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**THE BUDDHIST OUTLOOK ON LIFE
AND POLITICAL LIFE IN HANOI NOWADAYS**

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Based on the Buddhist outlook on life, the author analyses the relationship between religion and politics and clarifies the Buddhism influence on the political life of Hanoi in two periods: the Ly-Tran dynasties and the present. The shared point of these two periods was that Buddhism flourished, not only attracting the faith and veneration of many people but also being treated by the State as a national religion. However, Buddhism was not recognized in official documents.

Keywords: Vietnamese Buddhism, Mahayana, Human Life, Hanoi, political life.

**БУДДИЙСКИЙ ВЗГЛЯД НА ЖИЗНЬ
И ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ ЖИЗНЬ В ХАНОЕ В НАСТОЯЩЕЕ ВРЕМЯ**

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Основываясь на буддийском взгляде на жизнь, автор анализирует взаимосвязь между религией и политикой и проясняет влияние буддизма на политическую жизнь Ханоя в два периода: во времена династии Ли-Чан и в настоящее время. Общим для этих двух периодов было то, что буддизм процветал, будучи почитаемым среди многих людей, но и рассматривался государством как национальная религия. Однако буддизм не был признан в официальных документах.

Ключевые слова: вьетнамский буддизм, Махаяна, человеческая жизнь, Ханой, политическая жизнь.

Introduction

At the Millennial Anniversary of Hanoi (1010-2010) in the opening speech at the seminar “*Buddhism in the Ly dynasty with 1000 years of Thang Long-Hanoi*” professor Vu Khieu affirmed the role of Buddhism in Thang Long capital: “... the

thousand years of Thang Long civilization is also the thousand years in which Buddhism has become an important factor in the ideology of the Vietnamese and has entered the superstructure of society” [3, p. 11]. Thus, religion can contribute to society in many aspects. It is not confined solely to religious activities (rituals, beliefs, and spirituality) as a spiritual network. It becomes an ideology and holds a position in the superstructure, with significant penetration and influence on all aspects of life, including a nation’s economy, politics, and culture.

The relationship between religion and politics

Discussing the influence of Buddhism on politics is essentially discussing the relationship between religion and the state. In human history, each religion and each state in different socio-political contexts have had various forms of religion-state and religion-ethnic relations.

The state has the following primary forms:

- A theocratic state is a form of state where the Church holds political power and governs as the state.
- A secular state is a form of state separated from the Church and relatively or absolutely independent of the Church.

Regarding religion, there are the following types of religions:

– Indigenous religion is one that appears in a locality or a certain community. Initially, indigenous religion originated from beliefs, then developed into organized religions (Church or Sangha) and higher forms such as national religion. However, some indigenous beliefs did not develop into religions, were not associated with the theocratic State, nor were they associated with the secular State.

– Traditional religion is a religion that has a long history with a nation and a culture, and many of its values are accepted and become shared cultural values of a community or a country. However, its relationship with the state is not part of the official ideology.

– Ethnic religion is a religion that shares many similarities with traditional religion. The qualitative difference is its relation to the state. Ethnic religion is used by the State and the majority of people as an ideology representing the nation.

– National religion is a religion that has a close relationship with the state. Typically, each state selects one religion as its official religion, which is then recognized as the national religion. The difference between national religion and traditional religion and ethnic religion is that the state uses the ideology of national religion as the official ideology to orient the political tasks of the nation. The relationship between national religion and the State is the most typical relationship between religion and politics.

In Vietnam the relationship between Buddhism and the state is quite diverse. Buddhism participates in all types of religions in the relationship with the State mentioned.

When first introduced, Buddhism assimilated with indigenous beliefs, became the compassionate *Buddha* of the poor people who were colonized and oppressed, and then transformed into the Four Dharmas (Cloud of Dharma, Rain of Dharma, Thunder of Dharma, and Lightning of Dharma) existing in many Northern Delta provinces as an indigenous religion of Vietnamese people. When the Vietnamese regained independence and sovereignty after 1 000 years under Chinese domination, Buddhism began to be used predominantly by the feudal class as a national religion to build a flexible yet resolute political and diplomatic policy.

