

## The “Buddhism into Life” Spirit: The Lotus Pure Land Buddhism at Penglai Mountain in South Vietnam

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**Abstract:** By applying a systematic, interdisciplinary approach and comparative method, this article focuses on the characteristics, values and influences of “Buddhism into life” spirit of the Lotus Pure Land Buddhism at Penglai Mountain (Liên tông Tịnh độ Non Bồng, LTTĐNB) in Southern Vietnam, evaluating the phenomenon from the perspective of endogenous religions that contribute to inheriting and reviving of Buddhist traditional values to meet the needs of contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Lotus Pure Land Buddhism at Penglai Mountain, “Buddhism into life”, endogenous religions, Southern Vietnam

### Introduction

The Liên tông Tịnh độ Non Bồng (Lotus Pure Land Buddhism at Penglai Mountain, hereafter: LTTĐNB) is an endogenous religion based on Buddhism in Southern Vietnam. It was born in the mid-twentieth century and has continued to develop, attracting a large number of believers and making outstanding contributions to Buddhist culture of Vietnam. However, to date, research on the sect remains extremely limited. Research on endogenous religions in South Vietnam mainly

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focus on Caodaism<sup>3</sup> and Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương<sup>4</sup>. Besides some works on Buddhism in South Vietnam mentioning LTTĐNB, there are very few articles (Bùi 2019; Đặng et al 2022) and an MA thesis (Bùi 2018) introducing the social activities of this sect.

This article focuses on the spirit of “Buddhism into life” as one of the important factors that determine the vitality and influence of LTTĐNB. Inheriting the research results of predecessors, we analyze the literature of LTTĐNB through a systematic, interdisciplinary and comparative approach to clarify the characteristics, value and impact of LTTĐNB’s “Buddhism into life” spirit, and at the same time evaluating this phenomenon from the perspective of endogenous religions which revive the precious traditions of Buddhism to meet the needs of contemporary society.

### The spirit of “Buddhism into Life” and related concepts

For Western researchers, the concept of “Engaged Buddhism” was first popularized through the works published by Vietnamese Zen master, Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926-2022), in the 1960s. As Thích Nhất Hạnh said in interview with *Lion’s Roar* magazine, his ideas about Engaged Buddhism started taking shape when he was a peace activist during the American War in Vietnam:

“When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time,” he said in an interview with *Lion’s Roar* magazine. “When I was a novice in Vietnam, we young monks witnessed the suffering caused by the war. So we were very eager to practice Buddhism in such a way that we could bring it into society. That was not easy because the tradition does not directly offer Engaged Buddhism. So we had to do it by ourselves. That was the birth of Engaged Buddhism.” (The Rubin Museum 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Caodaism, whose full name is Đại Đạo Tam kỳ Phổ độ, was founded in 1926 in Tây Ninh province by a number of civil servants, capitalists, landlords, and intellectuals, the most prominent of whom was Ngô Văn Chiêu (1878-1932). Caodaism combines the Three Religions, Christianity, and a number of other religions and ideologies. Currently, Caodaism has more than 1 million followers, more than 13,000 dignitaries, and more than 1,300 religious establishments in 35 provinces and cities of Vietnam. See more, Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs) 2021, <https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/gioi-thieu-dao-cao-dai-o-viet-nam-post2BR1VAWaj1.html>

<sup>4</sup> Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương was founded by Mr. Đoàn Minh Huyên (also known as Phật Thầy Tây An - Buddha Teacher Tây An, 1807-1856) in late 1849 in An Giang province. The main ideology of BSKH is “Studying Buddhism and Self-Cultivation” to repay “The Four Great Graces” (including the grace of God and Buddha, the grace of the country, the grace of parents, and the grace of masters). Currently, there are about 15,000 followers living in 8 provinces of the South Vietnam. See more, Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs) Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs), 2010, [https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/Gioi\\_thieu\\_khai\\_quat\\_ve\\_dao\\_Buu\\_son\\_ky\\_huong-postOrxqcK0R8y.html](https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/Gioi_thieu_khai_quat_ve_dao_Buu_son_ky_huong-postOrxqcK0R8y.html)

"Engaged Buddhism" has become a general term for the many Buddhist organizations/movements opposing war, social injustice, and environmental protection that emerged in Asia in the early 20th century and subsequently spread to Europe and the United States. Besides Thích Nhất Hạnh, some of the leading monks of notable "Engaged Buddhism" organizations/movements include Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956), who fought against caste discrimination in India; Tenzin Gyatso, also known as the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (1940-), who fights for peace, freedom and human rights in Tibet; Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), who worked to promote Buddhist practice among the Sri Lankan people, eliminate class and racial, ethnic and religious discrimination, and focus on education and social charity activities, etc.

In fact, Thích Nhất Hạnh himself and many leaders of "Engaged Buddhism" are strongly inspired by the concept "Human Life Buddhism" (人生佛教) or "Humanistic Buddhism" (人間佛教, or Worldly Buddhism/ Buddhism for the Human World) which was first pioneered in China by Venerable Master Taixu (1889-1947) in the 1920s, and later influenced masters such as Venerable Master Hsing Yun (1906-2005), Venerable Master Cheng Yen (1937-), and Venerable Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009) in Taiwan. Master Taixu's views on "Humanistic Buddhism" can be summarized as follows:

"The modern human life may propel the survival of humankind while the survival of humankind may propel the existence of all things in the world. Modern life is the starting point of Buddhism. This is in conformity with the worldly trend. Buddhism helps to develop human life to perfect universal enlightenment and to perfect being. This is the only way leading to the essence of Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism aims at the development of human life instead of eliminating it. Therefore, it tends to be actively involved in human life." (Long 2000)

Many Western scholars, such as Gleig (2021), Laliberté (2024), and others, have compared "Humanistic Buddhism" and "Engaged Buddhism", pointing out that the two, as forms of "Activist Buddhism", have basic similarities, in which, "all are cultivating selflessness, generosity and benevolence by working in challenging real life situations" (Gleig 2021), and strive to achieve the "Truth, Goodness and Beauty" of society.

Many scholars in the East and the West have emphasized Western influence on the formation and development of "Humanistic Buddhism" and "Engaged Buddhism" in Asia in the early 20th century. In the article "Buddhism and modernity", Garfield explains the influence of Christian social welfare activities, the development of Christian nun groups, as well as Feminism, Ecologism, and Modernism (in Western academic and society) on Buddhist reform and modernization movements (Garfield

2015). Other scholars assert that Buddhist activism “reflects the globalization and hybridization of Asian, European, and American values” (Queen 2004).

We stand on the side of the researchers (King, Carman, ...) and believe that both “Humanistic Buddhism” and “Engaged Buddhism” are based on the spirit of “Buddhism into Life” which is the nature of Buddhism and also the traditional value of Buddhism. As Walpola Rahula said: “Buddhism is based on service to others...”. Political and social engagement is the “heritage of the bhikkhu” and the essence of Buddhism” (Rahula 1974). Thích Nhất Hạnh himself also emphasized: “Buddhism is already engaged. If it is not, it is not Buddhism” (Garfield 2015).

In this article, we explore the “Buddhism into Life” spirit of LTTĐNB as one of the endogenous religions born in the south in the early 20th century in South Vietnam. We study the way in which LTTĐNB has inherited and promoted the “Buddhism into life” value of traditional Buddhism in the modern context, in order to meet the needs of modern society.

### **The context for the flourishing of endogenous religions in the South Vietnam and the development of the LTTĐNB**

From a religious perspective, the South is a relatively special cultural region in comparison with the other ones of Vietnam. It is the only birthplace of the main and typical endogenous religions of Vietnam.

