Socio-Political Philosophy of Vietnamese Buddhism:

A Case Study of the Buddhist Movement of 1963 and 1966

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PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
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I am indebted to writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan, one of my Buddhist comrades for nearly 30 years, whose information has made this thesis abundant with details of the Buddhist uprising in 1966. He revealed many missing links that made the giant political puzzle at that time much more meaningful to the faithful and to our opponents alike. At least for the first time, Vietnam history has been written by the Vietnamese representing the voice of the silent majority.

I am very lucky to secure the service of an editor and a friend, Barbara Bee, whose editing skills transformed the rough text into a polished form.

Engaging in a research project for five years, I feel that I have grossly neglected my family. Without love and moral support from my wife, Ann, and my son, Edward, I would have given up the project long ago. I am deeply indebted to them and probably I will never be able to repay for their understanding, or should I say, their silent suffering for a number of years.

This thesis is dedicated to my three children, Nhu Uyen, the Deer Park in Sarnath where the Buddha turned the Dharma Wheel for the first time; Nhu Duong, The Sun Is My Heart, and Duong Tien, Only Wisdom Can Extinguish Karma. They reflect the essential parts of my journey into Buddhism.
Peace is the greatest weapon in the world. And those people who uphold the cause of peace are the real champions of society, of the world. I am happy to be associated with such people.

_Nelson Mandela_

_The Making Of A Champion_ debate at Centre For Peace and Conflict Studies at University of Sydney on September 4, 2000 on his visit to Sydney Olympics 2000.
Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.
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# Common Abbreviations & Naming System

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFC</td>
<td>Armed Forces Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSTITUTE</td>
<td>Buddhist Institute for the Propagation of the Faith. The American Mission called it Institute, e.g. Institute leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUSPAO</td>
<td>Joint United States Public Affairs Office, an information and propaganda wing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACV</td>
<td>Military Assistance Command, Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAMING</td>
<td>All Vietnamese names are kept in the usual order, e.g. Duong Van Minh, not Van Minh Duong. Sometimes first names are used as they had been used at the time, e.g. Thieu-Ky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NVNA</td>
<td>North Vietnamese Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEACE</td>
<td>The Peace Movement, the Engaged Buddhist Movement and the Struggle Movement are used interchangeably in this thesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMC</td>
<td>The Revolutionary Military Council found by General Duong Van Minh after 1963. Later it changed to the Armed Forces Council by General Khanh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RVNA</td>
<td>Republic of Vietnam Army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYSS</td>
<td>School of Youth For Social Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thich</td>
<td>Vietnamese transliteration of the Buddha’s clan, Sakya. For the sake of simplification, in this thesis Thich is usually omitted e.g. Tri Quang instead of Thich Tri Quang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UBC</td>
<td>Unified Buddhist Congregation established in 1964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VC</td>
<td>Viet Cong or Vietcong, a derogatory term assigned to the insurgent guerrillas in the South, as opposed to the regular soldiers sent by the North.</td>
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the political activism of Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism in the 60's, particularly the Struggle Movement for social justice and democracy of 1963 and the Peace Movement of 1966. It explores the Buddhist leaders' motives and their political means to deal with Saigon Military governments and senior advisors in the White House.

The thesis sets out to prove that socially and politically Engaged Buddhism is inherent in the Buddhist tradition and not alien to the Buddha's teachings. It also proves that Vietnamese Buddhism has always been engaged since the dawn of Vietnamese history.

The Buddhist Peace Movement is assessed in accordance with Buddhist principles such as non-violence and non-attachment to temporal power. Except a few minor incidents, it was found that the Buddhist leaders strictly adhered to the non-violent principle and Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism could have provided a political alternative, the Politics of Enlightenment, which could avert the unnecessary destruction of the Vietnam War.
Chapter One

My Journey to Buddhism

This thesis is a history and assessment of Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam, with particular emphasis on the Buddhist Peace Movement in the 60’s. It explores the political and peace activities of Buddhists at the time when senior advisers in the White House decided to seek a military solution to the war. Most literature of Buddhists’ activism during this time has been either sketchy or distorted by warring sides. It is time for the voice of the silent majority to be heard. The accounts presented in the thesis reflect the spiritual journey of a whole generation of Buddhist youths who regarded their actions as one of the Dharma-door leading to liberation, as taught by thousands of Bodhisattvas.

My Journey to Buddhism

I was not brought up in a practising Buddhist family. It is commonly assumed that ninety per cent of Vietnamese are nominal Buddhists, who practise a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and popular beliefs. My mother occasionally recited the sutra and I only went to the pagodas once or twice a year, with reluctance. The Buddha and Bodhisattvas statues seemed mysterious and somewhat irrelevant to a boy like me who was proud of having a ‘Western education’. I knew almost nothing about the sutras or Abhidharma, with the exception of some distorted ideas about Samsara (in popular Buddhism it simply means rebirth) and Karma (meaning fate or fatalistic consequences). I bowed in front of Bikkhus even though I do not know why I did it, perhaps because they looked so frightening to me!

My mother was not an ‘ordinary’ woman, at least in my eyes. In her generation most Vietnamese women were taught that they were inferior to men. They were raised only to be good mothers and were conditioned to accept that role. My mother had a good education. She finished the middle level of high school, spoke French fluently and had a strong desire to become a writer which, in hindsight, caused us to live in poverty. She
dressed in a Western way, wore make up, and had white teeth and curled hair. She was the typical rebellious woman of the 30s described in the classic work, *Severance With The Past*, as typified in the books by the most well known modern Vietnamese writer, Nhat Linh, who later became a martyr in the Buddhist movement in 1963.

In pursuing her writing career (though she could have easily obtained a job like teaching), my mother never had any steady job. I do not know how we survived then, but remember vividly that we were on the brink of starvation. She did not tell us much about her past; except here and there some scattered information.

My father was a young intellectual. After completing his Public Work Diploma, he ventured South from his hometown of Thanh Hoa. He stopped in Hue for a while, met my mother, fell in love and married her. However, his beautiful wife was not able to tie him down in one place for long! After a while he ventured again to Cambodia. My mother had to stay with her in-laws and performed a daughter-in-law’s duties, which I believe she loathed. Gradually she received fewer and fewer letters from my father. Women’s intuition urged her to join him in Cambodia. Venturing into a neighbouring country like Cambodia then was like going to the end of the earth, but she caught up with him anyway. Her suspicion was right. My father had formed a relationship with another woman. Had my mother broken up the relationship then, we would not have been born! But she did not do so and my sister and I were thrown into the circle of life! The love triangle did not last long however. After a few years she packed her belongings and came back to Vietnam, struggling in poverty to raise us.

In the 40’s a polio epidemic spread all over the world and I contracted it. I am able to walk but I limp a bit. In despair, sometimes I asked myself, or someone ‘up there’ the question ‘Why me?’ Deep down, I blamed my father and then my mother for all the suffering I had to bear in this world. Having received a Western education, I refused to accept the ‘fate’ and ‘rebirth’ notions of popular Buddhism. To me everything was man-made which I now know reflects more faithfully the concept of *Karma*. 

2
Being so poor and physically handicapped, I was unable to form any meaningful relationship so I withdrew into my own world: the book world where I could live with my imagination and dreams. Like Martin Luther King, I had a dream! I read extensively and I was always at the top of my class. Anyhow I was able to finish high school and passed a stringent examination of an elite faculty of education, where students were granted a stipend every month. For the first time in my life I did not have to worry where the next meal would come from and had all the time in the world to develop my academic and intellectual potential. In the 60s in Vietnam, existentialist French writers like Sartre and Camus... had an enormous impact on our generation. Politically the National Liberation Front (disdainfully called the Vietcong) began proving that they were a real force to be reckoned with, and the First Republic began showing signs of crumbling. The division of the country into two parts, North and South and war and peace became the issues of concern for my generation of young adults.

Having become more confident by this time, I formed a relationship with my sweetheart friend in high school. A few years before I had had a crush on her but I did not dare to say a word. She knew all about my feelings but she did not say a word either. Her school was just across the road from Xa Loi Pagoda, which in 1963 became the headquarters of the Buddhist Movement. By accident I discovered a small library owned by the President of the Southern Vietnam Buddhist Studies Society, Mai Tho Truyen. He was kind enough to put all the books in his private library there so readers could browse through them. I met all the writers I love there, from Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, D.T Suzuki, the Buddha, Hui Neng to a young Buddhist scholar who later became one of the most inspiring thinkers of our generation and now probably is one of the most loved spiritual leaders in the world, Thich Nhat Hanh (his pen name then was Thac Duc). I gained a deep understanding and attained the ‘right view’ of Buddhism by spending literally hundreds of evenings at Xa Loi Pagoda. I was able to correct my wrong perceptions of popular Buddhism from the past. My thinking was ‘re-shaped’ and a few years later I began practising Engaged Buddhism, based on the ethical-principles of the Bodhisattva’s ideal. Most importantly I no longer blamed my parents for my unfortunate childhood, but learned how to accept my life as it was then and now. I had some sort of “mini satori”
(little enlightenment) when I heard Kapleau Roshi’s confession: ‘that’s why I never bitterly asked, as so many people do, “What have I done to deserve this. The answer’s got to be plenty’ (1). I became a Buddhist without consciously realising.

I joined the first group of Buddhist students to study the sutras in modern context and the application of Buddhist principles to everyday life. Suddenly in May 1963 the Hue massacre happened. Instantly we joined in the protests against President Diem’s regime and gradually were carried away into the course of history, which ultimately reached the point of no return. We confronted a repressive regime which treated its citizens as ‘straw dogs’, and in 1966, in the campaign for peace, inevitably the Buddhists had to confront the most powerful country in this planet, the USA. Although the Movement was mercilessly put down by General Ky, this activism deepened our spiritual maturation, which in turn, helped guide our social and political actions. We made history and history made us.

The rapid growth of the movement of young Buddhists at the time was one of the most significant events in the 60’s. They were an army of selfless and fearless youth who had thrown away their schoolbooks, and effectively their careers, to become peace activists. They were non-violent soldiers who tirelessly and fearlessly engaged in anti-war activities, staged hunger strikes, or worked voluntarily in social service organisations... Many were jailed, conscripted, tortured or condemned by both sides of the political spectrum.

In hindsight, I realise the risks I took were enormous, particularly as I had just escaped poverty and had begun the ascent to the upper social stratum, but as the Burmese leader of Engaged Buddhists, Aung Sang Suu Kyi, commented, ‘Fear is only a habit’. As most Vietnamese students in the 60’s I became free from any fear and selfish desires. As reformed Buddhists we were also free from carrying the burden of a negative interpretation of Buddhism, deliberately painted by colonialists and their collaborators. We chose our way of practising the Dharma in a way that was relevant to people’s well being. We knew that if the war was to be stopped, its roots had to be destroyed: the myth
of alien ideologies, whether Communism or Catholicism, had to be debunked. In the process of engaging in political activism, a Buddhist philosophy of action emerged. It was some kind of reflective praxis, or thoughtful action. This praxis, which was by no means new or original, is called the Bodhisattva’s way. It was reinterpreted and transformed into relevant guidelines for action. The two dimensions of Buddhism were combined into one, called the politics of enlightenment. To the new generation of Buddhist intelligentsia, to serve their compatriots was one of the best ways to practise Dharma and to mitigate their Karma on the road to liberation. Religion and politics became one. Their motto was ‘to serve the people under the guidance of the Dharma’. Their primary objective was the Vietnamese people, not Buddhism, simply because Vietnamese Buddhism cannot exist without the Vietnamese people and country. It was meaningless to talk about serving religion per se, because a religion does not exist without its followers. In the political realm, their immediate objective was to stop the war, which was seen as initiated by the outsiders. When asked by Thomas Merton: ‘How is everything in Vietnam?’ Nhat Hanh answered: ‘Everything is destroyed!’ If the war had gone on at such a lightning speed as it did in 1965 and 66 there would not have been many Vietnamese to survive and as a result, there would not have been left any Buddhism to practise! The army of non-violent Buddhist youths defied imprisonment, torture, dismissal from work or conscription into the army (one of the most favoured punishments used by the South Vietnamese government). They well remembered the Bodhisattva’s vows: ‘If I do not go to hell to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings, who will?’ They were devoted to share the suffering of their countrymen. The Buddhists have a custom of buying birds and fish and then releasing them, which is a symbolic act of respecting all living beings. It would not do any justice to Buddhism if these young idealists just talked about compassion as if it were an academic subject and then buried their heads in the sand and did nothing to stop the war. How could they ignore the peasants’ suffering in that senseless war? If Buddhists did not act to stop the war and relieve the people’s suffering, who would? It was a sacred task that they all gladly undertook in the name of their faith and social justice.
Inside Information

I joined the Buddhist Movement in 1963 in the fight against President Diem and was lucky enough to have worked closely with some of the Buddhist Institute leaders, from Nhat Hanh, Thien Minh and Minh Chau. Because of my writing skills, I was assigned to write and distribute leaflets highlighting the Buddhists cause among high school students. To avoid arrest, from August 1963 to the date President Ngo Dinh Diem was toppled, I had to stay over night at different addresses. In 1964, I decided it was time for me to become an ‘official’ Buddhist. At that time Thich Thien An returned to Vietnam after finishing his Doctoral Study at Waseda University, Japan. He lectured on Zen Buddhism in the Faculty of Arts at the Saigon University and I was one of his most devoted students. At my request, he agreed to be my Teacher, witnessing my oaths to serve the Three Jewels and to observe the five precepts. On the New Year’s eve 1964 he took two young monks and me to Dalat in his twenty-year-old French car and performed the initiation rites at Linh Son Pagoda on New Year Day. From that day I was no longer an “accidental Buddhist”. Thich Thien An gave me a Dharma Name, Quang Tri, and in turn, I promised to strictly observe the five precepts.

When Nhat Hanh arrived in Saigon in early 1964, he requested a group of his former students to brief him on the Buddhist Institute’s affairs after the fall of Diem. As the editor of the Buddhist Students Association Review, Tin Tuong, I kept regular contact with the overseas Vietnamese Buddhist Students in Paris. Nhat Hanh came across my name when he stayed over in Paris on the way back to Vietnam. As a result, I was asked to be included in the first group of students to brief him. We met him at Truc Lam, The Bamboo Forest Pagoda, ten kilometres away from Saigon. What we briefed him was recorded in his journal, Fragrant Palm Leaves. This began my association with him, which continued for many years to come. Through Sister Chan Khong, I met, and became a friend of, Nhat Chi Mai, who burned herself for peace and Thanh Van, the first Director of the School for Youth and Social Service. When I had a teaching job in a small coastal town, I worked with my high school students in a pioneer village project, similar to Chan Khong’s in the out-skirts of Saigon. We managed to build a classroom and my high
school students volunteered to teach illiterate pupils, who lived less than a kilometre away from the main provincial primary school! Under the watchful eyes of the security forces, I had to camouflage my peace activities with apparently harmless programs, like organising a folk music group, or a youth club for cultural activities. The provincial security force did not know to handle a group of ‘do-gooders’ like us, but some friends in the high places in the provincial administration told me that my name was on the official black list.

In 1966, when General Ky sent his troops to Danang and Hue to suppress the Struggle Movement, Nhat Hanh was invited by the Fellowship of Reconciliation to come to the States to lecture on the Vietnamese Buddhist Revival at Cornell University. It was, of course, only a pretext to avoid suspicion from the South Vietnamese so Nhat Hanh could get an exit visa. His main mission was to seek allies and support from outside Vietnam. We were all busy organising our counter-activities against Ky’s government and did not know of his departure until he publicly announced his five-point peace proposal in Washington, at which Ky quickly denounced him and cancelled his passport! It was in the school holidays and I was able to go back to Saigon and work with some friends at the Buddhist Institute Headquarters, then called The National Pagoda. Being able to speak English, I was assigned to handle international reporters who wanted to interview the Buddhist leaders. When the Struggle Movement collapsed in Danang and Hue, I sneaked back to my teaching school, as if I had been on holiday somewhere in the country.

One of my close activist friends, who masterminded all the students’ demonstrations in Saigon during 1966, asked me if I wanted to join him to work at Van Hanh University. Gladly, I accepted. To elude the police during the turmoil period, this student leader had to hide at Phap Hoi Pagoda, then the temporary office of Van Hanh University. Touched by his courage, Minh Chau took him under his wing. The ministry of Education agreed to assist Minh Chau by providing three staff to the University. In 1967 two Buddhist students and I were seconded to Van Hanh University. Not knowing of the adversity between Minh Chau and Nhat Hanh, I spent my weekdays working at the University and
The Buddhist Movement of 1963-66

Van Minh Pham was granted an audience with His Holiness Dalai Lama in 1982
my weekends at the SYSS campus, talking to my friends in the Tiep Hien Order, dreaming and practising mindfulness. Then, one day, someone at the University revealed to me that I was suspected of working for Nhat Hanh's peace movement. Following this, I was removed from my post and assigned to work instead at the publishing section which had virtually no work at all for me. I had no choice and requested that I be transferred back to my teaching job.

At that time (1967) some student leaders in the Struggle Movement managed to evade Ky's police, fled to Saigon and hid at the Buddhist Youth Headquarters under Thien Minh's protection. Ky probably knew that Thien Minh harboured dissident students there but he decided not to arrest them. Thien Minh was not the only leader who harboured fugitive students. Minh Chau did the same. He provided a sanctuary for them and gave them jobs and accommodation in the University compound. As long as the fugitives did not venture outside the Buddhist Youth Headquarters or the University walls, they were left alone. In 1967 the tension between General Ky and his rival, General Thieu, was at breaking point and Ky did not want to be seen as the only villain in the Buddhists' eyes. It was said that Ky approached the Buddhist Institute leaders seeking their support against General Thieu in the 1967 presidential election. I lived in a small room at the Youth Headquarters, which provided me with an opportunity to work closely with these fugitive students. Gradually I became a close friend of writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan, one of the most important leaders of the Struggle Movement who had become Thien Minh's confidant. Thien Minh was usually regarded as Tri Quang's lieutenant, but in fact, he had been the real tactician behind all the political manoeuvres from 1964. Sensing that Thien Minh was a most dangerous opponent, Ky attempted to assassinate him, but somehow he survived. However he was incapacitated and had to walk with a stick. The new government after 1975 also viewed Thien Minh in the same light. So while they only put Tri Quang under house arrest and flattered him to buy his silence, they poisoned Thien Minh in prison as soon as he released an appeal for human rights.

After the Buddhist uprising in 1966, all the insiders knew that Tri Quang had relinquished his leadership of the Buddhist Movement to Thien Minh. When the Buddhist
Institute decided to change tactic in dealing with the South Vietnamese Government and the Americans, Thien Minh assumed the leading role in dealing with the Americans and the military government onwards. Hoang Nguyen Nhuan was closer to Thien Minh than anyone else in the Buddhist Institute. He was Thien Minh’s tactician adviser, student organiser and speechwriter. Apart from the inner circle of monks in the Council of the Institute of Propagation of the Faith (the American mission in Saigon called it the Institute) Nhuan knew more inside the Buddhist Institute than anyone else did. The Americans suspected that he was one of the leaders who influenced the decision-making mechanism of the Institute and cynically commented that the Institute leaders were really the spokesperson for Hoang Nguyen Nhuan.

I was given a second opportunity to leave the small town where I taught, to go back to Saigon. One colleague, who started his teaching job at the same school and in the same year I did, recommended the secondment and job transfer. In terms of the political spectrum, we were miles apart. He was seconded to work in the pacification project, (directly sponsored by the American propaganda wing), with his brother-in-law, a colonel in the Republic of Vietnam Army. Young Buddhists like us were considered as nationalistic left wingers whose idols at the time were Bertrand Russell, Jean Paul Sartre, Herbert Marcuse, Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. Even so the political differences did not mar our common aim, namely a social revolution to be initiated by the non-Communists before it was too late to save the South from collapse. I worked as an information officer at the Ministry of Education before I applied for, and was granted, a scholarship to study at the University of Sydney under the Colombo Plan.

After the defeat of the Struggle Movement, instead of confronting the Military Government and the American might, the Buddhist leaders adopted a participatory approach. Buddhists were nominated to contest in the Senate and the Lower House elections. Van Hanh University sent a large number of students to study overseas, mostly in the States. Unknown to many outsiders, a political party for laymen were formed, called the Buddhist Socialist Party. Consistently with our politics of enlightenment, we believed our Dharma Socialism would be a more humane and peaceful response to our
people's needs. I also joined the anti-war writers' movement and ironically, I had to express my anti-war sentiments in mostly Catholic journals and reviews! The Buddhist Institute was not allowed to publish anything after 1966. I also contributed to the best of my abilities to build up the political platform for the Buddhist Socialist Party, and in the process, had plenty of opportunities to work closely with writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan. Amazingly, in 1982 Nhuan escaped to a Thai refugee camp and was allowed to settle in Australia.

Without Nhuan's inside knowledge of the Buddhist Institute's political decision making mechanism, this thesis could not have been written. I had many personal discussions with Hoang Nguyen Nhuan as well as speaking to him over the phone, (usually in the early hours in order to save my phone bill). I also sent him a long list of questions that could help me to solve the political issues from 1963 to 1966, which seemed, at times, spontaneous, incoherent and incomprehensible to outsiders. Many Buddhist activists in the 60's were indeed thankful for Nhuan's inside information, without which the momentous events of this period of upheaval period would never have been fully understood.

**Other Published Resources**

The activities of the Struggle Movement were reported by a few journalists at the time in the New York Times and by pundits in the American propaganda machine, like Jarrod Schecter, who played the misinformation game by distorting facts and proclaiming half-truths. Time Magazine, which twice chose General Westmoreland as Man of the Year, threw political mud at the Buddhists leaders whenever there was an opportunity.

**Christopher S. Queen & Sallie B. King**: Recently the most serious study on the Struggle Movement was Sallie King's article 'Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Non-dualism in Action" in *Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Unfortunately King relies mostly on information provided by Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong and extracts a big part from Kahin's book. While King's assessment of the
Struggle Movement is fair, she is pre-occupied with her theme, non-dualism in action, and as a result most of her comments on the Buddhists' motives and activities are irrelevant. In the second volume, *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, Patricia Hunt Perry and Lyn Fine focus on Nhat Hanh's activities in the West after 1975, report the Buddhist peace activism in just five pages and repeat what Sallie King had said previously. Both fail to present the full picture of what took place probably because they lack inside knowledge of the Movement's activities and plans.

**Nhat Hanh and Chan Khong**: Understandably Nhat Hanh' and Inter-Being Order's activities have been widely reported in the West. After the peace campaign in 1966 Nhat Hanh became a well-respected world religious leader. Martin Luther King once lavishly praised him as a holy man and a scholar of immense intellectual capacity. He has been widely interviewed and his view on the Vietnam War was published in many magazines and books. Nhat Hanh himself wrote a few books about this period, particularly *The Lotus In The Sea Of Fire*, covered the time when he went to Washington with the hope of making the war-makers like Robert McNamara, Bill Bundy and President Johnson change their mind. *The Lotus in the Sea of Fire* reflected faithfully the Buddhist motives and measures used against the Saigon Government and the political manoeuvres of the American Mission in Saigon. Nhat Hanh also confided to Daniel Berrigan his inner thoughts. These reflections can be seen in the *Raft Is Not The Shore* written by Daniel Berrigan before 1975, Nhat Hanh reports his experiences in his own book, *Love and Actions* and Sister Chan Khong wrote *Learning True Love* to recount her non-violent struggle for social change.

**George Kahin**: Apart from these documents, reporting of the Buddhist Movement was scarce. There were a few pieces of news in The New York Times and a few chapters here and there written by Neil Sheehan, David Halberstam, Bernard Fall and Don Luce. The most accurate report was from a Japanese-American journalist, Takashi Oka, who then worked for Christian Science Monitor Review. Oka was one of a few journalists who were entrusted by the Struggle Movement leaders and students. His reports were pinpoint accurate and widely quoted by George Kahin in his book, *Intervention*. After the collapse
of the Saigon regime, Professor George Kahin patiently dug out the de-classified archives, came to Vietnam to meet with the Buddhist leaders and presented a more balanced picture of the Buddhist campaign for peace in 1966. Being able to read the declassified memos exchanged between the war makers, Kahin exposed the real reasons why the American administration was so hostile to the Struggle Movement at the time. Kahin, who with the assistance of John Lewis had written a book on Vietnam, *The United States in Vietnam*, was sympathetic to the plight of the Vietnamese people. As a result, Kahin was befriended by Nhat Hanh and when he made a research trip to Vietnam, he was granted an audience and interviews with the key leaders of the Buddhist Institute like Tri Quang, Thien Minh, and Tam Chau. This was a rare occurrence for any Westerner. Not only was Kahin’s account in *Intervention* well balanced, it also reflected faithfully Buddhist motives and aspirations. One of Kahin’s proteges, Dr Alfred McCoy, wrote *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, reveals the Saigon Generals’ network of corruption and drug trafficking activities. (2)

**Robert McNamara and American Ambassadors:** In the White House, the Struggle Movement was an irritating itch better forgotten! For instance, even though Nhat Hanh had a private meeting with the Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, to persuade the Americans to change their policy, there is not a word about this meeting in McNamara’s memoirs, *In Retrospect*. Nor does the term Buddhism ever appear in the index! Both American Ambassadors to Vietnam during the period of political turmoil, Henry Cabot Lodge and Maxwell Taylor, wrote their memoirs, *A Storm Has Many Eyes* and *The Sword and the Ploughshares*, respectively. The Commander of the U.S. Marines in Vietnam, General Lewis Walt, who witnessed the whole episode of Buddhist revolt in Danang, recorded in his book, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, the confrontation between the dissident soldiers and students and the U.S. marines more accurately and sympathetically.

**Tam Chau:** Apart from Nhat Hanh, none of the Institute leaders have written anything about the events of 1966. Tri Quang expressed his frustration and desperation about the failed attempt to stop the war in a sketchy 3-page autobiography. Tam Chau had not
written anything until recently. To everybody' surprise, in 1995, he wrote a booklet called *The White Paper* to defend his defection to Field Marshall Ky. Disappointingly, the Buddhists had expected more than the sketchy historical document released by one of the key Buddhist leaders at the time. It expresses his silent guilt of 30 years in emotive language and *The White Paper* contains no facts showing why he turned his back on the Buddhist Movement in 1966. Another key Buddhist leader, Thien Minh, was silenced by the Communist government for soon after he released an appeal for human rights in 1978 on behalf of the Buddhist Institute, he was poisoned in a remote prison. Minh Chau has studiously continued to translate the sutras, but has written nothing about the animosity existing between him and Nhat Hanh.

**Vietnamese Generals:** Many of the generals served in the RVNA did write memoirs. General Tran Van Don wrote "*Our Endless War*" both in Vietnamese and English. Another valuable memoir, providing revealing information about President Diem's repressive mechanism against the Buddhists, is General Do Mau’s book *My Country, Vietnam in Blood and Fire*. In his *Memoirs*, General Thi wrote about his role in the summer 1966 when the Buddhist uprising broke out. Ky wrote *Twenty Years and Twenty Days* and surprisingly, the confrontation between him and the Buddhists is mentioned in one chapter only. Bui Diem, the one who betrayed Premier Phan Huy Quat by plotting the transfer of power "legally" to the military, published his belated memoirs *In the Jaws of History* in 1999. A covert agent of the National Liberation Front, Truong Nhu Tang, who fell out with the Hanoi Politburo soon after the collapse of the South Vietnam and defected to the West, recounted his days with the Communist insurgents in *The Portrait of A Vietcong*. The key figures, General Duong Van Minh, General Nguyen Khanh and General Nguyen Van Thieu so far have refused to reveal anything about their experiences or memories.

**The Scope of Engaged Buddhism and the Peace Movement**

Buddhism has been seen as a solitary quest for enlightenment so the term “socially and politically engaged” Buddhism may appear contradictory. Most Westerners embrace
Buddhism out of private spiritual needs, not for social purposes. (3). Furthermore scholars who introduced Buddhism to the West in the early days of this century were deeply influenced by Theravada Buddhism. Yet, in those countries where the Sangha are supposed to spend time on monastic activities, their involvement in politics is well documented. Colonialism and Westernisation in South East Asia sparked numerous defensive reactions, sometimes peaceful, sometimes violent, from the Buddhist community. From these sources, contemporary Buddhist social activism was born (4). In Vietnam after the collapse of Confucianism, Buddhism became the main traditional cultural defense against cultural invasion by the French Catholic missionaries. Shortly after gaining independence, the Vietnamese Buddhists had to confront the oppressive measures exercised by the Catholic President, Ngo Dinh Diem, in his efforts to achieve mass conversion to Catholicism that the French colonialists had failed to achieve during their rule. Political actions by the Vietnamese Buddhists may have puzzled many people whose common assumptions of a world-denying religion were deeply challenged. The Buddhist Movement of 1963 and 1966 in South Vietnam made the outsiders aware of the plight of the majority of Vietnamese who were victims in the proxy war of the super powers. As Christopher Queen commented “no recent event has revealed the social and political dimensions of modern Buddhism as powerfully as the fiery death of a Vietnamese Monk, Thich Quang Duc on a Saigon street in 1963” (5). It was reported at the time that President Kennedy bewildered and asked his closest advisers: “Who are they? Why didn’t we know about them?” The CIA knew who the Buddhists and Buddhist leaders were, but they would not have imagined that a previously contemplative religion, a Sangha that is supposed to follow the path for individual quietist liberation and an apparently passive Buddhist mass, could have developed such fierce social and political aspirations. The image of a meditating monk sitting peacefully in flames was broadcast throughout the Western world and his message of anguish and protest over the repressive regime was seen by millions. Self-immolation is perceived as a suicidal act and the West wondered why a gentle monk chose such a horrific death? Yet in the years to come many more monks and people followed the steps of Thich Quang Duc, not only as protests against successive oppressive governments, but also as a measure against a war the Buddhists never condoned and which they fiercely protested in words and actions.
Meanwhile Thich Nhat Hanh was sent abroad as the Spokesman for the Unified Buddhist Congregation (UBC) to rally the support of the pacifists in the West. The movement was brutally repressed by Field Marshall Ky with the direct assistance of the American Mission in Saigon. However the one who orchestrated the repression was the National Security Council adviser, Walt Rostow.

**Methodology: Participant-Observer**

The theme of Engaged Buddhism has its own complexity. This thesis adopts a multi-disciplinary stance which examines why and how a religious movement like that of the Buddhist Struggle Movement, ‘performed’ in the chaotic period in the Vietnam history, when the destructive war was planned and executed by a few senior advisers at the White House. Confrontation was inevitable. On one hand, a group of religious leaders tried to justify their peace activism in accordance with the prescribed principles in the sutras and were determined to stop the war. On the other, the military and political ruling elite was no less determined to put away anyone who obstructed the policy of escalation. The role of politics and religion has confused many people since Gandhi’s days. Should the two be blended at all? Did these religious leaders overstep their primary responsibilities? How could they and their movement be judged impartially or objectively? Can the researchers be objective by the standards required in social sciences when this theme usually evokes so many emotive reactions?

Of course not many people are prepared to rock the academic boat by asking ‘how subjectivity?’ The filmmaker Oliver Stone comments:

> Many historians, whether they know it or not, are equally subject to jealousy and, thinking that history is their territory only. They (the unorthodox historians) pervert the paradigm with emotion, sentimentality and so on. But historians exhibit much pomposity when they think that they alone are in custody of the “facts” and they take it upon themselves to guard the “truth” as zealously as the chief priests of ancient Egypt: the prophesies must belong to them and them alone. (8)
Whether they like it or not, historians are subtly guided by their own perception and their credibility depends upon not only what, but also how they present their case. Obviously their perception of history will condition them to incline to belief in a certain unproved hypothesis. Anyone who claims they are completely objective in presenting their case before the history court must be treated with care, or as Oliver warned us, otherwise ‘we are all victims of counterfeit history’. (9)

There are nearly twelve hundred books on the Vietnam War on the Internet. There is probably the same amount of books on the shelves in university and research libraries. The ones written before 1980 were disadvantaged because the authors did not have access to the declassified archives. Apart from a few books and articles in the magazines served as a long arm of the American propaganda mechanism, most of the books about the Vietnam War, including McNamara’s memoirs, In retrospect (See Bibliography), were critical of the war makers. In my opinion Kahin’s book, Intervention (See Bibliography), recaptures well the cinematographic events triggered by senior advisers and the American mission in Saigon and then matched them with the Buddhist leaders’ actions. McNamara’s confessions have revealed part of his inner thoughts although he masked them so well. The latest book on the Vietnam, Choosing War, written by Frederick Logevall, was very critical of the decision-making mechanism in the White House. Books written by the American ‘Young Turk’ reporters at that time, years later, were awarded some of the highest accolades in journalism, like David Halberstam, Neil Sheehan, Karnow. I keep reminding myself that this is not a thesis on the Vietnam War, which is obviously beyond my reach in terms of resources and time, but unfortunately I keep getting lost in the historical labyrinth. The more I read, the more I feel distressed and angry and I do not want to hide my emotions just to appear to be objective. In the process, I admit, I have to practise mindfulness to grow calm again. No doubt, there are a few books trying to justify the “gung-ho” approach to the Vietnam War. Most of the books I have selected in the bibliography were written by those whose perception is somewhat anti-war, but twenty five years after the war had ended, not many historians would be prepared to defend the war makers. When the man who started the war,
McNamara, confessed: 'We were wrong, terrible wrong' in his first page of his memoirs (see Bibliography), nobody would argue otherwise.

The question of impartiality does arise here. Can an oral history, retold by activists be reliable or admissible in the court of history? History, actually, is full of hypothetical questions. As Oliver Stone ironically observes, it is also full of counterfeit recounts. Nevertheless there have been so many presumptuous and patronising accounts about Vietnam and the Vietnamese which assume they knew a solution to our political and social issues of my country. With the assistance of the propaganda machine, these voices seemed to be the loudest which was usually the bully's way to silence the ordinary people voices which have cried out for fair, accurate and credible accounts. My thesis is an attempt to set the record straight.

My thesis examines both historical and religious context; but the question of impartiality and objectivity is far more complex. Buddhism is an introspective-contemplative religion. A huge part of its corpus focuses on psychology and ethics. Engaged Buddhism adds another dimension: the social and political context. While independent observers can examine the historical and political events, can Buddhism be analysed and presented by purely objective academics? Those who have practised insight meditation agree that it is difficult, but not impossible, to play the double role of an observer-participant, which is the stance I wish to adopt here.

In order to identify methods used by researchers of Engaged Buddhism, Kennett Kraft proposed a round table conference among different groups. The three large groups were scholars of Engaged Buddhism, scholars who are engaged Buddhists and non-academic Engaged Buddhist thinkers. The first group of scholars objectify Engaged Buddhism as a subject of study and are concerned about:

*the command of pertinent sources and languages, the establishment of definitions and criteria, and the application of suitable theoretical frameworks. Those who work in this mode strive to uphold and established set of academic standards, avoiding personal*
views, citing sources carefully, not prejudging results and so on. (10)

The second group is, to some degree, involved in Buddhism. Calling themselves scholar-practitioners, even though they incline to be an advocate for a certain cause. They are the largest group contributing to the research of Buddhism nowadays.

Scholars in the third group are those who are actively involved in Engaged Buddhism or a Buddhist movement like Free Tibet. These scholars play the role of observer-participants. They are Buddhist practitioners and activist thinkers, who usually advocate for the implementation and action, of core Engaged Buddhism. According to Kraft, these activists have proved that engaged Buddhist studies can be pursued seriously from within the movement as well as from an outside perspective. The names of this third group were well known in the circles of Engaged Buddhists and most likely by their adherents. The Dalai Lama, Nhat Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa and a few activist scholars like Robert Thurman, Robert Aiken, Ken Jones, Stephen Batchelor etc...are in this group.

It narrows down the position of an observer and a participant to the difference in their degree of commitment. However regardless of position they occupy in the spectrum, as Buddhists, they always remember the critical approach in pursuing the Truth:

Yes Kalamas, it is proper that you have doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt had arisen in a matter which is doubtful. Now, look you Kalama; do not be led by reports, or tradition or hearsay. Be not let by the authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, or by considering appearances, or by the delight in speculative opinions. Nor by seeming possibilities, nor by ideas: ‘this is our teacher’. But O Kalama, when you know for yourselves that certain things are unwholesome and wrong, and bad, then give them up...When you know for yourselves that certain things are wholesome, and good, then accept them and follow them. (11)

There can be no blind faith in Buddhism. The Buddha often dared his faithful to cast doubts on his teachings until they were fully convinced. Without a critical mind, one is
not a true Buddhist, engaged or not engaged.

It is pointless to deny that my stance is of an observer-participant. We all know that historical legacy is full of hypotheses. One can ask the question ‘what if’ after certain events have passed and the answer would be as elusive as ever. But in hindsight what Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist leaders prophesied, did happen! As Nhat Hanh predicted, the unrepresentative military governments were not be able to withstand the Communists and the more the war escalated, the bigger the threat the Americans would lose it. ‘What if’ President Johnson had spared some time to sit down and listen to Nhat Hanh, instead of wasting his time showing a passing group of tourists around the White House on the day that he was supposed to meet with him?

After the war had ended, two million Vietnamese risked their lives to flee overseas and live in exile, including those who were fiercely anti-Americans and sympathetic to the National Liberation Front. The treatment that the Buddhists received from the Communist government vindicated the Buddhist view of Communism. In the war many Communist cadres wondered why the Buddhist activists who were fiercely against the Saigon government and hostile to the American policy of intervention, refused to support their cause. In his peace proposal, to the National Liberation Front’s dislike, Nhat Hanh called them “Vietcong”, a derogatory term. The Patriarch Thich Tinh Khiet called their policy “unenlightened politics”. Sister Chan Khong affirmed to a communist friend, who later became a high ranking authority in religious affairs in the Communist government: ‘We (the Buddhists) do not act against you but we do not support you either. But we do not denounce you to the police. If we think any of your policies are right, we will assist you to implement them. But if we think any of your policies is wrong, we will tell everybody about it’. What if the Communists had learned something from the Buddhist politics of enlightenment right after 1975? History would undoubtedly have had a different outcome for those who were forced to flee Vietnam after the war ended.

When the Berlin wall fell and Marxism became obsolete (Did the French students in Paris predict that in 1968?), many Communists wondered ‘what’s now?’ The crisis of ideology
in the Socialist world is as deep as the crisis of spirituality in the West. Amazingly many Westerners warmly welcome the spiritual path of Buddhism, the Vietnamese Communists, not knowing that they inherited a treasure, keep looking for something different to fill up the black hole in their ideology.

Playing the participant-observer’s role is not easy. I try to observe all the prescribed academic standards: terms defined, parameters set and frameworks established. All sources are quoted strictly in accordance with to the rules, except for the oral history part, mostly provided by the writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan, who is quoted simply as ‘inside information’. Of course I hope the Buddhist leaders, like Tri Quang, Tam Chau and Minh Chau will, some day, reflect on their roles in this period and put the record straight. Until then, there are obviously some missing links, too many to my regret! I have to work with a giant puzzle with crucial pieces missing!

Structure of the thesis

Chapter One: This chapter describes how and why I became involved with the Buddhist movement. Thus the story retold here is not just academic research but it is also my spiritual journey to discover a meaningful life. In chapter One, apart from very limited resources available on the Buddhist Struggle, information provided by the writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan has been used as the original sources to piece together the political puzzles during the period from 1963 to 1966. The methodology used to recount, explain and justify the Engaged Buddhist Movement’s position in Vietnam is the participant-observer method. The originality of the thesis lies in the fresh evidence supplied from inside the Movement by the writer-participant Hoang Nguyen Nhuan, who was at the heart of the struggle during those crucial years.

Chapter Two: In this chapter I try to define terms and set the parameters of Engaged Buddhism. The reformed Buddhist leaders provided a new reading of basic tenets in primitive Buddhism to justify their new praxis. These new interpretations also explain why the Engaged Buddhists emulated the Bodhisattva’s actions by venturing into the
unknown territories of social and political activism. The most common principles derived from the ancient Buddhist corpus are dependent co-arising, non-self and non-permanence, non-attachment, karma, non-violence and the essential Bodhisattva’s ideals in Mahayana tradition.

Chapter Three: Varieties of Engaged Buddhism in Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka and India and the hobby farmers’ types in the West are described and parallels made. The reformed Buddhists in modern history were no doubt inspired by two legendary figures, namely Asoka and Nagarjuna, who tried to redress the balance between spirituality and materialism, between self transformation and world transformation, or in neologism, inner and outer revolution. Particularly Nagarjuna had tentatively proposed a model of politics of enlightenment, which is frequently used by Engaged Buddhists as a framework for their political activities. I also present the parameters of Engaged Buddhism and finally propose a tentative definition of Engaged Buddhism. Some vital and contentious issues like should monks be involved in politics at all? or what is the relation between inner peace and world peace?, and if a situation calls for a violent response, what should the Buddhist activists respond’ etc... will be redressed in the conclusion to the chapter.

