


Application of Buddhism in the US-Vietnam War: A General Review

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 ISSN 2631-2131	“Buddhism has historically concentrated on cultivating the illuminated qualities of the inner mind to alleviate pain and conflict”
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Abstract

Buddhism was first invented in Kapilvastu, Nepal. Vietnam war is considered as second most devastating war of 20th century after second world war. At the same time, Vietnam had always boasted of 2000 years of Buddhist history. The US-Vietnam war, which surpassed the records of French-Vietnamese War finally ended after long negotiations in Paris and total withdrawal of the US troops in 1975. In the intermittent period, the Buddhists engaged in non-violent demonstrations against war, which was brutally suppressed then. But it made a long lasting impact, ultimately resulting in negotiations and the end of the war. Buddhism played a significant role in ending the Vietnam War. Thus the main objective of the study is to analyze and review the roles of Buddhism to end the war. This study is based on available literature on the subject. Thus it is an in-depth literature review of referenced texts and literature. It is also a content analysis of selected literature. The Harrim and pentagon analysis have mentioned little but the role of Buddhism, the monks, unity of Therawadi and Mahayani sect, and self-burn of a monk were the significant internal factors to end the war to reestablish the peace.

Keywords: Buddhism, Conflict Resolution, Vietnam War,

“The pious Land of Buddha is flooded with human blood! How can you stand still and stare at the scene of self-immolation by a Monk right on the middle of the road?” Nepali Poet Buddha Sayami (c.1966)

Introduction

Gautama Buddha, the emblem of peace and love, the pioneer of Buddhism, was born in Kapilabastu, Lumbini, Nepal. The peace, love, and compassion in Buddhism is the basic element of Sustainable development (Badal, 2021). Buddhism was first established from Kapilavastu of Nepal. Buddhism in Vietnam was initiated since 3rd or 2nd century BCE by the Indian delegation of monks and it is followed it by Chinese monks in 1st and 2nd century. By the end of the second century CE, Vietnam had developed into a major regional Mahayana Buddhist center centering on Luy Lau, northeast of the present-day capital city of Hanoi. Luy Lau was the capital of the Han region of *Jiaozhi* and was a popular place visited by many Indian Buddhist missionary monks route to China. The monks followed the maritime trade route from the Indian sub-continent to China used by Indian traders (Van, 2020). In history and the present, Buddhism holds an important position in the cultural life of Vietnamese people. Today, along with the development of the country, these legacies continue to contribute to the cultural activities of the people through many pagoda festivals and many religious activities, becoming an inseparable part of the cultural life of most Vietnamese people. Situated on the Indochinese Peninsula, Vietnam is a geographical dot amidst two large countries, the two most ancient civilizations of Asia, and probably of the whole world: India and China (Willbanks, 2018). Being near two such large countries and ancient civilizations, Vietnam has naturally been influenced by both. Vietnam's acquisition of Buddhism is no exception. Buddhism made its way to Vietnam and became a significant part of the spiritual fabric of the Vietnamese people. While syncretized with the cult of spirits/ancestral worship, Buddhism has survived and become one of the country's largest organized religions. Buddhism is widely practiced throughout modern-day Vietnam. It has become a defining worldview for many people who do not actually ascribe to its religious tenants (Ward & Burns, 2017).

Buddha gave the message of peace and non-violence to mankind immediately after his enlightenment more than 2500 years ago. It is an irony that such a war should occur in a Buddhist country. US Vietnam War started in early 1960s. The war intensified with the passing of every year and by the time of early 1969, more than 500,000 US troops were stationed in Vietnam. The Peace Talk in Paris for ending war in Vietnam started in 1968. It finally resulted in Peace Agreement signed on 27th January 1973. The actual end of the war realized only after the total withdrawal of American troops in April 1975. Thus it is the study of Buddhism and its application in the war in Vietnam. Gautama Buddha, the emblem of peace and love, pioneer of Buddhism, was born in Kapilabastu, Lumbini, Nepal. The philosophy was successful in the US-Vietnam war also.

Objective and Method

The objective of this article is to explain the role played by the Buddhists in ending the Vietnam War. Thus the main objective of the study is to analyze and review the roles of Buddhism to end

the war. This study is based on available literature on the subject. Thus it is an in-depth literature review of referenced texts and literature. It is also a content analysis of selected literature.