For the Vietnamese/Kinh people, the majority ethnic group in the southern culture, Southern Vietnam was a new land that they only began to reclaim from the 17th century. Far away from their homeland, coming to a strange land and facing many difficulties, early Vietnamese immigrants have a strong need for faith and spirituality. “However, Confucianism was not profound to most of the poorly educated immigrants (...), so Buddhism and Daoism mixed with traditional magic became dominant” (Hưng 2001). Unlike in the North Vietnam where there are almost only the Viet/ Kinh ethnic, in the South, they live mixed with other ethnic groups. The multicultural background in the South has resulted in a more diverse Buddhism, including both Northern Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism.

Historically, during the Nguyễn Dynasty (1802-1945), the last dynasty of the Vietnamese feudal regime, Confucianism held a dominant position. Buddhism had difficulty developing. French colonists invaded Vietnam in 1858 and signed the Treaty of Harman (locally known as the Treaty of Quý Mùi) in 1883, formally establishing their rule over the entire territory of Vietnam. Under the treaty, Cochinchina (southern Vietnam) became a colony, northern Vietnam became a protectorate, and central Vietnam was under the rule of the Nguyễn Dynasty. Therefore, Cochinchina was most directly and profoundly influenced by the West through France. France’s policies that created favorable conditions for Catholicism and suppressed Buddhism

also had the most impact in Cochinchina. During this period, Buddhism fell into decline. A group of monks neglected their practice, did not observe precepts, turned to rituals, magic, witchcraft and took advantage of folk superstitions to make profits, which greatly reduced the reputation of Buddhism that has accompanied the Vietnamese people for nearly 2,000 years.

Worldwide, it is worth noting the appearance of many Humanistic Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism movements in Asia, especially in the period 1930-1950. However, up to now, there is no evidence to say that these movements were known and had an influence leading to the birth of endogenous religions in the South Vietnam.

Buddhist revival began in the South Vietnam in 1923 under the promotion of Venerable Khánh Hòa. Buddhist associations and Buddhist magazines were established earliest, most numerous, and most influential in Cochinchina. They include Cochinchinese Buddhist Studies Association (Hội Nam kỳ Nghiên cứu Phật học, established in 1931) with its *Từ Bi Âm Magazine* (established in 1932): Lương Xuyên Buddhist Research Society (Hội Lương Xuyên Phật học, 1934) with its *Duy Tâm Buddhist Magazine* (1935): The Thiên Thai Zen Association (1934) with its *Bát Nhã Âm Magazine*: Kiêm Tế Buddhist Economic Association (1936) with its *Tiến Hóa Magazine*: Buddhist National Salvation Association (1946) with its *Tinh Tấn Magazine*: and Nam Việt Buddhist Association (1950). The Buddhist revival movement reformed the Sangha, improved the doctrines, and expanded the spread of Buddhism. Believers, especially young Buddhists at the time, found new excitement: "They need new understandings, new interpretations, and new methods of practice of Buddhism. At the same time, they demand to participate in social activities" (Nguyễn 1988).

It can be seen that Buddhism has always been the most popular religion in the south. The historical, social and religious movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries created the need for Buddhist reform and modernization. And the formation of endogenous religions based on Buddhism is one of the directions for reform and modernization of Buddhism in the South.

Endogenous religions that emerged in the South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries include: Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương (1849), Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa<sup>5</sup> (1867), Hiếu Nghĩa

<sup>5</sup> Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa was founded by Mr. Ngô Lợi (1831-1890) in 1867 in An Giang province. The basic doctrine of TÀHN is to practice Buddhism and repay the Four Graces (including of graces of ancestors, parents, country, compatriots, similar to Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương). Currently, THAN has about 78,000 followers living in several provinces of the Southwest Vietnam. See, Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs) 2010, [https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/Doi\\_net\\_ve\\_dao\\_Tu\\_an\\_hieu\\_nghia-post5gBa5e3aW4.html](https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/Doi_net_ve_dao_Tu_an_hieu_nghia-post5gBa5e3aW4.html)

Tà Lơn Buddhism<sup>6</sup> (1915), Minh Lý đạo Tam tông miếu<sup>7</sup> (1924), Caodaism (1926), Vietnam Tịnh độ Cư sĩ Buddhist Association<sup>8</sup> (1934), Hòa Hảo Buddhism<sup>9</sup> (1939), Khất sĩ Buddhism<sup>10</sup> (1944), and LTTĐNB (1957). Except for Minh Lý đạo (which absorbed the thoughts of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) and Caodaism (which combined the elements of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Christianity, etc.), the rest of the endogenous religions are mainly Buddhist. LTTĐNB is the latest of Vietnam's endogenous religions based on Buddhism.

## The formation and development of the LTTĐNB

The founder of LTTĐNB was Venerable Master Thiện Phước (1924 - 1986), whose real name was Lê Minh Ý (Lê Văn Mười), from Long An Province. He had the desire to become a monk since he was a child. He lived an ascetic life, often helped the poor, and built bridges and roads to facilitate people's travel... In 1945, putting aside his desire to become a monk, he joined the resistance against the French colonialists. In 1954, being hunted by the French, he took refuge in Bửu Quang Temple (An Giang Province) and became a disciple of Master Bửu Đức (1880-1974). Master Bửu Đức was originally a lay Buddhist of the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa sect. He practiced the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương's teachings of "studying Buddhism and cultivating oneself", then he devoted himself to studying the Tịnh Độ/ Pure Land sect and taught Pure Land

<sup>6</sup> Phật giáo Hiếu Nghĩa Tà Lơn was founded by Mr. Nguyễn Ngọc An in 1915 in Kiên Giang. The main ideology of PGHNTL is "Learning Buddhism, cultivating oneself, and repaying the four graces". Currently, PGHNTL has about 6,500 followers living in 4 provinces and cities in the Southwest. See, BTGCP 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Minh Lý đạo Tam Tông Miếu was founded by 6 dignitaries in 1924. MLĐTTM is based on the ideology of the Three Teachings, aiming for a peaceful and happy society. Currently, MLĐTTM has more than 400 students operating in Long An, Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu and Hồ Chí Minh City. See, Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs) 2010a, [https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/Gioi\\_thieu\\_khai\\_quat\\_ve\\_Phạt\\_giao\\_Hiếu\\_Nghĩa\\_Tà\\_Lơn-post96RYko7q1p.html](https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/Gioi_thieu_khai_quat_ve_Phạt_giao_Hiếu_Nghĩa_Tà_Lơn-post96RYko7q1p.html)

<sup>8</sup> Tịnh độ Cư sĩ Phật hội Việt Nam was founded in 1934 in Đồng Tháp province by Mr. Nguyễn Văn Bông (Đức Tông sư Minh Trí). TĐCSPHVN takes Buddhist teachings as its foundation, "studying - doing good - benefiting the country - benefiting the people". TĐCSPHVN has about 5,000 dignitaries and 650,000 followers in 23 provinces and cities from Khanh Hoa to Ca Mau. See, Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs) 2021a. <https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/gioi-thieu-khai-quat-ve-giao-hoi-tinh-do-cu-sy-phat-hoi-viet-nam-postZQR81lxadA.html>

<sup>9</sup> Phật giáo Hòa Hảo (Hòa Hảo Buddhism) was founded by Mr. Huỳnh Phú Sổ (1920-1947) in An Giang in 1939. The teachings of PGHH are Learning Buddhism - Cultivating oneself, and repaying the Four Graces. Currently, PGHH has about 1.5 million followers living in 22 provinces and cities, mainly concentrated in the Southwest. See, Ban Tôn giáo Chính phủ (Vietnam Government Committee for Religious Affairs) 2021. <https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan/khai-quat-lich-su-hinh-thanh-va-phat-trien-cua-giao-hoi-phat-giao-hoa-hao-postvongv4mqKL.html>

<sup>10</sup> Đạo Phật Khất sĩ (Mendicant Buddhism) was founded in 1947 in Mỹ Tho by Mr. Minh Đăng Quang (1923- ?/ 1954). The teachings and practices of ĐPKS are a synthesis of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. See Nguyễn 2021.

practice to his disciples. In 1956, following master Bửu Đứtc's instructions, the disciple Lê Minh Ý went to the Southeast region to study with Venerable Hồng Ân Trí Châu, of the 41st generation of the Lâm Tế (*Línjì-zōng/ Lin-chi tsung 臨濟宗*) lineage at Long Sơn temple (Bình Dương Province). He was given the Dharma name Thiện Phước. He then went to practice at Linh Sơn temple of Mt. Dinh area in Châu Thành District, Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu Province. He and his disciples opened new land here, built and repaired pagodas, founded LTTĐNB, and became the leader of the sect in 1957. The name "LTTĐNB" - Liên tông Tịnh độ Non Bồng (Lotus Pure Land Buddhism at Penglai Mountain) - indicates the nature of the sect that follows the Tịnh độ tông/ Pure Land Buddhism and aims towards Bồng Lai/ Penglai in the West.