Chapter Four: I examine the Vietnamese politics of enlightenment by retracing the exemplary Bodhisattva Kings in history, as back as to the Ly and the Tran dynasties in the 13th century, when Buddhism was taking shape to become distinctly Vietnamese Buddhism. I argued that, Vietnamese Buddhism, by adapting to the local conditions and belief, was able to produce a few Bodhisattva Kings who achieved the perfect balance between inner peace and world peace, between their political and social duties and individual spiritual pursuit. It is my contention that, Vietnamese Buddhism has always been a form of Engaged Buddhism, which balances beautifully the inner world of primitive Buddhism and the worldly life of Confucianism. The Buddhist Movement in the 60’s was not an unprecedented event as some Westerners saw it, but rather it was inherent in the Vietnamese tradition. Looking back to a religious-political model of the past, the Vietnamese Buddhists were not nostalgic and fanatical zealots, instead they believe a balanced spiritual-political model could grow out of their own tradition.
Chapter Five: I outline historical circumstances in which the Vietnamese Buddhists inherited the torch of nationalism after a few centuries of decadence. While Confucianism lost it appeal to mobilise the masses as it had in the past, the first generation of reformed monks prepared the ground work for the coming confrontation with the Catholic President Ngo Dinh Diem and the American war-makers in the sixties.

Chapter Six: I describe the struggle for religious freedom and social equality against the repressive President Diem in 1963. The Buddhists rediscovered their sources of strength in the masses and a new generation of youth who were willing to join forces to fight for democracy, social justice and peace. It was during this period that the Buddhist Movement became the People Movement. However, the fight against President Diem was a minor battle compared with the chasm between the peace campaigns of the Buddhist leaders and the White House's determination to crush opposition to escalation of the War. This confrontation reached its climax in 1966 when the Buddhist uprising exploded in Danang and Hue.

Chapter Seven: Profiles of the main players in the Vietnam War. Emerging as the champion of the Nationalist forces, the Institute leaders used People Power as an effective weapon to find a political solution to bring the warring sides to the negotiation table. The Hawks in the White House and their military cohorts were no less determined to expand the war to the North. The peace efforts by the Buddhist Movement appealed to a whole generation of youth activists, as well as to international religious and political figures, from The UN Secretary General, U Thant, to Pope Paul VI. The resulting clash between the Buddhist Peace Movement and the American military juggernaut was inevitable.

Chapter Eight: the peace activities of the Inter-Being Order and Nhat Hanh's anti-war literary campaign are described and analysed. Attempts to bring social change and peace by social actions appeared to be shattered by artilleries and bombs, but they also produced tragic and epic exemplars of a non-violent movement. Sister Nhat Chi Mai 's
self immolation for peace as well as the sacrifices of the students of the School of Youth For Social Services, highlighted the non-violent nature of the Buddhist Movement.

Chapter Nine: Outlines the vents which led to the final confrontation between the Buddhist Movement and the military government, which, this time, was usually called the Struggle Movement. The Movement was able to mobilise almost all the citizens from the Central Region, including the military and the police, to revolt against the military government in Saigon. Years later it was revealed that, for the second time during the Vietnam War, Johnson’s government almost considered withdrawing the Americans to Thailand. However, the newly appointed Chairman of National Security, Walt Rostow, devised a three-phase campaign to defeat the uprising. The movement was brutally suppressed by the American war machine and their Vietnamese cohorts, General Ky and Colonel Loan.

Chapter Ten: the Peace Movement is evaluated in accordance with the criteria proposed in Chapter Three, namely non-violence, non-attachment to temporal power, the balance between self-transformation and world-transformation.

Conclusion: This chapter examines whether any meaningful praxis emerged from the Vietnamese Buddhist Movement which can be used as spiritual guidelines for Engaged Buddhist activists in general.

In order to help the readers to identify numerous military, religious and political figures involved in these climatic events, their brief resumes are included in the appendix and a portrait of the Buddhist leader who has provided much inside information in this thesis is introduced. A time map of Vietnam history is also enclosed for those who are not familiar with the events in the Vietnam War.
Chapter Two

RE-READING THE DHARMA

Social activists have different motives, are inspired by many ideologies and use different ways and means to achieve their goals. What makes socially engaged Buddhists distinctive from the other groups? How are their ethical principles, which guide and direct their actions arrived at? How would they convince their fellow Buddhists to accept the social path as the modern version of the Buddhist way?

Most of the leaders of Engaged Buddhism have envisioned and articulated their own distinctive readings of traditional doctrines. The movement leaders did not claim to create a new social theory to transform the world, but rather they interpreted traditional doctrines in the light of modern problems. Like a Vietnamese saying, they used old bottles to store freshly fermented wine. They all came back to a shared heritage and constructed a new form of Buddhism to justify social activism and to bring about social change. They did not accept the classical scriptural version, but at the same time they had to rely on ancient teachings to provide a model for social actions in the present. For instance Dr Ambedkar could easily use Marxism as a guiding ideology to liberate the Untouchables in India, but he refused to venture outside the Indian tradition. Instead he asked a Burmese Elder Monk to initiate his ordination and in turn, conducted the mass conversion of millions of Untouchables. He wrote *The Buddha and His Dharma* as the framework for the liberation of the wretched of the earth.

Any Buddhist, engaged or not, has to start with the concept of suffering since it is the *raison d'etre* of Buddhism. No one can claim oneself a Buddhist unless one recognises suffering and attempts to alleviate it. Among the enormous body of Buddhist literature, the paramount principle that all Engaged Buddhists embrace is the genesis principle of *co-dependent arising*. As the Buddha said ‘those who know the *patitva samuppada* know the Dharma’. This is the central axis of the Dharma Wheel because all other tenets revolve around this principle. The principle ‘This is because of that is’ rejected the prime cause and the substantiated self in every single dharma. That leads to No-Self, which in turn leads us to non-attachment. Craving is the main source of human suffering
as the Buddha taught in the Second Noble Truth. ‘See things as they are’ or Right View, means to realise that reality has no substantiated entity. Every thing is as temporary as passing clouds. Realising this simple truth may help us adopt a non-attachment attitude to wealth or power when engaging in social activism. When this is realised, one becomes ‘enlightened’, meaning our vision of the world changes. Having a truthful vision compels us to act with wisdom and compassion as Bodhisattvas do. Our goals in life are no longer to accumulate wealth or fame, but to practise the Bodhisattva’s art of giving and eventually to mitigate our bad Karma. Paticca Samupadda is not linear, but spiral. The end is also the beginning in an endless process. Therefore ideally one should have spiritual maturation before engaging in politics as Nagarjuna advised, but this sort of requirement would push us back to primitive Buddhism. Socially engaged Buddhists are advised to have a spiritual training in mindfulness. Mindfulness practice is essential for social activists as a skilled means to help them to cope with and overcome adverse situations. What makes Buddhist social activism distinctive from secular social programs like that of the Marxists is the concept of non-violence? Could the Buddhists, while engaging in political activities, keep themselves entirely free from violence? Let us see how the Engaged Buddhists reinterpret these basic tenets to form a new set of ethics to guide them in action.

**Suffering and Happiness**

Buddha was the only religious founder who claimed he was an ordinary man. Deeply concerned about life and death He discovered a solution to the deepest human problems, as others could have before and since. By chance the young Prince Siddhartha was exposed to human suffering so that one night he fled home and became a wandering ascetic, drifting between many schools of thought until eventually he understood the nature of anguish, let go of its origin, realised the cessation and brought into being a new way of life. (1)

Suffering is unpleasant and everyone wants to avoid it. We all would rather have happiness, which means avoiding suffering. Instinct compels us to postpone or evade suffering. One flees anguish by indulging desires and warding off unpleasant situations. If all else fails one tries to take refuge in a fantasy world. Postponing or avoiding the real world only makes things worse. In the first Turning the Dharma Wheel, the Buddha taught his ascetic colleagues the Four Noble Truths, which are still the core of Buddhist
thoughts. The notion of ‘suffering’ however led the early Buddhist scholars to expose Buddhism as a pessimistic or negative force. Certainly Dukkha means suffering or pain and sorrow, but it connotes deeper, essential ideas of Buddhism like impermanence- no self-emptiness and inter-dependence. Furthermore in the third Noble Truth there is emancipation, liberation and freedom from suffering which is popularly known as Nirvana. Whatever we understand of Nirvana, it is happiness that every Buddhist pursues. The Buddha many times gave guidelines to a happy life for the Sangha community as well as lay people, from the happiness of sensual pleasures, of renunciation and of detachment. In other words, physical, mental and finally pure spiritual happiness is attained. Buddhism is a religion, which shows a path leading to happiness. The Buddha himself declares the purpose or scope of his teaching in his first turning of the Dharma Wheel: ‘In the past, Bikkhus, as well as now, I teach only dukkha and the utter quenching of dukkha’. Suffering and happiness are two sides of the same coin: if we know how to end suffering we are happy. If we live in such a way that we never comprehend the roots of suffering as shown in the second Noble Truth, we are a long way from being liberated.

All kinds of suffering are evidenced in this life such as sickness, old age, death, separation from beloved ones, not getting what one desires...But deep suffering arises from change, from the vicissitudes of life and from the impermanence of phenomena. The most fundamental philosophical aspect of the First Noble Truth is involved in conditioned states, which pose the meaning of existence. Buddhism explains the existence of our ego and of any dharma by inter-dependence, co-arising dependence and the non-subsstantiated self, or in Mahayanist language, Emptiness. Most of us probably have undergone personal crises when we have to face an underlying sense of meaninglessness and of emptiness what Nietzsche called nihilism (2). It became the central tenet of the whole Existentialist philosophy. Life as nausea or absurdity and so man must find consolation in religious promises like life after death with a faint hope that ‘there is a chance that we won’t really die after all! Stephen Batchelor vividly describes the first Noble Truth in modern terminology:

We feel anguish most acutely when we break out of our habitual routines and witness ourselves hovering between birth and death- our birth and death. We discover that we have been thrown, apparently without choice, into a world not of our making. However
painful the exit from the mother’s uterus, it is mercifully forgotten... We realise that the only certainty in life is that it will end. We don’t like the idea; we try to forget that too. (3).

We try to manage our life in such a way that we feel secure with career, family and material needs all in order. Yet we experience sickness, aging, pain, grief, despair and death even if we achieve success, love and wealth, eventually we cannot avoid the existential questions of why birth and death? It is like the story of a man in The Gateless Gate, hanging in a tree by his teeth over a precipice, his hands grasping no branch. Under the tree another man asks him: “Why did Bodhidharma come to China from India?” (4).

In the first Turning of the Dharma Wheel the Buddha talked to his former ascetic fellows and converted them by showing them how to cut off the roots of all suffering. Unfortunately the early Buddhist scholars focused on the first Noble Truth, namely Suffering, and as a result gave Buddhism a gloomy image. The central points of the Buddha’s teaching, however, are the third and the fourth Truths, which teach how suffering is extinguished. They are paths leading to happiness whatever we understand by this. The Dalai Lama stated: ‘All of us want happiness. Everyone is trying to create happiness’. (5) The path to the pursuit of happiness depends on how one perceives the roots of suffering. On the question of universal, or existential suffering, the Buddha advised us to let go of craving (the Second Truth). If one has the wisdom to see that every dharma is impermanent and has no substantiated self, that everything is interrelated in the Indra net then one no longer clings to, and defences, the fabricated identity which drives us to acquire or possess more power, more prestige than the next person (6). Those who focus on particular suffering will inevitably direct their effort to ‘letting go’ of a particular condition, be it social or historical. Also, particular suffering may have reflected collective karma of a group of people. One can see others’ suffering as well and can develop compassionate awareness. They will follow the Bodhisattva’s way and are compelled to act to relieve suffering. For instance Ambedkar who refused to accept the traditional interpretation of the four Noble Truths, paid attention to social structures and exploitation which were seen the roots of the Untouchables’ misery. The Vietnamese Buddhist Church saw the War as the source of the Vietnamese people’s
suffering and their ultimate survival, while the Dalai Lama recognised his people’s suffering in Tibet from the Chinese invasion and occupation.

Recognition of the fact of suffering is the first step toward its mitigation and enlightenment. Those who do not recognise the presence of suffering cannot truly become Buddhists or are not taking the message of the Buddha seriously. Even Nhat Hanh who tries to give Buddhism a lighter image by directing our focus to the wonderful side of life, also reminds us that:

*Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like blue sky, the sunshine, and the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and around us, everywhere, anytime...It would be pity if we were only aware of suffering.*

When rewording the traditional precepts, Nhat Hanh placed the awareness of suffering as the Fourth Precept for Inter-Being Order. He advised his Order followers not to avoid contact with suffering or to close their eyes to suffering. In line with Mahayana and engaged Buddhism, he urged his followers to ‘find ways to be with those who are suffering’. He is not only concerned with Existential and impermanent suffering but also to visible and particular suffering caused by social and historical conditions. Recognising the first Truth is essential because if we do not accept the first, then we cannot accept the next three.

Suffering can have a therapeutic effect and awareness of suffering can awake us and makes us search for its cause and thus we gracefully find the path to liberation. Hence emerges the meaning of practising meditation awareness of our suffering and the suffering of the others. Nhat Hanh criticised those who only pay attention to themselves but ignore the problems of the world like hunger, war, oppression, poverty and social justice, saying:

*These teachers have not truly understood the meaning of Hinayana. Of course we should not neglect practices like counting the breath, meditation and sutra study, but what is the purpose of doing these things? Meditation’s purpose is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going in the world can be seen within*
ourselves and vice versa. Once we see this clearly we cannot refuse to take a position and to act. When a village is being bombed and children and adults are suffering from wounds and death, can a Buddhist sit still in his un-bombed temple? (9)

The inter-being, inter-relatedness of all things in the network of relationships helps us see the world in a different way, or as in a Sulak’s comment: “It is matter of perspective” Our own nature, or our Buddha-nature is also the nature of suffering, injustice and destructive war. This vision helps us to nourish the wellspring of understanding or wisdom and compassion. This also helps us to practise the Bodhisattva’s way: **Living beings are innumerable; I vow to help them to cross the other shore, liberation.** The message of Engaged Buddhism is thus the essential message of Mahayana: alleviation of human suffering in this here-and-now-world. And to understand the Mahayanist message we must understand its three precepts namely Impermanence, No-Self and Interdependence.

**Impermanence and No Self**

The idea of an impermanent world can be found in almost all philosophies and religions. In the Upanishads it is the Maya; Heraclitus likens it to water under the bridge while Plato talks of the world of the senses. But beyond the changing phenomena, all these philosophies agree that there is a permanent and everlasting world ‘somewhere’. For Indian philosophers, it is Brahman, for Plato the world of ideas, while for two thousand years, the history of Western philosophy was only the footnote to Plato’s notion of a permanent and idealistic world. It reaches its peak when Descartes declares *Cogitato ergo sum* (**I think therefore I am**). Perhaps it can be said that only Buddhism breaks that dual mode of thinking. The concept of impermanence and Non-Self makes Buddhism unique among other philosophies and religions. Mahayanists claimed there was no such thing as a permanent and absolute world and even Nirvana is a conditioned world.

The relative world is in a constant state of flux of becoming and there is nothing permanent in our individual existence. We are dying and reborn every second. Buddha says the universe is a product of many forces that are acting according to different karmas. There is no such thing as a substantiated self. What we normally call ‘self’, ‘I’,

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'being', 'individual' is in fact a combination of ever changing physical and mental forces (or energies) which may be divided into five aggregates. The belief in individuality is said to arise from the "invention" of self. All efforts in meditation aim to realise that all phenomena are empty. If we attain the "right view" the seed of existence will be destroyed. If we cling to the belief that things have a solid and unchanging entity, we do not hold the right view; we fall into ignorance, the first step in the chain of the cycle of Birth and Death. Take the Aggregate of Consciousness for instance. Consciousness is a reaction (or interaction) which has one of the six faculties eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind as its basis, and one of the six corresponding external phenomena form, sound, smell, taste, tangible things and mind objects, as its objects. Consciousness arises only when there is an interaction between the two. Here is the concept of co-dependent arising which we will explore in depth further on.

The idea of no self probably shocked the Brahmins to the core because of their beliefs in the Brahman, the absolute and transcendental power from which their privileges are derived. It is also hard for ordinary people to accept. After being enlightened at the Bo tree, the Buddha hesitated for a while whether He should preach the Dharma because He realised that the idea of impermanence and Non-Self was like swimming against the tide. However the fabricated self was the root of all human bondage as Rahula denounced:

The idea of self is considered as an imaginary and false belief which produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine', selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism ....which are no doubt the deep causes of our karmic effects (10).

There were many dialogues between the Buddha and his disciples about non-self and sometimes the Buddha used strong words to expose the fallacy of the 'soul' theory. As in the Alagaddupama of the Majjhima he addressed his disciples:

'O bhikkhus, when neither self nor anything pertaining to self can truly and really be found, this speculative view: "the universe is that Atman (soul); I shall be that after death, permanent, abiding, ever-lasting, unchanging, and I shall exist as such for eternity"; is it not wholly and completely foolish? (11).
Even his closest disciple, Ananda, was bothered by this No-Self concept. Ananda had many discussions with The Buddha about this subject. The matter emerged again in many dharma talks between King Milanda of Ceylon and Nagasena. King Milanda bombarded the Bikkhu with a series of questions:

"if there is no permanent self involved in the matter, who is it, pray, who gives members of your order robes, food and lodging? Who is it who enjoys such things given?. Who is it who attains to the goal of the excellent way, to the Nirvana of Arhatship? (12).

There is another conversation in Samyutta-nikaya between a bikkhu named Khemela and a group of Bhikkhus. When asked by other Bhikkhus whether he saw in the five aggregates any self, he said no. But he confessed that he still had a vague feeling of “I AM” although he could not see it clearly. It is like the smell of a flower: it is not the smell of the petals, or of the colour, or of the pollen, but the smell of a flower

This question can be paraphrased as: if there is no self, who does the volitional actions and who gets the effects of karma?

It is safe to say that the doctrine of No-Self is the foundation stone on which the temple of Buddhism is built. However it should not be seen as a purely theoretical doctrine of ontology which the Buddha many times refused to discuss. Every Buddhist knows that he must aim at an entirely new attitude to life. He has to look to it for advice on how to lead a self-less life. In another words, the non self-concept underlines the ethical basis of Buddhism. As we will see later in the Bodhisattva ideal, detachment is an essential virtue in the enlightenment process. It should not be confused with a nihilistic ontological explanation. A wanderer, Vaccagotta, approached the Buddha many times to ask him whether there was an Atman. Every time Buddha remained silent. Feeling perplexed, Ananda asked Buddha why he did not answer Vaccagotta’s question. Buddha explained:

If I had answered “there is no Self”, then, Ananda, he (Vaccagotta) would be siding with those recluses and brahmanas who hold the nihilist theory. Had I answered “there is a self”, that would not be in accordance with my knowledge that all dharmas are without self. (13).
How we view the world very much depends on how we see ourselves. Macy categorises four different ways of seeing the outside world. In the first type, “I” and “non-I” are locked into a fierce battlefield. There is a clear demarcation between the forces of light and those of darkness. Along the way those opponents want to drag God on to their side and declare that they are fighting for God’s War. Which side is God on in the Middle East war (Jews versus Arabs), in Northern Ireland civil war (Catholics versus Protestants) and the Gulf war (President Bush versus Saddam Hussein)?

In the second type of “I”, the world is seen as trap from which to transcend to a supra phenomenal plane or a promised heaven. Man wants to transcend the passing “I” into a permanent lasting “I” in “the haven” that is aloof from our samsara world (14).

Many followers of major religions fall into this category. Many of them try to live a peaceful and spiritual life and somehow expect they will be more welcomed in the “next” world. This includes many Buddhists in the Amida Sect and those who understand detachment as becoming free from the samsara world and indifferent to its fate. Their “present” life is seen as only a passing image in the ‘material’ life as the way to reach a better world “out there”.

Zen Buddhism refuses to accept this dual point of view and always encourages its followers to live in the “here and now”. The last two types have no illusion about their lasting self and see the “world as lover and as self”. As lovers seek for union and when we fall in love with our world, we are apt to fall into oneness. As some sages in the Upanishads declared: “Tat twam asi-That are you”. If we hurt the rain forest, we hurt ourselves. If we pollute the rivers, we are all poisoned. What happens in a remote country, the G7 powers will feel a great impact. No one and no country is completely independent and immune from what is happening in other parts of our world. We are all inter-related. Joanna Macy herself experienced that the way she perceived the world was radically transformed after realising the fallacious idea of self. Most of ordinary people usually think that “the ‘I’ ended with their skin, that everything within the skin was them and every outside the skin was not”. (15) As soon as the concept “I” is “concretised”, we think that we are independent of the world, aloof from other species, and immune from what we do to them. Other people and the world are seen as our
opponents in the name of science, progress or national interests, and sometimes are to be destroyed mercilessly in the process.

Pandering to the ego probably results in most fundamental suffering. One is urged by the drive to acquire, possess and to cling to all that will apparently strengthen our sense of self and reject all that threatens to undermine it. And the struggle to sustain delusion of an imagined self is carried on with ill will, aggressiveness, bitterness and anger. We fabricate a sense of self by which we define ourselves to ourselves and are more than ready to engage in our lifelong lawsuit with reality. (16) One plays the double game in life. On one hand, one tries to confirm self by acquiring more power, prestige, wealth than the next person while on the other hand, driven by fear of losing our inflated and aggrandised self, one does not hesitate to use any destructive means to crush our opponents whether they are real or imagined. As a result, one becomes attached to belongings and possessions as if they were the self. Ironically, as Hubert Benoît pointed out, we constantly defend ourselves against that which offers to save us. In fact we fight to so inevitably human beings become ‘one-dimensional men’, as Herbert Marcuse termed it. A subtle form of egoistic attachment is the attachment to beliefs and ideologies. My beliefs are always wholesome, good or righteous, while ‘theirs’ are always defiled, wrong and devilish. And God is always on our side! The Buddha warned his disciples not to be mistaken between the raft and the shore, between the finger and the moon and advised them to discard even the right Dharma, let alone the wrong view. Undoubtedly many religious zealots and ideological lunatics have proved that belief can lead to mass murder. Nhat Hanh in his Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing prescribed this attachment as the First Precept:

*Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth* (17).

Nhat Hanh described this is as one of the most important aspect of the Buddha’s teaching in relation to dogmatism and fanaticism for he pointed out, to embrace a view and consider it as an absolute truth destroys the spirit of inquiry and enlightenment. Nhat Hanh cited the destruction of lives and moral values during the Vietnam War was the fruit of fanaticism and dogmatism.
On the social scale human conflicts can not be explained solely on economic grounds and there should be a more credible analysis beyond the Marxist theory of class struggle. It is quite common to witness how the oppressed quickly become the oppressors and after having satisfied their physical needs, the powerful are still driven by an insatiable existential hunger fed by wars and triumphs. For most of human history this psychic greed for self-affirmation has been the prime mover working beneath and beyond Marx’s historical materialism. Indeed, prestige and honour have overridden both political and economic concerns time and again (18).

This is the Buddha’s message as found in the second Noble Truth. This is followed by the message of the third Noble Truth. When one can see all dharmas are impermanent and without a substantiated self, one becomes free from any attachment. Not being attached to worldly possessions whether fame, wealth, power or belief, one is freed from any forms of suffering. That the message of the third Noble Truth. The doctrine of no self ultimately helps us to change our view of the world for the world is no longer a battlefield or a Saba world from where we seek to escape to a Promised Land. There is no other Promised Land than the world of the here and now. That is what Zen paradoxically proclaims “Samsara is Nirvana, Nirvana is Samsara”.

What the Buddha taught was detachment from the ego, not detachment from the world an important difference. Buddha likened these efforts of those who try to escape this Saba world as to those of a dog tied by a rope to a stake in the ground. The harder the dog tries, the more it circles round and round and so gets closer to the stake eventually wrapping itself around it (19). For the same reason, Bodhisattvas’ vows are to remain in the saba world to help those who need help. This world has a role to play in the Way to liberation, since every pressure, suffering and risk awaken us, release us from the bondage of ego and help us to see our true Buddha nature.

**Co-dependent Arising**

The doctrine of no self inevitably leads onto Buddha’s teaching of Conditioned Genesis, which is translated as co-dependent arising (Macy), conditioned co-production (Conze), co-existence origination (Suzuki), inter-being (Nhat Hanh) or more commonly, Interdependence.
Buddhist Genesis can be summarised in a short statement in the Majjhima-nikaya:

*This is because of that is;*
*This is not because that is not;*
*This is born because of that is born;*
*This dies because of that dies.*

It is believed that in the meditation vigil, Buddha sat down at the Bodhi tree and vowed not to stand up again until he attained enlightenment. Being able to see ‘the way thing are’ based on the principle of co-dependent arising, he broke the cycle of birth and death.

Conditioned Genesis consists of twelve inter-related factors, which explain how life begins, exists and continues. The chain starts with ignorance, which is followed by volitional actions or karma formation including consciousness, mental and physical phenomena. Then follows the six faculties of sensorial contact, sensation, “thirst” or desire, clinging, becoming, birth, decay and death. Each factor is conditioned by the other, which in turn, conditions the next one. This should not be seen as a linear relationship but as a circular one, or *Indra Net.* It is depicted as the wheel of birth and death with twelve spokes. To stop the turning wheel we must therefore remove its causes, which create its karmic effects. The Buddha in most circumstances refused to be dragged into metaphysical discussions, which he thought would not help human beings to attain liberation. However, by teaching the Conditioned Genesis of co-dependent arising, the Buddha clearly denied the prime mover that is, in many religions, the Creator, God or whatever the label assigned to the concept of God.

Buddhist Conditioned Genesis is not just another ontological speculation. Buddhism does not want to stop at the conceptualisation stage. Concepts, teachings and even Dharma are used only as means. Buddhism is essentially an empirical religion: one has to taste it, experience it and be his own ‘refuge’ for nobody can help us to attain liberation but ourselves.

Co-dependent-arising (paticca samuppada) was the central doctrine of Buddhism and the Buddha many times confirmed this. He said those who see paticca samuppada see
the Dharma, and those who see the Dharma see paticca samuppada. Since nothing can exist by itself, Buddhism denies the existence of the prime mover and an everlasting world beyond this conditioned world. Buddhism differs from other religions because their ethical values are normally derived from a super-natural source, which provides the moral sanction of human behaviour. In an advertisement for a meditation class in the Sydney Morning Herald it stated “No God please, we are Buddhists”. This was a tongue in cheek slogan, but it was not far from an essential truth of Buddhism for when asked by what authority he spoke, the Buddha again and again cited the law of co-dependent arising.

Some criticise Buddhism for lacking an ontological belief in an absolute and it is assumed to be without clear guidelines, with ‘every man for himself’ (20). Buddhist moral teachings have been judged as “weak”. Nietzsche once predicted that if God were really ‘dead’ all hell would break loose. By refusing to speculate about an everlasting and transcendental world, which is immutable and aloof from the conditioned world, the paradigm of co-dependent arising challenges all other metaphysical models, from the Upanishads to the Judeo Christian religions.

The Buddha usually refused to engage in metaphysical discussion. But in the course of its development, many Buddhist thinkers tried to analyse and to systematise ‘doctrinal’ elements and construct a Buddhist philosophy. While the central teachings, “Impermanence-No-Self- Co-Dependent Arising” are themselves not speculative notions, the Abhidharmists skillfully and subtly substantiated phenomena, and instead of focusing on the dynamic relationship between them and thus deviated from the doctrine of non-self. In the Third Turning of the Wheel, a Zen important sutra, Perfection of Wisdom, states that all dharmas are empty and there is no nirvana or enlightenment to be reached or achieved. The trilogy “no-self-impermanence-co-dependent arising” were restored and replaced by the term emptiness, which was created to express this central notion of Buddhism.

Nhat Hanh, who established the Interbeing order in South Vietnam before 1975, uses the term interbeing, inter-penetration instead. He also explains this central notion in simple language and Zen metaphors. He suggests that we contemplate our body as a Zen Koan in order to see clearly the interdependence of all things.
All the body's organs, including the nervous system and glands, rely on each other for existence. We see that every organ of the body implies the existence of all the others. This is called the interdependence of all things or inter-being in the Avatamsaka Sutra. Cause and effect are no longer perceived as linear, but as a net, not a two dimensional one, but a system of countless nets interwoven in all directions in a multi-dimensional space. Not only do the organs contain in themselves in the existence of all other organs, but also itself contains in itself all the other cells. This is expressed clearly in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* as "One is all. all is one" (21)

It becomes clear that because no one or no thing can exist independently, all dharmas have no substantiated self. The term emptiness and impermanence can be used interchangeably. All dharmas are interwoven in multi dimensional space (the Indra Net) and consequently the prime mover, Creator-God, has no place in Buddhism.

Western Buddhist scholars, like Macy, who have lived the Judeo-Christian tradition which uses reward and punishment by a supernatural power 'out there' as a means of social control, feel tremendously relieved by the belief that there is no Supreme Being 'out there'. It is not easy for a western Buddhist like Macy to shake off the dichotomies bred by hierarchical thinking that produces the polarities such as us-them, mind-matter and self-world. The Buddhist ethical norms are so transparent and of unparalleled simplicity. Everyone exists because everyone else exists (22). So the world ceases to be a battlefield. A just God's War, or a Holy War, can never be justified. Destroying another group of human beings is to destroy ourselves. Destroying the rain forest in the Amazon is to destroy our environment. The anti-nuclear groups, the conservationists, the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation, members of the Fellowship for Reconciliation may all have recognised this unburdened truth. People are not our enemies. If we recognise this simple principle loving-kindness and compassion can arise. We should love the world, not treat it as an enemy to be exploited, conquered and destroyed. Heaven is to be found here on this earth.
Karma

Karma is not an exclusive to Buddhism. It is normally associated with the notion of rebirth or reincarnation, and was universally accepted in the culture of the Buddha's time. It is also accepted by almost every religion of the East and regarded as self-evident to need proof (23). However because of the nexus impermanence- no self- dependent co-arising, the Buddhist approach to rebirth differs radically from other Indian schools of thought.

Karma in Sanskrit means “to do”, “to make”, “to perform” “to effect”, “to produce”...In the twelve inter-related chains, it is the mental volition, which begins creating karmic effects. It means the will to live, to exist, to re-exist, and to continue.....It creates the root of existence and continuity, striving by way of good and bad actions. It marks the beginning of a conditioned phenomenal world, whose existence is characterised by incessant activities governed by the principle of Karma.

In our concrete world, or nama-rupa (literally name and form i.e. physical- psychological framework), once an act good or evil is committed and conceived, it never vanishes, even after the lapse of a hundred lives. This is seen as natural justice or the theory of cause and effect, of action and reaction, which produces its effects or results. Buddhists firmly believe that a person reaps what he sows. A man who generates the cause cannot flee the consequences. Nothing in life happens without due cause that is, without previous Karma (24). Each person, therefore, has several “Karmas” such as racial, national, family and personal. In other words, a person inherits accumulated ‘traces’ shaping his/her personality marked by dispositions, tendencies, habitual and predictable patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour. Our mental activity is mostly conditioned by our existential fear (death, failure, not being recognised as a group member...), therefore our karma tends to be unwholesome, egoistic, aggressive and acquisitive. We may be influenced by our karma as to be unaware of our bad habits or unable to control them. However there is always the potential to develop good karma expressed by ethical behaviour (e.g. dana giving) which is either reinforced by faith (followers of Buddha dharma) or sanctioned by reward and punishment (popular meaning of Karma) (25). Hence there is the concept of karma mitigation on the individual scale, people may inherit good or bad seeds and it seems that no one can
avoid facing the consequences of unwise actions but at the same time they are free to decide how they will react and interact. This dynamic reaction and interaction will reshape the formation of the new personality. Samyutta-Nikaya mentions ‘two bundles of reeds’ supporting each other, one the hereditary psycho-physical factors as conditioned by our consciousness and two, consciousness conditioned by our “reincarnated “personality.

However, the effects of Karma do not always predetermine the course of one’s life. It is the two way reaction- and interaction between deeds and the doer. What we do may create karmic effects on what we are. But we in return, can mould our actions or karma. Within a certain number of probabilities we can make a choice which can lessen or remove Karmic effects. If our present life is merely a result of past actions all human efforts will become fruitless. Buddhism provides a dynamic process of interactions between interdependent forces so that the effects of the causes could be exhausted. As Macy sees it, co-dependent arising represents the release from karmic fatalism. The effects of karma in the past may be modified by present actions, Karma can be altered and its noxious effects destroyed. Karma theory allows freedom to act and as in the case of Bodhisattvas, it can liberate from the burden of a solidified self.

Another difficulty, which obscures the meaning of karma, is the No-Self notion. Naturally the question of who is accountable for one’s acts arises. If the self is transient, how can it survive from one life to the next? Does it weaken the notion of accountability? (26)

Using a Buddhist metaphor, life on earth is like a roadside inn. At any moment there are many travellers entering the door of Birth and others leaving by the door of Death. What we call life is the combination of Five Aggregates, a combination of physical and mental energies. What we call death is the total non-functioning of the physical and psychological forms. Every moment ‘they’ are born and ‘they’ die, yet we continue. In other words we can continue without a permanent and unchanging substance like self or soul (27). Forms are created and destroyed. There is nothing unchanging, permanent or transmigrating from one life to the next. Yet life is one, and passes unceasingly from form to form with intervals of rest in between. A person who dies here and is reborn elsewhere is neither the same person, nor another. (28). The Mahayanists very much
cherish the term "not two". Even close disciples of the Buddha were sometimes perplexed about the question that is responsible for the habits, sufferings, pleasures we experience. It seems we cannot categorically separate the "I" who experiences the result from the "I" who set it in motion because they are not discontinuous. Yet the Buddha refused to identify them. There is a continuity, but it is not the continuity of an agent as distinct and enduring being (29).

The popular Buddhist masses and believers of the Amida sect think that the reason why one must be refrain from doing wrong is because oneself, not others, has to suffer its evil consequences. This individualistic and retributive view of Karma, which may have been able to provide ethical norms for social behaviour, presupposes the absolute reality of an individual ‘soul’ and encourages a superficial fear and acquisitiveness ethic. The motivation for doing good therefore is to accumulate merit for a more favourable rebirth like investing in one’s karmic bank account. This in spite of the fact that ego and acquisitiveness are antithetical to Buddhism.

The dynamic co-dependent arising highlights the continuous process of mutual redefining of cause and effect therefore it prevents Karma from being interpreted as a deterministic theory. While the physical inorganic and biological order their causes and effects can be observed to some degree and some ‘scientific’ conclusion can be reached. However when it comes to mental volitional and transcendental order, the relationship between causes and effects can only be speculated as in behavioural ‘science’. Therefore karmic cause-effect relationship is not a clear-cut linear relationship. For instance, it is simplistic and cruel to assume that the poor, the powerless and the wretched on the earth owe their misfortune to moral transgressions in past lives. Ambedkar refused to interpret the four Noble truths in the traditional meaning ie the root of suffering is cravings, because it is unfair and unacceptable to blame the victims of unjust social structures. That is why the Buddha declared that He taught that every willed action may produce an experienced effect but He did not teach that all experienced effects are products of willed action (30). A simplistic retributive belief actually reduces Karma to destiny or fatalism and devalues self-reliance, which is the backbone of Buddhist ethics. It also has ‘theistic’ overtones, which are discounted by the co-dependence arising principle. Rahula warns that this kind of interpretation is quite “ambiguous and dangerous” and it may do more harms than good to humanity. It
may do harm because it can be used to justify indifference in the midst of social injustice. Certainly it may hinder any attempts to bring about social change because the political and social status quo is “morally” legitimised no matter how evil and oppressive it may be (31).

The nexus impermanence—no self-dependent co-arising again plays its central part in explaining the orthodox theory of Karma. As we have said, no one and no-thing can exist independently of any other existences. Once deeds are committed be they good or evil, they affect the general system of sentient beings and their effects are felt by others just as much as by the doer. Life can be seen as a spiritual community in which every single sentient being is its component part. Each person is conditioned by their past cumulative personal karma but they are also socially conditioned by the cumulative karma of previous and living generations which create social relationships, structures, institutions, beliefs, values ....Whether or not a newborn child inherits a personal karmic condition through rebirth, she or he certainly inherits socio-historical Karma conditions. (32).

This is the third dimension in shaping individual karma. In modern terminology this amounts to a tripod of Nature or hereditary karma, individual consciousness and Environmental nurture or social conditions. The socio-historical karmic dimension should be of concern to Buddhists. As Jones reaffirms the positive or negative social reinforcement to good or to bad karma is of profound importance in establishing a rationale for Buddhist social activism (33). Karma cannot be regarded simply and solely as a personal phenomenon. It is also a social phenomenon, the spiritual project of freeing humanity from bad karma like greed, violence, egotism or ethnocentrism by transforming the social structures. Sincere practising Buddhists are encouraged to promote good deeds not just for individual welfare but for the whole community too. After doing good deeds, Buddhists do not wish to attain any merit for themselves but to dedicate them to the deliverance of all sentient beings (parivarta). Thus the karmic effect of my deeds determines not only my future but to that of others too. Thus moral deed performed by one person contributes to the general good or welfare of the masses. Suzuki summarises this theory of Karma as follows:
The doctrine of Karma thus declares that an act of love and goodwill you are performing here is not for your selfish interests, but it simply means the appreciation of the works of your worthy ancestors and the discharge of your duties towards all humanity and your contribution to the world-treasury of moral ideals. Mature good stock, accumulate merits, purify evil Karma, remove the ego-hindrance, and cultivate love for all beings; and the ‘heavenly gate’ of Nirvana will be opened not only to you, but to the entire world. (34).

**The Bodhisattva’s Ideal**

The Mahayana tradition is entirely preoccupied with the Bodhisattva ideal, so that it is sometimes called Bodhisattva Yana. While the Theravadins try to achieve the Arhat state, the Mahayanists’ goal is nothing short of Bodhisattva’s enlightenment. Rahula said both Hinayanists and Mahayanists unanimously accept the Bodhisattva ideal as the highest state of enlightenment (35). In Ceylon and India, it was believed that only incarnated Bodhisattvas could be born rulers. The Buddha, before becoming fully enlightened, had been Bodhisattvas in his previous lives. The two key words which occur on almost each page of Mahayana writings are the words Bodhisattva and Emptiness. There are three *yanas* that represent different stages of enlightenment. Even though all sects accept the view that everyone is a potential Buddha, if one cannot achieve that ultimate goal, one may attend the lesser state of Pratyekabuddha or Sravaka. These two finally attain Nirvana, but their capacity to serve others is limited. A Bodhisattva is also in a position to attain Nirvana, but out of great compassion for the world, he renounces it and stays in Samsara for the sake of saving others (36). The Arhat aspirants in the Theravada tradition exclusively focus on monastic life and ascetic application of the Buddha’s teaching and are seen by the public as too cold and ascetic, and their path is too difficult, if not impossible, for the masses to follow.

The majority of faithful need an easier path and a more empathic model. The Bodhisattva who denounces everything to save sentient beings was created, adopted and adored. (37). Humphreys, who was trained in the Theravada tradition, raises a few doubts about this ideal which is regarded as a revolt against the conception of the
universal justice (i.e. Karma) by those who prefer to sin without suffering its effect. The new ideal may be easier to follow and more attractive, but is it Buddhism? (38)

The Mahayanists counter-attacked by saying that, after being enlightened, Arhat disappeared into the Oneness and left the suffered sentient beings behind, thus he did not completely shake off all attachments to “I” and “mine”. He somehow still retained the notion of self as different from others and so, therefore did not fully realise the truth of No-self. A quote from the Diamond Sutra highlights this:

All beings should be led by me (Bodhisattva) into Nirvana, into the realm of Nirvana, which leaves nothing behind. And yet, although innumerable beings have thus been led to Nirvana, no being at all has been led to Nirvana. If in the Bodhisattva perception of a “being” should take place, he would not be called an enlightened-being. (39).

The Theravadins probably still had a vivid image of the historical Buddha, therefore they would not dare to speculate a universal Enlightenment namely that every one is a potential Buddha. Everyone has to apply rigorously the precepts of Sila in order to subdue their mind or Meditation and finally to realise Wisdom or Prajna. An individual may have spent innumerable lives before they can reach that stage. Only the Sangha members might have had the time and determination to achieve wisdom and for ordinary lay people it was seen to contain a certain dryness of mind aloofness and lack of human warmth. (40).

