²⁾ we find that the Buddhist revival movement in the North not only had general roles but also special roles in the development of Vietnamese Buddhism in the 20th century.

First, giving prominence to idea of *renjian fojiao* (*Nhân gian Phật giáo*) (*Buddhism for this world*).

Because of the great influence of Chinese Buddhist revival movement under the leadership of Chinese monk Taixu's (Thích Thai Hu) the idea *renjian fojiao* (*Nhân gian Phật giáo*) (*Buddhism for this world*) came into as soon as the *Northern Buddhist Association* was established (in 1934). This idea was manifested in many writings in *Đuốc Tuệ* (Torch of Wisdom) newspaper and in the organ of *Northern Buddhist Association*. These writings emphasized that Buddhism was the religion for life and it had important role in secular life. Perhaps, layman Đồ Nam Tử Nguyễn Trọng Thuật officially initiated and developed idea of *renjian fojiao* (*Nhân gian Phật giáo*) (*Buddhism for this world*) in Vietnam. In order to concretize the idea of *renjian fojiao* (*Nhân gian Phật giáo*) (*Buddhism for this world*) Nguyễn Trọng Thuật wrote an article in Torch of Wisdom newspaper (at the end of 1935 and the beginning of 1936) to proposed that children of Buddhist believers should organize their wedding ceremony before Buddha sanctuary ⁽³⁾. Nguyễn Trọng Thuật wrote many articles under the title *renjian fojiao* (*Nhân gian Phật giáo*) (*Buddhism for this world*), in these article he detailed rural life and conducted villagers to live following Buddhist spirit.

The idea of *Buddhism for this world* which was received and initiated by Nguyễn Trọng Thuật was appreciated and supported by many Buddhist theorists in the North both in theory and in practice, especially monk Thích Trí Hải and layman Thiều Chửu Nguyễn Hữu Kha.

². See more: Nguyễn Đức Sự. "The Position and Influence of the Buddhist Revival Movement in the North", *Religious Study Review*, N^o. 4. 2006, pp. 15-19.

³. See more: Lê Tâm Đắc. "On the Wedding Ritual before Buddha Sanctuary", *Religious Study Review*, N^o. 3. 2006, pp. 58-69 and Lê Tâm Đắc. "Wedding Ceremony in Vietnamese Pagoda: History and Present", *Religious Study Review*, N^o. 3. 2008, pp. 44- 49.

From 1935 to 1954 monk Thích Trí Hải wrote nearly 200 articles which were printed in *Đuốc Tuệ* (Torch of Wisdom), *Tinh Tiến*, *Tin Tức Phật giáo* (Buddhist news), *Diệu Âm*, *Phương Tiện* and some books such as *Gia đình giáo dục*, *Thập thiện*, *Cái hại của vàng mã*. Almost articles dealt with the idea of *Buddhism for this world*. The ideas of his articles were manifested in the book under the title *Nhân gian Phật giáo đại cương* (The general Buddhism for this world) (it was written in 1971 and published in 2003). According to this outline, *Buddhism for this world* is an area of pure Buddhist society existing in real society. According to monk Thích Trí Hải's imagination, "*Quốc độ Phật giáo*" (Buddhist nation) had administrative unites, offices, mass organizations which were divided by age groups, sex, occupations. Buddhist nation had separate organizations on economy, culture, society, trade and tourism... All organizations operated harmoniously to create a society without social evils and class distinction. In this society everyone was equal and did good deeds. This society was "Buddhist socialism", it was ideal society accordance with Buddhist concept⁽⁴⁾.

In his work *The Way to Learn Buddhism in the 20th Century* was first published in 1952, layman Thiệu Chửu Nguyễn Hữu Kha also showed clearly "Buddhism for this world" by a thought to be called "Lục hòa - Ngũ Minh" (Six fold rules of conduct for monks and nuns in a monastery: and the five sciences or studies of India which help people improve their knowledge or wisdom) by Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn⁽⁵⁾. In this book he discussed the concept of Sangha, organizations of Sangha, reorganization of Sangha, the forms of monks' cultivation and their activities accordance with new era.

The Northern Buddhist reformers not only discussed theoretical aspect but also mobilized and carried out some concrete contents of idea of Buddhism for this world such as: organizing the wedding ceremony for children of Buddhist believers in pagoda, establishing school for feeding and teaching orphans, building Vạn Hạnh school in Hàm Long pagoda (Hà Nội), preparing to broaden Yên Tử vestiges area (Quảng Ninh province)....

⁴ . See more Thích Đồng Bôn. "*Most Venerable Thích Trí Hải with the Ambition of Buddhism for This World*, *Religious Study Review*, N^o. 4. 2006, pp. 20- 24.

⁵ . Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn. "*Thiệu Chửu Nguyễn Hữu Kha: Dharma and Nation*", *Religious Study Review*, N^o. 1. 2003, p. 33.