After Venerable Master Thiện Phước passed away in 1986, the next patriarch to lead LTTĐNB was Chief Nun Thích Nữ Huệ Giác (1937-2021). Her real name is Nguyễn Thị Cưng, originally from Bình Dương province. When she was studying at Gia Long Middle School in Hồ Chí Minh City (now Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai High School), she had excellent academic performance and often did good deeds and helped others. She studied under Master Hồng Ân Trí Châu, and later returned to Linh Sơn Temple to study under Venerable Master Thiện Phước. From 2021, Venerable Thích Giác-Quang (1947-2022) served as the Chairman of the Management Committee of LTTĐNB until his death. From 2022 to date, Venerable Thích Thiện Thảo (born in 1953) serves as the Chairman of the Management Committee.

From 1957 to 1986, LTTĐNB had 85 temples, about 1,000 monks and nuns, and more than 1 million believers. Now, the sect has a total of 187 temples in almost all provinces in the Southeast region (Hồ Chí Minh City, Đồng Nai, Bình Dương, Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu, and Bình Phước), the Southwest region (Cần Thơ, Long An, Bến Tre, Tiền Giang, Vĩnh Long, An Giang, Kiên Giang), the Central Highlands region (Lâm Đồng province), South Central region (Ninh Thuận, Bình Thuận), North Central region (Hà Tĩnh), and the Red River Delta region in Northern Vietnam (Sơn Tây, Phú Thọ). Of Vietnam's eight cultural regions, six have temples of LTTĐNB. As of July 2024, there are more than 1,402 monks and nuns in the sect. There are more than 5 million believers in Vietnam. Few of Vietnam's native religions have such a vast geographical reach and such a diverse followers like LTTĐNB. Over the past 67 years since its establishment, LTTĐNB has remained stable, united and continuously developing. One of the important factors that determines the vitality and influence of the LTTĐNB sect is the simple and pragmatic spirit of "Buddhism into Life" embodied in all aspects of the sect's thoughts, organization and activities.

### Aspects of "Buddhism into life" in the LTTĐNB

In the strictest sense, the LTTĐNB has no independent canon but is simply a collection of books on the teachings of the masters, primarily Venerable Bửu Đứtc

(often referred to as “Sư Ông”/ “the Grandfather Monk”), Venerable Thiện Phước (often referred to as “Mẫu Trầu”/ “the Mother Chewing Betel”), Chief Nun Huệ Giác (often referred to as “Ông Già” or “Già”/ “the Old Man”) and Venerable Thích Giác Quang. All books are written in the national language, a large part is in rhyming poetry, easy to understand, easy to memorize. In the teachings of the masters, there is no mention of the Engaged Buddhism and Humanistic Buddhism movements abroad. They often have presented their thoughts as a way of applying and updating Buddha' Dharma in modern times.

Venerable Bửu Đức, who laid the foundation for the LTTĐNB, affirmed a simple and practical “vision of the Dharma” from the outset: “People used to think that Buddhism was very far and that the Buddha was mystical, metaphysical, and mysterious. We need to use various methods to make Buddhism accessible to everyone” (cited from Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 69).

While temples and monks of many Buddhist sects tend to focus on death, funerals and the afterlife, the LTTĐNB is more concerned with life on Earth. There are absolutely no specific provisions regarding funeral rituals (which are often numerous and complicated) in LTTĐNB scriptures or commentaries. The rebirth mantra of LTTĐNB emphasizes the practice life, not the afterlife: “Cultivating to accumulate merit and pray to be reborn in the Pure Land. If I abandon my original vow, forgetting to think about the Western Paradise, I will be sent to hell” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 378). The same is true for the sutra praying for peace, which emphasizes the happiness and joy of Pure Land practice life rather than relying on the good or bad fortune of the zodiac: “The Heaven and Earth Star Gods sit together, The Western Penglai Island is forever immortal and indestructible” (Ibidem, 417). Before he passed away, Master Bửu Đức advised his disciples: “Cremate my body, do not regret this barren body, but strive to practice my teachings correctly. You must go to the Eastern region and learn the Dharma from Mẫu Trầu (Betel Mother) in order to complete your Dharma practice” (cited from Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 100). This wish is very close to the wish of Master Sheng Yen (1930-2009), the founder of Fa Gu Shan (Dharma Drum Mountain), a sect of Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan who said: “When I pass away, [you] do not keep any relics, do not hold a funeral: instead, just chant Amitabha, form a connection in the Pure Land: there should be only four large Chinese characters hung in the temple: “熄滅為樂 (Nirvana is Bliss)” to encourage the spirit of Buddhists” (Thích, Chí-Viên, 2009).

While many Buddhist temples in Vietnam have complicated rituals, fortune telling, divination, dream prediction, feng shui, burning of paper money, praying to star gods to ward off bad luck, since 1957 LTTĐNB regulations regard these activities as superstition, heretical, and against the Dharma, which true monks are not allowed to do, and true Buddhists are not allowed to watch or practice (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 81-100: Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 316-317): “Buddha cares about the world, and the world's knowledge and wisdom can change people's thoughts and lives. People can change their lives, from bad to good, from

dirty to pure. Fortune tellers cannot change our youthful lives. Only by practicing the Eightfold Path can we perfect our lives" (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 316-317).

Regarding life in this world, the teachings of most endogenous religions based on Buddhism in South Vietnam in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hòa Hảo Buddhism, Caodaism, all preached about tragedies of the Dharma-ending Age and the end of the world, emphasizing the urgency of practicing to be able to reach salvation in the "Lotus Meeting 蓮花會". Meanwhile, LTTĐNB masters' teachings focused on the Western Pure Land with happiness and bliss which is like one's parental home, like one's homeland, and on calling misguided children to soon know the way back. When the sect was first introduced in 1959, its founder, Venerable Master Thiện Phước, wrote a stanza, preaching about "Ultimate Nirvana is home", and admonishing that avoiding evil and doing good will help you see Buddha and become Buddha. (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 105). The "Long Vân hội Phổ đà/ the Putuo Longwen Meeting" by Chief Nun Huệ Giác is a passionate poem of exhortation: "One day you will ride on the boat together: you meet your parents without shedding tears. You cross the river of pain and confusion: you will return to the Bodhi tree and enjoy the good deed of meeting immortals and Buddhas." Also, "I [the master] wish you all return to the homeland: I will accompany you throughout the journey. You should try to return to the Bodhi tree, as early as the Longhua Meeting opens" (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 334-344).

Buddhism is often considered a pessimistic religion. However, starting from the truth of suffering, the purpose of the Four Noble Truths is to free all beings from suffering: therefore, the essence of Buddhism is to seek happiness. The teachings of LTTĐNB emphasize that correct practice is the path to attaining the Pure Land in this world. In her article "The True Buddhist (Chơn Phật tử)", Chief Nun Thích Nữ Huệ Giác exhorted Buddhists to practice diligently, cultivate altruism and compassion, live a simple life, be content with what they have, be as solid as a rock, study diligently, increase wisdom, endure suffering, and benefit all living beings: "In this way, although you are in the secular world, your heart is in the Pure Land: you enter the world of liberation and live with Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and good people. It is correct to rely on Buddha in your heart while you are alive and to return to Buddha after you die" (Thích, Nữ-Huệ-Giác (Chief Nun) 2021b, 103; Vietnam Buddhism Association LTTĐNB and Quan Âm Temple. 2021b, 103).