By contrast Compassion and Loving Kindness bring out human warmth while Dharma is no longer as just interplay of impersonal forces (Karma). Compassion cultivates relations amongst people ironically by being selfless this leads in fact to a boundless expansion of the self- because one identifies oneself with more and more living sentient beings. The Mahayanists created the image of a more metaphysical, but more human icon, which is close to, the human hearts: the Bodhisattva. In particular, Mahayana Buddhism did not shy away from contradictions. Bodhisattvas do not walk away from human suffering, but mingle with other sentient beings in the Samsara world and devote their energy to save them all. Bodhisattvas are the great moral exemplars of Mahayana Buddhism, mythical personifications of wisdom and compassion and selfless action.
who inspire innumerable followers. They are transcendental activists. They take upon
themselves the cares of suffering humanity. As Shantideva exclaims:

*I take upon myself the burden of sorrow. I resolve to do so; I endure it all. I do not turn
back or run away. I do not tremble. I am not afraid nor do I despair...I have resolved to
save them all. I must set them free.* (41).

In *Avatamsaka* Sutra, the young pilgrim Sudhana was shown amongst innumerable
Bodhisattvas walking, sitting and engaging in all kinds of good works out of a great
compassionate heart which would increase happiness of all beings. There is nothing
here of the indifference commonly imputed to Buddhism. In order to relate to the needs
of the people and situations, the Bodhisattvas made skilful use and expedient means to
engage selflessly in all sorts of actions. For example the lay Bodhisattva, *Vimalakirti,*
engaged in businesses, yet had no interest in making profit or having possessions. He
was an important landlord, yet he renounced ownership. To demonstrate the evils of
desire he even entered the brothels. He followed the ways of liberation without ever
abandoning the progress of goodness in the world (42). This non-attached attitude is
particularly important in establishing the moral code of Buddhist activists.

Is universal liberation possible? What about the iron law of Karmic effects? In
Buddhism everybody is supposed to light their own torch of liberation, however
unbearable their pain is, for others cannot do so. Even the Buddha could not escape the
fruit of evil karma, which was unwittingly committed by him in the past. This iron arm
of karma seizes everybody without exception and allows no one to escape. In order to
mitigate the ruthless mechanical rigidity of Karma, the concept of *parivarta* came into
existence. Whatever merits Bodhisattvas accumulated in thousands of lives they would
be turned over to the benefits of all sentient beings, so that they could reach liberation as
well. This unselfish devotion to the welfare of all beings constitutes the essence of
Bodhisattva-hood. No doubt there is a departure from the doctrine of Karma as firmly
entrenched in Theravada tradition but now this shifts from a predominantly individual
karmic emphasis to a more socially inclusive karma as mentioned earlier.

To reconcile this contradiction the Abhidharma introduced the metaphysical concept of
Dharmakaya, which manifests as Bodhi, the essence of Bodhisattvas. All beings are
potential Bodhisattvas as long as they are able to recognise and manifest the glory of Bodhi. It may be likened to the ever-shining sunlight, which may be temporarily hidden behind the clouds. Bodhisattvas possess both Wisdom and Loving Kindness-Compassion. Wisdom helps them to see things as they are in order to achieve liberation and a loving heart urges them to emancipate all sentient beings from the misery of Birth and Death. As Nagarjuna said: "One who understands the nature of Bodhi sees everything with a loving heart, for love is the essence of Bodhisattvas" (43). In The Bodhisattva’s Way of Life, Shantideva talks about giving or dana first and wisdom last and he has a reason to do so. Practising giving is the best way to see the interrelatedness of all beings and realise the co-dependent arising. The first act on becoming a monk is cutting one’s hair, which symbolises non-attachment to worldly interests, and renouncing the world. Personal renunciation is to recognise the delusion of self while dana simply means anything which one gives out of oneself, from helping people in difficulties of all kinds to promoting social welfare and to sacrificing one’s life for a worthy cause (44) It is believed that once a Bodhisattva is enlightened they usually make ten vows in front of a Buddha one of which is to accompany and protect all sentient beings even though the Bodhisattvas may have to sacrifice their body, their life and their possessions.

Sangharakshita comments that the Bodhisattva Ideal is the unifying factor not only for the Hinayana schools but also for the entire Buddhist tradition (45). All the different and sometimes seemingly divergent elements of the Mahayana are recombined in it. However, philosophy remains barren speculation unless it may be translated into a concrete way of life. Thought should lead to action and Doctrine should give birth to Method. Bodhisattvas become living exemplars of the devotional life. The appeal to the masses more because they are one of them like the enlightened Vimalakirti and their lives are not exclusively monastic. Any lay person who practises the ten perfection(s) may be able to attain the Bodhisattva-hood. They are close to, and revered by, the masses even more than the Buddha. They are no longer speculative and abstract, but their lives (which were re-told in Jakatas The Buddha’s Former Lives) have touched ordinary human hearts as Lama Anagarika Govinda points out:

_The Jakatas are the divine song of the Bodhisattva ideal in a form which speaks directly to the human heart and which, therefore is not only understandable to the wise but even_
to the simplest mind...In Ceylon, Burma, Siam and Cambodia crowds of people listen with rapt attention for hours when Bhikkhus during the full moon nights, recite the stories of the Buddha’s former lives, and even in Tibet, I have seen tears in the eyes of sturdy caravan men, when sitting around the camp fire, the Bodhisattva’s suffering and sacrifices were retold. (46).

In one of the Buddha’s previous incarnations as Prince Vessantara, he was required to sacrifice his own kingdom, his wife and children and so he did. Another Bodhisattva sacrificed his body to feed the hungry tigress that was unable to nourish her young cubs. These exemplars may appear illogical today, but their purpose is to show the great Loving Kindness-Compassion and the absolute non-attachment to worldly things which is an integral part of the Bodhisattva ideal. To ordinary Buddhists the motive and the power of compassion are important and so Bodhisattvas are revered, loved and close to their hearts. Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhists personify Bodhisattva Qan Ying in a woman’s form. She is a loving, motherly figure and her name literally means Listening to All the Suffering Sounds of the World. Whenever facing danger, Buddhists recite her name and believe that Qan Ying is always there to protect them. Bodhisattvas surrender the self and renounce every worldly thing, including their lives. In the example of Vilamakirti he is sick because all sentient beings are sick, in other words he takes on the ills of the world:

I renounce my bodies, my pleasures and all my merits in the past, present and future, so that all beings may attend the Good

May I be the protector of the helpless! May I be the guide for the wayfarers! May I be like unto a boat, a bridge and a causeway for all who wishes to cross. May I be a lamp for all who need a lamp. May I be a bed for those who need a bed. (47)

A layman who wants to practise the Bodhisattva Way has to vow to live up to six perfection(s) and again the first one is Giving. He can practise giving material things, merits, Dharma and even their body and lives. In the protest movement against President Diem in 1963 in Vietnam, The Bodhisattva Thich Quang Duc immolated himself and many monks and nuns soon followed suit. An ordained girl of the Interbeing Order, Nhat Chi Mai, also self immolated to pray for Peace to be restored in Vietnam. A young girl used an axe to cut off her hand in the hope of making the
Government change its heart. And a long time ago, in the third century B.C, Emperor Asoka, seen as an incarnated Bodhisattva, not only set up the first welfare state for his people but he also established hospitals for animals too. The ransoming and setting free of birds and turtles is an integral part of Chinese Buddhist festivals. The Bodhisattva Ideal has permeated everyday life and customs and is the basis of ethical codes in many Buddhist countries. Many Vietnamese Buddhists who joined the movement for religious freedom and democracy in 1963-1966 and the movement for peace and reconciliation afterwards followed the Bodhisattvas’ footsteps to relieve their compatriots’ affliction in the Vietnam war.

**Spiritual Practice For Social Activists**

Many social activists, particularly those who are attached to ideologies or beliefs, may act with wrong motives and means such as the communists. Their victims are not seen as innocent people but enemies of the state who have to be exterminated so that a new society can emerge. No body can deny that the Marxists are not social activists since they radically change systems, which they consider antithetical to their ideals of equality and justice. The architect of the killing field, Pol Pot, saw himself as the saviour, not the butcher of the Cambodian people. ‘My conscience is clear’, he said, ‘we burned the old grass and the new will grow’. This necessitates the posing of the question as to what the difference between Buddhist inspired activism and activism that arises from other religious or secular belief systems such as Communism? (48).

Nhat Hanh wrote a manual on Meditation called, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, for his followers, mostly lay people in the Youth For Social Services movement so that they could attain mindfulness while working in the line of fire during the Vietnam war. Bearing in mind that these lay young lay people did not have a monastic training in meditation, the manual was a crash course in helping them to master and restore the dispersed mind, to develop concentration and to obtain the great awakening (49). The ultimate goal of meditation is the same for both monks and laity namely spiritual awakening. In another words, Nhat Hanh’s manual helped them to arrive at liberation from narrow viewpoint and to become fearless and great compassionate. Later many Westerners were attracted to Buddhism because of the simplicity of Nhat Hanh’s breathing techniques which elicited criticism that he over-emphasised mindfulness at
the expense of deep self-realisation and that his teachings were too contemplative (50). Although there are some of his followers who cannot see the wood for the trees and mistake the means for the ends, according to Nhat Hanh meditation ultimately helps us to break through the false view and to be liberated from every sort of fear, pain and anxiety. It helps us to see reality as it is. Like the end-result of a long process of Dharma practice in monastic tradition, attaining wisdom and compassion is the ultimate goal. Social activists should follow the same path with the aim of correcting the false view, which is the main cause of suffering. And to gain the ‘right view’ is to be liberated from suffering.

The spiritual path to follow for lay people to follow is slightly different. A monk’s main practice is observing precepts and sitting meditation. A lay activist who normally has a much busier life and in case of the Vietnamese, an extremely dangerous one, does not have much time for sitting meditation. A breathing technique therefore is prescribed as an instant remedy for those who have a hectic life and as Nhat Hanh puts it, ‘it is only in an active and demanding situation, that mindfulness really becomes a challenge’ (51). Meditation, either daily periods or periodic retreats, is essential for social activists who constantly confront power and social injustice and are usually beaten by ruthless opponents. This is the best way to renew spiritual strength, in order to survive. The order of Dharma practice for lay activists has also to be re-scheduled. Sulak Sivaraksa describes a number of virtues that a Buddhist activist must cultivate when engaging in social actions in order to avoid the pitfalls of secular activists who can sometimes be motivated by grudges and anger against their opponents or seek self-satisfaction in good deeds. Instead of strictly observing the precepts, a lay person tries to emulate the Bodhisattvas’ vows by practising the art of giving until recognising that to give is more important than to receive so the order of their spiritual path becomes give-meditation-compassion. Many socially Engaged Buddhists actually give their time, money, voluntary work and even their lives to act for social justice. Like their monastic counterparts, they have to practise meditation in order to control disturbing feelings such as hatred, greed and self-centred. But what makes a Buddhist different from other activists is the spiritual training to cultivate inner peace and compassion. Without these spiritual qualities, social activists can easily become angry, greedy and deluded and their social actions without purpose (52). It is not very hard to find these sorts of social activists in our times who, in the name of social justice and equality, exterminated
thousands of people in Gulags and ‘re-education’ camps. The killing fields in Cambodia are still fresh in our memory. On a smaller scale fundamentalist religious group as well as members of all sorts of political and social groups can be driven by feelings of hatred and superiority which lead to more harm than general good.

Meditation, however, is not intended to be just a behaviour-modification or therapeutic technique to transform negatives feelings like hatred, anger, frustration or the dispersed mind. Breathing is an excellent tool for establishing peace, calmness, vigilance and general awareness. A tranquil heart and clear mind is very beneficial. Also, meditative practice is not the exclusive tool of Buddhism. Many other religions or philosophies, even cults, also encourage their followers to practise meditation. Neither is meditation the main point of Buddhism. Rather it is to see the nature of all things and to arrive at a new view of relationship, which leads to a strong commitment to social transformation (53). A new understanding of relationship is of the ultimate realisation of Buddhist meditation while concerns of No-Self-Impermanence–Interdependence helps us to see that relationship. In the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing, the Buddha taught sixteen methods of meditation and the last four shed lights on:

The ever-changing, impermanence nature of all that exists- the psychological, the physiological and the physical. Breathing is also impermanent. The fact of impermanence is very important, because it opens the way for us to see the inter-related, inter-conditioned nature as well as the self less nature (nothing has a separate, independent self) of all that exists. (54)

No Self–Impermanence-Inter-dependence are thus ONE reality seen from three different angles. If we can grasp that every dharma is in the process of disintegrating every second, we are no longer possessed by the idea of holding onto anything, whether psychological or physiological. When we are no longer attached to the false view of self, we arrive at the awareness of a great joy, the joy of emancipation from every sort of fear, pain or anxiety, suffering and anguish. We learn that nothing or no one can exist independently and that everything and everyone is interwoven in the Indra Net, the suffering of others is our own suffering, the happiness of others is our own happiness. When one is able to see reality, as it is, one is awakened, enlightened and liberated. When asked ‘Can awakening be realised through mindful breathing?’ Nhat Hanh did
not hesitate to answer ‘of course’ (55). When enlightened, other qualities like compassion, loving kindness, non-attachment and fearlessness naturally flow out to the world. That is why engaged Buddhist leaders always emphasise the meditative dimension of spiritual training for their members. A Buddha is one who lives twenty-four hours a day in mindfulness. While activist movements in the West have lacked spiritual training, social Buddhist activists realise that social change and inner change are inseparable and that effective social action must also address greed, anger and ignorance within people as well as within groups (56).

Non Violence and Buddhist Activists

Social activists in the main may have usually acted in good faith to challenge unjust historical circumstances like colonialism, foreign invasion, exploitation, oppression and injustice. However injustices remained and reforms resulted in the exchange of roles from the oppressed to the oppressors. Even some Buddhist activists have not been immune from violence. In the past Japanese Buddhism was closely linked with the militarists and the Prime Minister of Ceylon was murdered by an ordained monk. Sulak tells us the story of a notorious Thai monk who advocated that it was not sinful to kill a communist. As Tworkov, the Editor of Tricycle Buddhist Review commented, it is not sufficient to deny that Newin, known as the butcher of Burma and Polpot, the butcher of Cambodia, were not “real” Buddhist (57). How do engaged Buddhists deal with the issue of ends justifying means?

It was Gandhi, whose Satyagraha made the heartless South African rulers change their minds and hearts and which helped their Indians to regain the independence from the mighty British Empire. His non-violence (Ahimsa) approach touched the world and has become an invincible tool to overcome violence. However Ahimsa appeals to some of for the wrong reasons, as Nhat Hanh confessed in his being influenced by the success of Gandhi rather than the action of non-violence itself, so:

*If Gandhi had not succeeded, my being influenced by him would have been less in the beginning. That early influence was not in terms of theory or insight, but of success.*
You have to judge the value of an action in relation to the action itself... So I was influenced in that more superficial way. (58)

Indeed Gandhi’s movement Satyagraha means “holding on to the truth” or “soul force”. While truth alone exists, injustice is a two-way relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. If the oppressed refuses to recognise that relationship, it cannot exist by itself. In Gandhi’s words, “without our support or cooperation, unintentionally or intentionally, injustice cannot continue. (59) After testing satyagraha in South Africa for seven years, Gandhi realised that his non-violence resistance could be used to free India politically from British domination without waging a violent war if the Indian people would accept his leadership and abide completely by the ahimsa he placed before them. Gandhi always quoted from the Bhagavad Gita as his “spiritual reference book” but his language was unmistakably Buddhist. Proof of this is found in the Compassionate Buddha in the Dhammapada Sutra: “For hatred is not conquered by hatred; hatred is conquered by love. This is a law eternal”. Furthermore, it is the hater who falls ill physically, emotionally and spiritually. Hatred kills, Love heals. Satyagraha means holding to this Truth in every situation, no matter how fierce the storm. Because one wants nothing for self, this person is completely self-less, Satyagraha is not afraid of entering any conflict for the sake of those around him. Ahimsa is love in which all violence subsides. It is love in action. This is identical with Bodhisattva’s vows that we have seen earlier in relation to compassion and caring action, as Eastwara noted: ‘the secret of non-violence was revealed by a Compassionate Buddha more than twenty-five hundred years before’ (60). These principles that Gandhi placed before the Indian people can be translated as inter-dependence, compassion, selflessness and non-attachment. And as in the Buddhist interpretation of self, although Gandhi still hates the deed, he affirms the humanity of the doer. He writes:

I hold myself to be incapable of hating any being on earth... But I can and do hate evil wherever it exists. I hate the system of government that the British have set up in India... But I do not hate the domineering Englishmen. I seek to reform them in all the loving ways that are open to me. My non-cooperation has its roots not in hatred, but in love. (61)
This is exactly what social activists try to achieve when undergoing spiritual training, particularly meditative techniques: to see the deep causes of suffering. During the Vietnam war, Nhat Hanh wrote to Martin Luther King saying that ‘our enemies are not men. Our enemies are hatred, greed and ignorance’. The Vietnamese and American both were victims of the fanatic ideologies, or wrong views. The Buddhists were opposing the underlying cause of the suffering which is the policies emanating from Washington. (62) Likewise, The Dalai Lama has lobbied the world to put pressure on the Chinese Government to grant autonomy for Tibet, but he refuses to hate the Chinese populace who themselves have been deprived of fundamental human rights, just as Tibetans have.

Because Gandhi succeeded in regaining Indian independence, people tend to understand Ahimsa at a superficial level. It is seen as a technique of action or a political mass protest against ruthless oppressors rather than as a spiritual source of strength or a way of life. In modern terminology, it is a way to approach conflicts and resolves it nonviolently. Ahimsa is at the same time both the means and the way. In fact, the two are inseparable. True ahimsa may require a lifetime to learn, and like an enlightenment experience, it springs from and works in the same continuum of religion, politics and personal life. Gandhi’s writing sounds exactly like Bodhisattvas’ vows or modern Engaged Buddhists’ objectives as he declares

...Non-violence is not a cloistered virtue to be practised by the individual for his peace and final salvation, but it is a rule of conduct for society...I hold it therefore to be wrong to limit the use of non-violence to hermits and for acquiring merit for a favoured position in the other world. All virtue ceases to have use if it serves no purpose in every walk of life (63)

Because ahimsa tries to resolve the source of conflict, it also tries to transform the opponent by persuading them to the non-violent vision and to win them over to the side of the conflict. Ahimsa faces the evil doer with kindness and sympathy but also with determination with a view to transforming both sides so that in the end there will not be a winner or a loser but both will be transformed. Non-cooperation, mass protest, strike, civil disobedience are only means to secure the opponent’s cooperation with truth and justice. But if all else fails, in order to appeal to the opponent’s heart and mind, the
Satyagrahi’s final and purest weapon is to inflict suffering not on the opponent but on himself. Gandhi claims that:

*Suffering is the law of human beings; war is the law of the jungle. But suffering is definitely more powerful than the law of the jungle for converting the opponent.* (64)

Thus self-suffering became the hallmark of Satyagraha and the ultimate weapon to move men’s heart. Civil disobedience, non-cooperation or mass protest are methods designed not to coerce the oppressors, but to soften their hearts by visible suffering endured by the satyagrahi including jail, dispossession, physical injury and sometimes death. As Gandhi emphasised “satyagraha and its offshoots, non-cooperation and passive resistance, are nothing but new names for the law of suffering” (65). Success will not be measured by mere outcome but solely by the purity of its cause and a pure end, which can only be achieved only when the means are pure. To Gandhi, the relationship between the means and the end is inseparable like that of the seed and the tree. The influence of Buddhism on Gandhi’s thought became obvious when he stressed on the insight quality: “without self purification, the observation of the law of Ahimsa must remain an empty dream”. (66) Ahimsa is far from a doctrine of mass action, it must begin within the human heart. It is similar to the process toward enlightenment, which needs a lifelong practice. When one sees his own insight nature, other qualities like love, selflessness, non attachment, fearlessness naturally spring out, as Gandhi always said: “they come from within, not without”.

Gandhi’s Ahimsa actually is the core of Buddhist ethics as the first precept clearly spells out:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others be killed, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, and in my way of life. (67)

Furthermore living beings are defined as not only human beings but as the ecosystem itself. The Diamond Sutra states that it is impossible to distinguish between sentient and non-sentient beings. At present we recognise that protecting human life is not possible
without protecting the ecosystem. In principle even non-sentient beings will achieve enlightenment one day. Many Buddhist practitioners tried to use the First precept to develop a new ecological ethic and even advocated an eco-centric Sangha and a Gaia Buddhism. (68) In India, the Bikkhus had to retreat in every monsoon season because there were many living beings coming out of the ground that when going begging for food, they had to watch out to make sure that they did not trample on tiny beings. Is it possible to become completely non-violent?

Even the monks of the Mahayana tradition are vegetarian, but when they boil a cup of water as many as 60 thousand microorganisms are destroyed. There is no such thing as complete non-violence because in each of us, there is certain amount of non-violence and of violence of necessity in order to survive e.g we have to drink water. Our intention is to proceed in that direction. That is why we have to practise non-violence within by practising mindfulness in order to see the deep causes of violence. Not only does direct bodily harm concerns us but also thinking is at the base of every act of killing. A gun can kill living beings but a lunatic ideologist may kill millions. That which Gandhi called purification and Buddhists called insight understanding can nourish the seeds of peace in ourselves. (69)

The concept of non-violence cannot exist without the concept of violence. Looking at the world around us, violence happens almost everywhere. Ken Jones coined the term 'ecological violence' in relation to nature. One animal supports the life of another by becoming its prey in the food chain. In other words “life itself depends on killing other forms of life”. (70) Before becoming civilised, human beings had been part of this ‘harmonious balance’ of the food chain and by becoming non-violent, human beings have become ‘unnatural’!

To Buddhists the roots of violence can be traced to self-affirming expression which manifests in the forms of anger, resentment, greed, defensiveness. It starts the karmic momentum in the cycle of birth and death. Actually all five precepts, not just the first one, can be interpreted as non-harming principles and compassion becomes the central part of Buddhist ethics. It sounds like the basic principle for any great religion, but because violence is seen as rooted in the fabricated self, the Buddhist approach to realising compassion is unique. Individual or even community suffering is seen as the
inevitable results of previous karma. When confronting violence, Buddhists tend to inflict suffering on themselves in order to move the heart of the oppressors, as Gandhi suggested. As told in Jakatas, in his previous life, the Buddha fed himself to a hungry tigress. In Vietnam many monks and laymen self-immolated to stop Diem’s repressive regime and the escalation of war. In the history of mankind, many Buddhist countries have gone to war for various reasons, but there have not been any Buddhist wars of religion, aimed at forcible conversion. Buddhists do not recognise a ‘just war’, which is seen as a false term coined and put into circulation to justify and execute hatred, cruelty, violence and massacres (71)

However our world is far from an ideal living environment. Many wars are still ravaging many parts of the world. Violence has been manifested in more subtle and hidden ways. Instead of brute force used in colonialism in the past, oppression has been well hidden in the political and economic order. This is called institutional violence. For instance the current global economic order is a very effective mechanism for keeping billions in poverty and under oppressive regimes. How would engaged Buddhists view violence used against oppressors or oppressive regimes?

Sulak, who strictly observes Hinayana tradition, does not agree that members of the Sangha should be involved in any form of violence unless they disrobe themselves first, even though he is in sympathy with laymen who have to resort to violence. He comments:

*In our tradition, for the monks even to harm trees, to harm water to harm the earth, is wrong. To take a life means expulsion from the monkhood. And if you do that and remain in robes, you are a false monk* (72)

Like Gandhi, Sulak refused to accept not only the concept of a just war; he declined to support the use of violence against the villains like Ne Win. When asked whether he condoned the possibility of killing as an act of compassion, or an act to alleviate the suffering of others, he flatly refused: ‘This is not possible within my upbringing and my tradition. I cannot justify killing’ (73)
However even in his tradition, situational violence did occur. The assassination of
Bandaranaike Ceylon is a case in point. Decadent Thai monks, who relied on successive
military Governments to sustain their luxurious lifestyles, tacitly condoned the killing of
communists and the suppression of students and reformists. In the Mahayana tradition,
the limited use of violence, which Gary Snyder calls 'gentle violence', has been treated
with caution. There is a story about a Bodhisattva who was responsible for ferrying 500
people across the river. With Bodhisattva spirit he was forced to kill a saboteur who had
a plan to sink the boat. In this case a lesser killing may be the means of avoiding a
greater killing or, as the Vietnamese say “It is permissible to kill a cat in order to save a
thousand mice”. His Holiness the Dalai Lama tried to distinguish 'the act' from 'the
actor' but accepted that in exceptional cases to sacrifice one for the benefit of many
may, theoretically speaking, be correct. He quickly added that to implement it is very
complicated. The interpretation of gentle and limited violence is obviously open to
abuse because 'who is decide for the greater benefit of whom'. (74) After many years
strictly applying non-violence for social change, Nhat Hanh also confessed that: 'I
cannot say I am completely non-violent. Even the Buddha while he was walking,
drinking, eating could not be entirely non-violent due to what it takes to be alive. We
are all participating in some degrees of violence and non-violence' (75). Nhat Hanh and
most engaged Buddhists refused to recommend total non-violence for particular
situations, particularly in the instance of institutional violence:

The most visible form of violence is revolutionary and liberation violence. So if you
stand for non-violence, you automatically stand against revolution and liberation. Quite
distressing! 'No!' Buddhists are not against revolution or liberation. They are against
the other side, the side of the institutions, the side of the oppressors. The violence of the
system is much more destructive, much more harmful, although it is well hidden.
Buddhists call it institutional violence. By calling themselves non-violent they abhor all
violence, but are first to speak out against institutional violence. (76)

Between two evils, institutional violence, although it is well hidden in the propaganda
machine, is seen as a greater compared with violence used by the oppressed in the so-
called liberation wars. Having learned the futility of brute force in the past, now neo-
colonialism and economic exploitation have been able to operate non-violently.
Therefore, taking a stand against all violence is actually becoming party to the
hypocrisy of established power brokers or as a French theologian put it, violence can be condoned to expose a hypocritically peaceful situation. (77) Another Buddhist activist, Joanna Macy, refused to condemn violence used against institutional violence by quoting Gandhi’s comment that ‘non-violence was not for the weak but for the strong. Gandhi would rather have had somebody engaging in violence out of conviction than engage in non-violence out of cowardice! Therefore it is inappropriate to pass judgement on the use of arms and violence against those who are invading, killing, blockading and destroying’. (78) Buddhists in Vietnam and in Tibet faced the same dilemma. Could they take up arms and still maintain the principle of nonviolence? Twenty years after the Vietnam War ended, Nhat Hanh confessed that the seeds of anger were always there and all he could do was to practise mindfulness to diminish his anger. After many proposals to open the dialogue with the Chinese fell on deaf ears, the Dalai Lama stuck to his nonviolent approach and declared that he was convinced that it was the only way to conduct politics. Nevertheless, when visiting a group of volunteer hunger strikers in India, the Dalai Lama admitted that while he could not condone violence, neither could he offer any meaningful alternative either. (79) As Buddhists how are we to cope with situational violence? So far there has only been faint advice given! Sulak could only give vague scriptural warning that ‘to practise non-violence, we must cultivate mindfulness’ (80) while Jones advised that ‘one should meditate on the dilemma, then do what has to be done’. Nhat Hanh’s answer is very much in line with Gandhi’s ahimsa tradition, but it is still an open answer nevertheless:

*I am often asked: “What if you are practising nonviolence and someone breaks into your house and tries to kidnap you and your daughter or kill your husband? What should you do? Should you still act in a nonviolent way? The answer depends on your state of being. If you are prepared, you may react calmly and intelligently, in the most non-violent way possible. (81)*

What is the most non-violent way possible? Who is going to decide what degree of violence is reasonable? We have to come back to Nagarjuna’s politics of enlightenment to answer these questions. He answers that it depends upon the degree of individual spiritual maturity. And in the Engaged Buddhist movements, the role of the laity has become more and more significant. How do these lay people practise nonviolence while
engaging in social and political reform? Gary Snyder, a leader of the 60’s Hippie Beat and Square Movement, commented:

*My choice is the lay choice, the Bodhisattva choice, the choice of engaging in it as it is-running the same karmic risks...You go into it with your eyes open. You know it’s dangerous, but you choose to do it.... The Bodhisattva spirit means that you don’t back off from taking things on, or getting your hands a little bit dirty or quaffing a little bit poison, or running risks. (82)*

In his youthful days Snyder was known as a Buddhist anarchist who did not hesitate to use ‘gentle violence’ to stop what was morally wrong’. He believed that if poverty, oppression or injustice came to our front door, we are ‘really obligated to deal with them’. Now, being a respectable figure in the world Buddhist community, he writes more emphatically but realistically, stating that:

*Nonviolence is always the way, but you cannot always do it. This is the compassionate and practical paradox of the first precept...In an ultimate sense, there is no evasion of the precept. There are no excuses, there are no justifying circumstances for violence. However, in our contingent and organic beings in this karmic realm, the very law of impermanence is a law that is often enacted by processes that are violent (83).*

As Snyder realised, non-violence is still a difficult issue that is beyond the reach of any literal application to the precept of non-harm. How did the Buddhists maintain the principle of non-violence in their struggle?
Chapter Three

Essential issues of Engaged Buddhism

The Growth of Engaged Buddhism

Most Western Buddhists and scholars in the 19th century were deeply influenced by Hinayana. Scriptural texts were gathered and translated by people who had decided that Buddhism was world rejecting and passive. They chose to ignore the Sangha’s involvement in political affairs in South East Asia during the colonial period and probably considered political monks just as provocateurs. In the West the term engaged Buddhism did not exist until recent times.

In 1968 when Parallax began to publish books on Engaged Buddhism, there were a few books on this subject. In 1996 the publisher proudly presented a collection of essays, The Engaged Buddhist Reader, which included articles on the subject from more that 60 books. Today even elitist Buddhists now are fully engaging in social activism and begin to see that Buddhists who are not able to recognise suffering cannot call themselves Buddhists.

Obviously the image of monks who burned themselves, wrote political manifestoes, mobilised the public to join street protests, raised placards and shouted slogans, may have shattered the tranquility and peace of an esoteric religion, imprinted in many the Western readers, who consider the term socially and politically engaged Buddhism, contradictory.

However, during the research process, in the last four or five years, There appears to have been a vibrant shift from a primitive to a more modern Buddhism, which is taking shape in America. Interestingly I found that no longer did I have to rely on the ‘prescribed’ works of well established scholars like Christmas Humphreys, Edward Conze or Dr Suzuki, but I have encountered a new breed of scholars, who are mostly lay Buddhists. The tranquil discussions have become noisier, but livelier and, may I say, warmer and more human. The growing list of nominated candidates and laureates for the Nobel Peace Prize made The Engaged Buddhists really proud: Nhat Hanh,
Sulak Sivaraksa, The Dalai Lama and recently, Aung San Suu Kyi. Arnold Kotler, the editor of the Engaged Buddhist, recently recorded a significant growth of readership. In view of the above, perhaps we should not be surprised by this. Arnold Kotler has written:

*Now after a decade of working joyfully together, we present this Engaged Buddhist Reader, a collection of essays and poems gathered from more than sixty books on socially engaged Buddhism we have published previously. When we began Parallax Press in 1986, there were few books on “engaged Buddhism”. Today there are many reflecting the worldwide movement that is under-way. The notion of Buddhism as escapist has to a large extent vanished, while Buddhists, fully engaged in their lives and the life of society are visible throughout the world. (1)*

That was in 1996. Since then, the growth and influence of engaged Buddhism has been quite amazing. At the end of 1999, Kenneth Kraft presented a ‘new map of the path’ as a guide for American practitioners. The rapid growth of Buddhism in the West has been seen as the fourth Wheel Turning in history and this time the Wheel of Engaged Buddhism is going to be the new Mandala for the new millennium. (2) Not only have the numbers of books on Engaged Buddhism increased, but also they have influenced academic agendas. Recently there was an advertisement for a job with an ‘innovative Buddhist-inspired’ community which required someone with a Master’s Degree with professional experience in Engaged Buddhism’. In addition, universities such as Naropa Institute, The Boston Research Centre and Harvard University’s Centre for the Study of World Religions all have a Master’s program in Engaged Buddhism (3)

**Parameters of Engaged Buddhism**

Ironically this wide acceptance has made the task of defining the term ‘engaged’ more difficult. Some have commented that the term Engaged Buddhism is a tautology, because there is no such thing as non-engaged Buddhism. It has also attracted criticism in some quarters, for example, as one monk protested:
When people ask me, as they quite often do, What is an Engaged Buddhist? I am embarrassed. The phrase seems to imply that there are, can be, dis-engaged Buddhists. That is not something I feel it is polite, or politic, to admit. This becomes clearer if we use the Dalai Lama's alternative expression, “universal responsibility”. Would it sound okay to say: “We are responsible Buddhists, they are the irresponsible ones.”

Engaged Buddhism can be examined within the framework of spiritual and historical dimensions. While the spiritual context may have provided the same or at least, a similar framework for many Buddhists, the social-political dimension makes each movement unique from one to another. The former dimension is a benchmark to identify Buddhist-activists and define Buddhist social activism, as opposed to other types of activism, such as Marxism. The social dimension shapes distinctive characteristic of specific Buddhist social movements, such as the Struggle Movement in Vietnam in 1966, or the current Free Tibet Movement. The two dimensions can be combined into one spectrum, at one end is spirituality and at the other end is activism. Let us examine this spectrum of the inner-outer world from different angles.

**Tradition versus Modernity**: The raison d'etre of Buddhism is to end beings’ suffering. Traditional practice centred mostly on the psychological causes of human suffering, at the expense of its social causes. Craving for possessions, for instance, is the main cause of dissatisfaction. Unwholesome psychological elements like hatred, greed and delusion are products of our mind. The Buddha was compared to a Doctor of the Mind who diagnosed the illness, found its causes (craving, ignorance), prescribed a treatment for it (the Eightfold Path) and if everything went well, the patient would recover wholeness (Enlightenment). To overcome the illness, one should use a medicine called Mindfulness Meditation. The Buddha hardly addressed the external symptoms of social suffering; neither did the Sangha Community of his time.

The historic Buddha chose to act in a tragic way, which made him a revered figure, but to ordinary people, it was almost impossible to follow his footsteps. He renounced the material world and left his family to seek the Way when his son had just been born. He spent sometime as a wandering ascetic in the jungle and then another forty-
eight years to teach the Dharma. His religious order, the Sangha, embraced a strictly disciplined life in seeking enlightenment. To the masses, this life was entirely out of reach and most followers consider the Buddha’s path either too harsh or difficult to achieve.

Modern Buddhists, while adhering to the theodicy to explain the causes of suffering in the world, have modified its soteriology (that is a complex of beliefs and practices), in order to make them relevant to the current social conditions. Thus, the engaged Buddhists try to bring the spiritual and social dimensions together and it is not possible to understand why (motives) and how (skilful means) engaged Buddhists behave without referring to these two dimensions. Kenneth Kraft pointed this out very clearly in The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism as he declared:

*Present day Buddhist thinkers maintain that social conditions and political institutions also effect suffering in crucial ways, exacerbating it or easing it. The same forces that were underscored in early Buddhism like desire, greed, anger ignorance—must be dealt with socially and politically as well as individually.* (5)

Engaged Buddhists explained the first precept not only in terms of individual conduct, but also of global context. Nhat Hanh re-wrote the first precept, You Shall Not Kill, as ‘I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.’ (6) Not to kill is no longer just an individual ethical principle, but rather it implies collective and social responsibility to stop killing also. Its implications are far reaching. Not only must we as individuals refrain from killing, but we have a moral obligation to stop others from killing too. As a result, we will have to re-evaluate the very social and political system we live in to see if it causes human suffering. For instance, how do Westerners think about global capitalism, which has kept millions of people in the third world submerged in poverty? Or to use another example, does one simply blame warmongers, like Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot, for human holocausts while believing that one’s conscience is clear, even though we said and did nothing to protest or stop that killing?

Human desire surely leads to craving which in turn, causes suffering. But this is not always a linear causal effect. The principle of dependent co-arising, the central tenet
of Buddhism, teaches that the causal relationship is an interaction of multiple factors where cause and effect can not be categorically isolated or traced uni-directionally. Modern activists are challenging the belief that the pre-conceptions and pre-dispositions of the mind itself shaped reality in early Buddhism. To them, a genuine understanding of mutual causality involves a transcendence of conventional dichotomies between self and world. Thus a social system may determine a behavioural pattern. For instance, consumerism makes individuals more acquisitive, widens the gap between the rich and the poor nationally and internationally, and damages the environment. Here suffering is aided and abetted not only by craving, but also by a particular social system, which actively promotes and supports consumerism. (7)

**Ethical-practice based versus Service-based practice:** The continuum from ethics to social activism reflects different stages of its journey and progress on the road to spiritual maturity. Keeping in mind that as in any process, it is far from being a linear relationship, and this spectrum is useful only in classifying varieties of Engaged Buddhism.

During its history of development, Buddhism had to adapt to local cultures where it had spread, but its central teachings have remained almost untouched and its practitioners, whether monks or laity, must adhere to these. They include morality, meditative practices, compassion-wisdom and in Mahayana, following the Bodhisattvas' ideal. Translating these into Western-style concepts and language, Queen identified four distinctive styles of Buddhist ethics: discipline, virtue, altruism and engagement. These styles may be seen overlapping and cumulative, but on the whole, discipline and virtue characterised in the early history of Buddhism, while altruism and engagement came to prominence at a later stage. Most significantly, politically engaged Buddhism had few precedents before the nineteenth century. (8)

Discipline was translated into precepts, or ethical principles, to guard practitioners from going astray. To become a Buddhist, one must declare that one seeks refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha community while at the same time, to observe at least five precepts. Monks and nuns must adhere to two hundred and fifty precepts in addition to upholding celibacy. Meditation is a technique to practise to
attain wisdom and compassion. These self cultivated virtues have dearly been cherished by all sects, but the Mahayana Buddhists urged their practitioners to move to another realm, the realm of action. The Mahayanists also practise six perfections, the first of these is generosity, which is considered to consist in social interactive behaviour, while meditation-compassion-wisdom trilogy are placed further down in the practice order. In *Vipassana*, or insight meditation, practitioners have to project feelings of compassion on to people with whom they have a particular relationship. The above represents a significant shift from virtue to action and engagement. Thus, meditation is only a means of cultivating these virtuous states of the mind, like loving-kindness, joy and equanimity toward others and, in the process, to act or interact in these ways in the wider society. (9)

It took quite some time for the Mahayanists to refute the lonely cold and elitist path of early Buddhism to embrace instead the Bodhisattva’ ideal. In fact, it seems a serious practitioner may have to ‘jump’ back and forth from one side to the other for innumerable times, or to use the dependent co-arising framework, to move around the loop as many times as is necessary.

**Virtue based and action based:** Engagement implies action- or interaction with others in a social context. The virtues that every practitioner aspires to are wisdom and compassion. Wisdom, in Buddhist theodicy, means following the principle of dependent co-arising. While wisdom provides practitioners with the right view, the first essential step in the eight-fold path. Wisdom helps practitioners discover the principle of non-substantiated self and impermanence and helps them to detach from this material world. Without understanding this core principle, compassion cannot begin. Naturally, compassion is not an exclusive virtue of Buddhism as is evidenced in many religions. For instance, in Confucianism, compassion and wholesomeness are considered part of human nature. Mencius used a vivid example to illustrate what he defined as compassion. When a child is going to fall into a deep well, one’s spontaneous reaction is to attempt to save the child from being drowned. However, Confucianism does not provide any theodicy, or metaphysical foundation to justify his ethical position, unlike Buddhism.

There are two concepts to define love in Buddhism, *Karuna*, is translated as
compassion while Metta, the second is defined as loving-kindness. Assuming the Arhat or Lone-Enlightened Buddha attained compassion, how did he manifest his compassion? Was there compassion if the Arhat passed into infinity after being enlightened? Love must be manifested through social relationship that is why the Mahayanists describe compassion in more concrete terms, like generosity, giving and saving sentient beings. Qan Ying Bodhisattva listens to every cries of suffering in the world and alleviates them. So do Bodhisattvas, who vow never, go into infinity until the last being is saved? Thus the division between virtues (understanding compassion) and altruism and engagement is artificial. They are indivisible. Love means action.

**Mindfulness-based practice versus social engagement based practice:** The shift from mindfulness to service may happen naturally in the process of spiritual maturity, in accordance with the principle of dependant co-arising, as Nhat Hanh succinctly spells out:

*In our tradition, monasteries are only a kind of laboratory to spend time in, in order to discover ‘something’. They are not an end, they are a means. You get training and practice of the spiritual life so you can go elsewhere and be with other people.* (10)

Thus meditation is only a practicing technique to make people ‘aware’ of what is going within themselves and the world ‘out there’. Being aware, or mindfulness should never be misconstrued as an attained stage in the process of enlightening, or spiritual maturity.