During the Ly-Tran dynasties, Buddhism was not officially recognized as the *national religion* even though it experienced significant growth and had relations with the State in many aspects. In this period, kings and royal families respected and believed in Buddhism. The political theories of the state were developed and implemented by Buddhist intellectuals with principles rooted in the spirit of Buddhism, such as tolerance, generosity, and compassion. Buddhist institutions like the Truc Lam Zen sect, pagodas, and Zen monasteries were built and sponsored by the King (State). Although intellectual monks were highly regarded as special advisors by the court, they did not hold the power.

During the Le-Nguyen dynasties, Confucianism was honoured as the orthodox ideology of the ruling class and played a dominant role in the superstructure of

society. When Christianity was introduced to Vietnam, Buddhism retreated to the position of indigenous and traditional religion.

Since the *Ordinance on Beliefs and Religions in 2004*, Buddhism has promoted its advantages in its relationship with the state as the largest religion. The current operating principles of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha demonstrate the political stance supporting the orientation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam: “*Dharma, Nation, and Socialism*”.

The Buddhist outlook on life

Outlook on life is a part of worldview (understood broadly), including concepts about human life: What is the reason for living? What are the purposes, meanings, and values of human life? How to live a worthy life? Addressing these questions constitutes the domain of “outlook on life”... Everyone has their views on life. In daily life, these are the spontaneous, “naive” outlook on life of the masses. Thinkers generalize those thoughts, elevate them to theories, and create a self-conscious, philosophical outlook on life. The outlook on life reflects human social existence. It expresses people’s needs, interests, and ambitions in each social system. In a class-based society, the outlook on life has a class nature. The rising class in history often holds an optimistic, proactive, revolutionary outlook on life. The philosophy of life of the declining class is usually pessimistic. Outlook on life has a significant impact on activities (ideals of life). If an outlook on life accurately reflects historical development, it becomes a powerful factor in rationally reforming society. Conversely, if it incorrectly reflects the historical development, it will hinder social progress. A religious view of life transfers the meaning of life to the outside world, the other world, or originates from human nature but is understood abstractly, orienting activities towards (spiritual) needs [1, p. 235].

Thus, the philosophy of life is a reflection of human social existence, and it greatly impacts activities and life ideals. However, the dominant characteristic of the religious view of life is that it is often related to another aspect of the world, namely spiritual life.

The Buddhist view of life is not a spontaneous one but a profound system of thought inherited from ancient Indian philosophy (such as Vedas and Upanishads) and contemporary philosophical schools. Buddhism skipped the theocratic stage and moved to the human-centred stage. The foundation of the Buddhist view of life was based on an atheistic and dialectical worldview (Emptiness, Dependent Origination, Impermanence, and No-self) and unique epistemology (introspection and intuition). The Buddhist view of life was taught by Buddha Śākyamuni when he founded Buddhism around the 6th century BC. Buddhism was a reflection of the desire for freedom of many castes against the theocracy of Brahmanism, the harsh caste discrimination, and inequality in freedom of religion at that time. Hence, the Buddhist view of life embodied the spirit of equality and progressive atheism.

From the definition of outlook on life, it can be seen that Buddhism is a system of philosophical theory that discusses the following issues:

- The nature of human beings is “no-self” and “impermanence.”
- The human body and mind are composed of a temporary (impermanent) combination of five aggregates.
- Human life is a worldly life full of miseries and reincarnation.
- The purpose and reason for human life is to liberate oneself and help other people escape suffering.
- The true value of life is the Buddha-nature created in the process of cultivating good Karma by combining the three aspects: Precepts, Samadhi, and Wisdom.
- The ideal symbols of Buddhism are Buddha, Bodhisattva, and Arhat, who have attained enlightenment and escaped suffering (no more reincarnation).

However, like the ideological systems of other religions, the Buddhist view of life has certain limitations due to historical realities and its religious stance. Buddhism was criticized for being pessimistic, passive, lacking social engagement, and having no developmental orientation. However, in Vietnamese history, especially during the Dai Viet era, Buddhism overcame these limitations with its active *policy of entering the world*. “Entering the world” was a political-religious transition in the

relationships between *the sacred and the secular, theocracy and secular power, and religion and the state*. When studying the ideological shifts of Buddhism in these relationships, we can see more clearly its influence on political life, as well as its positive and negative values.

