

PRELIMINARY IDENTIFICATION OF THE BUDDHISM'S TRANSFORMATION IN VIETNAM AT PRESENT¹

Abstract: *Based on the results of recent field trips and surveys, the article initially outlines the transformation of Buddhism in Vietnam in terms of the fundamental changes of Buddhist faith, practice, and community. The current transformation of Buddhism in Vietnam is much stronger in comparison with 15 years ago. It is a consequence of the economic, political, social impacts and Buddhists themselves.*

Keywords: *Transformation; Buddhism; belief; practice; community.*

1. Discuss on transformation of religion

Recently, the transformation of religion in Vietnam has been an interest topic to many researchers. Many books, journals, research have addressed to this topic. Some typical research topics such as *Transformation of religions, beliefs in Vietnam at present* (Many authors, 2008); *Transformation of religions in Vietnam in the impact of globalization* (Nguyen Phu Loi, 2010); *Changes and development of religions under the influence of globalization over the past 10 years* (Le Duc Hanh, 2010); *Transformation of religions and beliefs in the context of Vietnam's international integration* (Nguyen Quoc Tuan and Chu Van Tuan, 2014); *Transformation of Buddhism in Vietnam and sustainable development, Transformation of Catholicism in Vietnam and sustainable development, Transformation of Protestantism in Vietnam and sustainable development, Transformation of traditionnal*

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religions in Vietnam and sustainable development. Some workshops such as *Transformation of religions in the Central Highlands: Current status, policies and solutions* (Institute for Religious Studies, 2013); *Religious changes and trends in the Centre of Vietnam: Policy Planning* (Institute for Religious Studies, 2017); *Transformation of religious life in Vietnam in the context of renovation and international integration* (Nguyen Van Dzung, 2017). In addition, there are many works, articles referring to transformation of religions in general, specific religions in Vietnam in particular.

The transformation of religion is an indispensable issue, and each religion must undergo a constant process of development and transformation since the formation. Perhaps, the transformation of religions strongly takes place in the context of a rapid change as well as the speedy development of science and technology, the wave of globalization and international integration, and other issues such as climate change, war, conflict.

Accordingly, there are two major trends of religious changes in the world today. Firstly, the decline of religion, impious trend is happening in Europe among Christians. Secondly, the revival of religion and belief is speedily taking place in some countries such as Asian countries or developing countries. According to many researchers, Vietnam is placed in this trend. Many opinions agree with the second trend; some people even believe that the 21st century is the century of religion.

For the impious tendency of religious believers, it is possible to refer remarkable figures on the decline of Christian faith in some Nordic countries in the article of the author Nguyen Van Dzung posted on the website of the Government Committee for Religious Affairs. According to this article, in the Nordics, more and more people are openly expressing their doubts about the dogmas of Christianity and even distrust of the existence of God. They still attend church, contribute to the church, however, it does not mean that they believe in the Christian dogma. For example, in Norway, according to the latest results of an annual socio-cultural research conducted by

Norsk Monitor, a socio-cultural research center of Norway, the number of atheists has increased dramatically in this country: 39% of Norwegians do not believe in the existence of God, 23% do not define or do not believe, 37% believe in God, the rest do not express their attitude. The situation is similar in Denmark. A poll conducted by the Gallup in 2015 showed that only 42% of Danish citizens identify themselves as religious believers. Whereas according to figures of Kirkestatistik, a statistical agency of the Church of Denmark, its membership accounts for 77,8% of the country's population. Accordingly, it even consists of atheists among them. In 2015, the Danish press had a wide debate about the confession of two pastors that they did not believe in the dogma of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The situation of the Swedish Church is similar. Currently, this Church is called "the Church of the atheists". According to research of Phil Zukerman, professor of sociology at Pitzer College in the United States of America, 85% of Swedes identify themselves as atheists. According to the Church of Sweden, its members account for 64,6% of the country's population. It means that many members of the Church are a mere "formality". The situation of the other countries like Ireland and Finland is similar¹.

There are different approaches to research on religious change. The sociologists of religions, through qualitative and quantitative studies as mentioned above, conducted surveys of the degree of faith and practices of religious believers to explore the changing tendency of these aspects.