In other words, meditation is a cleansing technique which could be used over and over again by anyone, regardless of their level of spiritual process, although we cannot be sure that meditative techniques naturally lead to enlightenment and vice versa for enlightened people may never have practised meditation. When addressing the Sangha community in the West, Nhat Hanh focused mostly on meditative-based-mindfulness in everyday life and as a result, the meaning of engagement has become ambivalent. Some critics suggested that Nhat Hanh’s socially engaged practice was either ‘too’ engaged with the world and neglected traditional practice towards enlightenment, or ‘not engaged enough’, because of a lack of collective action in the public arena. The shift from politically engaged and collective Buddhist activism to a more socially engaged practice has made the parameters of Engaged Buddhism much
wider and more ambiguous.

Against the trend of accepting engaged Buddhism during the last twenty years in the West, elitist Buddhists still have equated Buddhism with practice of meditation. To those who do not focus on teaching of meditation are viewed as not ‘real’ Buddhists. Some of Nhat Hanh’s students nowadays consider mindfulness as the ultimate goals of their practice. They perceived that socially engaged practice was characterised mainly by being grounded in the establishment of mindfulness throughout one’s everyday life and had a vague idea of a commitment to relieve and reduce suffering. Not only has mindfulness become a gateway to Dharma, but the ultimate objective of their practice. Apparently these people do not see the difference between the raft and the shore and there are those practitioners in the Inter-Being Order who do not evidence to show a commitment to relieve and reduce suffering, except to their own members in their Sangha communities. They have practised an elitist and lonely path, like that of the disciples of Pratyekabuddha, the lonely Enlightened Buddha and are encouraged to attain “quietism”. Ironically Nhat Hanh was one of the revered figures of the Buddhist Movement in the 60’s, when thousands of activists joined street protests to test whether the Vietnamese Lotus could withstand the sea of fire.

Ironically, the interviewer noted that many people were attracted to Nhat Hanh’s teachings and practices because of his explicit inclusion of social issues, yet his teachings expressly emphasised practices that sustained a mindful life. One classic question related to self-transformation and world transformation recurs namely ‘Is mindfulness enough to make a person spontaneously engage in social activism?’ or, by contrast, critics question the assumption that individual transformation can bring about social engagement. This, they argued, is naive and too idealistic. Furthermore, emphasising meditation alone may have led his followers to a false view of the relationship between technique and its ultimate aim, as one adherent confessed:

In the beginning I believed that a diligent practice was the answer. In fact, I was a fanatic about meditation and retreats. I thought that if I persevered I would become enlightened, like Shakyamuni Buddha 2,500 years ago. If I concentrated hard enough, I would experience what he experienced. Then I would go out and take action. It took me a long time to understand that I couldn’t wait till then to take action. (11)
Nhat Hanh himself never loses sight of this when he says: “Meditation is to be aware, and to try to help”. He expressed clearly his vision of Engaged Buddhism in a poem:

*Once there is seeing, there must be acting*  
*We must be aware of the real problems of the world.*  
*Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do,*  
*And what not to do, to be of help.* (12)

Nhat Hanh also does not overlook the dynamic interaction between the mindful inner world and social activism. During the war, he wrote *The Miracle of Mindfulness* as a manual of meditation for social workers of the School of Youth and Social Service. He emphasised on the importance of mindfulness while working with the Vietnamese peasants suffering American bombings. When he was a young and radical monk, he and others established the Fragrant Palm Leaves retreat where he and his close associates could practise mindfulness in order to replenish their spiritual energy. (13) This retreat served as a kind of Alma Mater. Also, when establishing Van Hanh University, Nhat Hanh did not intend merely to set up an ordinary higher learning centre, but rather a centre where students could ‘touch’ the source of spiritual energy. This led to the inception of the Tiep Hien Order, which Nhat Hanh established in 1964. He affirmed:

*To be in touch with mind means not only to be aware of the processes of our inner life but also to rediscover our true mind, which is the source of understanding and compassion. Being in touch with true mind is like digging deep into the soil until we reach a hidden source and the well fills with fresh water. Upon rediscovering our true mind, we are filled with understanding and compassion, which not only nourishes us, but those around us as well.* (14)

This dynamic relation between mindfulness and social engagement is well described by one engaged scholar: “*It may be possible to engage the mind without significantly changing the world we all share. But it is not possible to engage the world except through engagement with the mind.”* (15) However it should be stressed that, without engaging with the world, that form of Buddhism could not be called Engaged
Buddhism, and without engaging the mind while attempting to transform the world, it could not be called Buddhist social activism. Virtues like mindfulness, compassion, loving kindness, non-violence ... make social activism distinctively Buddhist and aim to create a more peaceful society as well as happier individuals. But with widespread human misery in the world today, how can Buddhists follow the footsteps of Bodhisattvas to alleviate suffering? Queen asks a critical question in relation to alleviating suffering and misery:

But one may wonder, in light of the widespread conditions of human misery in our world today, whether virtue-based morality, mental cultivation, individualised good works, and generalised vows to save all beings will be enough to prevent the spread of political tyranny, economic injustice, and environmental degradation in the era to come. Such a critical question reflects a critical shift in thought and practices that distinguishes Buddhist leaders and communities today from their predecessors in traditional Asian countries. (16)

Therefore it is quite perplexing to see that, nowadays Nhat Hanh’s students have primarily practised mindfulness as a gateway to Dharma. Nobody would disagree that individual and family mindfulness is a necessary link to cultural and political transformation, and that collective practice of mindfulness reinforces and guides one’s social activism, but practising mindfulness is only the first part of the process. The second part is to go out into the world, listen to the sound of suffering and help alleviate it, as the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva have been doing for millions of kalpas.

Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine noticed that some ‘angry’ activists in the American Peace Movement in the 60’s and 70’s were impressed by Nhat Hanh’s approach, with the result that their understanding of activism radically changed. Since the Vietnam War, there has been no need for a revival of the Peace Movement in America, it seems. Saying ‘all Buddhism is engaged’ may be a little complacent, because there still are some forms of non-engaged Buddhism, or even disengaged Buddhism. Nhat Hanh never encourages his disciples to cling to mindfulness and to become a new generation of lone-enlightened ones. Instead Nhat Hanh affirmed:

Some teachers tell us not to pay attention to the problems of the world like hunger,
war, oppression, social injustice, etc. These teachers have not truly understood the meaning of Mahayana. Of course we should not neglect practices like counting the breath, meditation and sutra study, but what is the purpose of doing these things? The purpose of meditation is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going in the world can be seen within ourselves and vice versa. Once we see this clearly, we cannot refuse to take a stand and to act. (17)

Likewise, Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace laureate, expressed the essential characteristic of Engaged Buddhism in a more practical way:

(In politics) we try everything we can do not to hurt others or create feelings of antipathy. But if people are doing things that are unacceptable to us, as the party that represents the democratic movement, we can’t just sit there and say, “They are doing it...They are doing it” and not to do anything. For instance, they have been sentencing our people unjustly to prison. We are not going to meditate and say “They have been unjust...” We are going to do something. (18)

Being mindful of unjust and oppressive social institutions is not enough. One must be inspired to act on it in order to seek and establish an alternative. This parameter is essential in defining Engaged Buddhism.

**Self-Transformation and World-Transformation:** As we have seen, the main focus of Engaged Buddhist movements is on social and political issues. They are intended to achieve a total liberation from all forms of oppression, whether social, political or spiritual but what made them distinctively different from other social reformists is that they do not neglect to cultivate inner peace. Self-transformation and world-transformation are clearly seen as inter-dependent. Political action to bring about social change is viewed as part of spiritual maturation process. The motto of the Sarvodaya group in Sri Lanka was ‘we made history and history made us’ This is the unique contribution of Buddhism to politics (19). Ambedkar fiercely fought for the rights of the Untouchables for their dignity as human beings, but claimed his fight was entirely spiritual. The Sarvodaya movement highlights the social meaning of the Four Noble Truths. The Dalai Lama has mobilised international pressure for the preservation of Tibetans’ religion and culture while Nhat Hanh put the survival of the
Vietnamese before anything else, including the preservation of Buddhist hierarchy, monasteries or rituals. All believe that they have offered a modern version of the Buddhist middle path, which is balanced between the material and transcendental aspects of social change (20). Their work is no different from Bodhisattvas’ work, which is to quench all the human sufferings in this world, here and now as well as in the hereafter.

Inevitably this social focus has provoked intense criticism from some quarters. Some traditionalist Buddhist scholars have raised doubts about Rahula’s scriptural interpretation. The English Bhikkhu Sangharakshita denounces Rahula’s premise that “Buddhism is based on service to others” as an “extreme confusion of thought”. He argues that the Bodhisattva’s ideal can not be equated with the secular concept of social service, otherwise Nirvana could be seen as a sort of anti-social selfishness. Other scholars who are unfamiliar with the Mahayana tradition also think that the primary focus of Buddha’s Scripture is on personal transformation, not social reformation, as illustrated here by Bardwell Smith’s comment:

*The primary goal of Buddhism is not a stable order or a just society but the discovery of genuine freedom (or awakening) by each person.... It is critical to stress the distinction between what is primary and what is not. For Buddhists to lose this distinction is to transform their tradition into something discontinuous with its original and historic essence.* (21).

Some argued the Buddha was not a social reformer, as many Engaged Buddhists like to think of Him. His disciples made little or no effort in developing the middle principles to mediate between universal principles and the sociopolitical and economic situations in any given society. These criticisms are valid as long as they serve as a warning to those who secularise the transcendental enlightenment and transform it into a strictly mundane enlightenment, but most would agree that the basic teachings of Buddhism can profitably be read with the intention of determining their implications for social ethics and for social and political theory (22).

Smith and other Western scholars study Buddhism as outsiders (Smith says “their” tradition) and still use dual modes of thinking, either this or that. But to the Buddhists,
all things are impermanent and subject to change. Its history and development prove that many sects and branches have developed their own distinctive characteristics, which are adaptable to, and suitable for the social and cultural environment in which they grow. Even so they remain all still distinctively Buddhist. From the Theravadins to Zen and Tantrism, tradition has been transformed into something new, yet continuous with its original and historic essence. Despite Smith’s contentions, these traditions are not discontinuous, as some critics would like to paint socially engaged Buddhism

It is virtually impossible for any Sangha members to turn the Dharma Wheel under intense bombings, destructive wars, foreign domination, or when the national culture is falling apart. Nhat Hanh once said that The Buddha had left the temple and gone to the countryside to share the suffering of the innocent Vietnamese. Ambedkar’s interpretation may have shocked some traditional Buddhists but he rightly thinks that it is an insult to blame the victims of social injustice through a rigid interpretation of Karma. The Sarvodaya leader, Ariyaratne, is adamant that it is an error to interpret Buddhism as a world-denying system while Sulak Sivaraksa is even more outspoken and clear on this:

*Spiritual consideration and social cannot be separated...People seeking to live spiritually must be concerned with their social and physical environment. To be truly religious is not to reject society but to work for social justice and change, Religion is the heart of social change and social change is the essence of religion.* (23).

Legend has it that, even as he was savouring the blissful state of awakening, a delegation of gods begged the Buddha to share his awakening with those who still suffered. And the Buddha’s decision to arise from his seat and go out into the world can be rightly interpreted as the first step in socially Engaged Buddhism. (24)

Even though seeing the danger of the secularisation of scriptural interpretation by annexing both contemporary social categories and superficial consciousness, Ken Jones in *The Social Face of Buddhism* (25), agrees that the Buddha’s analysis of human conditions does carry social implications. Therefore the social dimension of Buddhism needs no other rationale than that of being an amplification of traditional
Buddhist morality. The focus on social transformation in Engaged Buddhist practice is clearly supported by evidence in doctrine, practice and in history.

Many social conditions are seen by the Buddha as those which "lead to passion and to the piling up of rebirths" and therefore they should be changed or purged. Individual response is compounded by social conditions which in turn, are inherited by each new generation in what we term collective karma. It follows therefore that there is a need to create different social conditions in order to nurture positive personal transformation. Furthermore social activism may serve as a training ground to provide conditions for the ripening of inner awareness which in turn helps activists to see clearly and act effectively to facilitate both personal and social change. This reflects the inter-dependent principle, "this is, because of that is", or the image of Indra's Net, as Jones spells out:

..it is wrong to say that psychic transformation must precede social change, or that social change must first create the ideal society, which will then be conducive to psychic growth (26).

If one agrees that social and inner change are inseparable, the question now is how to keep a balance between two ends, transformation of world and transformation of self, social activism and solitary quest for enlightenment. As one of the Thailand's most revered monks, Buddhadasa, puts it: "...social goods, acting for the benefit of society are pre-requisites of travelling beyond to Nirvana'. (27)

A Definition of Engaged Buddhism

Apart from Nhat Hanh's statement 'All Buddhism is already engaged', there are a few more inclusive definitions like "Every moment of life is engagement", or "Engaged Buddhism encompasses all schools". Nevertheless, the parameters of Engaged Buddhism have to be limited to some extent so that a 'workable' definition can emerge. Within the spectrum of mindfulness-based versus service-based, or discipline and virtue-based versus altruism and engagement-based Buddhism, there must be essential criteria to define Engaged Buddhism, such as to engage, to act or to do, in order to change the world. The foci shift from one end of the spectrum to the other,
from psychological conditions to social ones, from ethical to service-based, from virtue to action. There must be an inter-relatedness between self-transformation to world-transformation. One has to cross over the other shore and follow the Bodhisattvas’ footsteps, even though one may come back to the inner shore to retouch and recharge one’s spiritual source as often as possible. Engaged Buddhism should not be understood as just social or charitable work. Engaged Buddhists, following into the footsteps of Bodhisattvas, must incorporate their personal beliefs, political commitments or other forms of involvement, to change or to create new social institutions to alleviate suffering. This is a matter of choice, not judgment. Ken Jones, author of The Social Face of Buddhism, offers a definition of what he called radical activism that the Vietnamese Buddhist Movement invoked in 1963 and 1966:

*Radical activism is concerned with fundamental changes in social policies, practices and institution (and as a result) must inevitably be to some extent involved in the questions of power and conflict, confrontation and partisanship.* (28)

**New Interpretations of the Dharma**

Not surprisingly, Engaged Buddhism was seen by conservative elements in the Sangha as a disturbing development, which shattered the notion of the quiet path to enlightening. Some may have questioned whether it was a true inheritance of the Buddhist tradition or just a heretical form of it. The Theravadins raised the same doubt at the time when Mahayana emerged as its formidable opponent. Engaged Buddhists argued that change was a fundamental principle in Buddhism and a continuing change of the tradition transformed it into a living religion. The Buddha always said that Dharma was only a raft helping his faithful to cross over the river and reach the enlightened shore. Their raft comprised all the basic tenets to justify a new praxis and the only difference was emphasis on the social and political environment. At the historic conversion of half a million of the Untouchables in Nagpur in 1956, Dr Ambedkar called his Buddhism *Neo-Buddhism*, or Navayana. Some were tempted to call it Terrayana, the Earth-Vehicle, because Engaged Buddhism focused on the pains and promises of *this* life in *this* world. This worldview and praxis may be unprecedented in the history of Buddhism, but its worldview and ultimate aim
remained the same, as Queen pointed out:

Engaged Buddhism is endowed with many, if not all, of the themes and techniques from the past: inter-dependence, mindfulness, compassion, skilful means...But it is also endowed with a sensitivity to social injustice, institutional evil and political oppression as source of human suffering, that has not been central to Buddhist analysis in the past. (29)

Each religion has its own theodicy and a soteriology. Theodicy means the essence of a religion which remains unchanged for a long time but soteriology means change with time. Buddhist metaphysics offers a vision of the world, which, in turn provides a complex of beliefs and practices, which constantly change with time and circumstances. The new interpretations of basic tenets such as interdependence, Karma, compassion, transformation of self have provided guiding principles for Buddhist activists. However not only did engaged Buddhists explain traditional beliefs with neologism, they placed them in a modern context where the flames of human greed and ignorance have been institutionalised in the furnace of the global market place, as Stephen Batchelor writes:

The contemporary social engagement of Dharma practice is rooted in awareness of how self-centred confusion and craving can no longer be adequately understood only as psychological drives that manifest themselves in subjective states of anguish. We find these drives embodied in the very economic, military and political structures that influence the lives of the majority of people on earth (30)

Gandhi and Ambedkar in the struggle for the liberation of the Untouchables highlight the different viewpoints of traditionalists and engaged Buddhists. In line with Hindu belief in immutable Karmic effects, Gandhi advocated compassion in dealing with Untouchables while struggling to improve their position and acceptance in Indian society. Gandhi believed that each person is limited or empowered by the cumulative effects of his or her Karma, and thus individuals cannot be rescued by outside forces. To Gandhi, caste was a complex issue related to cosmic law and thus it could not be abrogated by social or political institutions. Ambedkar, who was a product of Columbia University and the London School of Economics, viewed Karma from a
completely different angle. Like many engaged Buddhists, Ambedkar believed that collective and institutionalised expressions of greed, hatred and delusion arising from a legacy of colonialism, bureaucratic corruption and a religious-based caste system, had resulted in a great deal to human suffering, thus the system itself must be restructured and re-modelled to remove injustice. Blaming the victims of a socially unjust system while justifying human misery by reference to an immutable and metaphysical entity like Karma, was an insult to Untouchables, according to Ambedkar. He wanted new social institutions to be created to alleviate the effects of their collective Karma and his motto “mobilise, educate and agitate” showed his determination to move from notions of altruism and compassion to practical action and engagement with the poor Untouchables. A rigid interpretation of Karma as unchangeable effects coupled with the prospect of a promised land in a very distant future, offered by early Buddhism, may have contributed to insensitivity, or at least, indifference towards social justice issues in the past. As an Engaged Buddhist expresses it “I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma, born of my karma, related to my karma, supported to my karma. I feel that if I can mend the world, then my heart will be at peace” (31) Furthermore, reinforced by the notion of the here and now in Mahayana, Engaged Buddhists were determined to implement the social transformation of the world right here and right now, wherever they found themselves and in whatsoever circumstances.

However, the emphasis on fighting the destructive forces within modern economic and political systems has created a new rift within the Engaged Buddhists whose diverse reactions in the Gulf War and the Kosovo ethnic cleansing were completely conflicting. Some American Engaged Buddhists supported NATO bombings because they felt that there was no viable alternative, while others questioned the premise of ever using violence to achieve peace. Some were quite willing to come out and say openly that ‘we’ needed to intervene militarily to end the Kosovars’ sufferings. The editor of the Buddhist Magazine, Tricycle, used the concept of a just war, which is prevalent in Christian culture, to sanction intervention:

Pacifism is a position for which I have enormous respect, but it is not one that I share. I am drawn to those schools of Buddhism in which “killing” becomes part of a more complex conversations; in the Balkan, the alleviation of suffering emerges as the
prime motive for war, and the strategies accommodate paradox and contradiction.

(32)

It is a difficult issue and without spiritual practice to achieve self-transformation, Buddhist activists could have become fundamentalists on important issues of belief and practice.

Should Politics and Religion Mix?

Each society has its own distinctive problems. Western Buddhists may have been involved in activities that are seen as totally irrelevant by Buddhists in the third world. For instance in Britain many people are using names like Buddhist Humanists, Buddhist Greens or even Buddhist Christians. They have been busy developing an alternative culture or lifestyle to bring about a quiet revolution, which they firmly believe, is the only political program, which has any chance of success. (33). Others are involved in charity or welfare work, like setting up Hospices. Someone even call themselves "pure activists" who formerly have kept social activism at bay, but they are now beginning to undertake social actions by writing, publishing, debating, petitioning, lobbying, demonstrating...In the past these 'hobby-farmer Buddhists' have been criticised as insulated from the suffering of the real world. It is encouraging to see them now following the Bodhisattvas' footsteps however hesitantly. They now have a new agenda as Philip Kapleau noted:

A major task for Buddhism in the West, it seems to me, is to ally itself with religious and other concerned organisations to forestall the potential catastrophes facing human race: nuclear holocaust, irreversible pollution and the continuing large scale destruction of non-renewable resources. (34)

Even so these activists are still seen as light-hearted activists compared with their counterparts in the third world. In his book, Engaged Buddhism in the West, Queen includes a few articles on American Engaged Buddhist groups such as activist women, gay Buddhists and activists who strive for prison reform. One wonders where the list will end! Meanwhile the people of the Third World are struggling to get their families fed and to keep diseases at bay. The wretched and the oppressed in poor
countries still have to confront poverty, social injustice, destructive war... and are deeply involved in what is called radical activists or peace makers. They concentrate on fundamental changes in social policies, practices and institutions. Inevitably they have become involved in political struggles, conflict, confrontation and partisan politics which are part of any parcel of combating social problems (35). **Thus the question is not whether Engaged Buddhists, monks and laity, living in the Third World, should be involved in politics or not, but how they should be linked with politics, particularly partisan politics.**

Even if one would agree that Buddhism has a social message, we still need to ask in what framework social transformation can be achieved? Living in a simple rural society, the Buddha addressed problems like the caste system, poverty and individual economic problems. He did not have to encounter problems that we are facing today like biological holocausts, environmental destruction, ethnic cleansing etc... If He lived in our time we wonder what He would say and how He would act? Indeed one wonders if the politics of enlightenment would be sufficient for the monumental problems of our time, which threaten our planet?

The relationship between Buddhism and partisan politics in modern history has not always been healthy. In Mahayana countries like China and Japan, Buddhism was only the bridesmaid of Confucianism and Shintoism. It tended to make a virtue of its fidelity to government in order to survive economically and politically. And any rulers who did espouse Buddhism tended to associate religious faith with secular fealty. In the Hinayana countries, the Sangha was almost totally dependent on Government and the patronage of the wealthy therefore it lacked of power ‘to give or withhold social legitimisation’ (36). In these countries Buddhism was manipulated by rulers to legitimise their monarchy, as was Confucianism in China. For instance, Japanese Rinzai Buddhism was closely associated with the samurai warriors’ while martial arts and Zen Masters used the basic tenets of Mahayana (eg emptiness) to train samurai killers. In contemporary history many Zen Masters were pre-occupied with the task of giving Japanese military men Zen training and even the great Zen Master D. T Suzuki was a strong supporter of Japanese fascism. Nowadays in the business world Zen training has been used to instill loyalty and efficiency into the employees of Japanese industrial corporations (37). In Thailand, the Sangha has been subordinate
at every level and under the previous military dictatorship regime, some Sangha members openly violated the first precept by advocating the killing of communists. In Sri Lanka the Sangha eagerly sought the restoration of past Buddhist glory and thus became unwittingly involved in the darker side of politics. A prominent Sri Lankan monk was involved in the assassination of the country’s Prime Minister and has been entangled in the prolonged war with ethnic Tamils. Stephen Batchelor explained why the Sangha usually took the conservative stand in politics:

*While Buddhist traditions have consistently affirmed freedom from craving and anguish (the second Noble Truth) as the raison d’etre of a culture of awakening, they have been less consistent in affirming the freedom to respond creatively to the anguish of the world. Internally, through becoming religious orthodoxies, and externally, through identifying with autocratic and even to totalitarian regimes, Buddhism has inclined toward political conservatism.* (38)

Even so the darker side of politics should not mar the positive achievement of these movements. The Dalai Lama, who is in the delicate position of a God-King, tries to focus on the positive aspects of political action. He says:

*Sometimes we look down on politics, criticising it as dirty. However, if you look at it properly, politics in itself is not wrong. It is an instrument to serve human society. With good motivation-sincerity and honesty-politics becomes an instrument in the service of the society. But, when motivated by selfishness, with hatred, anger and jealousy, it becomes dirty.* (39).

According to His Holiness motivation is the essential factor to differentiate between Machiavellian and Enlightened politics. However political life is even more complex than the Dalai Lama’s model. Its connotation is extensive from theoretical framework to the application of tactics and strategies to achieve its objectives. It is involved with innumerable activities like partisan politics, forms of governments and human behaviours. Politics is concerned with the relation of man to man and as a result, no one in an organised society can live without participating in politics. When defending the role of the Sangha in public affairs, Rahula quotes Dr Hobhouse’s statement about the function of politics which sounds like a Bodhisattva’s vow: “It is the function of
politics to resolve human problems justly and equitably in such a manner as would be most beneficial to the greatest number” (40). On the darker side, politics is concerned with seizing and maintaining power to protect certain vested interest groups. But the aim of the enlightened politics is to protect people as prescribed by the Buddha in the “Ten Duties of the King”. Here is where politics and religion meet. Mahatma Gandhi emphasised that politics should not be separated from virtues, morality and righteousness. He also said that he became political because of his devotion to religion. Those who cried for the separation of religion from politics were ignorant not only of religion but also of politics. Answering critics who detested the idea of political Bhikkhus, Rahula was more forthright:

Politics is connected with life. So is religion. The two can never be separated. What the mind is to the body, religion is to politics. Religion is not external rites or ceremonies but the development of moral and spiritual character through the cultivation of such qualities as love, compassion and wisdom. Political administration undertaken by those who are lacking of such sublime thoughts and virtuous qualities can only spell disaster instead of prosperity to the world. (41).

Is a Politics of Enlightenment Possible?

There are some common links among the Engaged Buddhist Movements in modern times. Firstly, the crucial aspect that differentiates Buddhist activists with other social reformers is that they consider themselves not only as reformers or revolutionaries, but also as spiritual leaders. Gandhi, Ambedkar, Buddhist leaders in South Vietnam representing by Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama or Aung San Suu Kyi all maintained that they represented the traditional culture or value against an oppressive counterpart. Not only did they fight for social justice that basic human needs and dignity were respected, they also fought for values which their tradition cherished. Ambedkar emphasised that his fight was essentially spiritual and his objective was not just material improvement for Untouchables. The deep root of his movement was in fact religious rather than political, and he actually fought against a religious system that had brutalised his people for years. The Vietnamese Buddhist leaders engaged in a peace campaign because they believed the war was initiated by unenlightened forces that promoted hatred and killing, and caused enormous suffering to their compatriots.
and which obviously contradicted basic principles of Buddhism. The Chinese Government missed the point when they often quoted the Tibetans’ high living standard to defend for their occupation of Tibet. Who would like to exchange their religion, culture and social values for economic gains? The Buddhist activists did not resist what they considered evil unless they had a vision, as Daniel Berrigan expressed so well: ‘if one has only politics to resist politics, then everything goes! If one has an ideology to resist an ideology, every thing goes! What is required to resist the barbarian is a vision, a tradition, a faith; everything goes except the people, the community, the symbol of salvation’ (42) The Engaged Buddhists would say everything goes except compassion and wisdom, in other words, liberation.

Secondly, social reformers, like the Marxists, were incited by hatred towards certain social groups like the ruling class, why Engaged Buddhists were inspired by their religious ideals, the Bodhisattva’s ideals. The Buddhist activists acted out of compassion when witnessing their compatriots’ suffering which was not just a religious slogan, but a way of life in accordance with their belief. Nhat Hanh gave an example of a bombed village in Vietnam. Supposing the whole village was bombed, but fortunately the temple was intact. Should the monk meditate and pray or help the wounded? The object of praying and meditating is life, simply because life is the most beautiful and glorious thing we have. If the monks kept on praying and meditating, they did not understand the true meaning of praying and meditation! As in Nhat Hanh’s own words, ‘it hurts too much, we have to act’. (43) It was like Mencius’ spontaneous act when seeing a child drowning. Those who turned their back on suffering could not call themselves Buddhists. However, Buddhists may seek to destroy the system that creates suffering, but do not seek to revenge or destroy their enemy. One witnesses in many revolutions, when the oppressed succeed in dislodging their ‘enemy’, they immediately became the oppressors. In a sense Buddhists have no enemy, or as Nhat Hanh argued ‘men are not our enemy’. Therefore what the Engaged Buddhists seek to destroy are unjust human systems, not their opponents, to destroy the deed, not the doer in Gandhi’s words. Buddhists want to destroy the dark forces inside their opponents’ mind that are the real creators of unlightened political systems.

Thirdly, Buddhist activists try to keep a balance between the two extremes of
transforming the inner-self and ending socially unjust system(s). The secular social reformers, particularly the Marxists, gained their strength and support by promoting hatred and by focusing on conflict, as Marx asserted in the first line of the Communist Manifesto that conflict must be resolved by violence and armed struggle as the most desirable means to achieve justice.

Two legendary figures of Engaged Buddhism, Asoka and Nagarjuna both agreed that, one should practise the path, or cultivating the mind, before engaging in social or political action. Asoka served the welfare of the people ‘in accordance with the Dharma while Nagarjuna affirmed the main principle of politics of enlightenment was individualist transcendentalism (see below). Nhat Hanh reminded his disciples, saying: ‘Don’t do anything, just sit there!’ a lesson that teaches unless one has undergone practice to cultivate the mind, one becomes just another secular activist.

Gandhi campaigned against the British Raj as a Hindu spiritual leader, but if one examines his ideas closely, his Satyagraha reflects more faithfully the enlightened politics of Buddhism. He always maintained that Satyagraha is not a technique of social action, it is a way to approach conflicts and resolves it non-violently. It is a way of life or a spiritual force that is born of truth and love. Only by living it can one reach the full potential of Satyagraha (see Chapter Two). Gandhi humbly said that he did not invent Satyagraha, he only rediscovered it. He often said that the practice of Satyagraha had to begin ‘at home’, that is to start with spiritual practice. This resembles what Asoka called ‘under the guidance of Dharma’ and Nagarjuna referred to ‘individualist transcendentalism’. Secular activists tend to be self-righteous, arrogant, tyrannical and violent with their opponents because they lack of mindfulness training.

Satyagraha is manifested in Ahimsa, usually understood as non-violence and these two are intertwined and so impossible to separate (see Chapter Two). Ahimsa means ‘lacking any desire to kill’, which is another name for the first Buddhist precept. While the term non-violence implies a passive reaction, Ahimsa is a dynamic state of mind that has been experienced and practised in many contexts, including religion, politics and personal life. It encompasses more than the act of hurting any living things:
The principle of Ahimsa is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by our holding on to what we believe the world needs. (44)

These are called **Right View-Right Thought**, an important step of the Eight-fold path taught by the Buddha years ago. That is probably why Gandhi said he did not discover but only recover it. Like any Engaged Buddhists, Gandhi warned against the tendency of focusing on virtue and ethical-based Buddhism and affirmed that Ahimsa was not a clustered of virtue to be practised by the individual for his peace and final salvation, rather it is a **rule of conduct for society**, even though non-violence, like charity, must begin at home. In other words, if one inclines towards virtue or mindfulness, one may become the lone enlightened Buddha. An Engaged Buddhist must begin Ahimsa at home, by cultivating the mind or self-transformation, then ‘jump’ into the world out there to change unjust social and political structures. Secular activists often lack self-cultivation and as a result, they have been angrier and more violent than Engaged Buddhists. Nhat Hanh wrote the guidebook *The Miracle of Mindfulness* for his social workers in the School of Youth for Social Service during the war to help them to be mindful, calm and not to resort to any form of violence.

Have Buddhist activists been completely free of violence while engaging in political activities? Apparently three most highly regarded figures of non-Western engaged Buddhists. The Dalai Lama, Nhat Hanh and Aung San Suu Kyi, strictly adhere to non-violence, but not without a lot of soul searching and mindfulness cultivation. When some members of a Tibetan Youth Organisation in India decided to offer themselves for self-immolation, the Dalai Lama despondently declared: “I do not know what else I can do? His statement came short of supporting their acts, but it was an admission of failure from the world most famous pacifist. Nhat Hanh affirmed his belief in absolute non-violence in the Twelfth Precept of the Inter-Beings Order: “Do not kill. Do not let others to kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and to prevent war”. However when asked about reaction to a specific situation, Nhat Hanh’s answer became vague:

*What if you are practising love and patience and someone breaks into your house and*
tries to kidnap your daughter or kill your husband? What should you do? Should you shoot that person or act in a non-violent way? The answer depends on your state of being...A kind of answer would be superficial. (45)

The answer is ambiguous of necessity because non-violence is not a product, but rather a long process of application to different contexts where the degree of violence depends on individual mindfulness and a particular social and political context. Ahimsa, or non-violent action, like a creative product, may have been diverse and unpredictable. One has to be baptised by fire to become non-violent. The image of the Lotus in the Sea of Fire, in one of Nhat Hanh’s book about the Vietnam War, is not only a figurative image of Engaged Buddhism in the war, but is also a reminder that Buddhist activists actually went through the hell of fire in order to follow in the footsteps of Bodhisattvas.

Consequently diverse reactions of these Engaged Buddhists to oppressive and violent situations show that the relation between virtue like compassion, loving-kindness and compassionate actions, is a complex one. The assumption that compassion spontaneously leads to a certain responses may be an over-simplification. As Sulak Sivaraksa commented, the emphasis on pacifism seemed to be at once a great strength and a great weakness. (46)

Finally most leaders of modern Engaged Buddhist movements are laymen who had been educated by Western Institutions, thus, inevitably their interpretations of the Dharma have been influenced by the magnitude of social suffering in the world today, and by the globalisation of cultural values and modern notions such as human rights, economic justice, political due process and social progress. (47) Engaged Buddhists believed a new raft was needed to spread the social Dharma in modern times. Little wonder Ambedkar chose to call his Buddhism the New Vehicle.

Two Engaged Buddhists in Early History

Asoka: To Serve the People According to the Dharma: No politician in human
history better fits that model role of an enlightened ruler than Emperor Asoka, who created a powerful ideal, which still influences Engaged Buddhism. In the conquering war against Kalinga clans, one hundred thousand prisoners were taken and many times that number killed. As a result the Emperor felt profound sorrow and regret and became intensely devoted to the study of the Dharma. From then on he tried to achieve different victory through a moral conquest. At the time his religious empire stretched as far as Syria, Macedonia and Greece. As he said in the Edict 13, “wherever conquest is achieved by Dharma, it produces satisfaction...This is good here and after” (48). His moral policies can be summarised in a few words:

“Govern according to the Dharma, administer justice according to the Dharma, advance the people’s happiness according to the Dharma and protect them according to the Dharma” (49).

It should be noted that Asoka was not a ruler who was obsessed with any particular ideology. It was he who exercised a policy of religious pluralism, as we know it today. He treated equally all the members of all faiths in his kingdom and honoured men of all faiths because “the faiths of others all deserve to be honoured ...By honouring them, one exalts one’s own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others” (50). He established Department of Religious Affairs in which the officers-in-charge were to look after the affairs of the Sangha, of the Brahmmins and Ajivika ascetics (Edict CII). Not only did he advise his subjects to abstain from killing others, he wanted the sound of the war drums to be replaced by the sound of Dharma. His kingdom actually became the Buddha-land: Not only were his subjects protected but in his edict V there was a long list of animals under his protection too and all hunting was banned. His Edict I recorded his effort to overcome an addiction to eating meat (51). He was the first ruler to establish a welfare system. He ordered rest houses and hospices to be built for the poor and the sick while convicts and their families were to be provided with medicine and herbs. Programs of public works and agricultural improvement were to be introduced and public welfare officials were to be appointed. In Edict VI and VIII He affirmed his intention of becoming an enlightened ruler:

*I consider the promotion of the people’s welfare my highest duty, and its exercise is*
grounded in work and constant application. No task is more important to me than promoting the well being of the people. Such work as I accomplish contributing to discharging the debt I owe to all living creatures to make them happy in this world and to help them attain heaven in the next (52).

“According to Dharma” does not mean Buddhism was the paramount religion at the expense of other religions. By Dharma, Asoka means not just Buddha Dharma, but the universal Truth. Therefore, he was able to separate the authority of the State and the Congregation. These two wheels of power, religious and political, are sometimes mutually supportive in case of enlightened rulers, sometimes in conflict in the case of ruthless rulers. In South East Asian countries, the Sangha may either use its spiritual influence to legitimise or depose the monarch. The monarch may sometimes intervene to purge the Sangha of malpractice or even heresy (53).

Some critics think that Asoka's convictions were unrealistic and were the main causes of the disintegration of Mauryan empire. However, after his reign Buddhism began to flourish extensively. Without any military intervention all Asia accepted the Dharma and put it into practice as best as they could over the next millennium. The rule of Dharma replaced the rule of force. Little wonder that the young Gandhi was inspired by this non-violent principle in the struggle for national independence.

Five centuries after Asoka, Nagarjuna, one of the most powerful and articulate thinkers in the Mahayana tradition, founder of the Madhyamikas school and a Bodhisattva, offered some social perspective which Thurman calls the basic principle of Buddhist social action, namely that:

*The primary of Buddhist position on social action is one of the total activism, an unswerving commitment to complete self-transformation and complete world-transformation. This activism becomes fully explicit in the Universal Vehicle (Mahayana), with its magnificent literature on the Bodhisattva career.* (54).

Nagarjuna re-confirms the total commitment of Mahayana tradition to self transformation and world transformation that we have mentioned earlier, and his guidelines for social action are more significant for engaged Buddhism than Asoka's
and his social perspectives are the most insightful of world religions. (55)

**Nagarjuna: The Politics of Enlightenment**: First Nagarjuna asserts the main principle of Buddhist social and political ethics, individual transcendentalism. While most social thinkers justify the suppression of individual interest by the will and necessity of the collective interest, Nagarjuna proclaims the supremacy of the individual whose most important task is to seek his own enlightenment. He reminds individuals to observe the moral ethics (eg five precepts) to improve worldly status and to be reborn in human and divine realms. He introduces the concept of nothingness, which is an essential tenet in the Mahayana tradition. The ultimate goal of any Buddhist is to seek Enlightenment. Enlightenment requires wisdom to see things as they are. And the most important consideration here is the notion of “I”, “self” and “mine”. He asserts that they comprise illusory and unsubstantiated reality. Thus:

“I am” and “It is mine”
*These are false as absolutes
*For neither stands existent
*Under exact knowledge of reality (56)

He advises the King to discard his image of self and aim for ultimate liberation, because the root of all evil is the “I-habit” which is fundamentally false knowledge (57). Transcendent selflessness is at the heart of Buddhist Social activism. Many ethical principles are derived from its metaphysical foundation.

As long as the King or any other ruler becomes an enlightened ruler, he will be able to act with detachment (the third noble Truth). In every day life, he will be able to resist the temptations of over-consumption, food, possession or sex. He forbids the ruler drinking or gambling and introduces an ingenious meditation strategy to enable the king to avoid being tempted to engage in illicit sex. This is still being applied to young novices in monasteries today. Unlike Asoka, Nagarjuna objects to capital punishment and advocates the rehabilitative treatment of prisoners. His second principle of non-violence prescribed for rulers includes revulsion for lust, restraint of aggressions and the recognition of the vanity of possessions and power.
In the third principle Nagarjuna emphasises enlightenment-oriented education to provide everyone with an opportunity to practise the Dharma principle. In this way one is able to develop the potential of a would-be Buddha and eventually evolve towards awakening. Enlightened-oriented education is not just knowledge seeking, propaganda, or indoctrination. Nagarjuna understands well the Buddha’s metamorphose of “the finger pointing to the moon”, “the raft to the other shore” and the Buddha’s radical teaching “Ultimately the Buddha Dharma has to be abandoned, let alone unrighteous doctrine”. This is the commitment to the pluralistic ideal. Nagarjuna reminds us those belief systems, dogmatic views and fanatic ideologies are far from being the answer to anything. Rather they are themselves the sicknesses that require remedy. (58).

The fourth principle that Thurman calls Compassionate Socialism is concerned with economics and administration which should “provide everyone with everything they need to satisfy their basic needs so that they may have leisure to consider their own higher needs and aims” (59). Nagarjuna outlined a detailed welfare program (which is as comprehensive as that of any modern governments, a universal health care system, shelters for beggars, cripples and wandering ascetics, and water filters and food containers of rice, grains, foods and molasses at the road side for travellers. He also proposed an animal-care scheme showing that his concern was wider than for human society alone (60). In order to have sufficient revenue for these expensive programs, Nagarjuna advocated a regulated economy to protect small farmers who had always been the source of wealth for Indian society and which included minimum taxes. To make his wealth distribution scheme workable, he proposed a police force to protect common goods against theft and corruption. These policies were proposed in the second century BC! Little wonder Nagarjuna is considered as a Bodhisattva in the Mahayana tradition so advanced were his ideas of the common good at that time.

There is no evidence showing if Nagarjuna’ s friend accepted or delivered his enlightened policies, but the picture of the Southern Kingdom which emerges from Avatamsaka Sutta, the art of Ajanta, the accounts of Chinese pilgrims and Tibetan history show “a civilisation of wealthy cities, widespread scholarship, intense asceticism, prosperous farmers and peasants, relatively long lasting peace and
political stability” which appears to demonstrate widespread and effective social reform.