Review

Buddhism in Vietnam

Among some dozen countries of Asia, where the dominant religion is Buddhism, Vietnam is featured as one of the prominent Buddhist countries. Vietnamese government sponsored study itself claims that Buddhism was introduced in Vietnam directly from India in the First Century AD, by refuting previous claims that it was introduced from Eastern China (Nguyen & Hoang, 2008). Buddhism came directly to Vietnam from Indian traders and missionaries in the 1st or 2nd century A.D., centuries before the massive waves of Buddhist influence which came from China. Indeed, by the beginning of the 4th century, Vietnamese Buddhist monks were traveling in turn to India to retrieve more Buddhist sutras and do advanced study. Most Vietnamese are Buddhist. Due to strong Chinese influence Confucianism and Taoism are also followed. Christianity, predominantly Roman Catholicism, was established in Vietnam due largely to France's colonization of the area during the 19th and 20th centuries.

There had been attempts to overthrow Diem in 1960 and 1962. Both times he had remained in power but his position became more difficult in 1963. An incident on 11 June dealt his government a serious blow. A Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, burned himself to death at a busy intersection in Saigon. He was protesting about the persecution of Buddhists by Diem. His death was captured on film and flashed around the world. Diem's communist rivals claimed Thich Quang Duc's death was a protest over the war. They used this as further evidence that Diem had no support from the Vietnamese people. The US was now worried that Diem's regime was undermining their anticommunist effort in Southeast Asia (Ward & Burns, 2017).

Ngo Dinh Diem was a catholic and – he persecuted South Vietnam's Buddhist population he was assassinated in a coup in November 1963. By 1963 the US had lost faith in Diem: He was increasingly harsh to Buddhists. His troops killed Buddhists and raided their temples. In June 1963 a Buddhist monk called Quang Duc famously burned himself to death in protest. Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, head of the secret police, identified militant Buddhists as a source of trouble for the regime. Charging them with harboring Communists and supporting anti-Diem forces, Nhu launched a campaign against the Buddhists to bring them under control. The situation came to a head in May 1963 when ARVN troops fired into a crowd of Buddhist demonstrators in Hue who had taken to the streets to protest Diem's discriminatory policies. This was followed in June by the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk who set himself on fire in protest at a Saigon intersection, an act that made bold headlines around the world and caused maximum consternation in Washington. When Nhu sent his special forces into a number of Buddhist monasteries, resulting in the killing of several monks and the arrest of many others, this set off a wave of student protests in Hue and Saigon in which 4,000 students were rounded up

and arrested by government troops. The ancient capital was almost sacred to the Vietnamese people, particularly so to the Buddhists (Ward & Burns, 2017).

Officially, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is an atheist state, as declared by the government which is ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam. But why the Government Committee for Religious Affairs published statistics on religious practices in the country in 2018, Buddhism came out on the top with 14.9 percent of population following the religion. Besides, another 2.7 percent of population were following a religion which is mixed between Buddhism and other local faiths (Willbanks, 2018). With the longest surviving history and with largest number of following, can conclude that the Buddhism has made very deep impact in the socio-cultural life of Vietnam. No wonder, when Vietnam lists most beautiful historical structures of the country, they invariably include such Buddhist Pagodas as Tran Quoc Pagoda of Hanoi, Bai Dinh Pagoda of Ninh Binh and Thien Mu Pagoda of Hue. The constant throng of devotees and resident monks who attend to the shrines have made lively scenes in these Buddhist places of worships. So Buddhism is a living religion of Vietnam (Ward & Burns, 2017).

There are lots of temples and pagodas in Vietnam, and according to encyclopedia of Britannica that the pagoda structure derives from that of the stupa, a hemispherical, domed, commemorative monument first constructed in ancient India. Initially, these structures symbolized sacred mountains, and they were used to house relics or remains of saints and kings (Willbanks, 2018). It proves the Buddhism in Vietnam was introduced from Indian subcontinent. In all this network of religion, art and social beliefs, Araniko in the 12th century made a quest to launch the art of Nepal to the neighboring countries. He was summoned to Tibet to create architectural monuments. There is still a white stupa at Miaoying Temple, Beijing. Constructed by order of Kublai Khan under the supervision of Nepali architect Araniko, 1271 (Bajracharya, 2018). The relations with Tibet were commercial since Lichhavi period. Kerung was the main entry point between Nepal and Tibet. Around 618, trade flourished. Tsongtsen Gampo (Tang Dynasty) who united Tibet (in around 620 A.D.) had married Nepali princes, Bhrikuti (Harita Tara) and intimacy of relations grew. Bhrikuti married to Tsonng Tsen Gyampo and spread Buddhism in Bhrikuti is known as Harita Tara in Tibet (Sherpa, 2020).