The Pure Land is not imagined as a realm entirely separate from the world of human suffering in this life. Here we can see that LTTĐNB masters' views are similar to Humanistic Buddhist views of Master Taixu (China): "The building of pure lands is not accomplished by Nature: neither are these lands created by gods. Pure lands have come into being from minds of goodness which have arisen in human and other sentient beings" (King 2019), and or in the words of Master Sheng Yen from Taiwan:

“By ‘establishing a clear and cool pure land in a burning house,’ we can insure that we are not burned by the ‘fire.’ The house that is on ‘fire’ is the three realms of desire, form and formlessness, which include the human world we live in. Fire is a metaphor for such afflictions as sorrow, anxiety, anger, fear, suspicion, jealousy, obsession, and clinging. Shakyamuni hoped that, after the Dharma had been spread throughout the three realms, people would be able to avoid worry, fear, arrogance, dejection, disappointment, and depression, and manifest a clear and cool pure land within their mind, in all circumstances, whether favorable or unfavorable” (Master Sheng Yen, 2013)

Unlike many Buddhist sects that emphasize “merit”, the goal of the LTTĐNB is the Pure Land in this life and does not seek blessings in the next life. The Venerable Thích Giác Quang stated: “Don’t expect to gain blessings when studying Buddhism, because blessings are like a car without brakes, which will put all living beings into a dream. There is no difference between peace and suffering, and often “blessings and misfortunes go hand in hand.” That blessing is not peace, but chaos” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 467).

In LTTĐNB’s view, the way for Buddhism enters life, enters everyone’s heart, and realizes the Pure Land on Earth is mainly through practice of chanting the Buddha’s name. The Venerable Thiện Phước said: “Reciting the Buddha’s name can free you from all present and future troubles, and can help you see the Buddha and become a Buddha.” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 126). The LTTĐNB is the only Buddhist sect in Vietnam holding the retreat of “Bá nhật trì danh, cầu sanh Tịnh Độ” (Chanting the name of Buddha Amida continuously for 100 days, seeking life in the Pure Land)” since 1966 (in Nhất Nguyên Bửu Temple, Vĩnh Phú Commune, Thuận An District, Bình Dương Province), and it continues to this day. The chanting ceremony lasts for 100 days from the eighth day of the eighth lunar month to the seventeenth day of the eleventh lunar month, the day of Amitabha Buddha’s enlightenment. The practice is based on the Buddha’s teachings toward bodhisattvas (in the Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra (kinh Bát Chu Tam Muội) that chanting the Buddha’s name has the power to guide practitioners to the state of “one-minded, undisturbed” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 159; Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 206).

Many people tend to think that chanting Buddha’s name is a simple, easy practice suitable for the general public. The masters of LTTĐNB explained very carefully that, this method has extremely profound meaning. Chief Nun Thích Nữ Huệ Giác said: “Reciting Buddha’s name is not remembering the Buddha outside, the Buddha in the far away Western Paradise, but remembering the Buddha right in your heart

that you have long forgotten" (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 40).

LTTĐNB scripture mentions many rich Buddha recitation rituals, depending on the spiritual level and the predestined circumstances of each person. Among them, keeping precepts is Buddha recitation: doing good deeds is Buddha recitation: purifying the body and mind is Buddha recitation: doing social merit is Buddha recitation: maintaining a pure nature is Buddha recitation... (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 179-193). Chanting Buddha's name in this way is nothing more than cultivating the mind and doing good deeds in order to obtain the Pure Land in everyone's heart and mind as well as to obtain the Pure Land in this life.

*Developing the autonomous economy of Buddhist temples, promoting charity and social welfare activities*

The masters of the LTTĐNB have a thorough understanding of the Buddhist concept of "Unity of Knowledge and Action", "to Know is for to Act". Venerable Thiện Phước taught: "To practice, one must learn, learn to practice. To practice without learning is to practice blindly and ignorantly. To study without practicing, to talk without doing is useless like a bag for carrying book." (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 71). The ideal of "a pure land for this life" is realized through LTTĐNB's activities, from temple economy to charity and social service activities.

While the image of donation boxes in Buddhist temples is well known to Buddhists across Vietnam, there are certainly no donation boxes in LTTĐNB's temples. The sect's temple ossuary does not charge any fees to believers. Recently, while the Vietnamese media exposed a prominent problem: many large temples tried every means to get rich, in the minds of believers, the LTTĐNB sect is increasingly regarded as a respected, honest and trustworthy sect.

The temples of the LTTĐNB are all economic self-sufficient. Venerable Thiện Phước taught: "Do not let your body and mind be idle, otherwise your mouth and mind will easily give rise to bad things, 'idleness is the root of evil'". Monks and nuns are encouraged to do farming as a Buddhist activity, following the spirit of "one day without work, one day without food" of Zen Master Bai Shu Huaihai of the Tang Dynasty (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 240).

From the time of the construction of Linh Sơn temple in Mt. Dinh (Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu Province) (1957-1960), hundreds of monks and nuns worked every day in the fields, growing cassava, potatoes and vegetables, and went into the forest to cut grass to build a hermitage. From 1960 to 1965, the field of Linh Sơn temple covered an area of 1 thousand "mẫu" (1 mẫu = 10 thousands square meters) from the foot of the mountain to Rạch Ván Bridge. In the 70s and 80s, the sect continued to expand and reclaim land in Lâm Đồng, Bình Dương, Đồng Nai, Sài Gòn, Long An provinces (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 121-122; Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable)

2021b, 51). The sect established nine agricultural meditation committees in large temples: and established the sect's farmers' branch, with the nun Thích Nữ Kim Sơn as the branch president (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021a, 18). Through land reclamation, many wastelands that were once overgrown with weeds and infested with snakes, centipedes and mosquitoes have been transformed into green fields and gardens, crowded residents : together they "established a solemn and noble Pure Land on earth." (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 80-81).

Venerable Master Thiện Phước often warned monks: "Don't just follow the crowd and become a wealthy monk." (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 106). Chief Nun Huệ Giác advised everyone: "Simplify your diet, daily life, and sleep so that you have more time to reflect on the truth, chant the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha" (Thích, Nữ-Huệ-Giác (Chief Nun) 2021, 106). The Venerable Thích Giác Quang emphasized: "Buddhists must also know how to get rich legally and honestly, how to enrich themselves and society, create a peaceful and happy world for all beings, and contribute to the Western Paradise that everyone is about to reach" (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 224).

Along with the effort for economic autonomy, temples of LTTĐNB have always actively done charity and social service activities, implementing the Buddha's teachings: "Love can bring happiness to all beings, and compassion can save all beings from suffering" (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 134). Venerable Master Thiện Phước used to advise his disciples: "To become a monk is to perform necessary Buddhist duties to save all living beings from suffering." (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 71).

Nowadays in Vietnam today, there are rather many Buddhist temples participating in charity and social service activities. However, there are few other sects like LTTĐNB that has dedicatedly, consistently, persistently built many religious organizations, associations and institutions specializing in charity and social service and has made outstanding contributions throughout a long journey of nearly 70 years.