The above social reform may sound idealised in the context of present day realpolitik, but as a religiously inspired model, it starts with a transcendental conceptual framework. Even Machiavellian politicians talk about equity, fairness, justice, tolerance, pluralism etc.... The difference between the two is whether these Machiavellian really believe in what they propagate and have a firm commitment and courage to deliver i.e. their motivation. Thurman and many religious figures may sound optimistic and naive in our hostile political wilderness, but their demands are not merely lofty ideals or ultra-obligations for a few saints, rather they are the essential components of any viable social policy and enlightened society. Stephen Batchelor in his book, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, questioned whether Buddhist traditions alone could provide a sufficient basis for the creation of a contemporary culture of awakening, but he visualised the convergence of two visions of freedom. The first was the Buddha’s freedom from craving and anguish and the second was an autonomous individual’s freedom to realise his or her capacity for personal and social fulfillment (in the West entrenched in Jeffersonian ideals). Eventually individual and social engagement become two aspects of a culture of awakening, or in Thurman’s words, Buddhist perspective would reinforce the best of Jeffersonian democracy (61)

**Rahula and The Buddhist Manifesto**

In 1946 an activist monk in Sri Lanka, Walpola Rahula, attacked the established view held by some elders in the Sangha, considering chanting the sutras, performing funeral rites and preaching the prospect of a better life after rebirth. Rahula ridiculed these monks as those who cherished an idle and cloistered life and declared that engaging in social and political activities was inherent in the heritage of the Bhikkhus and engaged Buddhism was the essence of Buddhism. Since Rahula was not only an activist, he was also a well-respected academic, criticism was fierce and his critics came from every quarter, from colonial administrators, monks, the press to other Buddhist scholars. He was denounced as a political monk and an agitator and shortly landed in jail for his religious militancy. However support for his view was also overwhelming. An Engaged Buddhist movement was quickly formed in Sri Lanka to
promote a great wakening of the Bhikkhus and laymen regarding the current religious, social, economic and political problems. His book, *The Heritage of the Bhikkhu*, was regarded as the Manifesto of Engaged Buddhism in modern history.

The question whether religion and politics should be mixed is not new and has been raised from time to time whenever the Sangha and the Buddhists try to redress social injustice, or to voice their objection to repressive governments, or foreign invasions. Colonial rulers in Southeast Asia expected that the Sangha and the Buddhists would be inactive and accept their “fate”. They wished to paint the Sangha as a spiritual and religious community with no interest in worldly matters, especially political affairs. The Government of the day voiced the opinion that Buddhist monks should not participate in public affairs. In reply, Rahula, a renowned Sri Lankan monk and scholar, strongly denounced that view as a fallacy and wrote a series of articles to defend the stand of the “engaged Sangha” and of the “political monks”. The Sri Lankan Sangha also released a statement called “Bhikkhus and Politics” in which it declared that “it was nothing but fitting for Bhikkhus to identify themselves with activities conducive to the welfare of the people, whether these activities be labelled politics or not” (62). Rahula’s premise is uncompromising: **Buddhism is based on service to others.** He emphasised that during 50 years of turning the Dharma Wheel, the Buddha and his disciples did not settle permanently in one place but wandered from village to village and preached to the people the ideas conducive to their well-being both here on earth and after (63).

Rahula justifies his standpoint by finding the Buddha’s teachings on social services in Pali sutas such as *Digha nikaya*. Thus the Buddha once taught a young man named Sigala how to observe the six social relationships by adhering to the noble principles. In *Samyutta-nikaya*, one of the oldest Pali texts, he explains social unrest as arising from unjust conditions imposed by unrighteous rulers. He argued that the best way to eradicate crimes was to improve the social and economic conditions of the people. A young man once visited the Buddha and asked Him how to live a happy life as a layman, the Buddha did not hesitate to teach him doctrines conducive to the happiness for laymen in this world and hereafter” (64). He also gave clear political guidance to many governments at that time. In *Dhammapadatthakatha*, he prescribes the ten duties of the Universal Monarch, with a view to promoting a just and fair government.
In other words, the Buddha and his Sangha conveyed many important ideas pertaining to the health, right livelihood, spending wealth, mutual relationships, the well being of society and righteous government for the good of the common people. Unfortunately its social context has been obscured by many Western scholars who focus on the spiritual liberation path of Buddhism while preferring to ignore the less comfortable Buddhist teaching and practice in favour of its more contemplative aims and goals. But there was always contained within the Buddha’s teaching a clear social justice concept and the guidelines to implement it.

Not only did Rahula try to justify social responsibilities by searching for the evidence in Sutras, but also he went back to Sri Lankan history to find out what role monks had performed in the pre-colonial period. Introduced into Ceylon in the third century, Buddhism gradually became the state religion, thanks to Arahant Mahinda, the son of the Asoka Emperor. Buddhism and Sinhalese quickly embraced each other inseparably. In other words, Buddhism became the religious-nationalism and national culture in Ceylon. Whenever Sri Lankan was threatened by outside forces, they were aware that liberation of religion meant the liberation of the nation. Thus patriotism and religion became inseparably linked (65). The monks assumed the leading roles in all national and cultural activities, in particular by providing the necessary legitimacy that monarchs needed.

Rahula also found that, in the course of its development, the perception of the Bhikkhus’ role changed. The Buddha emphasised the practice of spiritual realisation rather than merely spending time studying doctrine. The ascetic monks believed that the foundation of Buddhism was individual practice (precepts, meditation, and wisdom), but later the scholastic monks maintained that the foundation of Buddhism was doctrine. As the society changed, the emphasis shifted from practice to scholarship. While the forest dwelling monks led a solitude life away from all social activities and dedicated themselves to individual practice, the village and urban dwelling monks lived among ordinary people, worked for their welfare and engaged in social, educational and cultural activities. This was seen as far more useful and beneficial and eventually won the respect of most people (66).
The Role of Laymen in the Modern Engaged Buddhist Movements

Contemporary engaged Buddhist Movements in Asia have emerged in different social contexts such as colonialism (Burma, Ceylon, Vietnam), the proxy war between Capitalism and Communism (Vietnam), social injustice (India), poverty (Ceylon), foreign invasion (Tibet) and Westernisation (Thailand).

Most engaged Buddhist leaders were educated in well known educational institutions in the West including Dr Ambedkar, the Dalai Lama, Nhat Hanh, Buddhadasa and Sulak. All are familiar with traditional sutras and Western cultural values as well. They all agree that if Buddhism is able to provide an alternative counter force to Westernisation, it must be interpreted within a modern context. They are no longer satisfied with a traditional point of view, which attempts to find scriptural social teachings to justify Buddhist social activism. Essentially Buddhism has no dogmas and the Buddha many times emphasises that his teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Everything grows and changes and the Buddha Dharma is no exception. Everywhere it spreads Buddhism accommodates to the local social conditions and as a result, a new kind of cultural Buddhism comes into existence. It is believed that before “entering” Nirvana, the Buddha told Anan, one of his closest disciples, if the Sangha wished, they could change the precepts. And not only did the precepts change, many school of thoughts were formed to suit a particular place at a particular time. The new generation of leaders do not hesitate to advocate the reform of the Sangha organisations and of the precepts, and to inject a new interpretation of the Buddha Dharma so that it can generate social reform and national regeneration in order to counter colonisation and cultural domination by the West. Confronted with many problems in modern society, the fundamental concern of these leaders is social change. The objectives of reformed Buddhism are to bring about desired social change. Their attempts go beyond institutional reform to a more fundamental and profound rethinking of basic beliefs, values and practices (67), which constitutes a challenge to Buddhist tradition. These interpretations fit in well with what modern sociologists call the exercise of personal choice in the modern situation where religious uncertainty or heresy is the norm. Realising that supremacy of the West is indebted to the scientific mind inherited from the enlightenment period in the 19th
century, engaged Buddhist leaders try to reconstruct a “new” Buddhism, which is more rational-scientific and less ritualistic-superstitious. (68) Some critics see the similar role of Protestantism and Buddhism in stimulating effective economic, political and social activities, because a “true” religion must be “optimistic and activist” (69). Some even see the doctrine of reformed Buddhism as an amalgamation of Eastern and Western elements and coin the term Protestant Buddhism that has both Buddhist lexicon and liberal Protestant grammar.

Those Buddhist reformers have enriched and broadened their cultural heritage(s) by accommodating new positive elements, but their vision and interpretation is still deeply rooted in the Buddhist tradition, a tradition that they can neither live with or without. They know very well that, in order to survive in modern times, as with any other institutional religions, Buddhism must have the strength of re-orientation and the wisdom of genuine reformation (70). The most radical, Dr Ambedkar (India), whose scriptural interpretation may have shocked some of the traditionalists, humbly declares that he wishes only to highlight the Buddha’s social message which has been deliberately overlooked and obscured by contemporary scholars. Rahula (Ceylon) defines Buddhism as a religion based on service to others; Buddhadasa (Thailand) teaches “only dukkha and the utter quenching of dukkha”. The Dalai Lama (Tibet) refers to Bodhisattva’s vows in Santideva’s Bodhicaryavatara, while Nhat Hanh (Vietnam) uses the inter-dependent principle in Vimalakirti. Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya movement in Ceylon interprets four dukkhas as its rationale and the practise of eight noble paths “to wake up everyone” All of them want to provide responses and challenges to their particular social and political contexts. Yet their thinking and doctrines are distinctively and uniformly Buddhist. Since the principles and techniques used have a 2,500-year-old heritage, many think that Buddhism may have a unique contribution to offer the West and the world in terms of viable solutions to contemporary problem (71)

During his life the Buddha addressed his message not only to the monks and nuns but also to lay people, including kings, ministers, ordinary people and even murderers. Some sutras such as Ugradatta and Vimalakirti are devoted to lay practice. However the centuries which followed the practice of Dharma became the exclusive domain of the institutionalised Sangha while the lay people resigned themselves to a supporting
role by providing the monks with food, shelter, clothing and medicine (72). Many of the Buddha’s lay disciples did attain enlightenment, so that when asked why he did not take ordination, Ugradatta answered: ‘I do not need to become a monk. I can practise just as well as a layman’ (73). Vimalakirti Sutra reflected the development of *Mahayana*, which strongly criticised the inwardly monastic Sangha. It attempted to open up the Dharma practice to anyone who wanted to follow the Buddha’s path and urged the ordained monks to practise the Dharma in a more open and engaged way for the whole society and not just for themselves.

Relationships between the ordained monks and the laity are not always harmonious. In Mahayana sutras many ordained disciples were sometimes considered lowly students compared with, for example, a man like Vimalakirti. In order to get the attention of the monastic establishment lay people had to take adversarial stances until the Mahayana School became better established. Ambedkar blamed the negligence of Buddhist laymen’s status as the main cause of the decline of Indian Buddhism after ten thousand monks had been massacred by Moslem fanatics in Bihar in the 12th century. It is interesting to note that most leaders in the Buddhist revival period were lay people including Dharmapala of India, Ambedkar of the Untouchables, Ariyaratne of Sarvodaya in Ceylon and Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand. In Vietnam even though Nhat Hanh is an ordained monks, he established the Inter-Being order to train social activists who were overwhelmingly lay people. Its first six apostles, except Sister Chan Khong (who was recently ordained) were lay people. In fact, in Swearer’s words, “monks are losing their distinctiveness and coming to resemble laity while lay people are becoming more like monks” (74). This explains why the relationship between Nhat Hanh and the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation has never been warm because monastic Vietnamese monks, who were trained in a conservative mould, could not accept non-ordained celibate monks. Ambedkar, the leader of Indian Untouchables did not hide his contempt for Burmese monks whom he called ‘an army of idlers’. Even though he initiated the mass conversion of millions of people to Buddhism, he was never ordained and only at the last minute, on Shangaraksita’s advice, did he take refuge in the Three Jewels.

Sulak Sivaraksa, who found the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, was disgusted with the Thai Sangha who lived in luxurious quarters and drove Mercedes
like millionaires. Being dependent on the financial support of the wealthy and the
government, Thai Sangha never dared to challenge repressive military governments.
Like Nhat Hanh in Vietnam, in the Thai Sangha ’s eyes Sulak was very much a
maverick.

Ariyaratne, who started the Sarvodaya Self Help Movement in Sri Lanka, was also an
independent force from the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress. Instead of becoming
entangled in the ethnic war in which the Sri Lankan monks tacitly supported ethnic
Sinhalese, the Sarvodaya Movement is a social reform movement which is built on a
Buddhist framework. lay model inspired Nhat Hanh ’s model of a School of Youth
For Social Services.

Even now the relation between monks and lay people is still an uneasy one. Although
Sulak likened spiritual masters to springs of fresh water, which help laity to renew
their inner strength, he criticised those who lived a luxurious life style. In Mahayana
Sangha denotes a community of followers, lay and monastic, but gradually lay people
were restricted to a supporting role. Sulak, witnessing the decadence in the Thai
Sangha ’s life styles, defined Sangha not as an exclusive community of monks, but
one, which included anyone of good conduct (75). In more recent times, particularly
in the West, the gap between the Sangha and laity is narrower. The laity in many
countries are well educated or better educated than the typical monastic. They can
access the monumental publications and become more knowledgeable about
Buddhism.

Batchelor, previously a Tibetan monk, agreed with Sulak on the importance of the
presence of spiritual leaders and likened them to trees which exist silently in the dark
and purify the air. However he said that in contemporary times, it could no longer be
taken for granted that, as a monk, one would automatically be serving a more valuable
role than a lay person would in the preservation of Buddhism. Likewise the notion
that a monk is somehow morally superior to the laity can no longer be accepted (76).
The growth of Engaged Buddhism in the West, particularly in America, has been due
to the collective efforts of Buddhist lay people and lay practitioners conduct many
Zen centres.
Philip Kapleau, who has had a significant impact on the direction of Buddhism in North America, admitted that even though an ordained individual could be better entrusted with the teachings than a lay person, all his followers eventually returned to lay life (77). Some of the more radical hippie Buddhists in the 60s, while admiring those who chose to withdraw from the world and be purified, made the lay choice or the Bodhisattva choice, of “engaging in life as it is”. They made no apologies for living the way ordinary people lived, eating the same poisons and running the same karmic risk (78). Snyder called it the Bodhisattva spirit in that one does not mind ‘getting one’s hands a little dirty’. This choice was not necessarily inferior to the monastic choice (79). It is also the case that there have been quite a few sexual and monetary scandals created by so-called Roshi (Zen Masters) in America and the ever-growing number of engaged Buddhists in the world. Nhat Hanh’s vision in founding the Inter-Being Order in 1964 aimed to produce social activists with full spiritual training. Whatever choices were made a cross fertilisation was useful to create a new kind of partnership between Sangha and laity, so that Engaged Buddhists did not become secularised like any other social activists and Sangha did not become passive bystanders in a world full of suffering.

A New Mandala

At the dawn of the new millennium, it is very encouraging to note that Buddhism is the fastest growing religion in the West and furthermore, Buddhism has undergone a profound transformation. New characteristics have emerged and transformed the Buddhist tradition into a new spiritual force. Buddhism has been classified as ‘spiritual’ and it is no longer Buddhism in the West, but American Buddhism. The lingering doubts of the conservative elements in the Sangha are no longer voiced, and the faithful are no longer satisfied to practise the path by observing traditional rites, such as meditation, prayer or temple ritual. Beliefs also have new meanings and some who proclaimed themselves agnostic Buddhists, dare to present Buddhism as a religion without beliefs. Above all, Western Buddhists heed the Bodhisattva’s vow to respond to suffering wherever it may be found. Thus they can no longer afford to ignore poverty, oppression and wars which still exist in many parts of the world. They are re-fashioning their heritage to meet the challenge of the future. Not only has Engaged Buddhism been wholeheartedly accepted by the faithful as a practising path
among six thousand other Dharma doors, some have gone as far to consider that every form of Buddhism is Engaged Buddhism.

From the above description of Engaged Buddhism there are a number of characteristics which define it:

1- Engaged Buddhism entails both inner and outer work
As we mentioned earlier, there has been a shift from virtue to action, from the spiritual path of a lonely Buddha to social action of committed active Bodhisattvas. The interdependence between self- and world-transformation has been recognised. The dichotomy between inner and outer is no longer valid, because the journey ‘out’ becomes a continuation and a deepening of the journey “in”, or using everyday language, one must change ourselves in order to change the world. The path of a lone enlightened Buddha appeals to few people nowadays because an exclusively inner transformation, however profound, is not the end of the path. As a Buddhist activist expresses it:

*We are learning how necessary personal development is for social change. The great ideologies have not survived and cannot take us into the new centuries. When we think of the world as something we can change without changing ourselves, we will not go very far.* (80)

2- New interpretations of basic tenets are needed to be palatable to the more informed and can we say more enlightened followers. Terms like the laws of Karma, reincarnation, Buddha Nature, liberation have to be re-defined. Greed, anger and delusion, known as the three poisons, have to be explained in a social and global context. The psychological factors are no longer the exclusive causes of suffering, but a number of social and global systems which have caused misery and unhappiness to human kind, as well to our eco-system, have to be encountered.

3- Wisdom and Compassion, the two attributes of enlightenment or liberation, are inseparable. We may not develop compassion without Wisdom but, as Philip Kapleau challenged “wisdom is not authentic unless expressed in action” and affirmed: “social action is itself a kind of meditation” (81)
4- The most inspired exemplar that serves as the signpost for Engaged Buddhism is the Bodhisattva’s ideal. A Bodhisattva can be an awakened being, a being on the way to awakening or a being who awakens others. In some traditions a practitioner who is selfless, compassionate and non-attached, particularly to materialism, is sometimes called a Bodhisattva. There are two Bodhisattvas well known to the Buddhists in every tradition. Manjushri embodies Wisdom and Avalokiteshvara, embodies compassion. To the faithful in Mahayana tradition, Qan Ying is the most loved and popular. To the ordinary (or Engaged) Buddhists, compassionate actions are more important that mere insightful understanding.

5- Most Engaged Buddhist leaders were educated in the West, therefore they espoused many modern concepts such as democracy, human rights, political oppression and social justice. Even with many recent scientific discoveries, the world and cosmic vision of Buddhism appeals to a great number of the well-educated and well-to-do westerners. Thus Buddhism has to be Westernised as well as modernised to be accepted. In Asian countries, Engaged Buddhism has become the main stream in spite of the resistance form conservative elements in the Sangha.

6- Finally, as in the Mahayana tradition, the new path recognises the ability to achieve enlightenment is extended not only to lay people, but ultimately to all existences- animal and the whole eco-system. As a result, apart from the ethnic Buddhist communities, laymen play a more and more important role in turning the Dharma Wheel. Most important, many Buddhist scholars in the West now are lay people, probably because monastic life does not appeal to the Westerners. Even in Asia where the Sangha is most revered, lay leaders played no less significant role than their counterparts in the West in the task of turning the Wheel. Ambedkar in India, Ariyaratna in Sri Lanka, Aung San Suu Ki in Burma overshadowed the role of the Sangha. The Dalai Lama and Nhat Hanh are two exceptions. However, behind them there have been thousands of young non-violent Bodhisattvas who have made the Vietnamese Peace Movement and Free Tibet Movement possible.

In the West we are now witnessing a more popular expression of Buddhism. Ethnic Buddhists still practise in their own year-old traditional way and there are still many meditation and retreat centres run by individuals or groups. However
many other Buddhists engage in all sorts of activities in their everyday life from social work to political campaigns like anti-nuclear to peace advocacy. Kenneth Kraft makes a convincing case of proposing a paradigm to include all these activists which he terms The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism. Using the image of a Mandala, the Wheel of Engaged Buddhism includes a hub, representing the Bodhisattva’s ideal which is the core of the new path, plus three other rings. The first ring represents the inner training, cultivating Awareness or Mindfulness in Daily Life. This is the common core of Buddhist activism because without this, Buddhists may drift to another form of activism like ideological or social reform. The second ring includes four sections, representing four primary fields of practice, namely, Embracing the Family, Working with Others, Participating in Politics and Caring for the Earth. The outer ring also includes four sections, representing four different modes of practice, namely Extending Compassionate Action, Exploring New Terrain, At Ease Amid Action and Spreading Joy in Ten Directions. (See Appendix)

All of the paths in the Wheel are interconnected and each path is seen as a part of a meaningful sequence, thus avoiding the attitude of being ‘holier than thou’. Engaged Buddhism, according to Kraft, is in a period of experimentation, and questions are more valuable than solutions to settle differences. Wherever the paths of Engaged Buddhism may lead, the ultimate aim of practitioners is to actualise the Bodhisattva’s ideal, to be wherever suffering is found. Using a specialised term, this is the Buddha’s Nature as Kraft explained it:

*On the Paths of Engaged Buddhism, we are not searching for some exotic foreign land, some far distant realm of enlightenment. Rather, we are going deeper into our own lives, back to where we all belong.* (82)

Based on fields and modes of each practising group, Ken Jones proposes a more practical paradigm of Engaged Buddhism (see appendix). On top of the chart, there are two distinctive groups of Inner and Outer Buddhism even though Jones reminds us that ‘they can no more be separated than two sides of a page in his book’. The faithful belonging to different traditions still practise meditation or mindfulness. Socially Engaged Buddhists usually practise with fellow Buddhists who are working
towards the same ends possibly through an organisational network, like the Plum Village or the Friends of Western Buddhist Order, or the Peace of Buddhist Fellowship. These organisations may form monastic or quasi-monastic communities. Most practitioners in Plum Village are laypersons but under the guidance of a small number of trained monks. Some part-timers only want to practise and apply mindfulness in personal relationships in the family, work and social context (equivalent to three fields in Kraft’s model) Many members of FWBO are also layperson who are engaging in commercial activities in the light of Buddhist Right Livelihood. There are many similar Right Livelihood communities in the United States whose members are striving for a Buddhist alternative way of life. Another form of social activism is called Social Helping Service and Welfare which includes those who work in special projects like the Human Foundation Dying Project in the USA, Buddhist Hospice Projects in the U.S. and Australia, or the Prison Chaplain Angulimala in Britain. The most contentious form of Engaged Buddhism is radical activism which is concerned with fundamental changes in social policies, practices and institutions in areas such as disarmament and defence policies, Third World poverty and environmental protection. Radical activists are inevitably involved in the questions of power and conflict, confrontation and partisanship. One of the most prominent groups of Buddhist radical activists is the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in the USA, Britain and Australia. Most of the Engaged Buddhist Movements in Asia, from Rahula ’s anti-British Empire, Ambedkar’s Movement to restore the dignity of Untouchables, Sulak Sivaraksa’s network of Engaged Buddhism, Aung San Suu Kyi ‘s struggle for human rights and democracy in Burma, Free Tibet Movement and the Vietnamese Peace Movement of 1963-66, comprises Buddhist radical activists. Another term which fits well in describing Vietnamese Engaged Buddhists is “peace makers”. (83)

To some, Buddhist radical activism departs noticeably from the antecedents in the Buddhist tradition. However, as one Japanese poet-activist, Nanao Sakaki, explained, today a Bodhisattva could be a politician or even an economist. (84) This un-chartered path is riddled with difficulties as we will see in the struggle for social justice and peace initiated by the Vietnamese Buddhists. However once choosing to follow in the footpath of Bodhisattvas, they always remember the Bodhisattva’s ideal: ‘find ways to be with those who are suffering wherever they are.
Chapter Four

A Model of Politics of Enlightenment: Vietnamese Bodhisattva Kings

Vietnamese Buddhism: a Balance between Spiritualism and Activism

Like any ancient population or group, the Vietnamese probably believed in animism. They worshipped many natural forces that were inexplicable to the pre logical mind. Under Chinese domination, Chinese rulers with a view to speeding up the assimilation process introduced Confucianism and Taoism in Vietnam. However, Confucianism is mainly concerned with social ethics and the social order and did not meet to the religious needs of the masses. Only the Vietnamese ruling elite, who had a vested interest in the administration, accepted it wholeheartedly as their religion. Taoism was more compatible with local beliefs and became gradually inter-woven with indigenous customs and superstitious practices. With its mystical approach, Buddhism eventually won over the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people and is now their mainstream belief.

Buddhism spread to China and Vietnam almost simultaneously in the Han dynasty in the first century AD. In Vietnam it was probably introduced directly by Indian merchants, who already had commercial links with the Middle East and Mediterranean countries and considered Vietnam as a resting post for them on the sea route to China. These merchants might not be necessarily Buddhist preachers but they probably practiced Buddhism and on a long voyage it was customary to pray to Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara to protect them. It should be noted that, in the first century, Mahayana had already developed in the South East coastal towns of India. Unwittingly these merchants were the first preachers of the Dharma. (1). It was possible that the Vietnamese Buddhist centre had been established before it did in China. It was recorded that twenty pagodas had been built in Vietnam, more than 500 monks had been ordained and fifteen sutras had been studied (2). It blended peacefully with indigenous beliefs and met less resistance because it won the hearts of the masses and the minds of the elite, while in China, the resistance was much stronger because Confucianism had deeply entrenched. It is said that Buddhism came to Vietnam as a fresh spring of water.
When Vietnam regained their independence from China, Buddhism reached its apogee and became Vietnamese Buddhism with its distinctive characteristics. It was a perfect blending between Confucianism with its main concern of social engagement, and Mahayana Buddhism, which encourages its followers to take up the Bodhisattva’s path of practice. In new terminology, Vietnamese Buddhism has been always engaged Buddhism.

Many monks in early history were deeply involved in politics and the best known was Van Hanh. Van Hanh studied Zen and Tantra and it was believed that he possessed magical powers. He was made the National Teacher for many successive Kings. When one of the kings became repressive, he did not hesitate to organise a bloodless coup to remove the tyrant from the throne. He helped the successive Ly Kings to fend off the Chinese invasion in the North and to pacify the Cham rebels in the South. Yet before leaving this impermanent world, he wrote a poem expressing his spiritual achievement: a non-attachment attitude of a Bodhisattva:

*Body is like a lightning, appearing then disappearing*
*Vegetation is green in spring, becomes dry in autumn*
*Never fear of ups and downs in life.*
*Ups and downs are ephemeral like dew on grass.* (3)

In response to the need to protect independence from an ever expansionist China, Vietnamese Buddhism was already an engaged-Buddhism which reflected the desire to pursue spiritual achievement as well as to respond to the survival need of the Vietnamese people. Like Bodhisattvas these Vietnamese monks never ran away from their compatriots’ sufferings.

In the tenth century Buddhism was already accepted as the spiritual guiding force in building national identity. Monks were considered as highly educated elite and therefore were assigned to many crucial roles in the Court, including military advisers. (4) They would act decisively in worldly affairs, political actions included, yet after paying their debt to society, they were more than content to have all the time in the world to pursue spiritual enlightenment. In Engaged Buddhism, it is the perfect balance between spiritualism and activism.
Buddhism and Patriotism

Unlike the previous dynasty, The Ly Kings were better educated and the ruling elite was sufficiently trained to run public affairs. The monks were in their role of spiritual leaders. Remembering his humble origin (an orphan living in Luc To Pagoda) Ly Thái To and his successors greatly helped in the preaching of the Buddha’s Dharma. Under their auspices, more than 300 pagodas were built, hundreds of big bells cast and numerous monks ordained. It is worth noting that during their reign, they achieved the most glorious military victory against the Chinese. Not only did the Ly Kings successfully repulse the Sung invasion, but also General Ly Thuong Kiet ventured into Chinese territory and destroyed the logistic base of the Sung’s army. The Sung Emperor had to secede some territories to buy peace. Even the historian Ngo Thoi Sy, who nurtured hard feelings against Buddhism, praised the act of sending troops to China as the most celebrated military victory ever in Vietnamese history. (5) On the southern front The Ly Sues were also busy waging the war against the Cham people. Yet most Ly Kings were compassionate enlightened rulers. In the battlefield, they might have acted and behaved cruelly like any militarists, but they genuinely practised the Buddha’s dharma. Three Ly Kings, even though never officially ordained, were Zen Masters of the third Vietnamese Zen sect, Thao Duong.

After victorious military ventures, the Vietnamese needed a national identity even more. The decisive victories against the Chinese, the Cham and the Thais in the North West, assured Vietnam’s sovereignty. A distinctive ‘ideology’ was badly needed. Confucianism was seen as a cultural means used by Chinese rulers to assimilate the Vietnamese, as they did in many Chinese ex-colonies such as Mongolia, Manchuria and the Southern part of Yang Tse River. To survive as an independent state, a new ideology had to be developed.

During the Chinese domination, Buddhism was inter-woven between Zen, mystical Tantra and animistic local beliefs, but it became the dominant spiritual forces of the masses. Meanwhile Confucian principles guiding social relations and the social order
proved to be effective in running public affairs. Thus three religions, Confucianism-Taoism-Buddhism were eventually blended into what was called the national ideology.

Having founded the national ideology for independent Vietnam, the Ly Kings governed the country on Confucian political principles, but injected Bodhisattva Wisdom and Loving Kindness. There was no evidence showing how much the Ly and Tran Kings knew of Asoka’s work in India, but many anecdotes recorded in the official Vietnamese history showed that they tried to apply the politics of enlightenment in governing the country.

In the wars against the Chinese and the Cham, like any Commander-in chief, King Ly Thanh Ton probably massacred innocent people, but he was not a completely heartless warmonger. He forbade his troops to loot the Cham’s properties and ordered prisoners of war be released. He also set out to free the captured Cham King, Nung Tri Cao. These might have been political ploys, but he was an ‘expansionist’ with a compassionate heart. As Emperor Asoka did in the third century BC in India, the Ly King also created a welfare state. In 1055, having experienced a chilly winter in the palace, he ordered that warm clothes and food be distributed to prisoners and that their sentences be reduced. During a Court meeting, he pointed to his daughter, Princess Dong Thien, and told his mandarins: ‘I love my subjects as much as I love my daughter. Many people committed offences because they did not understand the law. From now on, regardless of their severe offences, you have to treat them kindly’ (6). He lowered taxes whenever natural disasters happened. He was deeply concerned with the peasants’ welfare. In order to protect their properties, he ordered cattle thieves to be severely punished. Empress Y Lan, Ly Nhan Tong’s wife, gave money to poor families to redeem their daughters pawned to the wealthy so that they could have a normal family life (7). Many aristocrats enjoyed luxurious lives and preferred foreign-made products, Ly Thai Tong encouraged his concubines to start textile manufacturing and to sell their products to the mandarins. Ly Thanh Tong also requested his mandarins to take an oath in the Dong Co Temple that they would never be corrupt. An Ombudsman’s office was also established so that anyone who thought that they had been treated unjustly or unfairly, could come there and ring the complaint bell, so that his/her case could be re-examined (8). In his will, Ly Nhan Tong ordered a simple funeral to be held to reduce costs. When Ly Thai Tong thanked a General for saving his life in a rebellion, this
General answered: ‘Your compassion and kindness have moved Heaven and actually God has protected you. I would not dare to claim this credit’ (9).

As mentioned earlier, Confucianism was already recognised as a ‘suitable’ political basis for governing the country. A temple to revere Confucius and his 72 sages was built in the capital. Confucian examinations were first established to select the mandarins in accordance with the Chinese model. A National Academy was set up to train the Court bureaucrats’ children. Orthodox Confucianism gradually monopolised all the political power and the monks contentedly retreated to their monasteries and lived a simple life in the jungle or mingled with the masses in remote villages. Actually Confucian aggression toward Buddhism at a later stage was unwarranted because no enlightened Zen masters liked to cling onto power or wealth. They paid their due to society if required, but their ultimate goal was spiritual enlightenment, not worldly power. They possessed a balanced attitude to world and self-transformation. Like the Bodhisattvas they acted on worldly affairs but they did not let karmic effects hinder their path to liberation. One of the most well-known Vietnamese pagodas built by the Ly Kings and called One Pillar Pagoda, represents the Bodhisattvas attitudes toward life namely mingle with all sentient in the world but attach to nothing. The One Pillar Pagoda was built in the shape of a lotus with its roots submerged into the muddy soil, its stem piercing through the water and its flower blossoming in the air. The image of the Lotus has been associated with this engaged philosophy and has been the symbol of Vietnamese Buddhism ever since. On top of the lotus petals, Bodhisattva who hears every suffering sound in this world is stretching her arms to alleviate human misery. This is a clear message that the Buddha’s Dharma should and could only be preached here and now, in the here and now world.

Non-attachment: the throne is like a pair of worn shoes

At the end of the Ly dynasty, the influence of Buddhism declined. Losing the force of spiritual Zen, Buddhism was reduced to a few superstitious practices. Corruption and abuse in the Sangha precipitated its decline. Facing a new threat from the invincible Mongolian horsemen, the Tran Kings had to unify all of the three sects and revitalise Buddhism in order to mobilise the people against Chinese invasion.
Indeed Vietnam successfully defended herself against the most fearful Mongolian horsemen who had trampled the huge territory from Asia to Europe. Even the Pope had to make peace with them. They annexed the Sung’s territory and reigned in China for nearly one hundred years. They brought an army of 200,000 to invade Vietnam for the first time in 1257. King Tran Thai Tong often led the resistance to fight enemies in many vanguard battlefields. The Mongolians occupied the capital for a year, but eventually were chased out. Peace reigned for a short period. Then in 1284 the Mongolians invaded Vietnam for the second time and against all odds the Vietnamese again defeated them. The Mongolian horsemen refused to be beaten. They postponed a scheme to invade Japan and instead used all their available resources (it was believed that about 300,000 soldiers were involved in the third invasion) to conquer Vietnam. As on previous occasions, the Vietnamese army used guerrilla tactics to fight the invincible horsemen in a protracted war. The Mongolian defeat could be explained for a number of reasons. Firstly the Mongolians were invincible on horseback but they could not match the Vietnamese naval power. Secondly they did not have enough time to acclimatise to a tropical country like Vietnam, which is vastly different from that of the vast steppes in Mongolia. Thirdly, unlike any other feudal dynasties, the Trans were able to muster the support of the masses. The throne was not private property but represented the sovereignty of a nation-state so that everyone had the duty to defend it. And the Vietnamese people were determined to protect their independence by all means possible. The Tran Kings used many effective psychological warfare techniques. King Tran Nhan Tong organised a national summit, which included representatives from all walks of life, particularly the elderly members. He wanted consensus as to whether to negotiate with, or to wage resistance against the Mongolians. This was the first plebiscite that was ever organised in Vietnamese political history. This might have been a political ploy to pre-empt the defeatist elements in the Court, but it also reflected the determination of the whole people to protect their freedom and independence, which took them nearly ten centuries to reclaim. The two Kings who defeated the invincible Mongolian horsemen later abdicated soon after paying their debts to their country. They become monks in the mountains. In fact they became the two patriarchs of the Vietnamese Zen Sect called Truc Lam Yen Tu (Yen Tu Bamboo Forest). Little wonder they are regarded as Vietnamese Asoka.
Many brilliant Zen masters, both ordained monks and laity, emerged from this sect. Amongst them was Tran Thai Tong, the founder of the Tran dynasty. He was the third Patriarch of this Vietnamese Zen sect and from a very young age, he had experienced traumatic events. His marriage to the last Empress, Ly Chieu Hoang, was arranged by his Machiavellian uncle to ensure that he succeeded to the throne at the age of eight. When he was twenty years old, the Empress was not able to produce an heir for the throne as expected so he was forced by his minder to abandon his wife and to marry his sister-in-law who had been pregnant. He could not accept this and rebelled against his uncle. As in the Buddha’s case, he fled the palace in the middle of the night and went to Yen Tu Mountain. Here is the dialogue between him and the Abbot:

Truc Lam:

_I am just an old monk, living in the mountain for a long time. My bones are hardened and my body is thin; I have eaten vegetables and nuts and like living away from every thing. My desire no longer controls my actions. I am as unattached as floating clouds and carried here by the wind. You are the Supreme Master of your people and now you came here. I am sure that you have something on your mind that you want to ask me. What is it?_

King Tran Thai Tong sobbed:

_- I have been an orphan since I was very young, therefore I have no one in this world to ask for help. No dynasties can last forever. Coming to the mountains, I am looking for nothing but Buddha-hood._

The Master answered:

_- Buddha-hood cannot be found anywhere in the mountains. Buddha-hood is in your mind. Look deeply inside your mind, you will be enlightened some day. There is no point looking outside your mind for Buddha-hood._ (10)

This answer is very much an orthodox question & answer within the mould of the Lin Chi Zen sect and with the non-duality view of Mahayana in evidence. However Truc Lam Yen Tu is not just a fading copy of its original. He applied to a particular historical context and to a particular disciple, Tran Thai Tong, who was no ordinary Zen novice.
but the Supreme Leader of a nation and burdened with huge responsibilities for his subjects.

Finally his Machiavellian uncle caught up with him shortly. This man might have been a cruel and wicked politician, but his duty was to protect his family’s interest. He taught the young King a lesson telling him that:

- *If Your Highness wants to seek enlightenment, it is fine with me. But what about the Court and the country? Your subjects are expecting you to go back to the Court as the babies are expecting their parents to be with them. You are their leader and now all you want is to seek liberation for yourself!*

The Prime Minister then threatened the King, warning:

-*If you do not reconsider your position, none of us will go back to the Court! We will set up the court right her, in this mountain!*

Unsure of what to do, the young King again sought advice from Phu Van, Floating Clouds Master. The Master then delivered his judgement:

- *Being the Leader of a nation, you must consider people’s wishes and expectations as yours. If people want you to go back to the throne, how can you not to do so? However please do not neglect to learn the Sutras if you want to follow the path to liberation!* (11).

Reluctantly the young King went back to the Court. He realised that he owed a debt to his countrymen as much as he owed a debt to the three Jewels. Buddha-hood could only be found in this *samsara* world. Like the lotus flower submerged in the mud before blooming. No *Bodhisattva* Kings would run away from his country or his people. Twenty years later in 1257 he performed magnificently in the role of the hero-King by defeating the Mongolian horsemen.

How much did the King know about the Emperor Asoka’s work in India? There is no recorded evidence showing that the Tran Kings emulated the Indian model, but guided
by his spiritual realisation, Tran Thai Tong implemented a compassionate policy in
governing the country during his reign. After returning from Yen Tu Mountain and
having received the reassurance from Master Phu Van, he was quite prepared for the
role of a Bodhisattva-King. He learned the Confucian Books which provided guidance
in the arts of governing and he studied the sutras for his own spiritual needs. He
established the National Institute in 1253 for those who wanted to learn Confucianism
and ‘The Left Shore’ Institute where he learned and discussed the Buddha’s Dharma
with other Masters. As a ruler his main concern was for the people’s welfare, to make
the country prosperous and promote freedom and independence. No longer did he find
the conflict between his roles of King and Zen Master. He said that he became
enlightened when he read this well-known verse from Diamond Sutra: If you cling to
nowhere, Bodhi Mind will be generated. He was completely unfettered by worldly
pleasures. He abdicated the throne when he was quite young at forty He created
precedent by making the King’s Father, an honorary position, so that he could dedicate
more time to learning the Dharma. After completing his temporal duties, Tran Thai
Tong discarded his throne as if it were a pair of worn shoes (12).

While Tran Thai Tong remained a lay Zen Master, his grandson, Tran Nhan Tong was
ordained and regarded as the First Patriarch of the first Vietnamese Zen Sect, Truc Lam
Yen Tu. He convened the historic meeting Dien Hong in 1283 which was attended by
the elderly and other representatives of the people. There are no records showing how
those representatives were selected, but there is no doubt this monarch was democratic.

Thai Tong’s grandson, Nhan Tong, was appointed the heir of the throne at the age of
sixteen but was not really interested in power. In the middle of the night, like his
grandfather Thai Tong, he fled the palace and went to Yen Tu Mountain. He was, of
course, was tracked down by the Court. Again like his grandfather, he reluctantly went
back to the palace. He was a non-meat eater and after being enthroned, he released
many concubines and sent them home.

There is little doubt Thai Tong and Nhan Tong practised enlightened policies. Nhan Ton
asked a Zen Master to compile guidelines for Bodhisattva-Kings. They had to take
many different roles and responsibilities, which they fulfilled adequately but they
remained detached. As soon as was possible they abdicated their thrones to follow a
spiritual life. Recorded evidence shows the Tran Kings implemented a welfare state. When natural disasters happened, Tran Nhan Ton asked the wealthy to contribute via charity work. The court ordered medicine be manufactured and distributed to those who were sick. Those who were financially destitute could come to the office and ask for two coins and two kilos of rice. One of the most gallant acts of Tran Nhan Ton was in not punishing the defeatist mandarins who attempted to surrender to the Mongolians. He ordered the records of those who tried to appease the invaders during the war to be burned. While these Kings were absolute monarchs and rulers, their reigns were invariably humane and merciful as history has recorded.

The impact of Buddhism on social, political and cultural life was enormous. As we have seen, most of the Tran Kings showed a deep understanding of Buddhist principles. They implemented a social policy of compassion and tolerance under their kingship and they supported Buddhism first because they were Buddhists, and secondly because it served as the national ideology to unite the masses. Vietnamese Buddhism at that time reflected clearly the people's determination to protect independence and cultural identity. As Nguyen Lang said 'Buddhism is the backbone of Vietnamese culture, which manifests the wishes of the Vietnamese to be recognised as independent from their neighbours in the North' (13). The Truc Lam Yen Tu Sect was formed to fulfill that purpose. However what made the Vietnamese resilient was not their military might, but their insistence on cultural and political independence. In order to destroy any future resistance, when occupying Vietnam in the 15th century, the Ming rulers confiscated all the books written by Vietnamese authors, particularly Buddhist ones, brought them back to China and destroyed them. They thought the Vietnamese could only be defeated when their culture was dismantled. As was demonstrated in the French conquest, political and economic colonisation went hand in hand with cultural assimilation. Even so the Vietnamese held firm to their national identity and were not overcome.