The export of Buddhist idol intensified relations. Nepali scholar Shilmanju (7th century) contributed in spread of religion. Milarepa visited Nepal around 1052 and helped to extend religion and social works. Tibetan scholars visited Nepal to learn Buddhism. Arniko, a great young artist of Nepal showed his talent in Tibet and China. He is the first Diasporas residing abroad. He built Buddhist pagoda in Lhasa (Yuan Dynasty). The White Dagoba (Pagoda). Miao Ying Temple in Beijing was also constructed under his guidance. Arniko, as an Asian talent of 13th century like Leonardo da Vinci in Europe, is the first known artist of Nepal. Mahamanjusri of China (from Wutai Mountains) is known as the opener of the Kathmandu Valley Lake to prepare for settlement. Huen Tsang (Tang Dynasty) visited India in 629-45 and described about Nepal. Fahien (Jin Dynasty) and Huen Tsang like monks visited Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha. This has depicted the relations back to the mid-7th century. The history has depicted

that king Narendradev (645-679) of Licchavi period has helped China by supplying 700 horse-riding soldiers. There are many examples of good relations between the lands of the Himalayan high altitude border of the Tibetan Plateau (Poudel, 2017). Same the Pagoda Style temples are famous in Nepal Tibet and China. Thus Buddhist philosophy and architectures from Nepal were spread all over the world including Vietnam and USA.

Brief Review of foreign intervention in Vietnam

The Cold War was a long period of tension between America and the Soviet Union (USSR) after world war 2. The two countries had very different ideas about economics and government. The USA and USSR never actually fought each other – this is why it's known as a cold war (Ward & Burns, 2017). However, they did get involved in other wars between other communist and capitalist countries. After the French defeat, nine countries met and came up with the Geneva Accords. They agreed that Vietnam would be temporarily divided into North and South along the 17th parallel. Elections would then be held in 1956 to create a united Vietnam. However, South Vietnam's prime minister Diem refused to hold elections in 1956, because he feared Ho Chi Minh (North Vietnam) would win. As a result, Vietnam stayed divided. A group called the Vietcong (Vietnamese communists) began to fight against Diem, encouraging people in the South to support communism (Ward & Burns, 2017). They were supported by North Vietnam, who from 1959 sent troops and weapons into the South via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. President Eisenhower (1953-61) wanted to help protect South Vietnam against the communist North. He believed in a limited war – sending advisers to train the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN), but not fighting with them.

Eisenhower got the USA more involved in Vietnam for two reasons. America hated communism. *The domino theory* was the fear that if Vietnam became communist, other countries in that part of Asia would also become communist. In 1954 Eisenhower set up the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO): a group of countries who would work together *to stop communism* spreading in the region. The South Vietnamese government, led by Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, was cruel and unpopular. By the end of 1960, Diem's government had control of less than half of South Vietnam – without America's help, it seemed unlikely to survive.

The US knew that Diem's unpopular, undemocratic government would never survive. In November 1963 Diem was assassinated in a coup by ARVN generals - the USA knew it was coming but deliberately didn't warn him. Just 3 weeks after Diem's death, Kennedy was also assassinated. Lyndon B. Johnson took over as US President (Willbanks, 2018).

President Johnson had the same goals as Kennedy – to set up a stable government in South Vietnam, and to avoid full-blown war. However, his situation was more difficult than Kennedy's. The VC was a much more serious threat than before. It seemed certain that South Vietnam would not survive without more US involvement. Johnson sent in more US advisers – there were 20,000 by 1964(Ward & Burns, 2017).

On 4th August 1964, two US Navy ships – the Maddox and C. Turner Joy – claimed they had been torpedoed by North Vietnamese boats in the Gulf of Tonkin. However, there were doubts over what actually happened. Conditions were stormy and some believed there had been no attack at all (although North Vietnamese boats had fired at the US two days earlier, on 2nd August) (Willbanks, 2018).