In 1960, less than three years after Venerable Master Thiện Phước founded LTTĐNB, he founded the Southeast Buddhist Charity Association (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 243). Many orphanages were established successively at Phước Lộc Thọ temple (Đồng Nai Province) in 1960, at Huệ Trì temple (Bình Dương Province) in 1965 and at Phước Thiện An temple (Ho Chi Minh City), Từ Ái temple (Đồng Nai Province) in 1968, and at Phổ Hiền temple (Đồng Nai Province) in 1970. In 1978, these orphanages ceased operations in accordance with national policy. In 2001, Long Phước Điền temple (Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu province) became a place for children and families infected by Agent Orange. In 2002, monk Thích Minh Dũng established the White Lotus Social Center at Bửu Sơn Vihara (Đồng Nai Province), for caring children and the elderly. In 2016, nun Thích nữ Diệu Thắng established a social protection center in Di Linh district (Lâm Đồng province) to raise disadvantaged children. (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 118-119; 234-244).

The nursing homes were established at Quan Âm Temple (Biên Hòa, Đồng Nai Province) and Huỳnh Mai Temple (Phú Mỹ Town, Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu Province) in 1979, which regularly care for about 300 elderly people (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 32). In 1988, the Quan Âm Temple Red Cross Society was established, opening a physical examination and treatment room to provide primary health care services to the public.

LTTĐNB is the only sect that cares for the blind with two facilities to nurture them at Quan Âm Temple (Đồng Nai Province) and Thiên Quang Nunnery (Bình Dương Province) (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 120). In addition, the sect donates every year for natural disaster and epidemic relief (Covid), contributes to hunger eradication and poverty reduction, and builds charity houses and gratitude houses in many places in northern, central and southern Vietnam, and also helps people and children in need in Cuba, Japan, Thailand, India, Laos, and Cambodia... (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 118-119). LTTĐNB's total charitable budget in 2019 exceeded 90 billion VND, an 18-fold increase from 2009 (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 51-54). In particular, LTTĐNB has always attached great importance to the parallel development of charity and propagating the Dharma. As Chief Nun Huệ Giác said:

"It is not enough to simply provide material help: one should first give brief Buddhist teachings to ease the pain of the soul and the hardships of life, and then give small gifts. This brought confidence to those in difficult circumstances and confirmed the Buddha nature in everyone so that they could practice together on their journey to "Enlightened Land". Food helped them overcome hunger and pain to a certain extent, but the light of Dharma shone in their hearts and would help them more in the days to come. This is the true saving suffering and giving happiness" (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 22-323)

In its charitable work to help the blind, LTTĐNB care about giving them Braille scriptures, "bringing priceless spiritual value to those who cannot see the light of life." (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 323-324).

LTTĐNB's efforts in charitable activities and social services are reminiscent of Engaged and Humanistic Buddhist organizations/movements in East and Southeast Asia since the early twentieth century. In 1958, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratna founded and chaired the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka, which aimed to help farmers in the Kanatorua region achieve economic and social development. In 1966, Master Cheng Yen founded the Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan, which now has more than four million members. It leads global emergency relief efforts and funds free medical care, education, and environmental protection projects at home and abroad.

*Making efforts to plant forests and protect the ecological environment*

The LTTĐNB is also the most outstanding sect in Vietnam in terms of protecting the ecological environment. In the economic development of the temples, the sect was very active in opening land, planting trees and greening bare hills. From 1976, Venerable Thiện Phước had paid special attention to forestry activities, planting fruit trees, perennial trees, eucalyptus, white jade trees, etc., so that the mountainous area destroyed by the war could be rebuilt. In 1984, when Đồng Nai Province implemented the resolution on allocating land and forests, Chief Nun Huệ Giác led her disciples to take the lead in allocating land, receiving afforestation seedlings, implementing fire prevention, and forest protection. Continuing to expand operations in Vũng Tàu, Bình Dương, Bình Phước, Lâm Đồng, Bình Thuận provinces, up to now LTTĐNB has been responsible for cultivating over 1,000 hectares of forest. On May 19, 1988, with the consent and support of the local government in Đồng Nai province, Chief Nun Huệ Giác launched the "Planting Trees to commemorate President Hồ Chí Minh" movement, creating a good tradition for religion and society (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 151).

Not only industrial trees and fruit trees, many medicinal plants are also widely grown. On that basis, traditional medicine clinics were opened at Quan Âm temple (Đồng Nai) and Sắc Tứ Trường Bình temple (Bình Thuận). The sect also supported the use of medicinal plants in the Department of Traditional Medicine at the Phước Kiến Hospital (now Nguyễn Trãi Hospital, Hồ Chí Minh City).

A forest in Long Phước, planting trees 4m apart and rows 6m apart, intercropped with perennial trees and vegetables, "taking short-term to support long-term", has welcomed many delegations of scholars and students from Laos, Japan, and Sweden to study and exchange experiences. Venerable Thiện Phước once said that afforestation is not only for economic benefits, but also can improve the environment, balance the ecology, and create a harmonious relationship between humans and the environment. (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 54). The words of Chief Nun Huệ Giác are still resonate: "Forests are our country's precious wealth, our country's rich and powerful resources, and they provide shade and beautify Buddhist temple, the cultural and historical landscape of Vietnam. Bửu Hòa – Phước Thái nuns volunteer to plant trees, protect forests, and love them as much as they love every breath they take in their homeland" (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 156).

Forests not only make people rich, healthy, long-lived and cheerful, but also nourish people's soul and temperament. The "Non Bồng" (Penglai Mountain) in the sect's name means the Western Paradise, and is also related to the mountainous area (Mt. Dinh) where the sect was founded. The monks of this sect call themselves "người tu núi", "sơn tăng" (mountain monks), and the mountain they worship is called "Bàn Cổ Sơn" (Pangu Mountain) or "Phật địa Nam bang" (Southern Land of Buddha), the place where early masters such as Venerable Bửu Đức – who called himself "ông già

thất nghiệp” (the jobless old man) - lived, cultivated, and spread Buddhism (Venerable Thích Giác Quang 2021b, 150: 99).

The image of the mountain where the sect was founded became the symbol of “Western Paradise, Kind Mountain - My Mother”. In her insightful view, Venerable Huệ Giác saw the entire universe practicing together with Buddhists: the blessings of the Paradise also became shared by mankind and the universe: “The virtuous mountain choose virtuous people to practice together” (Happy Linh sơn – Thích, Nữ-Huệ-Giác (Chief Nun) 2021, 85).

Many poems by Thích Nữ Huệ Giác express her deep feelings about the harmonious coexistence of humans and all things in the universe. Out of compassion for all living beings and to abide by “not killing” precept, one of the Buddha’s pañca sila, the masters of LTTĐNB have always advised Buddhists to eat vegetarian food: “Being a vegetarian actually means being clean and pure. Purification of the body, purification of the mind, purification of character and love is the true way of vegetarianism. Vegetarianism helps people reduce hatred and contributes to protecting the environment. As for eating meat, it is actually “eating life”, that is, using the life of animals to feed oneself” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 320-325).

It is no coincidence that the proportion of vegetarian Buddhists at Quan Âm temple (Biên Hòa, Đồng Nai Province) is as high as 70%, which is significantly higher than many other sects (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 316). Many LTTĐNB temples raise packs of 20-30 dogs, either dogs that come by themselves or are brought by followers. Chief Nun Huệ Giác thoughtfully advised disciples to cultivate compassion and empathy for all living beings: “Raising a dog is also serving sentient beings, dogs are low-level sentient beings.” (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 299).

Similar to the LTTĐNB, we can mention the ecological movement led by Phrakhrū Pitak Nanthakhun in the 1980s and 1990s. Thai monks and nuns wrapped each tree trunk with saffron robes during a “tree ordination” ceremony, delivering the message “this tree is sacred and should be revered and protected just as we protect the life of a monk” to protect trees from felling and forest burning. For monks and nuns of LTTĐNB as well as Thailand’s “eco-monks,” the Buddha’s teachings are both ancient and new: “As the bee derives honey from the flower without harming its colour or fragrance, so should the wise interact with their surroundings” (The Dhamampada 1985, 31).

Following the teachings of traditional Buddhism, LTTĐNB not only promotes afforestation activities, animal rights protection, etc., but also cultivates a deep awareness of the close interconnectedness between humans and all living beings in the universe. In certain ways and to certain extents, such a spiritual transformation of LTTĐNB’s Buddhists has, so to speak, reached a dimension of “Deep Ecology”.