In summary, most of the Bodhisattva-Kings served people, performed their duties and at the same time followed their spiritual aspirations. Living and serving them according people according to the best of their abilities was one way to mitigate their Karma. They translated ideals into their ruling lives as kings. The Buddhist code of ethics was spelt out in detail and served as a political framework and guide. Every Buddhist has to aspire to four aims. Firstly, love and protect their country. Secondly be pious to older members
in the family. Thirdly be respectful to teachers and fourthly show concern for other people's well being. (These four deeds were fully developed by a Buddhist sect, Hoa Hao, in the Southern part of Vietnam during the colonial period). Although similar to Confucianism in some respects, it differed in others. While Confucian ethics aims at mainly to regulating social relations, Vietnamese Buddhism manifested the Middle Way taught by the Buddha and the Bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana tradition. This meant maintaining a balance between worldly responsibilities and spiritual aspirations.

The philosophy of non-attachment reflects the capacity to absorb positive aspects from other schools of thought. Thus Vietnamese Buddhism accommodated the socially engaged feature of Confucianism, blended it with the Bodhisattva ideal and brought about the concept of four deeds. At the same time it kept all the central tenets of spirituality. It is evidenced in Vietnamese culture today and it is difficult to discuss Vietnamese culture without mentioning Buddhism. It follows to the letter Asoka's wish of honouring men of all faiths carved in the Rock Edicts VII (164). As in a Vietnamese saying 'When succeed in life, enjoy being a mandarin; when fail or retire, enjoy being a part-time monk'. It is quite common to see a retired mandarin drink tea or play chess with an old village monk. Many a time the village pagoda is where a failed Confucian can retreat. Confucians who critical of some aspects of Buddhism but Zen masters gracefully incorporated Confucian ideas on social relations and their governing principles. Also the Buddhist King Tran Thai Tong first established the National Learning Academy in 1253 to train and recruit Confucian mandarins. His tolerant attitude to Confucians was crucial in gaining the support of the masses and ultimately defeating the Mongols.

The concept of incarnated Bodhisattva-King has not been institutionalised to become the blue print for political and social policy in Vietnam, but most historians agree that the Buddhist Kings, Ly and Tran, were the most compassionate rulers in Vietnam history and they have been venerated down the ages for their inspirational leadership and spiritual qualities. (15) Reminiscing of these Bodhisattva kings, the Vietnamese Buddhists were not just a bunch of nostalgic zealots. They know that if they engage in initiating a social revolution, this politics of enlightenment would make them distinctive form other ideologically inspired social activists, like the Marxists.
Although Confucianism and Buddhism were able to peacefully co-exist in early Vietnamese history, such was not the case when Buddhism came up against Catholicism and the French missionaries whose aims was to aid and abet colonialism and to achieve mass conversion of the Vietnamese. Buddhism was made the principal torch carrier of nationalism because it was the most effective rallying point against foreign invasion and intervention. The Buddhist revival in Southeast Asian inspired the Buddhist reform movement in the thirties and in turn, produced the first crop of leaders who played the key roles in confronting Ngo Dinh Diem’s regime in 1963 and the Americans and their henchmen in the military governments in the 60’s.
Chapter Five

VIETNAMESE BUDDHISM AND PATRIOTISM

Buddhism and Colonialism

In the nineteenth century most of the Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia had to endure both a military and cultural invasion as a result of European colonialism. Buddhist countries like Burma, Sri-Lanka (formerly Ceylon), Vietnam, Lao and Cambodia were all ruled by brute force and Christianity seriously threatened their traditional cultures. Colonialists came to those countries, holding guns in one hand and the Bible in the other. New religions Catholic in Vietnam, and Protestant in Burma and Ceylon were able to spread only because of the protection of the colonial rulers. Buddhism which always has a deep symbiotic relationship with the cultures in which it is found, became a ‘cultural artefact’ and imparted a sense of identity. It provided a distinctive countervailing force against the infiltration of Western culture, particularly from Christian religions. Not surprisingly Southeast Asians turned to Buddhism as cultural defensiveness against the intrusions of Western imperialism (1). Protestant and Catholic missionaries quickly jumped onto the Colonialism wagon to preach the Gospel, but in fact to try mass conversion. To justify brutal repression in the exploitation of natural resources, and to paint a human face on colonialism, they called it ‘mission civilisatrice’. This meant introducing scientific principles and the Bible to indigenous people irrespective of any pre-existing beliefs or cultural practices.

That human face of colonialism fooled no one. In the eyes of its faithful Buddhism was the cultural and spiritual heart which defined the people and gave them a national identity (2). Buddhism was the rallying force which united the people and served as a weapon to resist colonialism and Christianity. Anti colonialism and anti-Christianity became inseparable in the people’s struggle for national independence. Out of this
historical context contemporary Engaged Buddhism was born in Burma, Sri Lanka, India and Vietnam. (3) Definitely it was not coincident that the revival movement in South East Asian countries including Ceylon, Burma as well as Vietnam.

Ceylon (Sri Lanka)

In Ceylon, Buddhism was preached by Asoka’s Son, Mahinda, and had been made the National Religion long before the British came. The revival of Buddhism was actually initiated by a Ceylonese. The close connection of Ceylonese Buddhism with Ceylonese nationalism arose from the unique political and intellectual history of Ceylon (4). The Ceylonese had endured many colonial masters such as the Portuguese, Dutch and then the British. Eventually the British expelled the Dutch in 1815 and extended British rule over the entire island. As happened in all colonised countries, the colonalisers resorted to brutalising the natives on the one hand while on the other they pursued their aim of mass conversion of the Sinhalese to Christianity. The Dutch set out to ‘build churches in all districts and opened schools in villages. Books on Christianity were printed and published in the Sinhalese and Tamil languages. There even the proclaimed law demanding that all children be sent to Christian schools for their education’. (5). Not only did Buddhism lose its national religion status, anti-Buddhist laws were imposed so as to expropriate Buddhist temples, monasteries and land in Ceylon. This ‘divide and rule’ tactic was commonly applied. Co-operative monks were awarded the highest title in the Sangha and then asked to supply the Government with information. The colonisers realised that if they were to govern ‘peacefully’, the Bikkhus must be isolated from society so their influence over the people could be destroyed. (6) Meanwhile Christian missionaries exclusively ran educational services. To outsiders who have never experienced traumatic life under a foreign oppressive regime, the link between nationalism and Buddhism may be difficult to understand. To the colonised in Southeast Asia, the nationalist movements, which led to the anti-colonial wars, were motivated by a national identity inspired by Buddhism. A dynamic and articulate Ceylonese monk, Gunananda, started a debate between Christian missionaries and the Bikkhus in 1873. An account of the debate was reported in the Ceylon Times and incidentally caught the attention of Henry Steel Olcott, a former Colonel in the American Army. Later Olcott
duly founded the Theosophical Society of Ceylon and tried to rectify the monopoly of the Christian Church. Much impressed by Olcott, many Western educated Ceylonese laymen started a Buddhist revival movement by eliminating superstitious ritual practices, enunciating a code of ethics for laymen and reviving the past glories of Buddhist civilisation. Many members of this movement, such as Dharmapala and Bandaranaike, later played important roles in Ceylonese modern history. On the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of Buddhism, the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress requested an investigation on ‘the present state of Buddhism in Ceylon’, As a result, a report was released in 1956 stating:

*In the rest of the world Ceylon is regarded as essentially a Buddhist country and they (Ceylonese) want this claim established here as well...They will not content to remain in the position of inferiority to which they have been reduced by 450 years of foreign occupation.... They have no desire to make Buddhism the state religion (...) but they want the state to help them rehabilitate themselves and undo some, at least, of the injustices perpetrated against them during the days of their subjugation.* (7)

Thanks to the young Ceylonese and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the World Buddhist Fellowship was founded and a Buddhist flag was created. It the Buddhist flag that the Vietnamese Buddhists defended which led to the inception of the Buddhist Movement against the Catholic President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

**Burma**

A British colonial Government in India ruled Burma. The colonial period was much shorter but violent measures were used to dislodge Burmese intellectuals and destroy the country’s social structure (8) The first British-Burmese war broke out in 1824 and in 1885 the whole of Burma came under foreign rule but because it was ruled indirectly as an appendage of India, Buddhism remained more influential than was the case in Ceylon. The Sangha, like its counterpart in Ceylon, became the vanguard of the anti-British force and many of its prominent members were leaders during the resistance guerrilla war. One celebrated monk, U Wisera, died on hunger strike lasting over a hundred days. This was
because he demanded the right to wear his yellow robe while in prison. (9) Another monk, U Ottama, urged his countrymen not to pay taxes and was interned many times. Monks also participated in the uprising against British rule in 1930-31 and in the riots again the British in 1938.

As in other South East Asian countries, foreign religions entered Burma by the ‘back door’ in the aftermath of military conquest. Hinduism, Islam and Christianity flourished under colonial rule. Hinduism came with Indian workers and Tamil merchants; Christian missionaries, set about converting minority groups like the Karens, the Shins and the Kachins. These ethnic groups, rightly or wrongly, were despised as traitors by the Burmese, and seen as allies and collaborators by the British. They were encouraged to convert to Christianity en masse. As a result, these minority groups always sided up with their colonial masters. They fought along side the British against the Japanese and Burmese Armies in the independence wars (10). Like Ceylon, the Burmese have been caught up in a violent civil war that has continued to this day.

When the Burmese hero, Aung San, was assassinated in 1947, U Nu succeeded him and formed a new government which espoused a ‘socialist Buddhism’ ideology. A Buddhist Council was created as the governing body which conducted national affairs in accordance with the traditional ideal of a righteous monarch, Buddhism was regarded as the cornerstone of the national identity. (11) However, U Nu failed in his attempt to establish Buddhism as the state religion and his continued preoccupation with religious matters robbed him of an effective approach to political, economic and social problems of the day. However his attempt to govern the country can be seen as a modern approximation of the Asoka’s ideal.

India

Under the righteous monarch of Asoka, Buddhism spread throughout the Indian subcontinent but today, it survives only as a popular religion in West Bengal, in Bhutan and Nepal. It virtually disappeared from the homeland of the Buddha in about the 11th or 12th century when ten thousand of Sangha members were massacred by the Muslim
invaders. The revival did not start in India but in Ceylon and was led by a young Christian convert Sinhalese, David Hewavitarane. Impressed by the work of Colonel Henry Olcott, he re-converted to Buddhism and changed his name to Anagarika Dharmapala. Later the movement was assisted by Western scholars, mainly British and American. One of them was Sir Edwin Arnold, the author of *The Light of Asia*. Sir Edwin reported in a new magazine the state of disrepair of Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha Shakyamuni achieved enlightenment. This article caught the eye of Dharmapala and this young man took a vow to renew the place of enlightenment and revive the Buddha’s message. He founded the Mahabodhi Society in Ceylon which was instrumental in the Buddhist revival in South East Asia. In 1891 an International Buddhist Conference was convened at Bodh Gaya and attended by delegations from China, Japan, Ceylon and Burma. Thanks to the efforts of the Maha Bodhi society many sacred places were restored to their former glory including Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, Kushinagara when the Buddha entered Nirvana, and Rajagriha where the Buddha dwelt in meditation...In 1892 the Maha Bodhi magazine was published. It was the first time that a periodical in English addressed itself to the entire Buddhist world and called for a missionary program to preach the Dharma (12). The magazine attracted a large number of Indian intellectuals and friends of Buddhism in the West. Dharmapala then made two trips to the United States to seek support worldwide. A German branch of Maha Bodhi Society was founded and many more branches spread in cities in India. Under the Society auspices, a Buddhist Academy, a library, a free hospital and a teacher training College were established. An ambitious program of translating Buddhist texts into many minority language groups such as Tamil, Urdu, Telugu and Pali, the language of the sutras, began to be included in the syllabuses of many of the more prominent Indian Universities.

Buddhism started attracting the interest of Indian intellectuals who adopted Buddhist practices as their spiritual guide but were never converted. They also tried to accommodate Buddhism into the Indian tradition by presenting the Buddha, not as anti-Hindu, but rather as a critical-minded personality within the tradition of the Upanishads. Two of these most prominent contemporary scholars, Abanindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi were deeply inspired by Buddhist thoughts. Although Tagore’s attitude
toward Buddha was always one of deep faith, piety and devotion, he remained a Hindu. Buddha’s teachings had vanished from his country of birth ten centuries earlier but now and the time came for intellectuals, like Tagore, to make a strong plea for India to return to the spirit of Buddhism (13).

However it was Gandhi whose *Ahimsa* non-violent approach to the British Empire sped up the process of decolonisation. Even though he claimed himself a son of traditional India, ie Hinduism, his political and social programs were deeply influenced by Buddhist ethics. Like Tagore, Gandhi tried to bring Buddhism into the mainstream of the Indian tradition and to re-claim the Buddha as a reformer of Hinduism, not an opponent. At the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s birth in 1956, many Indian intellectuals voiced their welcome of the Buddha back in the national pantheon. The denunciation of the caste system which the Buddha championed, was used as a rationale for social reform, as Gandhi declared ‘if you are denying Buddhism, you are denying humanity, so long as you regard a single man as an Untouchable’ (14). After playing no role whatsoever in the religious life for nearly 10 centuries, the Wheel of Dharma was chosen to be the symbol in the centre of the Indian flag and Asoka’s rock pillar as the Indian coat of arms.

Nevertheless many conservative members of the Congress party stalled the reform of the caste system. The caste system was entrenched in India and the lower caste, the Untouchables, were subject to social, economic and religious discrimination and daily suffered personal harassment and humiliation. (15) It was a young man from the lower Hindu Caste, Ambedkar, who began a religious campaign to restore human dignity to the Unchouchables by persuading four hundred thousand followers to convert to Buddhism in 1956. Buddhism had disappeared for nearly ten centuries and at that time there was not even one ordained Indian monk. The Mahabodhi Society was managed by Hindu scholars and Buddhism appealed to them as an academic subject, not as a religion. Ambedkar, the young leader of the Untouchables, received his education from some of the best Universities (Columbia University and London School of Economics) worked as an academic, a writer, a politician and became the religious leader of the most oppressed
group of people in the world. Before embracing Buddhism, he put all traditional religions to a test. He stated that a religion must meet three conditions. First it must be in accord with science; secondly, it must recognise the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity; third it must not sanctify and ennable poverty. (16) According to Ambedkar, only Buddhism survived the ‘test’ and therefore qualified as a world religion. He was also impressed with the way the Buddha identified himself with ordinary human beings, being born a son of man and content to remain and preach his gospel as a common man. Like any hermeneutic religious leaders, Ambedkar was very much preoccupied with the link between religion and social oppression. He stated clearly that ‘unless religion can show it has a social conscience and that it is actively involved in the struggle for social justice, it will not be taken seriously by thinking men and women’. (17) He emphasised that the Buddha taught social freedom, equality and liberation to men in this life on earth and not after death in heaven. The Buddha’s principal social message which aimed to redress the economic, political, social and spiritual vicissitudes of historical communities. (18) Ambedkar redefined many central Buddhist tenets in his new Buddhist Bible, The Buddha and his Dhamma, to support his efforts to fight for social justice for the Untouchables. His ‘heretic’ interpretation of scripture may have shocked many traditional Buddhists, but he created a new concept of social activism for Engaged Buddhists. Ambedkar came before the Sixth Buddhist Council in Rangoon and announced his conversion realising that the social reform supported by the Indian intellectuals like Tagore or Gandhi was only valid on paper if made formally. Ambedkar saw that only Buddhism could provide lower caste Indians with a new sense of identity and human dignity. On 14 October 1956, in Nagpur, Ambedkar took refuge in the three jewels performed by a Burmese monk, U Chandramani and then conducted the initiation ceremony for 400,000 Untouchables. Sangharakshita personally witnessed this mass conversion to Buddhism of the dispossessed and commented:

*His conversion to Buddhism having been completed, Ambedkar turned to the 400,000 white-clad-figures sitting below him in the enclosure, men on the right, women and children on the left, and in a voice that boomed and crackled from the loudspeakers called upon those who wanted to embrace Buddhism to stand up. In response to his call*
the whole vast gathering rose as one man, hands joined in the traditional ‘lotus bud’ in readiness, whereupon Ambedkar repeated the first three Refuges, then the five precepts and finally the twenty two vows, and as one man the whole vast assembly repeated them after him in loud and joyous tones. Thus in the pace of half an hour 400,000 people became Buddhists. (19)

Since the Ambedkarites focused heavily on the tenets of social liberation and equality, there was of necessity a discussion about the affinity between Buddhism and socialism. The U Nu Government tried to apply the Asokan welfare policy, called ‘Buddhist Socialism’, in Burma. Many other outstanding figures in the Buddhist revival movement attempted to make a connection between the social ethics of Buddha and the ideals of socialism. For example, long before the Ambedkarite movement began, Anagarika Dhamapala mentioned the ‘Social Gospel of the Buddha’ in his lecture before the Chinese Buddhists at the Institute in Shanghai. He said moral decadence was directly related to the elimination of Buddhism in India and as a result, millions of people were neglected and so had become a depressed class. He called for the abolition of the caste system and the restoration of human rights for millions of the Untouchables. He appealed directly to the Indian people:

To the present generation of Indians I bring the message of the Buddha and I ask that his doctrines be examined, and if found good, followed. (20).

The time between Dhammapala’s speech and Dr Ambedkar’s announcement was forty years. The Indian government under the rule of the Congress party was not in a position to accept any solution of this sort. The mass conversion initiated by Ambedkar confirmed that the civil rights of the outcasts were in name only. Ambedkar criticised this and directly blamed Gandhi and the Congress Party for the stalemate. He made no efforts to camouflage his political and social concerns. Benz noted that Ambedkar was perfectly at liberty to become a Communist but instead, he went to Colombo to speak to ‘the sandaled and umbrelaed Buddhist monks’ who neither represented any world power nor wielded any direct political influence. The reason he did this because he believed that only
Buddhism could meet the four requirements of religion for a modern society (21). What Ambedkar did not say openly was that, in the political arena, Buddhist Socialism could have provided an alternative humane social revolution to that of Marxism. However he did say that once it was realised that Buddhism was a social gospel, its revival would be everlasting. He chose Buddhism partly because the Buddha’s religion was the only religion in which a society awakened by science could accept and partly it was still regarded as part of the Indian tradition, rather than a foreign imported ideology like Marxism. He was also impressed by what was happening in Ceylon and Burma in the 50’s when Buddhism formed ‘the spiritual nexus of the resistance to colonialism’ and fostered appropriate conditions for democratic constitutions.

In order to realise the social aims of Buddhism Ambedkar set out to re-access the roles of Sangha and of the Buddhist laymen, and to re-interpret the Buddha Dharma. He played down the monopoly roles of the Sangha members and stressed the importance of the laity’s contribution. He declared that there was no difference between the life of the bhikkhu and the upasaka. When preaching the five precepts, the Noble Eightfold path and the Ten Prefections, it was obvious the Buddha had the laity in mind (22). Keeping in mind that there were scarcely any Indian Bhikkhus at the time and that his mass followers needed minders to keep the movement developing, he attacked Sangha members who espoused the Arhant ideal and spent a great deal of their life in individual meditation calling them as ‘a huge army of idlers’. He reaffirmed the Bodhisattvas ideal in the Mahayana tradition: ‘A bhikkhu who is indifferent to the woes of mankind, however perfect in self culture, is not at all a bhikkhu’ (23). He also highlighted the indispensable role of the laity in modern Engaged Buddhist movements in Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Ceylon, Burma and Vietnam.

Ambedkar’s interpretation of the Buddha’s teachings was controversial and may have shocked many Buddhists. His approach to Buddhism was social and ethical rather than philosophical and mystical. He re-wrote the life of the Buddha in a non-traditional way and he deliberately left out the first sermon about the Four Noble Truths which, according to him, was ‘a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting
the gospel of Buddhism' (24). For instance while Buddha explained Dukkha in terms of craving and impermanence, Ambedkar saw it as a result of social and economic injustice. He rejected the concept of Karma and rebirth, because this belief provides a basis for belief in the caste system. To Ambedkar the denying of the Prime cause was the key element of the Buddha Dharma as much as the hallmark of its rationality and egalitarianism (25). Ambedkar's interpretation of the Dharma may have lacked a transcendent dimension, but to him, blaming the victims (their craving) instead of attempting to eliminate social injustice which created it was an insult to millions of Untouchables. However, as Macy has commented, this 'innovation of religious theology' was not an isolated phenomenon. Ambedkar re-interpreted the Dharma in a social context, as did the clergy in the liberation theology movement in the Christian world. This has also been the case in the Mahayana tradition, where the Bodhisattva ideal is used as a form of socially Engaged Buddhism applied to everyday life.

This new vision of socially engaged Buddhism with its emphasis on social justice in the here and now and not merely as the result of Karma, profoundly influenced the Vietnamese Sangha and the laity in the 60s in their struggles, first against the autocratic Catholic President for religious freedom, and second against the superpowers for a just peace and reconciliation.

Foreign Missionaries and Mass Conversion

Like their fellow Buddhists in Ceylon and Burma, the Vietnamese Buddhists faced colonialism on two fronts: military and cultural. In Vietnam, because the early missionaries were either Portuguese-Spanish or French, the Roman Catholic Church was the main player in the cultural front.

Portuguese merchants came to Vietnam as early as in the 16th century. The Dutch also opened their businesses in Faifo and in the northern part. British merchants came later but they were no less active. In 1673 the British East India Company opened a shop near Hanoi. A missionary in a Jesuit order, Ignatius went to Vietnam and preached the faith in

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the North. Another two missionaries, Carvalho and Buzomi, landed in Danang and encouraged by the positive reception, they asked their Superior to open another branch in the North. But the missionary who enticed the French expeditionary force to Vietnam was Alexandre De Rhode. It was believed that in 1629 there were more than 6,700 new Catholic converts, including some members of the Royal family. Feeling threatened by the new religion which denied all Confucian ethics, the Trinh Principality in the North expelled De Rhode in 1630 and the Nguyen Principality in the South followed suit, issuing many edicts to prevent the propagation of the new faith. De Rhode went back to Rome and tried to convince the Vatican to establish a new church as opposed to the Portuguese one. In a letter to the French Court De Rhode asked to be provided with soldiers to conquer the East (26). However, De Rhode died in 1660 before he could realise his ambition. Soon after a Foreign Missionary Association was founded which was closely associated with French colonialism. Being suspicious of the increased activities of the Foreign Missionary Association, the Trinh and Nguyen principalities requested that it be strictly controlled. However in the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, many Dutch and Portuguese missionaries were assigned to the Court as astronomers, mathematicians and medical doctors (192). Pigneau De Behaine who was appointed as the head of the Society of Foreign Missions in Vietnam in 1765 tried to entice the French Court to colonise Vietnam (27). Phan Boi Chau, the most celebrated anti-colonialism patriot, in the petition to the Chinese Christian Conference held in Peking in April 1922, condemned De Behaine as ‘the vanguard colonialist’ who tried to realise Napoleon’s colonial policy. A French historian, Charles Maybon also drew attention to the essential role the Catholic Missions played in the colonial war:

*The history of the Society of Foreign Missions is closely associated with the history of the propagation of French influence in Indochina. ...The most illustrious missionary in the Society, Bishop Adrian Pigneau de Behaine officially strengthened this tie: the interference of the society members in Vietnamese affairs led to the first armed intervention* (28)
Bishop De Behaine approached the exiled Prince Nguyen Anh when he was chased out to Siam by his rival, Quang Trung, and advised him to seek military assistance from France. Nguyen Anh wrote a letter to Louis XVI and entrusted the priest to bring his son, Prince Canh, to France. Nguyen Anh even signed the first treaty between France and Vietnam, allowing France access to Con Lon Island and allowing Catholicism freely. But the French Government had to abandon this plan because resources had been exhausted after the war in America. When the Consular in India refused to implement the treaty, Pigneau De Behaine decided to act alone. He recruited some mercenaries, bought weapons and two ships to assist Nguyen Anh. Using Western military techniques, he also helped to set up a military training camp.

When Nguyen Anh conquered the whole country, he felt indebted to the French missionaries and therefore treated all foreigners well. However, just before his death, witnessing the British occupation of Singapore, Nguyen Anh (the King Gia Long) advised his heir to continue treating the Europeans well but warned him to be wary of their military ambition. The missionaries did not restrict their activities to religious matters but in many instances, were deeply involved in many clandestine and hostile activities. Le Van Duyet, the Governor of the Southern Part, objected to King Minh Mang as the appointed Royal heir and their relationship turned sour. After Duyet had passed away, his son, Le Van Khoi, rebelled against the court and occupied many provinces in the South. The missionaries and the new Catholic converts actively took part in the rebellion. Consequently, King Minh Mang issued many edicts to restrict missionary activities to purely religious matters. Because of this the Catholic missionaries painted him as a tyrant who pursued a policy of religious persecution. The missionaries and the Catholic converts hoped that if Le Van Khoi seceded, the Southern part could become a Catholic country. After the rebellion collapsed, a French priest, Marchand, and five other ring leaders were brought to the Court and duly executed. A decade later, another priest, Pellerin, was also suspected of being involved in a rebellion led by the King’s cousin, Hong Bao. The Nguyen Court’s reaction was quite understandable. The propagation of the Christian faith was forbidden, and two priests, Schoeffler and Bonnard were executed (29).
Using religious persecution as a pretext, the French set out to conquer Vietnam. Napoleon III decided to send Rear Admiral Rigault de Genouille to mastermind the conquest. The Admiral was instructed ‘to finish the persecution of the Catholics, to secure the freedom to preach the Catholic faith and occupy Tourane port’ (30). After achieving these objectives, Renouilly sailed for the South and began attacking Gia Dinh. With the assistance from Spanish mercenaries, the French annexed the South in 1868 which became a French colony and later was renamed Cochinchina. In 1884 the French occupied the North and renamed it Tonkin. The central part was left to the Nguyen monarch and called Annam. Colonisation was almost complete. Later Cambodia and Laos, already French colonies, became part of the Federation of Indochina until 1954.

Unlike in Theravada countries where the missionaries were mostly from the Church of England, in Vietnam the missionaries were mainly Roman Catholic. In Hinayana countries, the Christian Church only boarded the ‘train of military conquest’. In another word, the Church of England only took a passive role in the colonisation process, mainly opportunistic. Although the British colonial government granted the Christian Church many privileges in education as well as land and properties to the missionaries, they did not support any aggressive religious propagation. Contrary to the British however, Catholic missionaries in Vietnam were the main driving forces behind colonialism. Thus it is inconceivable that the history of colonialism in Vietnam can be written without describing the involvement of Catholicism as Cao Huy Thuan affirmed:

(The) Catholic Church activities were a part of the colonial strategies. In Colonialism, the Big C represents three small c’s: Christianisation, Commerce and Civilisation. (31).

Some colonial historians blamed the religious persecution adopted by some Nguyen Kings as the main catalyst for the colonial war. Cao Huy Thuan spent some time digging in French archives and found many private letters written by the main players at that time, such as Rigault de Genouilly, Chasseloup Laubat, Dupre, Philastre.... He unearthed
evidence that supported the view of the Catholic Church's deep involvement in colonising Vietnam:

In fact what was called the religious persecution was only the natural reactions of the leaders of a country which was seriously threatened by foreign invasion. If the Catholic Church was persecuted mainly because the missionaries acted as if they were accomplices and accessories of the foreign cultural and military invasion. No body would blame Catholicism itself, which is a religion of love, but no Vietnamese could forgive the European missionaries for causing serious crimes and sufferings to the Vietnamese people. (32).

Colonialism and Catholicism cannot be separated in the history of Vietnam. The Vietnamese rejected Catholicism because they could see behind the missionaries the brute force of the colonial powers and behind the ruthless colonialists, the missionaries and the new converts. Catholicism was a foreign religion imposed by their enemies. To accept Catholicism meant to accept foreign domination and to reject their own country (33). Perhaps more than any other country, the Vietnamese people witnessed the real purpose of the missionaries in the colonial war. When fighting against the French, the Vietnamese people waged a war on two fronts, military and cultural. That was why when the Nguyen Court conceded defeat, the people fought on tirelessly for nearly a hundred years to prevent their country from being colonised and their culture from being decimated.

In order to justify colonialism the Catholic Church together with the colonial rulers created the Civilising mission myth. They argued that the purpose of colonisation was to bring civilisation and prosperity to less developed countries, to inject Christian values in those who still lived in the shadow of 'barbaric' religions. In fact Colonisation and Civilisation were two sides of the same coin: Colonise land and civilise people were one and the same aim. Hence the missionaries spared no efforts to discredit and destroy local beliefs such as Confucianism and ancestor worship. To their surprise, the missionaries found strong resistance, not only to colonial rule, but also to Catholicism. To destroy the
driving force of national resistance, Confucianism and Buddhism became the driving force of national resistance thus were the main targets of a most vicious attack by French missionaries, as the historian of the society of Foreign Missions, priest Louvet confirmed: *The most dangerous enemies of France and Catholicism are the Confucians* (34). Little wonder then that the patriotic Confucian, Phan Boi Chau, regarded Bishop Pignneau De Behaine, who enticed the French Court to use force to protect ‘religious freedom’, as the vanguard leader of colonial aspirations (35).

Catholic converts were usually recruited from the poorest parts of society and more often than not, the anti-social elements. Once converted, they lived in different ghettos and actually created ‘a state within a state’. They accepted orders only from their parish priests and disregarded the law of the Court. French officers reported many incidents in which the Catholic mob terrorised the non-Catholic community at large. For example, Major Jaureguiberry denied that he had ever ordered the Vietnamese Catholic to rob and burn houses in the Chinese quarter, as claimed. In fact this Catholic mob was under the control of a French priest, Lefebre (36). To reward their allies, the French colonial government confiscated the land and properties of the non-Catholic and gave them to the converts (37). More often than not, the foreign priests blatantly ignored local law. In Binh Dinh province priests sometimes committed the most serious crimes such as rebellion against the Court, inciting others to rebel, assault, make false arrests...They often went unpunished. The Vietnamese Court had no jurisdiction over the Catholic priests because the French colonial government wanted to protect the missionaries and the converts from being persecuted ‘unfairly’. In many provinces, pagodas were acquired and given to the priests to transform into Catholic churches. Admiral Bonard donated a pagoda in My Tho to Bishop Lefebre which was made the Central Church in that city (38). Land acquisition or confiscation from non-Catholics was common. Two Vietnamese priests, Pham Ngo Hien and Nguyen Hoa Duong, who were re-converted back to Confucianism, reported that a Bishop owned at least 100 hectares of land and paid no tax to the court (39).

As in Burma and Ceylon, mass conversion was the favourite tactic to secure allegiance of the local people. Converts were promised protection by the colonial authority and
enjoyed enormous privileges. Priests were never concerned about the genuineness of conversion because as soon as people were converted, they lived isolated from the non-Catholics alienated from their own countrymen and only accepted orders from the priests. Also privileges such as paying minimal taxes, exemption from being conscripted and full protection from the colonial authority made conversion more appealing. Most of the new converts were poor peasants in the famine years (40).

It was a vicious circle. The more the converts were despised, ostracised and feared by the Vietnamese non-Catholics, the closer together they became as a group in their isolated communities. The converts were alienated from history, the land and their compatriots so that eventually there was only one country that they related to, that of God, represented by the Roman Catholic Church. As Benoit XV said: ‘Forget about your family and your country. Remember you have to expand your real country, that is the country of God’ (41). During the Vietnam War, a prominent Catholic priest echoed the same sentiments as his predecessors. Priest Hoang Quynh, who formed the Catholic local guards under the auspices of the French government to fight the Viet Minh, declared: ‘We would rather lose our country than lose Christ’.

As has been previously stated, the Catholic priests did not come aboard the colonisation wagon, they actively lobbied with Napoleon III to conquer Vietnam when most of the French Court hesitated in sending expeditionary forces to a remote country. The Pope’s representative in China, Priest Huc, wrote to the French Emperor to encourage him to start an expedition. He emphasised the ‘strategic position’ of Danang a port in the Asian Pacific region, the natural products in Cochinchina (South Vietnam) and the ease of converting the locals commenting that:

The people are very nice and hard working. They will be easily induced to convert to Catholicism. It will only take a short time to transform this country into a Catholic country and consequently, people will be loyal to France (42).
Another priest, Pellerin, went to Paris and had an audience with Napoleon III to ask him to send troops to Vietnam otherwise ‘Catholicism in Cochin china would be totally destroyed’. He also went to Rome to meet with Pope Pious XI and the Pope commended him ‘for his efforts to involve the French army in the expedition’. What Catholic missionaries insisted was that Vietnam ought to become a permanent French colony, rather than just temporarily occupied in a few strategic locations. Realising that Napoleon III was not totally convinced, another priest, Legrand, submitted not only a detailed report on the benefits of the expedition but he also sketched a military plan of how to occupy Vietnam. He pleaded: ‘the fruit is ripe and will shortly fall. I pray to God not to let it (Vietnam) fall in the lap of the British’ (43).

The missionaries also tried to influence military tactics. Father Pellerin discussed with General Genouilly whether the French should occupy Saigon or Hanoi after the fall of Danang port in the central Vietnam. Genouilly reacted angrily and accused Pellerin of interfering in political, administrative and military affairs.

At first the French had no intention of colonising the whole of Vietnam. They sought only to protect the missionaries and occupy some ports for their merchant ships, so they tried to negotiate with the Nguyen Court for a peaceful solution. The Court was forced to sign the 1862 Treaty and three provinces in the Southern part were seceded. Phan Thanh Gian, the most revered Confucian Mandarin at the time, was appointed Emissary and sent to France to redeem the three lost provinces. However a peaceful solution was not what the Catholic priests wanted and they did everything possible to halt the negotiation process.

When the Southern Vietnam became a French colony, Chasseloup Laubat, the first Governor tried to implement an assimilation policy that attempted to turn every Vietnamese into a Catholic and a pro-colonial citizen. The Governor knew that he had to rely on the Catholics missionaries to help him to achieve these objectives. If the South was to become a loyal colony then the traditional culture and religions had to be destroyed, ‘anything that needed to be destroyed’ to achieve this’ (44). When a French
administrator, Bonard, wanted to reconcile with the Confucians to secure their co-operation, he was strongly opposed by the missionaries. They accused Bonard of giving the power to ‘the worst enemies’ of the Catholic Church. To intimidate him and to make him abandon this policy the Catholic priests spread a rumour that he practised an anti-Catholic policy and even appealed to the French Court for his removal.

In order to keep the Vietnamese loyal to colonial rule, the ideal solution was seen as mass conversion, because the converts would only accept orders from the priests. The missionaries’ argument was simple: *the cross is mightier than the gun*—especially in matters of converting the populace into obedience.

As in Ceylon, the Catholic Church monopolised educational institutions. It was acknowledged that education was the best means to achieve assimilation. By setting up modern schools, the colonial government hoped to train new and loyal bureaucrats so Confucian education was first abolished in the South. In doing this it was hoped that the Vietnamese people would be cut off from their traditional culture and religions, their main source for resisting colonialism. Romanised Vietnamese scripts and Western ideas were taught with the aim of wiping out completely any remnant of traditional culture. In primary schools children were forced to be baptised and mass conversions followed. While the middle schools and seminaries provided the colonial government with the collaborative administrators needed, the Catholic Church was able to train a new crop of priests. *Mass conversion and education had to go hand in hand if colonisation was to succeed.* The growth of Catholic education in the South was phenomenal. In 1863 there was only one French high school and one seminary under the control of two missionaries but by 1865 the number of schools had increased to 20 with 800 students. In 1868 there were 56 schools with 1,300 students and in 1869 there were 104 schools with 3,200 students (45).

This assimilation policy assured a loyal and stable colony in the long term, but it was a costly exercise. From time to time repressive measures had to be used against armed rebellions including execution of ring leaders and mass imprisonment. A large number of
colonial army personnel and bureaucracies had to be employed to make the indigenous people toe the line. The assimilation policy was applied as soon as Cochinchina became a colony. (46) When the whole of Vietnam was completely under French rule, Association Policy (which was much less expensive) was put into practice. This time the colonial masters tried to secure the collaboration of the moderate Confucians by encouraging the protection of traditional values and religions. The missionaries of course strongly objected to this ‘defeatist’ policy. Priest Puginier wrote a petition to the French Court and urged that the assimilation policy and repressive measures be maintained. It was obvious that, if the collaboration strategy was to be accepted, the last generation of Confucians must be able to share power with the colonial masters. Puginier condemned it as ‘a humiliating approach, an unfair treatment of the Catholic community and a political disaster’ (47). Instead he suggested the source of rebellion be destroyed. Since Confucians led the resistance, it made sense to eliminate them, Confucianism and traditional culture. He reminded the French government that there were ‘400,000 Catholics who sacrificed for, and loved the mother country France’. He also volunteered to deploy the Catholic converts to search and destroy enemies from the South to the North. And who were these enemies of the mother country and Catholic Church? He compiled a black list including the Court mandarins who led an abortive coup against the French army in Hue, the Vietnamese provincial Governors, all serving and retired mandarins and Confucians, village chiefs who harboured the resistant fighters and people living in non-Catholic villages. In other words, the whole country except the Catholics! (48). On the cultural front, Puginier proposed a drastic measure: cutting the Vietnamese people off from their sources and replacing these by Catholicism. If Vietnam was to become a Catholic country one day, the colonialists must be assured of their loyalty forever for Vietnam was to be a ‘little France’ in Southeast Asia! The prospect of a Catholic Vietnam was very promising. Puginier promised that 20,000 people could be converted in the near future and that all the Tonkinese would be Catholic converts after 30 years.

As in the Vietnam War, the Doves and the Hawks were fighting in the parliament. The supply Bill to finance Puginier’s expedition had to be approved by the Lower House and
the Senate. It was a Catholic Senator, Bishop Freppel, who helped the government’s bill to be passed. The royalist Bishop who was strongly supported by the Vatican, made an emotional speech to convince the Senate to pass the Bill. He said that the alliance between Catholic and Colonialism was a sacred cooperation. France was fighting for ‘justice and honour’ for the French missionaries and the Catholics in Vietnam. If France withdrew her troops from Tonkin, her prestige would completely destroyed in the eyes of the people in the Far East countries. (History repeats itself. It is interesting to hear Cardinal Spellman and the Catholic hawks raised identical arguments against the Communists in the Vietnam War. He openly declared in front of the American marines that ‘the American soldiers came to Vietnam not only as the representatives of the US Army, but as the Christ’s crusaders. The Vietnam War is a war to protect the Christian civilisation. There is no other solution than a military victory’. (49)

The foreign missionaries exerted their influence on the implementation of colonial policies whenever possible. When some ‘socialist’ French Governors, like Paul Bert, Doumer, Long and Varenne, tried to implement more liberal approaches and to introduce political reform, the Catholic Church was vocal in attacking these policies. For instance they staged a large demonstration in front of Governor Beau’s office and asked for immediate justice for the colonial entrepreneurs who owned almost every industrial and commercial enterprise as well as the Catholic Church who also owned commercial interests, as well as the media, in Tonkin. ‘Avenir De Tonkin’ (The Future of Tonkin), one of the Church papers, even threatened to lobby the French government to remove Sarraut, who was a member of Progressive Socialist Party in France. Its threat was far from subtle: ‘Nobody can remain a Governor for long if he disregards the legitimate aspiration of the colonials’. And what was the ‘legitimate aspiration’? It was spelt out loud and clear: ‘No cooperation between the colonisers and the colonised is possible. The best policy is the repressive and assimilation one’. (50).

As a result of all this, two categories of people emerged in the history of colonialism: either loyal collaborators or ardent anti-colonial patriots. As we have seen earlier in Bishop Puginier’s black list, on one side were the Catholics and the colonials, on the
other, the rest of the Vietnamese people. Catholics still lived as foreigners among their compatriot; their church was a Catholic Church in Vietnam, not a Vietnamese Catholic Church! This meant there was no hope of national reconciliation. But it was in the colonial context that a new generation of the Vietnamese Sangha members gradually began preparing the groundwork for a revived and engaged Buddhism, which eventually led the inevitable confrontation with the Catholic President Diem who was still piously dreaming of the conversion of the whole Vietnamese people.

**Failures of the Last Confucians**

With its focus on human relationships, Confucianism eventually became the national ideology and Buddhist activities were mostly restricted to the monasteries. Respected and enlightened Zen Masters became rarer and they were more than pleased to retreat to the deep jungle to pursue their spiritual path. At the end of the 16th century the decline of Buddhism was inevitable when monks only performed funeral rites and superstitious practices. From vibrant Engaged Buddhism in Lys and Trans, it gradually became known as a ‘religion of the dead’. It completely lost its appeal to the intellectual elite and tragically only survived in the form of popular Buddhism.