Based on the analysis of the Buddhist philosophy of life and its religious-political relationship, it is possible to analyse the influence of the Buddhist philosophy of life on the political life of the capital, Hanoi, through two significant periods: the Ly-Tran dynasties and the present.

The Buddhist outlook on life and political life in Thang Long during the Ly-Tran dynasties

Thang Long, the capital of the Ly-Tran dynasties, was a Buddhist citadel with notable landmarks such as Khai Quoc Pagoda, Dien Huu Pagoda (One Pillar Pagoda), Bao Thien Pagoda (now St. Joseph's Cathedral Hanoi built on the original foundation), Linh Quang, Sung Khanh Bao Thien, Dai Bi, Thien Quang, Uc Nien, Van Nien, and Vinh Khanh. These works played a crucial role in politics. The influence of Buddhism on political life was evident. Many kings were Buddhists who respected and believed in Buddha, so the royal palace, mandarins, intellectuals (including Confucian scholars), and the working people in the capital respected Buddha, creating an urban lifestyle as a Buddhist centre. The state's policies and governance under the Ly dynasty always demonstrated the spirit of compassion, forgiveness, and tolerance promoted by Buddhism.

In terms of ideology, Buddhism developed to its peak during this period, unified people's minds, and fostered community cohesion, creating national strength in the face of major political tasks, such as building and protecting the capital and the country and defeating foreign invaders. The court's responsibility towards the people was considered good karma. Many monks were high-ranking intellectuals and well-versed in Buddhism and Confucianism. They worked as political, economic, diplomatic, and military advisors while also being spiritual guides. The people revered the king as a Buddha or Bodhisattva. Mandarins who cared for the country and loved the people were honoured as Bodhisattvas who saved sentient beings.

Intellectuals who believed in Buddha and were loyal to the king, patriotic, and cared for the well-being of the people would be respected by the people. In the religion-state relationship, Buddhism contributed to the State and society and became a vital factor in reforming society positively and reasonably.

During the Ly-Tran dynasties, Buddhist philosophy was selectively absorbed and developed into ideological doctrines with Vietnamese characteristics by Buddhists who promoted the nationalism of Dai Viet. In particular, through Chữ Nôm (a logographic writing system formerly used to write the Vietnamese language), Buddhist texts in Nôm began to be used. The strategy of unifying national Buddhism was demonstrated by the establishment of the Truc Lam Zen sect at Yen Tu under the leadership of King Tran Nhan Tong. He was the first one to use Chữ Nôm to compose poems about Buddhism. The most famous poem was “Cư trần lạc đạo” (To live in this world), which clearly expressed the stance of “entering the world” of Buddhism of Dai Viet. Through that, the Buddhist philosophies of life about people, morality, life and death, impermanence, and cause and effect were affirmed as the traditional philosophy of life of Dai Viet. The influence of Buddhism on political life during this period was obvious.

From the positive synergy between Buddhism and politics, between the court and the Church, between ordinary believers and the ruling elite, Buddhism permeated Vietnamese people’s lives, was supported by the ruling class, and was considered a dominant ideological system. The support for the king’s policies was a belief in good karma, which created unity among the people. Historians evaluated the Ly-Tran dynasties as having maintained external peace with Champa and successfully resisted the Song dynasty. The Ly-Tran dynasties had political stability, economic development, and a flourishing culture thanks to talented and virtuous kings, namely Ly Thai To, Ly Thanh Tong, Ly Thai Tong, Ly Nhan Tong, Tran Thanh Tong, and Tran Nhan Tong.

In daily life, the Buddhist outlook on life strongly influenced all classes in Thang Long Citadel. Firstly, Buddhism influenced the thoughts, actions, and ideologies of the kings, nobles, and mandarins in the royal court, who represented the

Thang Long Citadel. Then, according to social policy, it affected the lifestyle and beliefs of Buddhist followers and local people. For example, the philosophy of cause and effect and reincarnation embodied in festivals like Yulan Festival, Buddha's Birthday, and customs such as visiting temples, practicing vegetarianism, offering incense on days of worship anticipation, and intertwining ancestral altars with Buddhist altars in households. The village communal house (đình làng) served as a cultural and political centre and was often combined with a pagoda to create spaces that blended political and spiritual aspects for the local community. Parallel couplets, horizontal lacquered boards, and calligraphic decorations found in communal houses, temples, and households' ancestral altars were indeed slogans imbued with the spirit of compassion, pure charity, salvation, patriotism, love for the people, and pride in the nation.