*Promoting women's role*

Gender equality in Buddhism is a complex and controversial issue, largely due to the Buddha's reluctant admission of women into the monastic community. Although the Buddha affirmed to Ananda that women had the same potential as men to attain enlightenment and perfection, he also predicted that women joining the Sangha would shorten the life of Buddhism. In this context, Eight Garudhammas, or Eight Heavy Rules, were formulated to “build a dyke to a great reservoir so that the water may not overflow”. For example, these eight regulations include: 1. A nun who has been ordained even for a hundred years must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms, do proper homage to a monk ordained but that day. [...], 7. A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun; 8. From today, admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden (Book of the Discipline V, 354–355, cited from Hirakawa 1999).

Eight Garudhammas puts nuns in a much lower position than monks, and the respect that nuns have for monks is one-way. Thus, promoting gender equality became one of the trends in Buddhist reform and modernization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, most notably in the development of the Buddhist nun community in Taiwan. Currently, there are almost five times as many nuns as monks (Yang 2002). Venerable Master Zheng Yen (證嚴) of the Tzu Chi Foundation (Ciji or Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation 慈濟基金會) is a woman. In famous male-led monasteries such as Fo Guang Shan (佛光山) and Fa Gu Shan (法鼓山), the role of nuns is also very important. The executive directors of the five branches of Fo Guang Shan are all women.

In 2001, at the Humanistic Buddhism (人間佛教) Science Conference held in Taipei, Master Shih Chao-hwei (釋昭慧) and a group of Buddhist nuns and lay women tore up the printed version of the Eight Garudhammas Sutra (Chen 2011). This dramatic move was not spontaneous, but a continuation of Master Shih Chao-hwei's nearly decade-long struggle against male chauvinism, which distorts the teachings of Buddha who always preach about “necessarily equality”. In 2021, Master Shih Chao-hwei was awarded the Niwano Peace Prize, a prestigious world-renowned honor in recognition of her contributions to gender equality and animal rights.

In Vietnam, the LTTĐNB is the most typical Buddhist sect that values the role of women. Venerable Thiện Phước once taught: “There is no distinction between bhikkhus and bhikkhuni: both monks and nuns can become the Master, and nuns can do some of the work of monks” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 103). He designated the Nun Thích nữ Huệ Giác as the “eldest son” of the sect, and the master's successor to lead LTTĐNB. For 45 of the 67 years since its founding, the

LTTĐNB has been led by Chief Nun Thích Nữ Huệ Giác. This is the only religious sect in Vietnam where a woman is the Head of the sect. Chief Nun Thích Nữ Huệ Giác continues her Master's mission, emphasizing that:

“The path to Buddhahood is non-discriminatory. In the Buddhist worldview, all living beings have Buddha nature. Everyone has the potential and ability to become a Buddha, no matter who they are, what social class they belong to, whether they are male or female” (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 40).

Chief Nun Huệ Giác always emphasizes that the difficulties faced by women in practice compared to men are not obstacles that make women discouraged and retreat, but make them determined to work harder: “It is very difficult for women to practice, so I hope you will work hard, accumulate virtue and increase blessings, always remember to chant the Buddha’s name in your heart, so that there is no room for distracting thoughts to interfere.” (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021b, 205).

Currently, LTTĐNB has a total of 1,402 monks and nuns, including 815 nuns and 587 monks. Compared to the Vietnam Buddhism Association and other indigenous religions in Vietnam that are based on Buddhism, there is no other religion that has more nuns than monks, even 1.4 times the number of monks like LTTĐNB. Of the 187 temples in the LTTĐNB system, 73 are presided over by nuns. The sect's charitable activities and social services in orphanages, nursing homes, herbal medicine clinics... are all under the guidance of Chief Nun Huệ Giác and the important role of many abbesses, with the participation of many nuns and female Buddhists and followers. Nuns can promote compassion in the hearts of the masses, combine giving with preaching, and extend compassion to all living beings, thereby enhancing emotional strength. On the other hand, even in the land reclamation and forest planting activities that require men's physical strength, Chief Nun Huệ Giác still set an example and actively encouraged nuns, female believers and strong-willed Buddhists.

Not only prominent for its feminist activities, women's empowerment, LTTĐNB also expresses in a simple yet subtle way the sacred feminine in Buddhism. The LTTĐNB's founder, Venerable Thiện Phước, is a man but is affectionately known as Mẫu Trầu Bông Lai (the Mother chewing betel at Penglai Mountain), “Mẫu Trầu” (the mother chewing betel), or “Thầy Mẹ” (Mother Master). Meanwhile, Chief Nun Thích Nữ Huệ Giác is a woman but is referred to as “Ông Sáu”/“Ông Lục” (Mr. Six) or “Ông Già”/“Già” (the Old Man).

According to the sect's scriptures, the titles indicate the Venerable Master Thiện Phước as a loving mother who chews betel nuts, a loving mother who raises her children, a master who “invites good children and grandchildren to practice.” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 65). In real life, Venerable Master Thiện Phước

chewed betel nut. On the anniversary of his death, Buddhists would bring green betel leaves picked from the garden to the temple. Meanwhile, the title “the old man” of the Chief Nun Thích Nữ Huệ Giác represents the image of a simple old farmer and a big tree, emphasizing her strong will, her “lion gait” and her “great power to attract and influence the masses.” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 77-115).

In their teachings and poems, Venerable Thiện Phước and Chief Nun Huệ Giác sincerely expressed the compassion of a mother, calling on the lost children to return home as soon as possible and return to their mother's arms, to return to Penglai Mother Mountain, where “Mother Amitabha” and “Mother Buddha” are there waiting and protecting everyone. Maternal love is selfless love. Even if a child makes mistakes, is weak, or has losses, she will tolerate and support him. As the heartfelt letter that Venerable Thiện Phước, in words of “*Điều Trì Địa Mẫu*” (Mother of All Beings), wrote: “I (Mom) love my children, whether you are bad or good, Whether you are intelligent or stupid, I never forget you: Even if there are thousands of sins, as long as you know how to do good As long as you know how to avoid bad doings: I will never insist on humiliating and criticizing you Encouraging children to work hard to cultivate virtue, I do not care about the cold or warmth” (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021a, 165).

The sacred feminine is not defined by gender. In essence, the Sacred Feminine is the gateway to enlightenment and full realization. It is compassion in every thought, word, and action that saves all beings.

### **Striving for religious harmony and for “good life and good religion”**

In the ideal of a pure land for humanity, harmony is a fundamental value. This stems from the Buddhist worldview that emphasizes the interdependence of all beings. The LTĐNB always values, builds and maintains harmonious relationships.

First, the internal relations within the LTĐNB sect are harmonious. Venerable Thiện Phước taught: “Living in harmony in the Sangha/ Blending together like water and milk/ Practicing the precepts together/ Sharing personal knowledge with each other.” (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 268). During nearly 70 years of its history, the LTĐNB has never experienced any unfortunate conflicts or clashes. The relationship between the dignitaries and the monks, nuns, believers and masters is like that of a big family. All are like children of the same family, disciples of the same master. And they use familiar nicknames to address their masters, such as “*Sư Ông*” (“Grandfather Monk”), “*Thầy Mẹ*” (“Mother Master”), “*Già*” (“Old Man”), etc.