Then Vietnamese Confucians blindly followed Sung school of thought which was submerged in metaphysical speculation and lost touch with reality. It produced generations of bookworms and arrogant defenders of the righteous path (i.e. Confucianism). It was no match for the technological Western civilisation. When the French artillery was first heard at Faifo port in Danang, the Confucian citadel quickly crumbled. Suddenly Confucians found themselves surrounded by many hostile elements. Colonial rulers and the newly converted Catholics saw them as the main obstacles to colonialism and Catholicism. By showing the defeatist attitude, the Court and its mandarins also lost their Mandate of Heaven in the eyes of the ordinary Vietnamese. Many Confucians either refused to join the mandarin rank or disobeyed the order to surrender. These self-esteem Confucians rather came back to live as hermits among the peasants than to cooperate with the enemies. There they met their long lost friends among
the peasants: the village monks who were previously hounded by orthodox Confucians. These old monks who had a deep understanding of the peasants’ aspiration were the people’s confidants. The hermit Confucians and the old village monks renewed their acquaintances and associated themselves closely with the anti-colonial Royalist Resistance and the anti-colonial war at a later stage (51). Even some mandarin-Confucians calmly and proudly sacrificed their lives to achieve Righteousness and so were revered by the masses. Amongst these, Phan Thanh Gian was appointed the emissary to go to France to redeem the six provinces occupied by the French army, but took his own life by going on a hunger strike for many days and taking poison. Another patriotic Confucian, the Governor of Hanoi, Hoang Dieu refused to surrender and hanged himself. The ‘popular’ Confucians who either refused to join the mandarin rank or defected from the Court were far more respected. Nguyen Dinh Chieu, known as Do Chieu (Teacher Chieu), refused to accept any favour from the French and lived a very simple life like that of Gandhi. When the French annexed the Southern Part of Vietnam and renamed it Cochinchina, hermit Confucians jointly with the village monks led many uprisings all over the country. Little wonder that the colonial government and the Catholic missionaries were more determined than ever to destroy Confucianism even though they aimed at the wrong target.

In 1884 when the Court had to sign the Patenotre treaty that virtually affirmed French rule throughout Vietnam, the Foreign Missionaries openly cooperated with the invaders. When humiliation became too much to bear, the Court secretly stockpiled weapons in a secret camp to prepare for resistance. The secret preparation was leaked to the French by none other than Bishop Puginier in a letter to General De Courcy (52). The abortive coup was obviously doomed to failure and King Ham Nghi fled to Tan So secret camp in Quang Tri. The King then issued an Edict to call for an insurrection throughout the country. The Edict required every one to contribute to, and participate in the fight to ‘restore the Monarchy and to denounce those Catholics who had collaborated with the French. This was the first time that the Mandarin-Confucians, the hermit Confucians and the peasants jointly fought a common enemy. People gathered whatever weapons they could to wage war. The movement’s slogan was ‘Kill the French and the Catholics’.
tragic civil war between the Catholics and the Vietnamese lasted until 1913 when the last leader, Hoang Hoa Tham, died. The resistance leaders knew that they were fighting a losing war, but they went bravely to meet their death as if going to a promised Heaven (53). The war failed not only because of the repressive measures exercised by the French, but also because it lacked a centralised leadership and most importantly, because it relied on outdated weapons and tactics. When a new national resistance movement began later, it was led by new groups of reformed Confucian leaders who were inspired by world events at the beginning of the 20th century and whose tactics and ideas reflected a fresh approach to the problems of resistance warfare.

Southern Vietnam became a colony in the early days of the colonial war (1867) and with enthusiastic assistance from French missionaries, the Catholic school system was instituted to replace the Confucian system. The decline of Confucian education happened more slowly in the North because it was not under direct French rule, but eventually all Confucian examinations were abolished in 1907. In the new Catholic schools, the medium of instruction was either French or Romanised scripts that were created by early European missionaries. Until then there was a gap between spoken and written Vietnamese. Spoken Vietnamese, belonging to the Austro-Asiatic group of Mon Khmer languages, differs from the North China group of Han-Tibetan languages. Under Chinese rule, Chinese was used as the lingua franca. After regaining independence, many successive dynasties systematically fostered knowledge of written Chinese for administrative, religious and cultural purpose (54). In the thirteenth century a new writing system was developed, known as Chu Nom that effectively transcribed phonetic Vietnamese. Even though Chu Nom was seen as a symbol of political and cultural sovereignty, it was extremely difficult for ordinary people to learn. This effectively made the majority of Vietnamese ‘illiterate’ as far as written Vietnamese was concerned. Using Latin to transcribe phonetically spoken Vietnamese, Quoc Ngu can be learned and mastered in just a few months. The missionaries thought Quoc Ngu could speed up mass conversion to Catholicism. Unexpectedly, Confucians happily joined the modernisation push and were the ones who campaigned to have traditional learning discarded. Certain world events shook their conservative outlook to the core and they started looking
elsewhere for a new identity. No longer did they outright reject Western culture as imposed by the colonial masters. They knew that if traditional ideology was to play any role in the 20th century, it would have to be modernised and revived. Equipped with this new outlook, the Confucian and Buddhist revival movement went ahead at full speed.

Most Confucians were still well versed in Chinese and still interpreted world events through Chinese eyes. Two Chinese reformists who deeply influenced the last generation of Vietnamese Confucians were K’ang Yu Wei (1858-1927) and Liang Chi Chao (1873-1929). They spread their reformist ideas by writing books, establishing schools, publishing newspapers and magazines, lobbying the Court and travelling overseas to gain first hand information and ideas. Liang’s works, known as Tan Thu (New Books), reached the reformist Confucians as early as 1903. During the next few years the Vietnamese reformists plunged into social and political activities that had a far reaching impact on anti-colonial organisations, at least until 1945. These two most celebrated patriotic Confucians represented the two major trends in the transitional period namely armed struggle and a peaceful political campaign to regain independence by non-violent actions. However both agreed that if the struggle for independence was to succeed, a new national ideology had to be found to guide political actions. And both agreed Confucianism hindered modernisation that was crucial in the de-colonisation process.

Like the Chinese reformists, Phan Boi Chau wrote many books to denounce colonialism. He established an educational institution called Dong Kinh Nghia Thuc to propagate new ideas, sent students overseas (particularly to Japan) to learn the technological skills of the West and lobbied important Japanese and Chinese figures and politicians to gain support in the struggle to regain independence. However, he refused to give up the armed struggle against the French colonial government. The other patriot, Phan Chu Trinh, realised that the most effective method to fight the colonial regime was to mobilise the masses to engage in non-violent actions. Phan Chu Trinh refused to take up arms, denounced the Court and its mandarins, disseminated information about people’s rights that he learned from French social theorists like Rousseau and Montesquieu, proposed that Romanised scripts be adopted in place of Chinese scripts and set up commercial enterprises which
orthodox Confucians loathed. The most spectacular political action inspired by the new Confucians was the **non-violent mass protest** of 1908. Burdened by high taxes and the Mandarins' corrupt practice, the peasants in Quang Nam rebelled and surrounded many prefects’ offices, took corrupt mandarins as hostages and demonstrated to the French provincial Governor to demand that tax be lowered and corrupt officials punished. These were unprecedented political actions. Exercising their ‘people’s rights’ to which the French rulers always paid lip service, the peasants peacefully demanded that their rulers address their grievances. This successful mass mobilisation was far more significant than the uprising of the Soviet Nghe Tinh that the communists cherished at a later period. Its impact can be compared with the ‘salt route protest’ led by Gandhi a few decades later. All protesters had their hair cut short, so identifying themselves with Phan Chu Trinh’s symbolic gesture to sever all traditional links with Confucianism. However, the French recognised that civil disobedience was far more effective than desperate violent acts. The ‘hair cutting movement’, as the French termed it, was cruelly and violently suppressed. Many of its leaders were executed and the best-known being Tran Qui Cap. He was executed by being chopped in two, while hundreds of other leaders were imprisoned. Phan Boi Chau who was not involved in any way, was also sentenced to death in absentia along with Phan Chu Trinh but this was later commuted to life imprisonment, due to the intervention of the Human Rights Association in France.

The impact of Phan Chu Trinh’s anti-colonial stance on the next generation was enormous. He was an **enfant terrible**. He had his hair cut short, wore western clothes, wrote articles in Romanised script, denounced the monarchy and the Confucian-Mandarins and raised ‘the People’s Rights’ banner. He encouraged his followers to run commercial enterprises, as well as to learn all the practical skills of Western education. His vision was greater than that of his fellow contemporary Confucians. Like other modernists, he knew that if anti-colonialism was to have any chance of success, the masses must be involved and a new sense of national identity must be found. The collapse of Confucianism made Buddhism emerge the only viable alternative counter cultural force to the West.
Buddhism as the Torch Bearer of Nationalism

The aggressive attempt by the Foreign Missionaries to achieve mass conversion which, more than ever was seen as a direct attack on traditional values and the collapse of Confucianism, made Buddhism a viable and attractive alternative cultural force to counter the West. The revival of Chinese and Southeast Asian Buddhism aided this. In all Buddhist countries facing Western imperialism, Buddhism came to be identified with the national struggle as Ken Jones pointed out in his book, *The Social Face of Buddhism* (55). It imparted a sense of identity and provided a distinctive countervailing force against the infiltration of Western culture. Except that now the Buddha’s message had to made palatable to a new generation who knew more about Western philosophers of the 19th century than they did about Sages and Bodhisattvas. A ‘modernist’ Buddhist taught that Buddhists should pay more attention to the Buddha’s social message and less to myth and ceremony (56). A renewed Buddhism must also show concern for social injustices, particularly those created by colonialism. This social activism of engaged Buddhism was to become the focus of the Vietnamese Sangha in the years to come and became more and more relevant to the social and political needs of the Vietnamese people in their continuing struggle against the super power, America.

The new generation of ordained monks no longer just practised Buddhist rites at funerals or worked as ‘quack doctors’. Rather they worked to restore the vitality of a spiritual and engaged Buddhism such as was apparent in the Tran Dynasty. They aimed to eradicate the negative image of Buddhism which was harmful to the spiritual needs of the population (57). Furthermore the influence of orthodox Confucianism on social structures was less than has been supposed. Only a small circle of the Confucian elite observed strict ethical principles and Confucianism never developed a power base amongst the masses. When Confucian leaders were forced to retreat to the villages to seek their compatriots’ support, they came across old friends namely the old village-monks, who were the real vital link between the resistance leaders and the masses. Buddhist temples were used as meeting places to plan resistance in the anti-colonial war. In fact the monks themselves conducted many uprisings. For instance in 1898 a monk, Vo Tru, in the provinces of Binh Dinh and Phu Yen, led an uprising. After it failed, every pagoda in the
district was searched and the prison was full of monks. The French called it the ‘Monk Rebellion’. (58) In the North, the Abbot of Ngoc Long Dong Pagoda, near Hanoi led another uprising. The ‘righteous’ soldiers attacked Hanoi in December 1898 but again failed to make an impression on colonial rule. The ruling authorities violently suppressed the uprising and large numbers of monks were either imprisoned or executed.

Like their Confucian counterparts, most of the monks were able to read and write Chinese, therefore world events were viewed mostly from a Chinese perspective. There was no evidence showing how much the monks knew about the Buddhist revival in Theravada countries, but the Chinese Buddhist reform activities lead by Thai Hsu deeply inspired the Vietnamese monks. Like the sixth patriarch of Chinese Zen, Hue Neng, Thai Hu was from a humble background and he previously earned a living as a peddler. He was ordained when he was only sixteen. Like most of his contemporaries, he admired Sun Yat Sen and the Chinese revolution of 1911. When his master died he took over his mantle of leadership and started his own revolution, reinterpreting the Buddha’s Dharma and establishing new rules for the Sangha, including reorganising the administration of temples. He lobbied for a centralised Sangha, which would strictly administer the ordination and administration of its members. However Thai Hsu soon found out that many monks who were to lose most of their privileges under his proposal, tried to sabotage his reforms. Nevertheless he was able to muster the laity’s support to publish a magazine called ‘Giac Xa’ (The Enlightened Society). It advocated a renewed Buddhism to implement Thai Hsu’s progressive programs to reform the Sangha (57). Later the magazine’s name was changed to ‘Hai Trieu Am’ (The Sounds from the Suffering World) a name which was inspired by the Bodhisattva Avalokita’s vow. As its name implies, Avalokita is supposed to hear all being ‘s cries for help and to alleviate suffering. This was the kind of Engaged Buddhism that Thai Hu openly preached and was adopted by the Vietnamese Sangha (59). Thai Hu was not afraid of being involved in political action or of taking a political stance. He openly and strongly supported the ‘new’ China envisaged by Sun Yat Sen. The father of the Chinese Revolution was regarded as a reincarnated Bodhisattva who responded positively to the Chinese people’s desperate situation between a corrupt feudal force and international imperialist forces. Thai Hu
enthusiastically encouraged his people and monks to join the resistance against the Japanese invasion. On the cultural front, he quickly realised that a reformed Confucianism alone was not capable of preventing the Chinese people from being cut off from the traditional links and embracing a totally alien revolutionary doctrine (e.g. Marxism). A renewed and engaged Buddhism was the last hope of the Chinese people to fight both a decadent monarchy and cultural invasion from the West. It was little wonder that Thich Tri Quang, the gentle Vietnamese monk who shook America in the 60’s, praised Thai Hsu as the ‘model’ Teacher of all the Vietnamese Sangha (60). Inspired by Thai Hsu’s vision and interpretation of the Buddha’s Dharma as well as his attempt to purify the ‘idle’ army of monks, the Vietnamese Sangha launched a revived and engaged Buddhism which eventually bore fruits in the 60s and beyond.

Meanwhile the Catholic missionaries considered that Confucianism was the main obstacle to their mass conversion, they spared no effort to discredit it. Unexpectedly reformed Confucians themselves rejected recalcitrant learning and the colonialists suddenly realised that they had aimed at the wrong target. Buddhism, not Confucianism was far more entrenched in the people’s beliefs and was the real threat to their power. Reformed Confucians like Phan Chu Trinh also saw Buddhism as the only cultural force that was effective in mustering the people’s support. Phan Chu Trinh pointed out that religion made people selfless and ready to die for righteous causes, and lauded the support of Buddhism, because, he claimed without Buddhism, the invincible Mongolians would not have been defeated (61).

The Vietnamese reformed monks advocated similar objectives to those of Thai Hsu’s, such as restructuring and purifying decadent members, establishing new monasteries to train new novices and interpreting sutras in accordance with the spiritual-engaged religion. One of the distinctive characteristics of modern Engaged Buddhism was the important role of the laity. Thai Hsu’s reforms were strongly opposed by self-interested groups. The Buddhist revival movements in Hinayana countries were lead by well-educated laymen, while a huge army of the Sangha remained idle as Ambedkar critically pointed out. Secondly, the role of the masses was vital in any attempt to bring about
social change e.g. Sarvodaya in Ceylon, the Untouchables in India. Most importantly Buddhism had to be relevant to the pressing needs and expectations of the Vietnamese people to build resistance to the colonialist military and cultural invasion and to instil a social and political vision to redress injustice. Young Vietnamese intellectuals rejected both traditional values and those of Western culture in which Catholicism was the main component. Politically, Marxism which appealed to those who concerned with social justice and to the class structure, also posed a real threat to the reformed members of the Sangha, who foresaw a dilemma in that the Vietnamese had to choose between the Bad and the Ugly, or as a popular proverb has it. 'While trying to avoid slipping on the watermelon skin, you step on the coconut shell'.

When Confucianism waned, the French, who were always suspicious of potential threats to their power, limited the Buddhist Sangha and curbed the construction of temples (62). They also tried to interfere in its internal matters. Instead of leaving the initiative to the people to establish their own organisations, they sponsored pro-government personalities in some Buddhist Studies groups so as to infiltrate and control them. It was quite common to find Vietnamese who served in the colonial administration made presidents and the Governor General was made Honorary President of these organisations (63). In spite of these efforts by the French, the first Buddhist association, Luc Hoa Lien Hiep, was formed in 1923 in the South. Its objectives were to lobby for a national Buddhist Association. Many dedicated monks travelled thousands of kilometres to the Central and the North to get support and advice from celebrated Zen masters. Not until 1930 was the Southern Buddhist Studies Association established. The Annam Buddhist Association came into existence in Hue in 1932 and the Northern Buddhist Association in 1934. Each association published its own magazine to muster support from young and well-educated laymen.

While the Catholic Church enjoyed privileges granted by their allied colonial rulers and became the biggest landowner in the country as well as having official status, all other religions were considered merely associations needing official sanction to own the land and properties (64). Also the Government could cancel permission and dissolve them
whenever it suited them. The decree issued by Emperor Bao Dai to enforce this, later became one of the main reasons why the Buddhist movement came into being in 1963.

The Buddhist revival was viewed with suspicion by both leftists and rightists. The leftists suspected that Buddhist associations were to be used as a decoy to divert anti-colonial feelings (they were right in case of the pro-colonial rule associations). One Marxist writer, Hai Trieu, criticised them and said they served as escapist activities and that colonial ruler only wanted the people to submerge themselves in the ‘Opium Ocean’. He proved to be a fundamentalist Marxist when he declared that ‘Buddhism as a religion for lazy people with its non-action philosophy, which is self-destructive’. Interestingly, those who ardently defended Buddhism were not Buddhists, but reformed Confucians. Phan Khoi counter-argued that, thanks to Buddhism, ‘the invincible Mongolians were chased like a flock of ducks and that Buddhism was anything but ‘the opium of the people’ (65). Another reformist leader, Huynh Thuc Khang, praised Buddhism as good medicine to cure the Vietnamese people’s lethargy. These Confucians confirmed once and for all that Buddhism had assumed the leading role in fighting the colonial war.

Under the watchful eyes of the French secret service, the Buddhist associations had to watch their steps and moderate their activities. In reality they were busy establishing monasteries to train young novices; forming sutras study groups; giving Dharma talks; setting up Buddhist Youth organisations and grouping Buddhist believers into structured cells from village to national level. The Buddhist Youth Association became one of the best-organised youth associations in the entire country. In 1962 South Vietnam alone could count as many as 1,000 units of this movement consisting of 70,000 active young member under the guidance of 3,000 leaders. The manifesto of the Buddhist revival movement was planned and proclaimed as:

- The collapse of Confucianism creates a vacuum in which a ‘new’ ideology has not emerged.
• The history of its development proves that Buddhism is flexible enough to accommodate new ideas as well as traditional values.

• Buddhism is an experimental religion which allows its followers to challenge any irrational teachings even it comes from the Buddha himself. It is not a dogmatic religion so it accommodates science.

• Individual effort is the key to enlightenment, therefore this should be fostered in the Vietnamese people.

• Buddhism observes freedom of thought and social equality which should be the guiding principles of any modern society.

• Finally all superstitious practices must be eliminated and unworthy members of Sangha must be purified (66).

To avoid undue government scrutiny, details of the social policy were not itemised but the general meaning of the term ‘social equality’ was clear from the outset. Furthermore most of the Buddhist associations invited pro French representatives to be honorary patrons. For example, the executive management of the Buddhist Studies Association in the South included a local administrator, Tran Cuu Chan, the Annam Buddhist Association invited King Bao Dai to be its honorary President. The Buddhist Association in the North included most of the collaborating intellectuals and was patronised by George Codes, Director of the School of South-East Asia Studies.

While the majority of reformed monks and laity tried to tread thin line, some impatient Buddhist activists thought the pace of reform was too slow and accused the revival movement of being ineffective and not relevant to social needs and daily life. It is true that some of the rightist elements in the movement never wished to confront the colonial government. The activists formed their own progressive associations and published their own magazines to propagate what they termed Buddhist socialism. These people were
actively involved in community-based activities such as the distribution of traditional medicine, the setting up orphanages and organising relief work in times of famine. Some secretly cooperated with anti-colonial groups. One of the most vocal groups to apply Buddhist principles daily life was Phat Hoc Kiem Tê, or ‘Buddhist Group For Social Actions’ which published Tien Hoa or Progress magazine. As the name suggests, the group pursued socially engaged Buddhism. Their Sutras were given a social emphasis. As Ambedkar in India, the group did not wholeheartedly accept the traditional interpretation of four noble truths. They argued that human suffering was not caused by craving material possessions, but was rather the results of unjust political and social structures. Enlightenment was due to an accumulation of scientific knowledge rather than following a spiritual path. To alleviate suffering, one had to strive for structural changes in society. A socialist program was needed to prevent a selected few from owning most of the wealth. If people did not fight to possess wealth, there would be no more wars and that was the real meaning of Nirvana. The manifesto of this particular group sounded more like the manifesto of a socialist party than that of Buddhists devoted to a path of spiritual enlightenment.

The Buddhist Group for Social Action also proposed many radical changes to the Sangha training. It suggested that monks imitate their Japanese opposites who wore western suits, got married and ate meat! They praised Chinese monks for joining the nationalist army to fight against the Japanese invaders. The group was so impatient for progress that they no longer adhered to a non-violent approach to colonialism. The French became suspicious and most of the monks in the group were arrested and banished to Paulo Condor Island, a notorious detention centre for anti-colonial activists.

On the whole, the mainstream Sangha members were patient in achieving their objectives. The most significant achievement of the revival movement was to produce a new generation of monks. The Annam Buddhist Association in the central Vietnam and Luong Xuyen Monastery produced many talented monks who later played an important role in the Buddhist movements in 1963 and 1966. Following in the footsteps of Thai Hsu in China, a Vinaya (Precepts) Committee was established to purify corrupt and idle
monks so those who only performed funeral rites were not allowed to wear the saffron robes. Superstitious practices were eliminated. A challenging syllabus was designed from an elementary to advanced level for those who wanted to become members of the Dharma Propagation Team or the Bodhisattva Messengers. The Annam Buddhist Monastery began in 1933 with fifty novices. Only ten monks graduated among them, two prominent leaders of the Buddhist Movement in the 60’s: Thich Tri Quang and Thich Thien Minh. The monasteries did not always run smoothly. To begin with, public donation was insufficient to support a large number of trainee-monks so they had to move to one pagoda to another so that many temples could share the financial burden. In April 1945, when a famine in the North cost two million lives, the trainee-monks had to walk a thousand kilometres, from Hue to Vinh Trang pagoda in My Tho, because the South then was immune from the horrible famine. This long march took them a few months and was led by the Executive President of the Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Church in 1966, Thich Thien Hoa.

Another important achievement of the Buddhist Revival movement was to make the Buddha’s teachings more accessible to young intellectuals. The Buddhist Youth Family was formed Dr Le Dinh Tham, a lecturer at The Annam Buddhist Monastery who grouped thousands of young and well educated Buddhists into an association called Buddhist Studies and Moral Perfection Group. As well as encouraging social activities, this group was prepared for the problems of real life Buddhism. This group eventually produced many Buddhist leaders and one of them, Thich Minh Chau, was the first Chancellor of Van Hanh Buddhist University in Saigon. Dr Le Dinh Tham’s work highlighted the pressing need of the modern Buddhist Church for the sutras to be appropriate for future generations. The need to re-assess the laymen’s role of an up-to-date Buddhist Church was also vital. Without cadres like Dr Le Dinh Tham, the mobilisation of the masses could not have been realised in any political confrontation.

One item on the hidden agenda was the response of Buddhism to the political situation caused by colonialism. The Buddha’s social teachings were very much an endorsement of socialism. In China, Thai Hsu openly endorsed socialist doctrines, but not the means to
achieve them (67). Many patriotic Buddhists in Hinayana countries also explored the policy of Buddhist Socialism. The left wing members in the Kien Te study group finally abandoned a non-violent approach and joined the armed struggle led by the Marxists. One of its leaders, Thich Thien Chieu, decided to unrobe himself and later became a provincial Communist commissar. Not only did the left-wingers join the national resistance, but most of the younger Buddhist leaders also joined the League for Vietnam Independence led by Ho Chi Minh, whose true political colour was then very well camouflaged. The leaders, Thich Tri Quang, Thich Thien Minh served in the Save Our Fatherland Front in Quang Tri and Quang Binh, while Thich Huyen Quang, who had been imprisoned by the Communist Government, was a member of the Save Our Fatherland Buddhist Committee in Binh Dinh. As a result hundreds of monks were imprisoned, tortured and murdered by the French. They lived and died in the Buddhist belief that they had to pay a debt to their country, their people, their parents and the three Jewels. They were Vietnamese as well as Buddhists. The main objectives of the political movement in the Buddhist Church when the Vietnam war reached its fiercest moment were, in the words Dharma and People: to any Buddhists, to serve the country in accordance with an enlightened mind is to serve the three jewels; to serve the people in accordance with people’s need.

In order to bring the Buddha Dharma to fellow Buddhists, the Church was involved in publishing, which was very successful. There were no-less than ten different magazines published. Many sutras were translated into Romanised script and so the Dharma reached grass root believers. The young intelligentsia no longer regarded Buddhism as a mixture of animism and superstitious practices. It is interesting to see that a revived Buddhism was supported by a spectrum of learned men from reformed Confucians, like Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Khoi; pro-colonial scholars such as Pham Quynh, Nguyen Thien Thuat; revolutionaries including Huynh Thuc Khang; young intellectual ‘Turks’ Le Dinh Tham and even Troskyists like Phan Van Hum and Ta Thu Thau. Publishing produced many talented and prolific writers who shouldered the task of turning the Dharma Wheel not only inside Vietnam, but also outside the country to the West. One of them, Thich Nhat
Hanh is still one of the most prolific and influential writers and teachers of our time admired in the West as much as in Vietnam.

An American scholar, Dr David Marr has noted that even though Buddhism attracted attention because it had a sophisticated philosophical approach, it remained of limited national significance. Even so secular intellectuals were surprised to see groups of monks attending political meeting (68). As we have shown, when Confucianism faded into the background, Buddhism progressed and inspired many intellectuals to explore ideas around a national identity. After the purification of the Sangha and its superstitious practices, the social interpretation of Buddhist sutras was supported by intellectuals of different political persuasions, with the exception the Colonial government, the Catholic church and the Marxists. Marr was not aware of the diverse activities of different Buddhist groups, such as the Kiem Te group in the Mekong Delta. Thich Mat The, an author of many books on Buddhism, was elected a representative of the first congress of the Vietnamese people in 1945. In addition to colonialists who always wanted to paint Buddhism as a religion of withdrawal from the world, many people, including experts in Vietnam history, were unprepared for the social and political commitment of the Buddhists. This is well illustrated by the self immolation of the Bodhisattva Thich Quang Duc which shocked people internationally and led President Kennedy to ask in bewilderment: 'Who are these Buddhists? Why do we know little about them?' In his perplexity we can recognise Kennedy's surprise that spiritual beings could act so decisively for political ends. With the Buddhist revival of the 30's, the groundwork was laid for the Movement in 1963. If Buddhism really was of limited national significance, it would not have been able to muster the support of the general population to confront the Might of America in the campaign for peace in 1966.
Chapter Six

The Buddhist Movement of 1963: The Struggle for Social Justice

On May 17 1954 the battle of Dien Bien Phu marked the beginning of the end of the French colonial empire and made Vietnam on the world map. After the Geneva Conference, Vietnam was just another new country emerging after the decolonisation period. Then suddenly in 1963, suddenly Vietnam became the headlines in the international press, arising from an internal conflict between the government and the Buddhists, commonly known as the Buddhist crisis. On the 18 of May 1963, a photograph of a self-immolated monk taken by photographer Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press, astonished the American public, as well as international opinion. All the episodes of the struggle were well reported in the American press and severely embarrassed Kennedy, who was the first Catholic president of the United States. American involvement in Vietnam began way back in 1945, when the Americans showed their ambivalent attitude towards de-colonisation and their French ally. American involvement and the looming Vietnam War started when the incumbent Secretary of States, Foster Dulles, declared that the Americans ‘should not stand by passively and see the extension of communism by any means into South-East Asia. We are not standing passively by’.(1) Nine years later, the United States was horrified to see their efforts to defend the Free World in Vietnam going down the drain by the arrogant reactions of Diem’s government to an apparently minor clash with the Buddhists, the largest religious group in the country. It started with a decree forbidding the Buddhists to raise their flags.

Prelude to the Vietnam War

After the Second World War, Vietnam was caught up in turbulent international politics, known as the Cold War, which originated the internal conflict lasting for more than 30 years. The hot zones then were Germany, Korea and Vietnam. When the two German
The Buddhist Movement of 1963-66

President Diem and Ambassador Henri Cabot Lodge
governments were reluctant to solve their conflict by force and the American forces posted in the 38th parallel to prevent the war from being exploded again, Vietnam was gradually pushed into a hot proxy war.

After the Japanese Emperor had officially offered to surrender to the allied forces in 1945, the Vietnamese Communists emerged as the main players ready to assume power from the Japanese. On August 23, they formed an interim government, called the National Unity government, in Hanoi and received 'the mandate of heaven' from the last Emperor Bao Dai. The last Emperor, Bao Dai, abdicated and transferred the Royal seal and sword to the Communist representative at the Heaven Gate in Hue. When the French broke their promise of de-colonisation and sent their troops to re-occupy Vietnam, President Ho Chi Minh declared a National Resistance War. Regardless of their political colours at that time a national consensus sustained the Viet Minh as the legitimate government, representing the Vietnamese people (2). Although being aware of an unsympathetic policy towards religions, most monks and Buddhist laymen, enthusiastically joined the resistance. Most of the monasteries were closed because of the number of young monks unrobed to become freedom fighters. It was conservatively estimated that from 1947 to 1954 at least 400 young monks sacrificed their lives in the war. (3)

The political situation became even more complicated when the French manipulated the pro-colonial elements to form a so-called nationalist government in French occupied territory, which included most cities and towns. This time the young King was made figurehead only.

The protracted guerrilla war tired the French expeditionary troops who were increasingly condemned by de-colonisation supporters. In the first few months in 1954, when the French were about to lose the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Conference was convened to discuss the Korean and Vietnamese situations. The French made a last ditch stand to remain in Vietnam. They knew that they were doomed on the battlefield and also at the conference table unless massive American aid was forthcoming. However
the American Secretary of State, Foster Dulles, believed that the Indochina conflict was 'the wrong war in the wrong place' and although he agreed to boost the French war budget, he refused to commit American troops to save the French in a 'dirty war'. So did the British government. Churchill declared that he was not prepared to give any undertaking in Indochina. The manoeuvring of the war game ended finally when the Viet Minh’s red flag was raised over the French command bunker at Dien Bien Phu on the afternoon of May 7, 1954. Like their American counterparts 20 years later, the French were unable to achieve an 'honourable peace, as they wished. The final declarations of the Geneva Conference released on July 21, 1954 attempted to spell out a program for converting the armistice in Indochina into a lasting peace by temporarily dividing Vietnam into two Northern and Southern zones, under two different representative authorities. The Conference also declared that

so far as Vietnam is concerned, the settlement of political problems, effected on the basis of respect for principles of independence, unity and territorial integrity, the Vietnamese people shall be permitted to enjoy fundamental freedoms, guarantee by democratic institutions established as a result of free general elections by secret ballots (4)

The Geneva Conference participants produced no durable solution to the Indochina conflict but only a military truce that awaited a political settlement, which never really happened. The conference was merely an interlude between two wars- rather a lull in the same war.

Before the conference concluded and because most of the personalities in the ‘nationalist’ government were collaborators and therefore did not have sufficient credentials to compete in a ‘free’ election two years later, a new an anti-colonial leader had be found. Ngo Dinh Diem, who later became the President of the first Republic came to the fore. King Bao Dai was pressured to invite Ngo Dinh Diem to form a ‘nationalist’ government on the 6th July 1954. One year later the American Administration gave direct financial assistance to the South Vietnamese Government. This was a turning point in America’s relationship with Vietnam, which replaced France as the major power. The American
Government undertook the ‘mission’ of establishing a separate non-communist state in the South and somehow believed that Ngo Dinh Diem had some chance of competing effectively with Ho. Their rationale was twofold. First they firmly believed that communism was global and monolithic and secondly Communism, especially as exemplified by China, was expansionist. They believed that after the loss of China, another loss would start a domino effect in South East Asia.

**From An American Mandarin ...**

While the American Administration believed that they had found a capable Vietnamese leader like Magsaysay of the Philippines, Ngo Dinh Diem was in fact, an obscure figure. Even though he was known as anti-French and anti-Communist, his family had served the French colonial master. His father, Ngo Dinh Kha, was an interpreter for the French government and quickly rose to the high-ranking position of mandarin of the Nguyen Court. He served as a counsellor to the Emperor Thanh Thai. Diem contemplated the priesthood but eventually followed in the footsteps of his family by enrolling in the civil service school which trained local bureaucrats for the French administration. Upon graduation he was appointed a district prefect and then a provincial chief. In 1933 the French advised Bao Dai to name Diem as the Minister of the Interior. It was believed that Diem requested the Vietnam Court be invested with more power to reform the mandarin administration. Naturally the French refused and he resigned in disgust after only a few months publicly proclaiming that he could not ‘act against the interest of my country’. This anti-French attitude may have been only rhetoric, but Diem won the admiration of many young people when he was summoned to serve his country in 1954. Throughout the next decade he lived as a hermit in Hue. When the Japanese briefly occupied Vietnam, he flirted with them, hoping to persuade them to appoint him Prime Minister but another Confucian scholar ‘got the nod’. He was captured by the Communists then released. Diem left Vietnam in 1950 and spent sometime at a seminary in New Jersey. There he was introduced to Cardinal Spellman and Democrat Senators Mike Mansfield and John Kennedy. He painted himself as anti-French and anti-Communist, a real third force nationalist. The French no longer opposed him and after a while, the Americans
were unable to find an alternative to Diem. Bao Dai realised that his position was precarious. He thought Diem’s connection with the Americans would bring them into the scene to supplant the French. Suddenly all the puzzle pieces fitted. Diem became America’s man in Vietnam.

As soon as Diem landed in Saigon, he encountered enormous problems. The Vietnamese Army was under the control of the Commander in Chief, Nguyen Van Hinh, who disliked Diem and attempted to stage a coup d’etat. Hinh only aborted this under pressure from Paris and soon after he was recalled. Next Diem was confronted with many private armies of religious sects which were funded and equipped by the French. Diem’s position seemed hopeless and even General Collins who came to Saigon as President Eisenhower’s personal emissary suggested American withdrawal, while the French Prime Minister considered Diem both as ‘wholly negative’ and ‘not only incapable but mad’ (5). He was only saved when America, out of desperation, wanting to buy time, promised 300 million dollars in aid. Luck was on Diem’s side, in the person of Colonel Edward Lansdale. Lansdale waved an open chequebook and was able to buy off most of Diem’s opponents so eventually Diem survived as a national leader. In 1957 during his visit to the US, President Eisenhower praised him as the ‘miracle man of Asia’ and later Vice President Lyndon Johnson called him the ‘Churchill of Asia’. But the truth is America needed a man like Diem to prevent the domino effect in South East Asia. As result he became indispensable to Washington’s plans for the region.

.. to an Autocratic Catholic President

Diem then consolidated his power. He had Emperor Bao Dai, to whom he vowed to be loyal under oath, dethroned. It was Colonel Lansdale (the Quiet American in Graham Green’s novel) who advised Diem to legitimise his position. Lansdale also told him that a simple majority-supporting vote would do and in order to avoid the suspicion of American collusion, Lansdale took leave and came back to the US. Diem heeded the first part of Lansdale’s advice and proceeded to organise a plebiscite but he rigged the results. He claimed 98.2 percent of the votes without realising that the tally of votes exceeded the
number of registered voters! (6). Even in the Saigon electorate, under the watchful eyes of international communities, the discrepancy amounted to 200,000 votes. Considering the number of Bao Dai sympathisers was still significant, this was a blatant election fraud. (7) Karnow explained this unnecessary vote rigging as Diem’s ‘mandarin mentality which could not accept the idea of even a minority resistance to his rule’ (8).

Before he was summoned by Bao Dai, Diem’s brother, Nhu, lobbied a group of politicians in the South and the centre to form a People’s Revolutionary Committee which was headed by the leader of a religious sect, Nguyen Bao Toan. This committee represented almost every religious sect and political group at the time. After becoming the legitimate head of state, Diem and his right-hand man, his brother Nhu ordered the elimination of all their opponents (9). While Ho Chi Minh was busy in 1945 eliminating all other nationalist party members, Diem also prepared the ground for his one-party state from 1955 onwards. It was conservatively estimated that there were approximately 40,000 political prisoners by the end of 1958 and 12,000 killed during 1955-1957. This number rose to 150,000 prisoners when the Communists revived their insurgency in the South. (10).

In order to effectively control all the rebellious elements Diem trusted no one but his family members, but had to rely on the support of Catholic refugees who moved to the South after the Geneva Accords was signed. With funding from the French some Catholic priests founded private armies in the so-called autonomous Catholic diocese and, more often than not, acted as the gatekeepers for colonialism. However, through the dramatic propaganda secretly coordinated by none other than Colonel Lansdale, a million or more opted to move south of the Seventeenth parallel under the provisions of the Geneva Agreement permitting civilians to regroup. A substantial majority of these were Catholic from the districts of Phat Diem and Bui Chu. Altogether half of the northern Catholic population moved south, more than doubling the South’s Catholics (11). Lansdale went to great lengths to propagandise this move with statements like ‘the Virgin Mary has departed from the North’, ‘Christ has gone South’. He also made promises like ‘a buffalo and five acres’ and threatened ‘America is about to drop atomic bombs in the North’. It
was a brilliant psychological tactic, which worked for these Catholic refugees, alongside with the former French army and bureaucrats would become the core supporters of Diem’s regime for years to come. However their fanatical anti-Communist attitudes alienated them from other religious groups, including the Buddhists. (12)

As soon as he came to power, Diem made his family all-powerful. Among them, Ngo Dinh Nhu was perhaps the most brilliant of them all. He was the principal regime’s theoretician and manager. One of Diem’s associates from his hermit days recalled that Nhu considered Diem as the Gandhi of Vietnam (presumably Nhu would have played Nehru’s role had they come to power). Nhu was a French-trained technocrat who had graduated from an elitist school for archivists, *Ecole Des Chartes*. He returned to Vietnam, worked for while at Hanoi Library and had many opportunities to acquaint with Vietnamese socialites. He married Tran Le Xuan, later known as Madame Nhu, the daughter of a member of Hanoi Haute Society. Spending a few years at the Latin Quarter at the Sorbonne, Nhu got to know some Catholic progressives and was impressed by an obscure French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier. Opposed to the trend of atheistic and nihilistic existentialist philosophers at that time, Mounier, together with Karl Jaspers, emphasised human dignity as an alternative to both Communism and Capitalism. Nhu even copied Mounier by forming a left-wing Catholic Group *Esprit*, like that of Mounier. He hoped that a left wing Catholic philosophy of Personalism, would become an ideology to oppose Marxism. But even those Catholic refugees who were fiercely anti-communist, partly because of their association with the French, and partly because of the threat of excommunication from the Church, never understood this abstract and incomprehensible doctrine, let alone the remaining populace, who were deeply emerged in the traditional religions of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Mounier’s heir to the Esprit Group called Nhu a fraud (13). It was logical that Nhu went on to found a political group, Can Lao Party, i.e. the Personalist Labour Party, of which the Bishop of Nha Trang diocese became the General Secretary. Its members were mostly recruited from amongst Catholics and its membership became ticket to high-ranking office. Almost all of Nhu’s trusted associates were Catholic and Can Lao party members. This party with its tentacles quickly reached deep into all governmental levels, including Parliament, the Army and all levels of the administration. Its primary goals were no longer to weed out communist
sympathisers but rather to eliminate ruthlessly any non-communist group with the potential to challenge Diem’s autocratic rule. Even the kingmaker, Colonel Lansdale, foresaw that Diem and Nhu would soon transform Vietnam into a police state (14).

In 1956, after refusing to hold an election prescribed by the Geneva Accord, Diem officially launched his anti-Communist campaign backed by his conviction that Catholicism should be the national ideology to combat the Marxist ideology of North Vietnam. The President’s Ordinance No 6 allowed the government to arrest any one at will. The results of Diem’s move surprised no one. Thus South Vietnam became a quasi police state characterised by arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, strict censorship of the press and the absence of an effective political opposition (15).