Rolling Thunder was a bombing campaign that targeted the Ho Chi Minh Trail and industrial areas in North Vietnam. As well as bombs the US also dropped napalm (a burning chemical) and pineapple bombs (which shoot pellets everywhere when they explode). The first ground troops were sent in in March 1965, to protect the US air bases. Rolling Thunder caused significant damage to its targets. But - The Ho Chi Minh Trail was constantly repaired, so supplies still got through to the South. Aid from China and the USSR was not targeted. The destruction it caused turned the Vietnamese people against the USA. It killed thousands of civilians, which was bad for the USA's image. The Vietcong had the home advantage – unlike the USA, they were familiar with Vietnam's jungle terrain and used it to their advantage. They fought a guerrilla war (Ward & Burns, 2017).

Johnson didn't stand for re-election in 1968 because of the increasing criticism of the war. He was succeeded by Richard Nixon, who promised to get the USA out of the war. Nixon's ideas – known as the Nixon Doctrine - said that the US would no longer provide troops to its allies, only aid and training. This meant that the US would gradually withdraw and leave South Vietnam to fight their own war, a process called Vietnamisation (Willbanks, 2018).

In 1969 Nixon secretly ordered the bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in neighboring Cambodia, and in 1970 he sent in 30,000 US troops. America achieved its aim of damaging the Ho Chi Minh Trail and preventing a communist government in Cambodia, but people back home were outraged at Nixon for expanding the war. Congress cancelled the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. By 1972 both sides felt pressured to make peace, and a ceasefire was agreed in the Paris Agreement in 1973. However, America never got what it had been fighting for all along - in March 1975 North Vietnam invaded the South, and Vietnam became united as a communist country (Ward & Burns, 2017).

Beginning of Religious conflict in South Vietnam

Vietnam was under the rule of China for a thousand years. Then the country was influenced by Buddhism, Taoism and the belief of worshipping ancestors. Vietnam then fell under the French colony that severely deteriorated Buddhism. Buddhists' role in national administration was diminished (Ward & Burns, 2017). Liberation movement against France took place. Monks had a leading role in protesting for Buddhism protection and they even committed self-burning suicide. Vietnamese Buddhist association was also established. In post-colonization period, as Vietnam was divided by the Geneva Resolution, Sangha council was separated into socialist system in the north and democratic system in the south. Ho Chi Minh later liberated North Vietnam and conjugated South Vietnam into a unitary state. Religious organizations, thus,

comply themselves with the aim and principle of socialist communist system (Chinnak & Sarakijkosol, 2016)

When Ngo Dinh Diem came to the power of the South Vietnam by removing emperor Bao Dai in 1955, he started using his power to promote Catholicism in Vietnam. Diem's elder brother Ngo Dinh Thuc was a long time Catholic Bishop. Diem and his younger brother Nhu were devout Catholics. Even in legal provisions, he started discriminatory attitude towards other majority religions like Buddhism. The Catholics were specially exempted from compulsory military conscription. This was a clear incentive to convert into that religion (Ward & Burns, 2017). By the time of 1962-63, the conflict became quite open.

On Vesaka Day of 1963, the Buddhists in Vietnam decided to defy the Diem regime and openly displayed Buddhist flags during the celebrations despite a ban imposed by the government. A few days earlier, Catholics were openly allowed to display Vatican flags during their celebration. There were oppressive police actions against Buddhists at several places. The larger protests were held against police suppression. In Hue, police opened fire against the protestors and 8 of them were killed. The US government's advice to Diem not to suppress majority Buddhist community went unheeded by the Diem government. On 10th June 1963, a Buddhist monk called Thich Quang Duc travelled from Hue to Saigon and he made his way to the center of the street and assumed the lotus position. With the help of his assistants, he poured petrol on his body and by striking a match, he conducted the self-immolation. The whole scene was captured by Associated Press photographer Malcolm Browne and photo was circulated in next day's newspaper all over the world. The shocking photograph made the US policy makers to rethink about their support to Diem (Willbanks, 2018).

Then the series of US intervention to the South Vietnam government for the appeasement of the Buddhists did not have much impact. Instead, Diem hardened his stand against Buddhists. Then began series of military coup plots most of which were foiled by the regime. Finally, another successful coup took place against Diem regime and the notorious brothers Diem and Nhu were killed by the coup leaders on 1st November 1963. Although these events had various other political implications, the intervention by the Buddhists made a big difference in the turn of events in Vietnam. The Americans and the south Vietnamese governments after 1963 took serious notes of the opinion of Buddhists and any suppression of Buddhist ideas became difficult after above incident, which became popularly known as Buddhist Crisis in Vietnam (Ward & Burns, 2017).