According to Pham Tat Dong and when studying religious transformation, sociologists also focus on the angle of social change. The social change commonly means "a change compared to a social situation or pre-existing lifestyle². Le Ngoc Hung: "Social change is a process through which patterns of social behaviors, social relations, social institutions, and social stratification systems changed over time"³. Based on the approach of social change, the sociologists emphasized the variation in religious behaviors, religious institutions, relationship of religions when studying religious change.

Meanwhile, the anthropologists are more interested in the change of religious life and its core is religious practices. In research on the transformation of religious life or of religious practices, anthropologists place this change in relation to economic, political and social issues⁴.

The anthropologists of religion are interested in religious rituals and practices- one of the manifestations of religious transformation-become more or less complex. The anthropologists of religion also focus on subjects (emic) who practice religion, mentality, emotional state as well as desires and aspirations of the subjects who conduct the religious rites.

From the perspective of research on religions, researchers of religion have based on an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary approach to study of religious change on the basis of transforming religious faith, religious practices and religious community. There are three major dimensions of research on religions. From this perspective, the transformation of religious belief is the most important. Accordingly, research on religions is more concerned with the conversion, the rise or fall of religious belief, the emergence of new religious beliefs. In my opinion, transformation of religious belief is the core or essence when referring to religious change. It does not mean that the change of religious practices, the religious community is not a religious change. However, according to my opinion, this transformation is not the essence of religious transformation.

In this article, the transformation of Buddhism is viewed from the view of research on religions, the major changes of Buddhism in the three aspects such as belief, practice and community compared to Buddhism over 15 years ago. This article is based on the results of field trips, interviews, seminars with Board for Religious Affairs, dignitaries, Buddhists in some provinces and cities in recent years.

2. Current transformations of Buddhism in Vietnam

The phrase “Buddhism in Vietnam” used in this article refers to the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam, which consists of three main denominations such as Mahayana, Theravada, and Buddhist

mendicants. It is necessary to distinguish between the transformation of Buddhism in Vietnam in general and the transformation of each denomination in particular when analyzing the change of Buddhism in Vietnam. In fact, there may be a significant change in this denomination, but it is not occurred in another denomination.

In general, Buddhism in Vietnam has seen a strong development over the past period, manifested in many dimensions such as an increase in the number of followers, dignitaries, worship facilities, training establishments; the rise of mass media in connection with the propagation of Buddhism, international activities, social activities of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam. There are some features of Buddhist transformation in terms of belief, practice and community.

2.1. The transformation of Buddhism in Vietnam in terms of the Buddhist faith

As mentioned above, the transformation of religious belief is fundamental because it will lead to changes in religious practices and religious community. In studying the transformation of Buddhist belief in Vietnam, we have found that there was a strong change in the faith of believers. There was an increase in the number of Buddhists or sympathizers to Buddhism⁵. The number of believers has increased in recent years. According to the results of our recent surveys, 290 people (99%) of the 293 (Buddhist) respondents in Nam Dinh and Thai Binh confirmed that the number of Buddhists has increased. There were new converts among people recently confessed Buddhist belief. A part of them was ethnic minorities. According to a report by the Committee of religious affairs of Dak Lak Province, the number of ethnic minorities converted to Buddhism has actually increased in Buon Ma Thuot city, Cu M'gar district, Krông Păc district⁶. In 2009, the Executive Board of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam organized a Sarana (conversion to Buddhism) for about 3,000 people belonging to ethnic minorities in Kon Tum⁷. In addition to the ethnic minorities believed in traditional beliefs were converted to Buddhism, some Catholics and Protestants were also converted to Buddhism⁸.

Conversely, there were also Buddhists converted to Catholicism and Protestantism. Based on our research and field trip in the South-western provinces (Tây Nam Bộ), a part of Theravada Buddhists was converted to Catholicism and Protestantism. As a result of the increased evangelization of Catholicism and Protestantism (especially Protestantism) in the Khmers' community; and other changes in livelihoods, the Khmers had to escape their communities, to work away from home so they converted to Catholicism or Protestantism. In addition, other reasons such as being helped by Protestant community when having illness, diseases, they gradually believed in Protestantism.