Secondly, harmonious relations between LTĐNB and other religions/religious sects. As mentioned earlier, Venerable Bửu Đức first became a monk in Chot Xim (Bokor Mountain, present-day Cambodia), and later studied under Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa sects: Venerable Thiện Phước and Chief Nun Huệ Giác both learned from the 42nd master of the Linji Zen sect, and then concentrated

on the Pure Land Dharma. Venerable Thiện Phước used to teach: "Whoever practices Buddhism, takes refuge in the Buddha, and receives the precepts of the Buddha is a disciple of the Buddha, regardless of skin color, ethnicity, visible or invisible, human or heavenly realm. Why the path to liberation is divided into sects and schools? The division within the Sangha has created the premise for mutual criticism and denigration, which has led to outsiders' evaluation of Buddhists" (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 82). Moreover, Venerable Thích Giác Quang has always emphasized that the methods of practice are only means to realize the Truth, like a raft to cross the river: "Practitioners should not criticize Zen and praise Pure Land Buddhism, or criticize Pure Land Buddhism and praise Zen. Because praise and criticism, right and wrong are worldly matters. If practitioners still praise and criticize in this way, even the Buddha will become an ordinary person," adding the following "The Buddha has 84,000 methods to spread the Dharma and save the world. The reason why people criticize Zen and Pure Land Buddhism and look down on different sects and religions is because not yet learned all the methods of "Buddha's salvation" (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 466-468).

Practicing only the way of reciting Buddha's name, Venerable Huệ Giác also talked about tranquility and happiness of "mountain Zen", "forest Zen" (walking, contemplating, listening, and blending with the mountains and forests), and "farming Zen" (farming as practicing Zen), so on. The path of Pure Land Buddhism is also intertwined with the values of truth, goodness, and beauty in the Three Teachings: "Tu hành không Phật cũng đặng tiên/ Buộc chặt duyên lành với Thánh hiền (English translation: Even if you don't become a Buddha, you can still practice to achieve immortality and establish a good relationship with saint.)" (Lối về của con/Your way home – Thích, Nữ-Huệ-Giác (Chief Nun), 183).

In terms of relations with other endogenous religions in the South, between 1962 and 1965, many monks from other sects such as Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Tịnh Độ Cư sĩ, Sơn Môn Linh Sơn Tiên Thạch Tự, etc. gathered at Mt. Dinh (Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu) to study with Venerable Master Thiện Phước. They all call themselves "mountain monks". Some monks from these sects also teach Buddhist rituals at Phật học đường Tây Phương Bồng Đảo (Western Penglai Buddhist Academic Hall) of the LTTĐNB.

The LTTĐNB had a particularly close relationship with the Khất sĩ Buddhism. In the early days of their studies, both the later Khất sĩ's founder (Minh Đăng Quang) and the later LTTĐNB's founder (Thiện Phước) met Venerable Bửu Đức. Venerable Bửu Đức instructed them that one should go to the Mekong Delta region and the other should go to the southeast region to study Dharma. Not only that, within the LTTĐNB system, there is a sectarian group that practices Dhūta, namely the "Khất sĩ Tịnh độ Non Bồng" (Pure Land Mendicant at Penglai Mountain), which was officially established in 1960. When Venerable Thiện Phước bestowed the Dharma name on Venerable Thích Giác Quang, he gave Thích Giác Quang the mission of "protecting the community of Mendicant monks in the future." (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 84). The LTTĐNB has both Buddhist temples and Mendicant's

viharas, as well as both "thầy" (Mahayana monks) and "sư" (Theravada monks). Currently, the LTTĐNB sect has 8 viharas and 102 Mendicant monks.

In the shrine of LTTĐNB's masters at Quan Âm Temple (Biên Hòa City, Đồng Nai Province), Venerable Bửu Đức, Venerable Thiện Phước, and Chief Nun Huệ Giác are enshrined in the central altars: the left altar is dedicated to Venerable Thích Giác Quang, while the right altar is dedicated to other masters, including Master Đoàn Minh Huyền (the founder of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương) and Master Minh Đăng Quang (the founder of Khất sĩ Buddhism).

When Venerable Master Thiện Phước assigned Venerable Thích Giác Quang to draft the internal regulations of LTTĐNB, he carefully instructed: "The Penglai Buddhism (LTTĐNB) is not an independent system, but a unity of the ten directions. The Penglai Buddhism has established friendly relations with other sects. You must base on that reality to draft the internal rules" (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 111).

The LTTĐNB and the Khất sĩ Buddhism already joined the Vietnam Buddhism Association, while other endogenous religions still exist independently. Venerable Thích Giác Quang confided:

"More than two thousand years ago, the Buddha converted Mahakasyapa (an ascetic), the three Kasyapa brothers (Zoroastrians), Sariputra, and Maudgalyayana (intellectual/wealthy class), etc. into Buddhists. They were all outsiders, but the Buddha asked them to join the Buddhist monastic community to benefit sentient beings and the Sangha itself. Now that the Buddha is no longer with us: the Vietnam Buddhism Association, as the Buddha, needs to help other religious sects strengthen unity, promote harmony, and build an indivisible Buddhist community..." (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 88).

Here we can recall the many leaders of both Engaged and Humanistic Buddhism who see not only different Buddhist sects but also different religions as different paths to enlightenment and, therefore, they respect other sects and other religions and are willing to work with them. Venerable Sheng Yen (Taiwan) believes that friendship between religions plays an important role in creating peace. After the September 11 attacks in the United States, he stressed that the most "thoroughly effective" means to overcome religious violence is for individuals to extend friendship, understanding and respect to people of different religions, ethnicities and cultures (Sheng Yen 2003).

Thirdly, the harmonious relationship between "Good Life and Good Religion": currently, there are more than 5 million Buddhists in the LTTĐNB. This number is quite large in comparison with other native religions<sup>11</sup>. Venerable Thích Giác Quang taught that "There should be no distinction between monks and lay people

<sup>11</sup> According to statistics from the Religious Affairs Commission of the Civil Affairs Departments of various provinces, there are currently about 15,000 followers of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, about

in meditation, because monks and lay people are just external forms" (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 467). Monks and nuns, Buddhists, believers and lay people, as long as they cultivate their minds, do good deeds and stay away from evil, they are all contributing to the pure land on earth.

Like Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and Hòa Hảo Buddhism, in the LTTĐNB, the masters emphasize the close relationship between "learning Buddhism" and "cultivating oneself". The moral value system of monks, nuns, Buddhists and believers is based on the "Four Great Graces/Tứ Ân", including (1) Parental Grace (encouraging parents to cultivate faith in the Three Jewels, charity, good deeds, and right view to bring happiness in the present and sow blessings for the future), (2) The Grace of Masters (respecting, trusting and following the guidance of sectarian masters), (3) The Grace of the country (loving and serving the motherland), and (4) The Grace of living beings (cherishing the love for fellow countrymen, supporting the elderly and the weak, and helping the poor and the needy...) (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021a, 107-108).

Therefore, Buddhist believers have always been a powerful force in Buddhist activities besides monks and nuns. After three months of summer retreat for monks and nuns, the next is the Bá Nhứt Trì Danh retreat (100 days of continuous recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name) when devout Buddhists from all over the country gather at Nhứt Nguyên Temple in Bình Dương Province, live in the pagoda, and chant sutras with the monks and nuns. All pagodas regularly open cultivation classes where Buddhists practice the Eight Precepts regularly every week/half month/month. The monks and nuns are economic self-sufficient, and there are no offering boxes or collection services in temples (for preserving bones, fortune-telling, praying for rebirth, praying for peace...). This further motivates Buddhists, believers, monks and nuns to work together for the cause of afforestation: and encourages sponsors and kind-hearted people to join hands in Buddhist charity and social service activities.

Regarding intermarriage between Buddhists and people of other religions, Venerable Thích Giác Quang suggested:

"Buddhists can follow "fraternal religions" (i.e. the religion of their spouse), but always follow the precepts they have initially vowed to follow. When you keep the precepts, no matter what the circumstances, you remain a devout Buddhist. After marriage, use love to help your "partner" gradually comprehend the profound meaning of Buddhism and live according to Buddhist teachings" (Thích, Giác-Quang (Venerable) 2021b, 226).