The formal attempt to blend the various schools of Buddhist thought was the 1963 meeting that saw the founding of the United Church of Vietnamese Buddhism it is also known as Association of Unified Buddhism. In this organization of unified Buddhism an attempt has been made to integrate the two great currents of Mahayana and Theravada to high-level contacts and discussions. It provided a unified voice for Buddhists as they sought to protect their religious faith and stand against the injustices of the Vietnam War. These initiatives to unify Buddhism

had far reaching impact in blending the major branches and various sects of each branch (Morris, 2021)

Importance of Buddhism in the resolution of conflicts

Buddhism has historically concentrated on cultivating the illuminated qualities of the inner mind to alleviate pain and conflict. The seed of hatred, for example, can be weakened and its energy can be transformed into the energy of compassion. The seed of love can be watered and strengthened. A Buddhist practitioner should turn inward to achieve some semblance of harmony and cultivate the fine qualities of knowledge, generosity, and devotion. With various degrees of understanding of Buddhism, people were able to solve their innate questions of life and also positively contribute to society and the world at large.

The very first of five precepts or the *Panchasheela* of Buddha urges the disciples to refrain from harming any sentient beings. Hence the principle of non-violence is the bedrock of Buddhism. It is a crucial precondition for a constructive resolution of conflicts. Violence is commonly described here to include all deliberate acts to harm or endanger somebody. In the noble eightfold path, the fourth path is called *Right Conduct*, whereupon Buddha talks of the need to stop violence. *Ahimsa* is incorporated into a Buddhist canon. Non-violence through thinking, word, or behavior involves determining not to hurt others, avoid lying and harm, and release violent actions. In fact, a person harms oneself by wounding others. Therefore, Buddhism is a vital resource for conflict resolution due to the religion's mindfulness and peacefulness.

For the Buddhists, communism is as much foreign as Catholicism then propounded by the Diem government. In the history of conflicts in Vietnam, as described earlier, the South Vietnamese forces suppressed the Buddhist religious leaders and supporters in the spring of 1963, causing President Ngo Dinh Diem's administration to experience a political crisis (Ward & Burns, 2017). Ngo Dinh Diem did little to relieve the tensions, but he vowed to reform later on. Many people believed that Saigon's government's real decision-maker and the person responsible for Buddhist repression was his brother and closest adviser, Ngo Dinh Nhu (Ward & Burns, 2017). Buddhist protests continued throughout the spring and summer, culminating in June when a Buddhist monk immolated himself. Such a radical step on the part of Buddhists sent shock waves through the world and made a huge impact.

In 1967, President Nixon campaigned on a ticket that endorsed the end of the United States invasion in Vietnam. The Vietnam war was a sad manifestation of violence from both sides, and it ended after the U.S. decided to withdraw its troops. The deal was amicably struck through the Paris Peace Accords to ensure the U.S. forces' retreat ended a bloody period in Vietnam's history. In original independent the Buddha clearly declares: "This exists then that exists. This does not, neither does that. This is created then that is created. This is destructed then that is destructed."

Vietnam has reinvented its political affiliations after the end of the bitter Vietnam War. It has also confronted difficulties in dealing with China, exemplified in their border wars of 1979 and

1986. It faces a maritime dispute over China's expansive South China Sea claims, though both committed in 2011 to solving this through negotiations. It is now seen as an astute manager of that complex relationship. Vietnam has also focused on developing its Asian and global economic outreach, and building new political connections with the United States and the West (Rana, 2019). In original independent the Buddha declares that this exists then that exists. This is destructed then that is destructed. The war was ended because of the end of the enmity. The conflict was addressed.

Conclusion

Although the death of about 3 million Vietnamese, most of them civilians and also the death of 58,000 American troops in the country was the saddest part of history from the Buddhist point of view, the conclusion of this war by total withdrawal by a Superpower shows the strength of moral power over brutal power. The Buddhists were never interested in winning wars but they always pursued for winning of minds. After Vietnam war, Buddhism became more popular in the West. It is acknowledged the fact that Vietnam War had such an impact all over the world and in the West in particular. That case did not have the conclusive visible proof it required until the Buddhists riots in the spring of 1963. The Harrim and pentagon analysis have mentioned little but the role of Buddhism, the monks, unity of Therawadi and Mahayani sect, and self-burn of a monk were the significant internal factors to end the war to reestablish the peace.

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