In the later periods and nowadays many Buddhist practices as well as promulgating Buddha Dharma of Vietnamese Buddhism, especially in the South and in Ho Chi Minh City have been carried out according to the idea of Buddhism for this world which was initiated and carried out by the Northern Buddhist reformers during period of Buddhist revival in the first half of the 20th century.

Second, the Vietnamese Buddhism's position and role was enhanced in the international Buddhist arena

Before 1945 the international Buddhist activities of the Northern Buddhist Association were relatively effective. In 1937 many talent monks were appointed to learn in China (for example most venerable Thích Trí Hải). In 1938 most venerable Thích Thái Hòa and most venerable Thích Thanh Giảng were appointed to learn in Cambodia. The mutual visits between the Northern Buddhist Association and the Buddhist organizations of other countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand were carried out. Most venerable Thích Thái Hư visited The Northern Buddhist Association in Quán Sứ pagoda 1940.

After the year of 1950, the role of Vietnamese Buddhism became prominent in the international Buddhism. The Vietnamese Buddhist delegation, primarily, the Northern Buddhist Association under the leadership of venerable Thích Tổ Liên took part in establishing *Hội Liên hữu Phật giáo thế giới* (the World Fellowship of Buddhists)

From the 5th May to 20th May, 1950 in India (there was confusion about time of the First World Buddhist Conference) Vietnamese Buddhist delegation lectured on Vietnamese Buddhism at Buddhist Mahabodi Society (Calcutta, India). Vietnamese Buddhist delegation received Governor of Bengal, President of India - Mr. Prasad Rajendra....

From May 26th to June 6th, 1950 the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation attended the World Buddhist Conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka together with 25 other delegations to establish the World Fellowship of Buddhists. In 1951 the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation attended the extraordinary conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Colombo, Sri Lanka to put forward the programme and discuss the method of establishing peace. In 1952 the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation attended the Second World Buddhist Conference in Tokyo, Japan (in this conference,

venerable Thích Tổ Liên was elected to be the vice president of the World Fellowship of Buddhists).

Venerable Thích Tổ Liên, in his capacity as the delegation leader, introduced excellently Vietnamese Buddhism in all of contact and discussing. Thanks to Thích Tổ Liên's lectures, many people in the world were interested in Vietnamese Buddhism. The Vietnamese Buddhist delegation had many contributions to great successes of the World Buddhist Conferences ⁽⁶⁾.

It is said that before 1954, the Buddhist Association in the North, especially the contributions of venerable Thích Tổ Liên, had an important role in enhancing Vietnamese Buddhism's position and role in the international Buddhist arena and laying the foundation for the international Buddhist work of Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha in the future.

Third, *the considerable contributions to reunification of national Buddhism in 1951*

Actually, the idea of unification of the Buddhist Associations appeared at the end of 1920 ⁽⁷⁾. Because of subjective and objective reasons, the idea of unification of all the Buddhist associations in the country was not realized at that time.

The need of the unification of the Buddhist organizations continued to be agitated for after 1945. Buddhists in the whole country desired to have the Buddhist United Association. This eager desire was really proposed and carried out effectively after the First World Buddhist Conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 1950 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 associations, specially the important role of venerable Thích Tổ Liên.

After the Colombo Conference, venerable Thích Tổ Liên, in his capacity as delegation header of Vietnamese Buddhist delegation, the founder of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, actively campaigned for unity of Buddhist associations in the whole country. His action was praised and supported by the World Fellowship of

⁶ . Venerable Tổ Liên. *Chronicle for the Vietnam Buddhist delegation to India and Ceylon*, Religion Publishing House, Hanoi, 2007; Thích Gia Quang. *Venerable Tổ Liên with the International Relations of Vietnam Buddhism*, *Religious Studies Review*, N^o. 3. 2007, pp. 34-38.

⁷ . See Nguyễn Đại Đồng, Lê Tâm Đắc. "Monk Tâm Lai and the Mobilization for Buddhist Revival in Vietnam at the Beginning of the 20th Century", *Religious Study Review*, N^o. 6. 2007, pp. 31- 40.

Buddhists and the contemporary Buddhist Associations in the Center and in the South⁽⁸⁾.

Thanks to the supports of the Vietnamese Buddhist associations as well as the World Buddhist associations, the National United Buddhist Conference was held from 6th to 9th May, 1951 in Từ Đàm pagoda, Huế. The Conference unanimously adopted regulations of the Vietnamese Confederation of Buddhist Associations as well as the organization system of National Buddhist Association.

In short, thanks to considerable efforts of the Northern Buddhist Association, especially venerable Thích Tổ Liên's contributions, the dream of unification of Vietnamese Buddhist associations came true in 1951. This unification was not achieved completely because many regions in Vietnam were under the French domination, but this event was an important premise for the development of Vietnamese Buddhism in the following stages, specially the establishment of an unique Buddhist organization- Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha in November, 1981. /.

⁸ . See Lê Tâm Đắc. “Most Venerable Thích Tổ Liên and the Establishment of Vietnamese Confederation of Buddhist Associations in 1951”, *Religious Study Review*, N^o. 3. 2007, pp. 19-33.