In-depth interview with Mr. T. N, 47 year olds, the Khmer.

Before coming to the Protestantism, he had suffered from muscular dystrophy, was treated but the disease was not cured. He became a Protestant, he just prayed, his disease gradually disappeared. He said that his illness was healed by God. He is a student of the Bible School, he will graduate in two years⁹. In the article *The Conversion of a Part of the Khmers in the Southwest Region*, the author Tran Huu Hop presented the statistics on the number of the Khmer Catholics and Protestants of the Steering Committee for the Southwest Region. According to these data, in 2015, there were 3,202 Catholics and 2,195 Protestants in the Southwest region¹⁰. According to Tran Huu Hop, the Khmers had also converted to other religions such as Hoa Hao Buddhism, Caodaism.

Table 1: The conversion of faith to Buddhism

Answers	Frequency	Percentage	Value	Accumulated Percentage
Yes	65	22.2	22.2	22.2
No	56	19.1	19.1	41.3
Do not know	172	58.7	58.7	100.0
Total	293	100.0	100.0	

(The results of the field research in the provinces of Nam Dinh and Thai Binh in July 2017)

Table 2: Conversion of Buddhists to other Religions

Answers	Frequency	Percentage	Value	Accumulated Percentage
Yes	30	10.2	10.2	10.2
No	72	24.6	24.6	34.8
Do not know	191	65.2	65.2	100.0
Total	293	100.0	100.0	

(The results of the field research in the provinces of Nam Dinh and Thai Binh in July 2017)

The two tables above show the conversion of faith from the other religions to Buddhism and vice versa. Table 1 gives information on the phenomenon of conversion from the other religion to Buddhism; 65/293 (22.2%) of respondents said that there was the phenomenon of converting to Buddhism. Table 2 gives information on the conversion of Buddhists to other religions; only 30/293 (10.2%) of respondents answered that there was the phenomenon of conversion from Buddhism to other religions. According to the abbot of Nhué Pagoda (My Loc District, Nam Dinh Province), there were Catholics and Protestants who converted to Buddhism. On the other hand, there are Buddhists who worship “The Four Palaces” or “Spirits of the Four Palaces” (Tứ Phủ), but they have not converted to other religions.

Mentioning the change of Buddhism, the abbot of Keo Buddhists temple, Thai Binh Province said: “Compared to 15 years ago, Pagoda’s activities are more professionally organize and more participants. Previously, the people who came to the temple were mostly local people. The number of people visited the temple has increased and the number of young people has also increased¹¹. Regarding the structure of believers, there are changes among those who love Buddhism. In the past, people who came to the pagoda were mostly old people, retirees, women. At present, there is an increase of young people, intellectuals, civil servants and officials who come to pagodas. Those who are sympathetic to Buddhism do not only visit

Buddhist temples but they also participate in religious practices. This trend is clearer.

Regarding the quality of Buddhist faith, through qualitative research and participant observation, we found that “It is no longer true that Buddhists have little knowledge of Buddhist doctrine and canon”. When asking about the frequency of participation in temple worship, among the 293 respondents, 251 (85.7%) responded that they regularly come to the temple for worship. Regarding feelings after the temple ceremony, the majority of respondents said they felt more relaxed. See the table below:

Table 3: Feelings after the temple ceremony

Feelings	Yes		No		Total	
	number	%	number	%	number	%
More relaxed	286	97.6	7	2.4	293	100.0
More comfortable	276	94.2	17	5.8	293	100.0
Peaceful	278	94.9	15	5.1	293	100.0
Feel smarter	237	80.9	56	19.1	293	100.0
Happier	249	85.0	44	15.0	293	100.0
Other	0	0	293	100.0	293	100.0

(The results of the field research in the provinces of Nam Dinh and Thai Binh in July 2017)

The abbot of Nhuế Pagoda (My Loc District, Nam Dinh) said that people are more interested in worshipping the Buddha. About 30% of Buddhists have Buddhist altars at home. They place the altar of Buddha above, the altar of ancestors below, hanging the Buddha image in the middle, sometimes hanging image of Shakyamuni Buddha¹². He said that there was no Buddha altar in the house of Buddhists over 15 years ago¹³. According to the results of the survey, among the 293 Buddhists surveyed, 127 said that they had the altar of the Buddha in the house.