The humanistic spirit of Buddhism, exemplified by the rule of virtue, was a prominent feature in the Ly-Tran dynasties. However, Buddhism did not advocate the establishment of an ecclesiastical authority that imposed political power. The Buddhist Sangha always maintained a cooperative relationship (including political cooperation) and assisted the royal court to the greatest extent, without any ambition or conspiracy to compete for political power. Sometimes, Buddhism was used to support politics, but it never acted under pretences. The royal court advisors were true Buddhists who were deeply knowledgeable in Buddhist texts and were role models in Buddhist ethics, so they were respected and followed by the court and the people. As a result, a series of issues about Dai Viet's political ideology were answered from a Buddhist perspective. However, the country still developed, and politics were stable according to the feudal state model. The dynasty was sustainable, and the people were proud of their nation and ruling dynasty.

The Buddhist outlook on life and political life in Hanoi nowadays

Nowadays, Buddhism no longer has the dominant position in ideology as it did during the Ly-Tran dynasties. The leaders of the Vietnamese State are no longer from Buddhist backgrounds or Buddhists as before, but the influence of Buddhism on the spiritual life of Hanoians remains significant.

According to statistics from the Hanoi Buddhist Association in 2011 there were 1 897 monks and nuns, 1 792 pagodas and 2 million Buddhists in the city [2, p. 35]. The Central Buddhist Sangha and the representative organizations of Buddhism were located in Hanoi, attracting domestic and international Buddhist activities.

Up to now, Buddhism remains the major religion in Hanoi, and Hanoi is the locality with the most pagodas in Vietnam. Among the religions recognized by organizations in Vietnam, only Buddhism clearly defines the direction of practice, not only serving the Dharma and the nation but also associated with socialism. This demonstrates that Buddhism's political orientation, or "entering the world," is attached to the nation. The leading lines of Buddhism affirm that this orientation is "a selective inheritance according to the reasonable thoughts of Buddha Shakyamuni and the historical tradition of Vietnamese Buddhism, which the predecessors have nurtured over the past 20 centuries" [2, p. 29].

Buddhism in Hanoi, as well as in northern Vietnam in general, is relatively homogeneous, primarily following the Mahayana sect [4, p. 272], which has existed since the period of Chinese domination and flourished during the Ly-Tran dynasties. The ideology of Mahayana Buddhism is relatively open-minded and not rigid in practices. Its doctrine is not too strict because it guides Buddhist monks and nuns to a moral lifestyle and good behaviour. This philosophy positively influences Hanoians' psychology and consciousness, including political ideology.

To adapt to the integration era, the trend of "entering the word" of Vietnamese Buddhism continues to be promoted and inherited. The Hanoi Buddhist Association has directed its affiliated agencies to engage in activities contributing to the nation's construction and development. With the spirit of "propagating Dharma as one's duty, benefiting beings as one's career" (Vietnamese: *Hoằng Pháp vì Gia vụ, lợi Sinh vì sự nghiệp*), since 1982 the City Sangha has established the City Dharma Propagation Board to disseminate the humanistic and human-centred philosophy of Buddhism to practitioners, aiming to build a good society and a good religion. Since 2008 the Hanoi Dharma Propagation Board has organized many classes to teach basic doctrine and attracted thousands of Buddhists. Thanks to that, many teachings are conveyed to

Buddhists to create positive changes in awareness, especially regarding complex political events such as economic management, sovereignty over islands, land, corruption, bribery, and the exploitation of religion to cause “peaceful evolution”. Such a method of operation is consistent with the purpose of Buddhism, which is not aimed at establishing new institutions and political structures but seeks to solve problems in society through personal morality, directing a humane attitude, improving the spiritual life of all members, engaging in charitable activities, giving alms, etc.

In the current socialist-oriented market, Hanoi City is a place that gathers many labour forces, forms of business, and economic sectors. The Buddhist ideology of equality calls on economists and politicians to come up with appropriate management measures so that enterprises and economic forms can compete healthily, cooperates for mutual development, and avoids causing tension and mutual destruction among economic components that negatively impact the overall economy.