This perspective of tolerance and inclusion (rather than exclusive viewpoint) is truly valuable. In terms of monk training, the LTTĐNB has two schools: one is for monks and nuns to study in temples and Buddhist colleges at home and abroad: Secondly,

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70,000 followers of the Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, and about 1.5 million followers of the Hòa Hảo Buddhism. <https://btgcp.gov.vn/gioi-thieu-cac-to-chuc-ton-giao-da-duoc-cong-nhan.html>,

monks and nuns study in secular universities and academic research institutions. On this basis, the knowledge and skills of monks and nuns continued to improve, and they were able to combine the "inner classics" with the "outer classics" to effectively promote Buddhism and serve society.

The LTTĐNB is always enthusiastic and responsible in the mission of "Buddhism and the nation advancing together". During the War of Resistance Against U.S. Aggression, from 1962 to 1965, the Linh Sơn Temple actively supported food and medicine, provided meals for the Vietnamese People's Liberation Army, and offer the temple space to revolutionary soldiers as a working base. The temple also serves as a stepping stone and special contact channels of Saigon City's the Fifth Special Operations Force. During the War of Resistance Against U.S. Aggression, many Buddhists and monks and nuns participated in communications, first aid and other services. As a result, the temple was often heavily bombed (by the enemy) between 1963 and 1964 and was 100% destroyed in a 1965 enemy attack. The monks had to be evacuated to Biên Hòa and Sài Gòn, until 1966 when a central facility was established at Quan Âm temple in Biên Hòa, Đồng Nai (Vietnam Buddhism Association 2021a, 14-15).

After the war, LTTĐNB monks, nuns and followers worked hard together to rebuild the country. The sect has support local government, participated in and even led some major movements, e.g., "Reclamation and building of a new economy", "Planting forests to cover bare hills", "Planting trees to show gratitude to President Hồ Chí Minh" as well as participated in various social activities, e.g., "Eliminating hunger and reducing poverty", "Thanking the families of disabled soldiers, martyrs and revolutionary heroes", "Fulfilling international obligations and helping brother countries", and so on.

Due to their great contributions to the Dharma and the nation, LTTĐNB masters have received many noble awards from the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front. Venerable Thiện Phước the Medal for Resisting the US Aggression and Saving the Nation (the Second Class). Chief Nun Huệ Giác was awarded the Medal for Resisting the US Aggression and Saving the Nation (the Third Class), the Labor Medal (the Third Class), the Prime Minister's Certificate of Merit, the Prime Minister's Dongshan Bronze Drum Medal, the "People's Great Unity Medal" by the Central Committee of the Vietnam Fatherland Front and the "Humanitarian Medal" by the Vietnam Red Cross, etc.

According to King (2019), in their relations with the State and the government, Engaged Buddhist organizations/movements often have conflicting relationships and confrontational and combative activities. On the other hand, Humanistic Buddhism often cultivates friendly relations. Venerable Hsing Yun (Taiwan) advocates the "link of empathy" (結緣, *jiéyuán*) with the belief that a relationship of mutual respect and trust between Fo Guang Shan and the Taiwanese government is beneficial to both sides, contributing to social harmony and progress.

However, as an exemplary leader of Engaged Buddhism, the Dalai Lama also upholds a harmonious moral outlook and always seeks win-win solutions that meet the needs of all parties. He said: "due to the fundamental interconnectedness which lies at the heart of reality, 'my' interest and 'your' interest are intimately connected. In a deep sense, they converge." (Dalai Lama 1999) Understanding this profound interconnectedness, LTTĐNB monks and nuns always strive for harmony between religions, harmony between Buddhism and Nation, realizing the Pure Land right here on earth.

## Conclusion

Prior to this paper, research works on endogenous religions based on Buddhism in South Vietnam mainly focused on Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương and Hòa Hảo Buddhism, and often introduced their formation and its elements (theology, scriptures, doctrines, rituals, religious organizations, religious facilities...) as well as the influence of that religion in the cultural context of the southern Vietnamese region. In this paper, we delve into the LTTĐNB and focuses on just one of its characteristics: the spirit of "Buddhism into Life". Not only considering the cultural context of Buddhism in South Vietnam in particular and Vietnamese Buddhism in general, we pay attention to situating the LTTĐNB and the endogenous religions of Vietnam in the context of reforming and modernizing Buddhism in Asia.

Compared to the endogenous religions that emerged in the South in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the LTTĐNB sect is the latest. With the vigorous development of the Buddhist revival movement (from the 1930s to the 1950s) and Vietnam's withdrawal from the war against France and its entry into the difficult situation of resisting the United States and saving the nation, the modernization of Vietnamese Buddhism faced new requirements. It has become increasingly urgent that Buddhism cannot ignore the concerns of the country and the people, and cannot be separated from the economic, political and social activities of secular life.

It can be seen that, throughout the process of formation and development of nearly 70 years, LTTĐNB's world view, philosophy of life, and practice direction have been very consistent with the spirit of "Buddhism into Life". This spirit is reflected in the sect's focus on life here and now rather than on death, funerals and the afterlife, and in its emphasis on chanting Buddha's name, cultivating the mind, doing good deeds, and aiming for Pure Land just on earth. This spirit is reflected in the sect's practical activities, including efforts to achieve economic self-sufficiency in the monastery, promoting charitable activities and serving society: actively planting forests, protecting the ecological environment: improving gender equality, enhancing the role of nuns and female Buddhists and believers: sincerely cultivating harmony

between religions, accompanying Buddhism and the Nation, and striving for the prosperity of the people, the country, and social justice, democracy and civilization.

LTTĐNB's spirit of "Buddhism into Life" has many interesting similarities with the Humanistic Buddhism and Engaged Buddhism movements. However, there is no evidence that the LTTĐNB was directly influenced or inspired by these movements. In our opinion, the basic similarities are mainly due to the fact that LTTĐNB as well as Humanistic and Engaged Buddhist movements are firmly grounded in the Dharma and values of traditional Buddhism, updating and applying those values appropriately to the modern contexts to meet modern requirements.

In comparison with endogenous religions based on Buddhism in Vietnam, the LTTĐNB, on the one hand, shares common characteristics of Buddhist culture in the South, such as high hybridity: simplicity and popularity: democracy: practicality: openness and dynamism, and worldly spirit (Phan 2013). Regarding the spirit of "Buddhism into Life", the important similarities between LTTĐNB and Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương, Tứ Ân Hiếu Nghĩa, Hòa Hảo Buddhism are that they all closely associate "learning Buddhism" with "cultivating oneself", based on Buddhist ethics of the Four Great Graces. The uniqueness of the LTTĐNB lies in its goal of a Pure Land just in this life (rather than escaping the tragedy of the End of the World), its emphasis on charitable activities, serving society, practically saving suffering and giving joy to sentient beings, especially the weak and marginalized (including nature, which is increasingly being exploited and destroyed by humans), and its cultivation of sustainable harmony between religions, sustainable harmony of Buddhism and Nation.

The profound spirit of "Buddhism into Life" is one of the values that constitute the prestige and position of the LTTĐNB as a Buddhist sect that practices diligently, is respected for its noble morality, and has made many great contributions to the people and the nation.

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Хијен Ти Ту Фан и Ђау Ван Труонг

*Дух „Будизма у животу“: будизам Чисте земље лотуса  
на планини Пенглај у јужном Вијетнаму*

**Сажетак:** Применом систематског, интердисциплинарног приступа и компаративне методе, овај чланак се фокусира на карактеристике, вредности и утицаје духа „будизам у животу“ Lotus Pure Land Buddhism at Penglai Mountain (ЛТТДНВ) у јужном Вијетнаму. Феномен се процењује из перспективе ендогених религија које доприносе наслеђивању и оживљавању традиционалних будистичких вредности како би задовољиле потребе савременог друштва.

**Кључне речи:** Lotus Pure Land Buddhism at Penglai Mountain (ЛТТДНВ), „будизам у животу“, ендогене религије, јужни Вијетнам