At present, temples are expanding because the demand for organizing mass activities. In the minds of many people, including Buddhist monks and nuns, the temple is not only a place to satisfy spiritual needs, but it is also a place to satisfy the needs of learning, cultivating ; it does not only to meet the needs of religious practices of the Buddhists, but it is also a place to meet the needs of society. Therefore, there is a current tendency to build the temple on a large scale with the lecture hall can accommodate thousands of people, to be able to organize many activities, great events.

2.2. Transformation of Buddhism in Vietnam in terms of Buddhist practice

The results of the sociological survey conducted in the provinces of Nam Dinh and Thai Binh in July 2017. Of the 293 respondents, the majority of respondents stated that the practice of Buddhism has been increased, few respondents said that the practice was reduced, a small number of 10 to 20% said it was not changed. The activities consisted of chanting, reciting the Buddha, listening to teachings, ceremony, learning Dharma, prayer for peace, prayer for the repose of the dead, offerings, etc.

The change of Buddhism in terms of belief practice is noteworthy because the increase of activities outside of Buddhism, such as the activities of prayer for security (peace), prayer for the repose of the dead, move the stars to avoid the risks. For example, in recent years, people have been celebrating the wedding ceremony at the temple more and more. It is predicted that this activity will become more and more popular.

The following tables show the participation, the practice of the rituals, the activities “outside of Buddhism” compared to the past.

Table 4: Rituals at Buddhist temples today

Rituals organized by the temple	Number of respondents who participated	Percentage
prayer for security (peace)	286	97,6%

move the stars to avoid the risks	278	94,9%
prayer for the repose of the dead	280	95,6%
offer children to the temple	250	85,3%
cut of the predestination	220	75,1%
establishment of Mandala (lập đàn)	182	62,1%

(The results of the field research in the provinces of Nam Dinh and Thai Binh in July 2017)

Compared to participation in these rituals about 15 years ago.

Table 5: Participation in these rituals about 15 years ago

Rituals organized by the temple	Number of respondents who participated	Percentage
prayer for security (peace)	199	67,9%
move the stars to avoid the risks	174	59,4%
prayer for the repose of the dead	185	63,1%
offer children to the temple	116	39,6%
cut of the predestination	92	31,4%
establishment of Mandala (lập đàn)	88	30%

(The results of the field research in the provinces of Nam Dinh and Thai Binh in July 2017)

According to the analysis in the two tables above, most of those interviewed participated in the ceremony organized by the Buddhist temples. Participation rates are much higher than 15 years ago. The rise of “service” activities outside the Buddhist doctrine shows that the practice of Buddhism is dominated by the social needs and needs of Buddhists.

Studying the factors influencing the practice of Buddhists such as the elements of time (having no time to go to the pagodas), the elements of material (not having any material condition to contribute to the temple), the lack of places of worship are no longer dominant factors Buddhists as about 15 years ago. These are the reasons why Buddhists are more involved in purely Buddhist activities and social activities today. See the two tables below:

Table 6: Factors influencing Buddhist practice 15 Years Ago

Elements	Yes		No		Total	
	number	%	number	%	number	%
Elements of time	142	48.5	151	51.5	293	100.0
Material elements	54	18.4	239	81.6	293	100.0
For other family members	29	9.9	264	90.1	293	100.0
Places of worship (too far, do not have)	15	5.1	278	94.9	293	100.0
Other	0	0	293	100.0	293	100.0

Table 7: Factors influencing Buddhist practice in the Present

Elements	Yes		No		Total	
	number	%	number	%	number	%
Elements of time	34	11.6	259	88.4	293	100.0

Material elements	12	4.1	281	95.9	293	100.0
For other family members	8	2.7	285	97.3	293	100.0
Places of worship (too far, do not have)	3	1.0	290	99.0	293	100.0
Other	0	0	293	100.0	293	100.0

(The results of the field research in the provinces of Nam Dinh and Thai Binh in July 2017)

One of the changes in the Buddhist practice is the practiced way, practice space, the modernization of certain rituals, Buddhist activities, the application of scientific and technological progress as uses the Internet in Buddhist practice, preach. Recently, some Buddhist monks practice rituals in shrines located outside the Buddhist temple space¹⁴. In addition, some Buddhist monks participate in the Medium.