Buddhism also encourages building politics based on morality and using power with a sense of responsibility. Leaders following Buddhism shall pioneer in cultivating morality to become good human beings. Buddhism in Hanoi City proactively practices the fundamental precepts of Buddhism in movements across the country, such as not engaging in corruption and not abetting smuggling, fraud, or tax evasion to make illegal profits. The elite class’s good lifestyle in society will likely impact the masses positively, making them trust and support all the city’s policies and strive to work and produce, contributing to the construction and development of Hanoi. This is a good way to make the whole society healthy.

In the period of international integration, Hanoi is the place that has received the earliest and most opportunities, such as economic development, cultural diversity, and open diplomacy, but it faces numerous challenges. Creating new cultural values and modern families must inherit traditions, including Buddhist culture. A humane outlook on life imbued with Buddhism’s spirit of compassion will raise awareness so people have tolerance, openness, equality, and altruism. In the face of crucial political activities of the country, it is necessary to have a cautious attitude to make

appropriate responses. Therefore, Buddhism in Hanoi City should further enhance its role of “entering the world” and participating in political activities to promote intellectual potential and demonstrate its role.

Buddhist monks and nuns in Hanoi have actively run for government agencies to contribute their wisdom and virtue to the cause of national construction and development. Most Venerable Thich Bao Nghiem was elected deputy to the 13th National Assembly. Most Venerable Thich Thanh Quyet was elected deputy to the 15th National Assembly. Reverend Thich Tien Dat was elected deputy to the 14th City People’s Council. Many monks and nuns were elected deputies to the all-level People’s Councils. The participation of representatives of Buddhism in the administrative apparatus of the capital has had a certain impact, giving people faith in a tolerant and compassionate political system.

In addition, to imbue the ideals and philosophy of Buddhism regarding a peaceful and happy society for the people and to link the longevity of Buddhism with the longevity of the nation, the Hanoi Buddhist Association, together with the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, has undertaken various actions, including expanding the people’s front, combating the sabotage of the great national unity, fostering religious unity, and opposing efforts to disrupt and divide the Sangha aiming at causing social disorder, insecurity, and instability. The Hanoi Buddhist Association actively fights against hostile forces that take advantage of the “peaceful evolution” theory to distort the situation of religion and the policy of freedom of belief in Vietnam. Moreover, the Sangha engages in public and religious diplomacy and exposes those who falsely claim to represent Buddhism but act contrary to the principles, objectives, and direction of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.

On August 12, 2003 at Quan Su Pagoda Most Venerable Thich Thanh Tu and several monks from the Standing Committee of the Executive Council of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in Hanoi met a specialist from the United States Department of State (responsible for bilateral issues between the United States and Vietnam). The meeting affirmed that the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha was the only organization representing Buddhism in Vietnam at home and abroad. Furthermore, it was

emphasized that the correct religious policies of the Party and the State of Vietnam always facilitated the development of religions within the great national unity and following the law. Finally, it was stated that Vietnamese law did not allow any individual or organization to take advantage of the freedom of religion to conduct political activities against the Government and the people's interests.

In recent years, with the rapid trend of integration and globalization, the Hanoi Buddhist Association and the Central Buddhist Sangha have hosted many vital international Buddhist events, such as the United Nations Day of Vesak in 2008 and the International Conference on Buddhist Women in 2009. Moreover, the Hanoi Buddhist Association has sent many Buddhist delegations to attend international Buddhist forums and organized visits of Buddhist delegations to Vietnamese communities abroad. These efforts aim to garner support from Buddhists worldwide and introduce Vietnam and the Vietnamese who love peace and are ready to be friends with all countries.

Nowadays, the influence of Buddhism on thought is no longer clear, and there are not many politicians who are Buddhists. However, Buddhism's compassion still influences the political policies and guidelines of Vietnam in general and Hanoi in particular. If the simple lifestyle, love of doing good deeds, and altruistic and humane behaviour become the characteristics of the capital's residents, they will contribute to the political and social stability of Hanoi. Buddhist philosophy, in general, and its outlook on life in particular, are a part of the ideology and lifestyle of Hanoians and contribute to building Hanoi City, a City for Peace.

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