2.3. Transformation of Buddhism in Vietnam in terms of the Buddhist community

One of the most prominent features of the Buddhist community is the strong development of Mandala (đạo tràng), Buddhist groups in “spontaneous” and “conscious” tendencies. “Conscience” means the establishment of Mandala, the organization mandala activities according to certain principles by temples, monks, abbots. “Spontaneity” means the establishment of Mandala, religious groups by Buddhists and those who are sympathetic to Buddhism. At present, there are a large number of Mandala or religious groups that practice the Pure Land. It is noteworthy that some Mandala groups do not belong to any temple, they self-organize, self-cultivate according to discs, sermons on the internet.

Mandala, whether “spontaneous” and “conscious”, are organized more and more professionally. For example, the Mandala of Tan Bao Buddhist Temple, Lao Cai Province is organized according to a large Mandala with the sub-Mandalas. The administrative council has 01 director general, 01 deputy director, commissioners (in charge of sub-Mandala), departments, clubs. The Buddhist activities of the Mandala are organized and implemented. Along with activities such as daily chanting, Buddhist rituals according to doctrine, canon law, these Mandala also have social activities. For example, the Mandala of Tan Bao Pagoda, Lao Cai, has activities as cooking rice for patients at the hospital (on Monday, Wednesday, Friday); helping people affected by natural disasters, floods; providing rice to the boarding school; bicycles and scholarships to poor students¹⁵.

In the last decade, the emergence of “Mandala to pray for the dead”. The Mandala probably appeared in the South, the Central Highlands (Nam Bộ, Tây Nguyên)¹⁶. Currently, these Mandala have appeared in many provinces and cities of the country, some committees of religious affairs of the provinces even do not know these Mandala. According to the results of our research in Can Tho (in August 2017), some “Mandala to pray for the dead” show signs of abuse to take the money.

According to the results survey in Nam Dinh, Thai Binh on July 2017, among the 293 respondents, 264 (accounted for 90,1%) responded that number of Mandala has increased (for the question: the current number of Mandala more or less in comparison with to the past). To see the table below.

Table 8: number of Mandala

Answers	Frequency	Percentage	Value	Accumulated Percentage
Increase	264	90.1	90.1	90.1
Do not know	29	9.9	9.9	100.0
Total	293	100.0	100.0	

The emergence of many Mandala or groups of followers of the Pure Land has shown the converting of the Buddhists. The phenomenon of Buddhists converted from one Mandala to the other, from this denomination to another is not rare. The rapid development of the Pure Land Buddhism's Mandala shows that the faith in Amitabha Buddha is strongly developing. Recently, besides Pure Land, there have been new Buddhist communities based on the belief of Tibetan Buddhism.

Another feature to mention in terms of the Buddhist community in Vietnam today is a formation of Buddhist communities with a gender structure, age groups, professional groups. These are opened Buddhist communities, without structure organized closely like other Buddhist communities, which are formed on the basis of similarities of age, sex, needs... For example, summer cultivated sessions for adolescents, teaching courses for different objects or associations. These are the types of Buddhist community that are developing in recent years.

Conclusion

The article has mentioned some characteristics of Buddhist transformation in terms of faith, practice and community in comparison to 15 years ago. The transformation of beliefs led to the transformation of practice and community. In terms of faith, the transformation of Buddhism is not only reflected in the conversion into Buddhism or vice versa; it is also the conversion of belief from this denomination to another. In terms of practice, the pure Buddhist activities do not change much, but the way of practice has changes. Meanwhile, the social activities of Buddhism have many changes, an increase the forms of activity, scale, extension of activities, etc.

In terms of community, as mentioned above, the emergence of many Buddhist Mandala, groups or communities... have shown the tendency of individualization, the individualization of Buddhist belief are becoming clearer. This is an important feature that must be taken into account when researching and developing policies. /.

NOTES:

- 1 http://btgcp.gov.vn/Plus.aspx/vi/News/38/0/240/0/9860/Ve_su_gia_tang_so_ngu_oi_vo_than_o_cac_nuoc_Bac_Au
- 2 Phạm Tất Dong, Lê Ngọc Hùng (co-chief author, 2008), *Sociology* (Vietnamese), World Pub., Hanoi: 279.
- 3 Phạm Tất Dong, Lê Ngọc Hùng (co-chief author, 2008), *ibid*: 279-280.
- 4 Authors (2008), *Transformation of Religions, Beliefs in Vietnam at Present* (Vietnamese), World Pub., Hanoi: 9.
- 5 Mr. N.T.C, a member form Nam Định Board of Religious Affairs, said that 90% of the inhabitants of Nam Định are sympathetic to Buddhism. Currently, according to him, the number of Buddhists has suddenly increased. (Interview with the Nam Định Board of Religious Affairs, July 25th, 2017).
- 6 *Proceedings of the Conference: Religious Change in the Central Highlands: Current Situation, Policies and Solutions*, Buôn Ma Thuột, July 2013. (Vietnamese)
- 7 *Proceedings of the Conference: Religious Change in the Central Highlands: Current Situation, Policies and Solutions*, Buôn Ma Thuột, July 2013. However, in the article “Identifying Changing Trends in Contemporary Religious Life in the Central Highlands”, (*Religious Studies*, N^o. 2, 2015) the author stated nearly 4,000 ethnic minorities were converted to Buddhism.
- 8 There is no statistic of Catholics, Protestants converting to Buddhism in Vietnam.
- 9 These were the results of in-depth interview with Mr. T.N, 47 year olds, the Khmer, had religious activities at the Nhon Loc Group, Can Tho City. He said that his wife and children were also following Protestantism. According to the in-depth interview with Pastor of the Baptist Church of Can Tho City, the pastor said that about 10 percent of the Khmer people converted to Protestantism (Author’s notes in Can Tho on August 26th, 2017).
- 10 Trần Hữu Hợp (2017), “The Conversion of a Part of the Khmer People in the Southwest Part of Southern Vietnam”, *Religious Studies*, N^o. 3&4: 100, 103. (Vietnamese)
- 11 Notes of the author in interview with the abbot of Keo Pagoda, Thai Binh province on July 29th, 2017.
- 12 According to an interview conducted in July 2017.
- 13 The above views of the abbot of Nhue Pagoda also agreed with the opinion of Mr. N.T.C, the Nam Định Board of Religious Affairs, who said that a family had mainly an ancestor altar in the past; today, the altar of the Buddha has appeared, and many people have built Buddha statues on the terrace, the balcony. (Interview with the Nam Định Board of Religious Affairs on July 25th, 2017).
- 14 In our survey conducted in Nam Định in July 2017, we saw a Buddhist monk performing a ritual for a family having many deaths in succession (cắt giải trùng tang) at Bảo Lộc Temple (Mỹ Lộc, Nam Định). According to those who served at

the temple, these rituals were quite popular here.

- 15 Notes of the author in an interview with N.T.L, 68 year olds, Tan Bao Mandala at Tan Bao pagoda on May 26th, 2017.
- 16 In a field trip conducted by the Institute of Research on Religions, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences in the Central Highlands in July 2013, we saw the emergence of Mandala praying for the dead in Đắk Lắk province. The Executive Council of the Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam in Đắk Lắk was not supported at the emergence of the Mandala at that time.

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8. Nguyễn Quốc Tuấn, Chu Văn Tuấn (co-director, 2014), *Transformation of religions and beliefs in the context of Vietnam's international integration*, đề tài cấp Bộ, Viện Nghiên cứu Tôn giáo chủ trì.
9. Chu Văn Tuấn (2015), “Transformation of religions in Vietnam in the context of international integration” (Vietnamese), *Religious Studies*, N^o. 1.
10. Institute for Religious Studies & the Central Highlands Steering Committee (2017), *Proceedings of the Conference: Religious Change in the Central Highlands: Current Situation, Policies and Solutions*, Buôn Ma Thuột, July.