Gradually the repressive apparatus affected everyone who did not fit Diem’s image of an anti-Communist, Catholic or Can Lao member. He managed to alienate everyone, democrats, socialists, liberals, adherents of all sects and of course the Buddhists! Whichever group was bold enough to express their disagreement with Diem’s anti-communist stance was labelled ‘Communist sympathiser’. This label was used to silence anyone who annoyed the regime or was suspected of disloyal, or just a handy means to extort money by the Mafia-like Personalist Labour Party. Diem was presumably trained as a Confucian but he held contempt for traditional belief, like Buddhism and regarded other religious sects, as superstitions. In an interview with Schecter, Ngo Dinh Nhu revealed his opposition to Vietnamese traditional beliefs, particularly Buddhism. In his eyes Buddhism ‘played no part in the intellectual, military and economic progress of the country. It is a primitive, superstitious religion with little relevance to modern Vietnam’. (16) Even though the Catholics occupied only 10% of the total populace, Diem proposed a new constitution be drawn up based the on ‘Holy Spirit and personalism’. He, his family and his cohorts in the Personalist Labour Party then using their ‘theist’ Catholic ideology as their main weapon in the crusade against ‘atheist communism’ (17) described by the Cardinal Spellman as the crusade against the anti-Christ. As a result the majority of the Vietnamese people became marginalised, yet they were the ones who suffered most in the years of conflict.
Before the 1963 Storm

As people had to make a difficult choice between a Marxist led resistance and the pro-colonial ‘nationalist’ government, the elders in the Buddhist Sangha tried to focus on consolidating church organisations at a grass roots level. Many monks chose to stay in French occupied cities so as to re-organise monasteries and cultivate a younger generation of ordained monks as well as lay groups. Some Sangha members continued to work side by side with the Communists with a view to protecting thousands of Buddhists who could never bring themselves to collaborate with the French. Ironically it was in the French occupied territories that Buddhist organisations were most strongly revitalised. Sangha Communities were formed in many parts of the country. In 1951 The Vietnamese Buddhist Central Organisation came into existence and its headquarters located in Hue. This became the Buddhist ‘Mecca’. The leadership of this organisation comprised many talented monks who ‘shook America’ in the Buddhist Movement of 1963 and 1966.

Anticipating the ideological war looming in the near future, the Sangha tried on the one hand to consolidate its resources, on the other, to establish an international network. Vietnam was a founding member of World Fellowship of Buddhists established in Colombo, Ceylon in 1950. The five-colour Buddhist flag flew for the first time at Quan Su pagoda on Vesak Day on 13 May 1950. The flag quickly became the sacred symbol of the Buddhist faith and was the reason for the confrontation the eve of Vesak Day in 1963 when Diem issued an order forbidding the flying of the Buddhist flag. The consolidation of organisational structures was accomplished when the National Unified Buddhist Church was founded in 1951, including all the Sangha and lay organisations throughout the country. The Church also quickly confirmed its ‘middle way’ between the two international opposing forces by not leaning either towards ‘atheist’ communism or ‘monotheist’ capitalism. It was a humanistic path which focused not on the hatred of the class struggle but rather on the enlightenment of human beings. The Sangha and lay Buddhists were not slow to express their political viewpoint on the Franco-Vietnam war in which most of the innocent victims were the Vietnamese peasants. This anti war attitude was again to become the main focus for the Buddhist Movement for Religious
Freedom in 1963 and For Democracy and Peace in 1966. Efforts for peace and reconciliation were not just ad hoc reactions to Diem’s Catholicisation of the country and the war escalation of American vested interests. Rather, it represented the foundation of the Buddhist Church since the first Indochina war.

The Straw That Broke the Camel’s Back

Facing the difficult choice between the resistance led mostly by the communists and the colonial rulers which relied on the support of the Catholic community, many Buddhists chose to fight alongside the Communists because to some extent, their social gospel was similar to the communist ideology. Buddhism is the religion of the poor. During the first Indochina war (45-54) pagodas became sanctuaries for resistance fighters. Many monks were killed and imprisoned by the French. But when Diem first came to power the Buddhists were willing to support him as much as the Catholics. His religion did not worry the Buddhists as long as he worked for peace and national development. There are 84,000 dharma gates in Buddhism and Catholicism was seen as just another gate leading to liberation. What pushed the Buddhists into a corner and made them oppose Diem was his patronising attitude to non-Catholics and his brother, Archbishop Thuc’s efforts to make Catholicism the state religion. (18) It was quite acceptable that after the Geneva Accord, the refugees, about 80% of whom were Catholic, were assisted to resettle in the South. But realising that the Catholics would be the backbone of his regime, most relief funds were channelled to Catholic priests. Consequently non-Catholic refugees received little assistance from the government. It was estimated that American funded at least $282 million to pay the costs of resettlement and American private charities provided several millions more. Catholics settled en bloc with their parish priests in 203 separate villages in the most fertile and strategically important areas around Saigon as well as in the highlands (19) Eventually they lived in ghettos completely separated with their fellow countrymen and Diem was unable, or unwilling, to build his constituency beyond his fellow Catholics. His regime, therefore, was seen not only as a symbol of Catholicism but also of foreign intervention: “In all their years of occupation, the French never succeeded
in placing a Catholic emperor on the throne of Vietnam, but with Diem, you, Americans have given us one.' (20) was an apt commentary for those times.

When the military situation deteriorated soon after the National Liberation Front was formed, a ‘strategic hamlet’ program was launched in early 1962 with a view to separating communist insurgents from the peasants. Robert Thompson, a British counter-insurgent, who promoted a similar program in Malaysia, encouraged this program. Ngo Dinh Nhu directly handled it. However Diem and Nhu saw the Strategic Hamlet Program as a means to spread their influence rather than as a device to fight the guerrillas. Many peasants were forced to relocate into barbed wire areas and were allowed to toil on the land only between curfew hours. Diem’s officials were give a free hand to run the program and consequently materials and funds provided by the US were siphoned off into their pockets. During this time the National Unified Buddhist Church compiled a dossier on the Buddhists who were persecuted by Diem’s officials. A letter of protest signed by the Patriarch Thich Tinh Khiet and was sent to Diem and the Speaker of the Parliament with documented evidence. This included the fact that Buddhists in the provinces of Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh and Phu Yen in central Vietnam were placed under house arrest or imprisoned without charges or trial unless they agreed to convert to Catholicism. It also told how a Buddhist monk, who was accused of being a Communist sympathiser was thrown into prison without trial. Later he was accused of having a relationship with a female Buddhist. He was not released until the woman pronounced it a lie. The only offence this monk committed was that he refused to leave the pagoda so the village chief could build a church instead on the land. In another province a Buddhist was buried alive. The dossier concluded:

*These are 21 cases of the total 50 cases in which the Buddhists were persecuted, harassed, imprisoned and murdered in the provinces of Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh and Phu Yen from 1960 to 1962. There are many more cases of missing people for whom the Church is unable to collect the evidence*’ (21).
This may not have amounted to systematic persecution and contained evidence only at
the village official level, the letter of protest was signed by the highest Patriarch, Thich
Tinh Khiét. This showed that the Buddhist Church viewed the situation as very serious.
In his last days in 1963 Ngo Dinh Nhu accused the Sangha leadership of a conspiracy to
overthrow a previous government thereby, denying the Movement was spontaneous and
as a result of his edict forbidding the Buddhists to fly their flags in public. The protest
letter was neither acknowledged nor resolved despite it being a public warning to a
regime which alienated everyone except its Catholic cohorts.

The Worthless Flag

Hue is the headquarters of the National Unified Buddhist Church and is regarded as the
‘Mecca’ of Vietnamese Buddhists. Most of the monks ordained in the revival period who
later led the protest movement against Diem’s government, lived in Hue. Since joining
the World Fellowship of Buddhists in 1950, the five-colour flag designed by Colonel
Steel Alcott was adopted by all Buddhist countries. It symbolised their deepest aspiration:
to rebuild their national religion within the Buddhist world. There are two occasions a
year that Hue residents cherish the most. The first is the day they commemorate the fall
of the Hue Citadel into the hands of the colonial rulers and Vesak day, the Buddha’s
birthday. On 8 of May 1963, as usual, Buddhist flags flew everywhere in the city and
outside people’s homes alongside an altar set up at the front gate. There was to be a
procession from the oldest pagoda Dieu De to another historic pagoda Tu Dam. In the
evening there was to be a special broadcast from the city’s radio station capturing all
the main events of the ceremony on that day. Suddenly on the eve of Vesak Day, the
City’s Administrators received a directive from the Presidential Palace forbidding the
flying of any Buddhist flags in public places. To add insult to injury, just a week
previously, when Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc celebrated his twenty-fifth year as a priest
called the silver-jubilee ceremony Vatican flags were seen flying everywhere in the city,
even in the Buddhist quarter! Forbidding the flying of the Buddhist flags on Vesak day
was something akin to the American President ordering that carols not being sung in
Churches on Christmas Day! To Hue residents this was nothing short of a disaster! The
elders and leaders of the Church convened an urgent meeting and a delegation was despatched to meet the Provincial Chief. This was the last straw which broke the camel’s back because of all the accumulated resentment since the Church’s letter of protest had been ignored by the Government in 1962. A delegation of Elders and leaders, led by the most revered Patriarch, Thich Tinh Khiet, showed the Buddhist Church’s determination to see the matter resolved. A protest group of approximately 10,000 people gathered at the front gate of the Administration building. To avert the crisis the Provincial Chief said that there had been a misunderstanding of the President’s directive. He ordered the police not to confiscate the Buddhist flags and asked the leaders to persuade the crowd to disperse, but a confrontation seemed inevitable. The next morning the procession began as planned. It began calmly. However, this was a calm before the storm! Here is an eyewitness account of the events on that day by Hoang Nguyen Nhuan, the Buddhist Youth leader at the time:

This morning the procession from Dieu De to Tu Dam pagoda was delayed because of the unexpected reactions by some participants. While the procession was crossing Gia Hoi Bridge to get into the main streets of Hue, a few banners were raised to the surprise of the organising monks and the combat police. On them were written slogans:

We are forced to fight for religious freedom and social equality.
Down with malicious policies!
The international Buddhist Flags cannot be lowered.
Buddhists demand equal treatment of religions
Buddhists are determined to protect the Dharma

The organising monks reacted quickly and ordered the banners confiscated, and then the procession proceeded. However the banners were raised again a few times. On arriving at Tu Dam pagoda, the Venerable Tri Quang requested that the banners be raised so that he was able to explain them. The atmosphere was electric because Tri Quang then relayed a clear message detailing all the persecution that the Buddhists had endured during the colonial rule and Diem’s regime. His warning was reconciliatory yet firm:
'The Buddhist protest was legitimate and constructive’. If resolved, it will be beneficial to the Government as well as to Buddhists’ (22).

The fact that Thich Tri Quang delivered a spontaneous speech rather than reading a prepared text, proved that the Buddhists were unprepared for what happened on Vesak Day. In the evening there was supposed to be a special broadcast from the city radio station detailing the main events recorded live at the ceremony. Instead only music was played. Curious, the crowd poured into the radio station, waiting to hear Thich Tri Quang’s speech. When they began to get more and more restless, the Provincial Chief and Thich Tri Quang went into the radio station to find out why. The crowd began to be surrounded and hemmed in by police and special units, under the command of the deputy Province Chief in charge of security, Dang Sy, a Catholic. Under the complex power structure of the ‘divide and rule’ policy, Dang Sy was very powerful. The crowd was requested to disperse, but, seeing Thich Tri Quang was still inside the radio station, they refused to budge. Water canons and rubber bullets were then used to disperse the protesters. The troops and tanks also moved in. In the melee, 9 people were killed and another 14 injured, some of them children crushed under the tanks. The conflict which was sparked by a small incident, became a fully-fledged struggle whose impact would, in the end bring down Diem and his regime (23).

The General who later led the coup d’etat to overthrow Diem, General Tran Van Don, wondered whether the Radio Station event amounted to the last straw in the people’s resentment and hatred of Diem’s family, or was it an ambush masterminded by the Sangha (24). The leaders of the Sangha, like everyone else, were stunned by the cruelty of Diem’s troops. As a result hundreds of spontaneous demonstrations were staged by people from all walks of life, students and Buddhists living outside the Citadel of Hue who were anxious about their spiritual leaders. The next day, Thich Tri Quang stood up in a French made car driven by the Provincial Chief himself. He tried to calm the public by asking them to disperse and wait for the Church’s order. The Government controlled national radio, however, claimed that the Communists were responsible for the Radio Station massacre. It was a turning point in the conflict and on the 10 May, the Sangha
leaders called for a mass meeting and publicly started the campaign for religious freedom and social justice. The Supreme Patriarch, Thich Tinh Khiet, the Chairman of the National Vietnamese Buddhist Association announced a five-point proclamation. It demanded that the:

- Directive forbidding the flying of the Buddhist flags be permanently revoked.
- Buddhist Church should enjoy the same religious freedom as the Catholic Church.
- Terrorist campaign against the Buddhists be ended.
- Freedom of practice of the Buddhist faith be guaranteed.
- Government pay indemnities to the families of victims of the Hue massacre and punish those who were responsible.

The Movement Manifesto

The five-point manifesto was reasonable and restrained. However to some extent, it was judged as too general and vague. It had been drafted in response to the emergency situation, because the public was on the verge of rioting. Five days later, on the 15 May, the Church leaders released an amendment to clarify their objectives and strategies.

Thich Tri Quang, assuming the role of the movement’s leader, argued that the movement was not a political one and their motive was not to overthrow the incumbent leadership or to grasp power. Rather: ‘we only demand policies be improved. We are not concerned with the personnel who govern the country. Whoever governs the country must change those policies against us, or we will not be satisfied. We do not intend to struggle for power, even though we, as any ordinary citizen, wish to contribute to the national development. But in our religious sphere, we wish only to develop our spiritual path’ (25).

Then another issue came to the fore regarding the Catholic Church. While the Catholic refugees were Diem’s main supporters and therefore identified closely with the regime, the Southern Catholics were moderate and quite detached from his regime. The Buddhists
did not wish to engage in a religious war with the Catholics and remembered that only in the last century, the Royalist Movement led by Confucians declared war on the French colonialists and the Catholics. They declared:

_We have no enemies, particularly the Catholic. We are fighting for religious equality within the framework of social justice, that is why we have to mention Catholicism. This is not a fight between one religion against another. Living in the second half of the 20th century, we believe that everyone has the right to worship according to their faith; whoever believes that his or her religion is the only truth, is mistaken according to the Buddha._ (26).

The reason why the Catholic Church was highlighted was because of its favoured status. Knowing most Buddhists would side with the resistance, the French used every possible means to infiltrate their organisations by installing secret service collaborators in the management and conduct of many Buddhist associations in the South. To be sure that all the Buddhist associations were either a-political or under strict control, The French coerced Emperor Bao Dai to proclaim Ordinance no 10 in 1950 which classified Buddhist Associations as like any other ordinary clubs or associations. Only the French Foreign (Catholic) Missionary was exempt and clause 44, said that special regulations for the Catholic Missionaries were to be prescribed and proclaimed at a later stage (27). In other words, only Catholicism was recognised as having religious status, all other religions, such as Buddhism, Confucianism and small sects like Cao Dai, Hoa Hao were strictly controlled under Ordinance 10. Understandably the resentment from the non-Catholic section was enormous, since only the Catholic Church enjoyed special privileges. Ironically, the special regulations for the Catholics were never proclaimed and also, after Bao Dai had been dethroned, Ordinance 10 was never revoked by the first Republic.

The issue re-surfaced when the Buddhist leaders demanded equality in religious status within a framework of social justice because the two were inextricably linked. The ramifications of Ordinance 10 severely restricted activities among the Buddhist
irrespective of its spiritual basis. Under the regulations designed for clubs and associations, the permit for a Buddhist group could be denied and the government did not have to give a reason for its refusal, a permit could be revoked because of national security. In Clauses 10 and 22, a government official could inspect Buddhist documents at any time. Most importantly, any donation or purchase of real estate had to be approved by the government. While the leaders of the Sangha were elected by the community of monks according to their level of enlightenment, Ordinance 10 required that members in an Annual General Meeting elect leaders! Clause 44 of the Ordinance stated that ‘there would be special regulations for the Catholic and Christian Foreign Missionaries’. That was exactly what the Buddhist Movement meant by ‘religious equality within the framework of social justice’. POPE JOHN XXIII abolished the Catholic Foreign Missionaries on 24 December 1960 and they were replaced by a Committee of Vietnamese Bishops. Ironically there were still no regulations proclaimed as stated in Ordinance 10 for the special status of the Catholics. In other words the regulation of religions was unclear. The Movement leaders proposed that new, uniform legislation should cater for all main religions including Buddhism, Catholicism and Christianity.

The Movement leaders also proclaimed non-violence as a form of protest for its members:

*We understand the complexity of the political and military situation and we want also to apply Buddhist principles in our struggle. Therefore we will use sacrifice as our ultimate weapon. What we try to do is to transform people’s hearts and minds, not just change policies. From now on we publicly declare that every monk and layperson will emulate Gandhi’s non-violent actions to the end and will act within legal means as much as possible. (28)*

In the months to come, the Buddhists showed the whole world what they meant by ‘ultimate weapon’ and ‘utmost sacrifices’. Interestingly, they were interpreted differently by some reporters. Jerrold Schecter said the new face of Buddha (or Buddhists) was militant and violent in the extreme while Denis Warner thought the Buddhists’ physical
defencelessness proved to be unbeatable (29). Others disapproved the political actions of monks holding placards, running amok in the streets and using only their bare hands to protect themselves while combat police and Special Forces ready with burp guns, tear gas and truncheons. Marguerite Higgins, who was sent to Vietnam by the Kennedy administration, found these rampaging monks at odds with her former memories of them, those who ‘sincerely’ practised the spirit of non-violence and compassion (29). Nevertheless a whole army of foreign reporters and observers in Vietnam, and beyond, were amazed and fascinated at what happened during 106 days in the summer of 1963. The reason why the movement leaders decided to move their protest to Saigon was because the city was where all the reporters and diplomats were gathered who anxious to watch the Buddhists’ next moves. It was a clever tactic because thanks to mass communication, the plight of the Buddhists was heralded beyond Vietnam and undoubtedly helped to precipitate the end of a repressive regime.

The Movement’s Leaders

When the campaign officially began with the manifesto containing all the Movement’s objectives and strategies proclaimed to the public and later presented to the government, three monks emerged as leaders who continued to play a vital role in Buddhist affairs for many years to follow.

The first monk who was named the ‘Man Who Shook America’ by Time magazine was Thich Tri Quang. He was a product of the revival movement of the 30’s. He attended Annam monastery in Hue, graduated as the top student in his class and was ordained in 1946. As had most young monks at that time, he joined the resistance along with all of his brothers. However one year later he decided to come back to Hue where he lectured at Bao Quoc monastery. In 1951 inspired by the establishment of the World Buddhist Fellowship in Ceylon, he and other monks successfully lobbied to set up the National Vietnamese Buddhist Association in 1952. He was arrested by the French security and the Nationalist Government but released shortly afterwards. Diem’s youngest brother, Ngo Dinh Can, who in reality ruled Central Vietnam with his own private army and
security forces, befriended him. Coming from the same province, Quang Binh, Thich Tri Quang was able to persuade Can to fund some projects to rebuild the Buddhist infrastructures. This was the reason why Ngo Dinh Nhu thought the efforts to overthrow Diem’s regime was a ‘well laid and long planned plot by Thich Tri Quang’ (30). However a rumour surfaced saying that, because of their friendship, Thich Tri Quang was reluctant to start the campaign until the Hue massacre occurred. Thich Tri Quang explained in his Autobiography written after 1975 that he was compelled to challenge Diem and his cohorts because of Bishop Thuc’s ambition of becoming the first Vietnamese Cardinal. Thuc spared no efforts to achieve mass conversion to the Catholic faith to impress the Vatican. Hence the persecution of Buddhists and the anti-Buddhist flag edict (31). Thich Tri Quang publicly accused the Government of practising religious persecution on Vesak Day 1963 and he was present in the compound of the radio station and witnessed the Hue massacre. His name is synonymous with the Buddhist Movement for religious freedom and social justice. To the Vietnamese Buddhists Thich Tri Quang was unquestionably the soul of the Movement.

The second monk in command was Thich Thien Minh. He was usually regarded as Tri Quang’s Lieutenant and a product of Annam monastery in Hue during the revival period. Both were in the same class, where Thich Thien Minh graduated second. Nhat Hanh considered Thien Minh’s mind was the most brilliant that the revival produced. He was articulate and skilled at organising and negotiating. He travelled extensively in Vietnam as a Dharma Teacher. He was once invited to stay at Xa Loi pagoda in Saigon to assist the establishment of the South Vietnam Buddhist Studies Society whose members traditionally did not enjoy a close association with the Central and the North Sangha. Because of this connection he was able to persuade the Buddhists in the South to join the campaign against Diem in the early days of 1963. While Tri Quang appealed to the older members of the Buddhist community, Thien Minh, as the architect of youth organisations, was able to mobilise students and intellectuals to join the Movement and to fight for its causes. The person the writer calls ‘the Leader’ in this thesis was Thien Minh’s closest confidant and as a young student in 1963, thousands of young Buddhists worked under his guidance. The Leader who worked closely with both Tri Quang and
Thien Minh from 1962, summed up the difference in the personalities between these two monks, commenting that:

*When attending the monastery, they already showed their different personalities. ‘The Bearded Old Man’ (Thich Tri Quang) has a short temper while the ‘Limping Old Man’ (Thich Thien Minh was assaulted by Field Marshall Ky’s henchmen which left him crippled) is always patient, calm and collected. The Bearded Old Man is very well versed in Abhidharma while the Limping Old Man is good at history. Both are addicted to playing Chinese chess at which the Limping Old Man wins eight out of ten matches. The Bearded Old man loves flowers, classical music and old books. The Limping Old Man likes swimming and having a dog. The Bearded Old Man likes to lecture us while the Limping Man is a very good listener. (32)*

In summary Thich Tri Quang was an intellectual, while Thich Thien Minh was a man of action. It was Thich Thien Minh who amassed evidence of religious persecution from 1959 to 1962 in a dossier, which was presented to Diem in early 1963. Diem ignored this. In the interview the Leader thought Thich Tri Quang started the campaign, but it was Thich Thien Minh who masterminded all the objectives and strategies in the movement. He was behind the ‘spontaneous’ act of raising the placards and banners in the procession on Vesak Day. He was the author of the Manifesto (called the Appendix) detailing the movement’s objectives and strategies on the 10 May 63. As the spiritual leader of the Buddhist Youth Organisations it was he who motivated and inspired students to participate in the struggle not just for religious reasons, but for the cause for social justice. This was why he was appointed the Head of the delegation of the Inter-Sect Committee in negotiations with the Government. He was feared by Diem and later by the military junta. The French jailed him for being a resistance fighter, General Ky had a failed attempt on his life, Thieu’s kangaroo court sentenced him for 15 years for being a subversive and finally the Communists poisoned him for daring to make public the Declaration of Human Rights for South Vietnamese in 1977, only two years after the ‘Great Spring Victory’. This was because the Communist could not tolerate a challenge
to their absolute authority so soon after taking control of Vietnam. Thich Thien Minh had to be eliminated.

While Thich Tri Quang and Thien Minh were the beloved sons of Hue, Thich Tam Chau was a refugee from the North. He actively worked with anti-communist groups and for a time lived in Phat Diem autonomous region. Catholic priests who received funds from the French to set up a private army to fight the Communists controlled this. In his own words, since 1946 Thich Tam Chau had preached the Buddha Dharma and at the same time, engaged in propaganda against the Communists. He also co-operated with the Nationalists and friendly religious leaders to prevent infiltration by the Communists. It was no surprise that a Communist Court sentenced him to death in absentia 1949. Unlike many other monks who supported the anti-colonialist war led by the Communists, Tam Chau perceived the danger of communist ideology and fiercely opposed it. Soon after moving to the South he founded the North Vietnam Sangha Association in 1954. He was appointed Deputy Chairman of the National Vietnamese Buddhist Association and after the Hue incident, Chairman of the Inter Sect Committee to protect the Buddhist faith. He commanded the loyalty of most Buddhist refugees from the North who were as devoted as the faithful in Central Vietnam. Apart from secondary and university students who staged numerous demonstrations against the government, most of the mass rallies by the Buddhists in Saigon pictured and shown on TV were the ‘pyjamas clad and blackened teeth’ (Northerners) refugees. The divisiveness between the North Vietnamese Sangha and the Central and the South Sangha that broke out some years later was rooted in their attitudes towards the Resistance fighters, i.e. the Communists, rather than in regional differences as some may have suggested. (33) The terms ‘moderate’ or ‘militant’ labels used for both camps were coined sensational journalists and did not reflect the true motives and non-violent tactics of the Buddhist Movement in 1963 or 1966 (34).

The Torch of Thich Quang Duc Bodhisattva

After the Movement declared its objectives via non violent tactics, thousand of young students started joining the fight and poured into the streets to hold mass demonstrations,
meetings, prayers and hunger strikes. The Buddhist Movement brought to world attention
the state of their country at that time, ideologically divided, fully suffering people and
injustice. They participated in the movement for mundane reasons, without any personal
ambition or self-interest. Mass demonstration may be taken for granted as a civil right in
the West, but this was not so in Vietnam and the Buddhists had paid a heavy price. When
they demonstrated on June 3,500 students gathered in front of the Government
Representative’s office in Hue. They jeered and taunted the soldiers who then fixed their
bayonets, donned their masks and hurled tear gas. The students then sat down and prayed.
The result was that sixty students were hospitalised, forty of them suffering from second
degree chemical burn caused by acid. Thirty-eight demonstrators were jailed and the
quiet city of Hue turned into an armed camp overnight (35). A curfew was declared and
pagodas were isolated. Even water and electricity were cut off.

The Government stepped up its campaign to discredit the monks. On June 8, Madame
Nhu blamed a certain international Buddhist group for sowing disorder, discrediting
Buddhism and undermining the nation (36). When the acting American Ambassador,
Trueheart, complained to Diem, leaflets were distributed in Hue accusing Tri Quang of
being a Communist agent. However the Movement decided to move its activities to
Saigon, where they could be reported quickly to the Western press. This was a clever
tactic because from then on, thanks to sympathetic reporters, the world began noticing the
Buddhist crisis in Vietnam. On May 25, a meeting of eleven Buddhist Sects at Xa Loi
issued a joint communiqué declaring that they would join the struggle. This was a
significant event since Theravada sects and particularly the South Vietnam Buddhist
Societies were never close to the Mahayana Church, nor active in politics before. Prayer,
hunger strikes, dharma talks, press conferences were organised at the two main pagodas,
Xa Loi and An Quang attracting thousands of the faithful and young students.

But the action that moved people hearts the world over and made the outside world
sympathetic to the plights of the Vietnamese Buddhists was Thich Quang Duc ‘s self-
immolation in a Saigon street on June 11. The impact of his action on the Western World
is described here:
No recent event has revealed the social and political dimensions of modern Buddhism as powerfully as the fiery death of Thich Quang Duc on a Saigon street in 1963. Because wire service and television broadcast the image of a meditating monk in flames...their message of anguish and protest...was engraved on the heart of the world (37).

As a result of Thich Quang Duc’s brave act of self-sacrifice and because reporters also saw the cruelty of the combat police, they filed many unfavourable reports on the Government. Reporters like Halberstam (New York Time), Neil Sheehan, Stanley Karnow (Saturday Evening Post) Robinson (NBC) and Francois Sully (Newsweek) were either expelled by the Government or beaten up by the Secret Service. The media became a most effective supporter of the Movement, as Neil Sheehan confirmed: ‘the presence of foreign reporters gave the Buddhist leaders hope that if they continued their campaign, sympathetic officers in the Army might eventually move against the regime or drive the Kennedy administration into encouraging a coup’. (38). The Venerable Quang Duc and another seven monks had volunteered to self immolate in the early days of the struggle, but their request was politely refused. (39) However realising that Diem, Nhu and his wife, Madame Nhu, had no desire to solve the crisis peacefully and were determined to crush the Movement, its leaders thought it was time for some drastic action! Thich Quang Duc and another well-respected Bikkhuni, Dieu Không, volunteered to become the first torch of the movement. Thich Quang Duc was most likely chosen because he had been ordained Bikkhu for a long time and it was hoped that his meditation powers would help him to endure the agony of burning. The event was planned carefully and foreign reporters were secretly tipped off that ‘a great event was about to happen’. The incident was captured by the photographer Malcolm Browne of the Associated Press who witnessed the entire immolation. Jerrold Schecter recorded the event which shocked the world:

_The orange robed monks and grey robed nuns appeared to be part of a quiet protest as they walked slowly down Phan Dinh Phung Street in Saigon on a hot June afternoon. Heading the procession was an automobile filled with monks. At the intersection of Phan_
Dinh Phung and Le Van Duyet, the monks got out of the car and lifted the bonnet. It appeared that they were having engine trouble. The procession parted around the car as if to move on, but instead the monks and nuns formed a circle seven or eight deep. Slowly they began to intone the deep, mournful, resonant rhythm of a sutra. The monk in the car walked to the centre of the circle and 73 year-old Thich Quang Duc seated himself on the asphalt, his hand resting loosely on his knees in the lotus position. Nuns began to weep, their sobs breaking the measure of the chant. A monk removed a five gallon can of gasoline from the car and poured it over Thich Quang Duc, who sat calmly in silence as the gasoline soaked his robe and wet the asphalt in a small dark pool. Then Thich Quang Duc, his Buddhist prayer beads in his right hand, opened a box of matches and struck one. Instantly he was engulfed in a whoosh of flame and heavy black smoke that partially obscured him from view. The chanting stopped. The smoke rose and, as the fierce flames brightened Quang Duc’s face, his shaven skull and his robe, he remained fixed in meditation. (40)

The next day in the American media the photographs of a monk sitting calmly in the midst of engulfing flames stunned the America public and embarrassed the Administration. As a result the Americans were compelled to re-assess Diem’s ability to win the war and their involvement in it. Denis Warner was right: defenselessness became the most effective weapon against a repressive government, which no longer listened to its citizens. Some reporters still called this Quang Duc’s act ‘suicide’ and could not fathom it but As Nhat Hanh explained: ‘It was a powerful attempt by one individual to reach the heart of others and through sacrifice’. The burning the whole or part of the body, is an ancient custom in Mahayana, though very rarely practised. In the Saddharma-Pundarika Sutra (The Lotus of the True Law) there is a story of a Bodhisattva who ate incense and sweetened substances and drank scented oil for twenty years. The he wrapped himself in divine clothes, bathed in perfumed oil and set fire to himself as an offering to the Buddha. According to the text, his body burned continuously for twelve thousand years. But the act of self-immolation was practised mostly by Chinese Buddhists and there are as many as twenty-five recorded deaths in this manner, including nuns and lay people. Quang Duc’s act may have been compatible with the “Middle Way”,

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but as Rahula commented: *an act of this kind demands immense courage, faith, determination, inner purification and whatever one thinks of it, it is a heroic action, better to commit suicide than to kill others, better burn oneself than burn others*. (41)

Some figures in the Kennedy administration, who had supported Diem and wanted to give him another chance, showed their displeasure. Under American pressure, Diem appeared on the national radio, appealed for calm and promised to solve the crisis in the spirit of national reconciliation’. He was quoted as saying in one of his addresses to the nation after Quang Duc’s self-immolation: ‘there is the constitution behind the Buddhists, and there is ME behind the constitution’. There is no doubt Diem believed deep down that his opponents were guilty of the crime of *lese-majeste*! The Patriarch Thich Tinh Khiem, Thich Thien Minh and Thich Tri Quang were invited to come to the negotiation table in Saigon. For the first time during the crisis the three Buddhist leaders got together and planned their next step. The prominent role of Thich Thien Minh was now quite obvious. Even though he was only in charge of Youth Affairs, he was appointed the Leader of the delegation to hold discussions with the Inter-Departmental Committee led by Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho, who held a powerless position in the government.

As we have said earlier, Thich Thien Minh was the author of the report detailing the persecution of Buddhists in the provinces under his supervision. He was also the author of the manifesto, which clarified the Movement’s objectives, and strategies released on 15 May. So, undoubtedly he was the most appropriate negotiator to find an acceptable solution for the crisis, Thich Tam Chau was a member of the negotiating team while Tri Quang was noticeably absent from the delegation.

The Inter Departmental Committee had no real influence and was used as a stalling device by the government. But the death of Thich Quang Duc then made everyone restless. Within 24 hours after the self-immolation, fifteen thousand mourners came to Xa Loi Pagoda to pay their last respects to ‘Quang Duc Bodhisattva’ and to guard against any attempt to remove his corpse. To avoid riots, the Government was forced to find a solution. Both sides sat down continuously for two days and a joint communiqué was released at 1.30 a.m. in the morning 16 June. All five movement demands were resolved
The Buddhist Movement of 1963-66

Twenty-one year-old Thien My self-immolated in front the main Cathedral in Saigon
satisfactorily, including a promise to abolish Ordinance 10 and to punish those who were responsible for the Hue Massacre, if found guilty. To avoid admitting guilt, instead of indemnifying the victims the Government would assist them financially. President Diem and Patriarch Thich Tinh Khet ratified the agreement with a comment from Diem: 'I agreed with these points in principle from the beginning'. The Patriarch Thich Tinh Khet then sent a public letter to all Buddhists saying that 'all our demands are resolved satisfactorily, particularly the abolishing of Ordinance Ten which helps Buddhism in its historical and significant role in the country'. To alleviate the Buddhists’ suspicion that the Joint Communiqué was only a tactic to help them buy time by the government, the Patriarch said that ‘whether the joint Communiqué is to be implemented or not is the responsibility of the Government’. He urged everyone to ‘adhere to the Law of the nation, not to perform any actions contrary to Buddhist ethics and to wait for the order from the National Buddhist Association’ (42)

Talking to his confidants after the signing of the joint communiqué, Thich Thien Minh expressed his concern: ‘Vice President Tho was a decorative figure. Even Diem may have lost power by now. That is the real worry!’ (43). The Buddhists were told to go back to their normal life and movement activities were confined to religious ones. Thich Thien Minh’s intuition was right. President Diem appeared obdurate but in fact his brother, Nhu, by now wielded the power. He saw Diem as Gandhi and himself as Nehru while his Personalist Labour Party became the Congress Party Nhu wasted no time. The Patriarch agreed to postpone the funeral for a week but his decision was not conveyed to all the Buddhists and on June 16, half a million people poured out into the streets to attend Thich Quang Duc’s cortege. Again, tear gas grenades, bayonets and truncheons were used to disperse the crowd. A youth was killed while many more were injured and thousands were arrested. In a conference of the Republic Youth Movement of which Nhu was the patron, Nhu denounced the Buddhist Movement as Communist inspired arguing that, the monks were lowly educated people who brainwashed the Buddhists into fanaticism and incitement to civil disobedience. He described Thich Quang Duc’s self-immolation as a conspiracy of premeditated murder, and most importantly he claimed the Movements housed rebels who should be treated accordingly. He used all the Machiavellian tricks in
the book including a ‘spontaneous’ protest from war veterans requesting that the monks restrict their activities to religious rites. He also induced a break away Buddhist Sect, Co Son Mon to send a letter of protest to the World Fellowship of Buddhists denouncing the political monks. During this period Nhu’s combat police were as active as ever, even more so. Nhu’s wife, Madame Nhu, also joined the fray. Addressing young girls in her Women’s Solidarity Group, she said the Buddhists’ agitation was an ‘ignoble form of treason’, the monks ‘can only deceive those who want to be deceived’ and that ‘The Movement applied the most odious of Communist tactics while betraying the most sacred principles of Buddhism’ (44).

In response to this provocation, the Movement leaders called for calm, patience and non-violence. They agreed to limit the number of people attending Thich Quang Duc’s cremation (which miraculously created a sacred relic for Quang Duc’s heart refused to burn in the crematory furnace). Thousands of the faithful rushed to Xa Loi Pagoda day and night to worship this relic and to protect it from being taken away by the Secret Service. Thich Quang Duc’s sacrifice caused great trouble to the government far more than they had imagined. It inspired the most talented poet of the time, Vu Hoang Chuong, to compose the poem, ‘Compassion Flame’. Now everyone seemed to have ‘freedom from fear’ and so the more repressive measures were used, the more people joined the fight. On Sunday 30 June a total strike and ban of all commercial activities was called. Thousands of monks in Saigon, Hue and all other small towns in Central Vietnam went on a hunger strike for 48 hours. Also, secondary and university students called for a hunger strike in front of the Parliament in support of the Sangha.

Unexpectedly, an event that accelerated the fall of Diem was the death of the writer Nhat Linh. In 1960 there was an abortive coup against Diem and most of the middle ranking officers who plotted the coup asked for, and were granted political asylum in Cambodia. Thirty-four opposition civilians, who were accused of being involved in the coup, were court marshalled and one of them was Nhat Linh. He had been the most well known writer in the 40’s and 50’s and was made Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Coalition Government led by Ho Chi Minh in 1945. When the Communists tried to eliminate all
nationalist members, Nhat Linh went to the South and lived as a hermit, devoting his time to writing and publishing work. Instead of appearing before the court, he took poison after writing his last testament: ‘*No body has the right to try me. My life will be judged by history. I voluntarily take my life as Thich Quang Duc did as a protest against the suppression of all basic freedom rights*.’ Nhat Linh’s death galvanised the masses. Hundreds of people attended his funeral despite the Secret Service’s threat of arrest. After a series of exchanged letters, on July 14 the Patriarch issued a communiqué resuming the struggle as a result of a Government investigative team who washed their hands of the matter, claiming the Hue massacre was caused by the Communists.

The Movement increased its activities to include prayers, hunger strikes, street demonstrations, daily press releases and meetings throughout the country. Non-violence was strictly adhered to. In one demonstration a monk was beaten unconscious but he did not move or retaliate. The Government intensified its repression. Foreign reporters were assaulted and they had to send a protest letter to President Kennedy. Some reporters were on the death list of the Secret Service so that they were forced to sleep in foreign affairs compounds. A group of lecturers at the University of Hue were expelled because they certified victims killed by government troops. Thich Tam Chau declared that the Buddhists’ weapons were their ‘bare hands and thin chests’. The Patriarch advised the faithful: ‘If I die, pray for those who kill me’. On the 4 August, a young monk self-immolated in a small town. His body was quickly taken away by the police. A young layman cut off a finger to offer to the three jewels. On the August 12 a young girl also tried to chop her hand off as a prayer that the President listen to the Buddhists’ voice. On the August 13 another young monk self-immolated in Hue and again his body was taken away. On August 15 a nun, Dieu Quang, sacrificed herself in Nha Trang. The students in Hue staged the biggest demonstrations ever on the August 15 and on the 16 August, a total ban and boycott were called for. The last three monks and laymen who sacrificed themselves were all young men and women. The climax of protest was reached however when an old monk, Thich Tieu Dieu, self-immolated at Tu Dam pagoda, the heart of the Buddhist Movement. Nhu could no longer tolerate such public demonstrations. He acted
ruthlessly and decisively and so Campaign Deluge was launched on August 21 to destroy Buddhist resistance once and for all.

While the Army was busy organising the coup, Diem and Nhu were increasingly isolated and even their loyal servants defected. The Chief of the Intelligence Service, who was hand picked by Nhu for the position, was suspected of plotting a coup against him and banished to an insignificant position as Ambassador to Egypt. This defection explained why the Government’s secret plans to smash ‘the lowly educated monks’ were leaked to the Church as well as to foreign reporters. The leaders had been told of Campaign Deluge two weeks before it began. All the important leaders refused to go into hiding but volunteered to stay put to prove how desperate the Government had become. As a spokesman for the Church declared ‘We throw out the banana skin and the Government slips’. They knew Nhu had put all his cards on the table and that he had nothing left to deal out. Except for a small delegation of Theravada monks who escaped to Cambodia to inform the outside world of the religious persecution and appeal to United Nations’ intervention, the remainder waited patiently. Nhu had to act not only at the prospects of more self-immolations, but because President Kennedy to send a new Ambassador, Henri Cabot Lodge, to Saigon on the 22nd of August. Nhu wanted to end the Buddhist crisis once and for all and present the new Ambassador with a fait accompli. His Special Forces and secret service raided pagodas all over Vietnam and arrested all rebel monks. Neil Sheehan was informed of this by a secret service agent and so witnessed Campaign Deluge in action at Xa Loi Pagoda, the headquarters of the Buddhist Movement. Sheehan wrote:

*The raid of Xa Loi, like those on the pagodas elsewhere in South Vietnam, was flawlessly executed. It reminded me of a scene from a movie of the French Resistance- the scene when the Gestapo arrived at a Resistance hide-out in Paris...The police and the troops in the trucks vaulted to the pavement, and the officers shouted orders and formed up their units. The gong at the top of the pagoda started to clang an alarm into the night. The monks added to this din of helplessness by beating on pots and pans. The police battered open the pagoda gate and the Special Forces with submachine guns held high, pranced*
up before the gate to lead the assault... The crash of breaking glass began and the splintering of doors gave away to boot heels and the butts of submachine guns. Shots were interspersed with the screams of the monks being dragged from their rooms. Troops were shooting to stop any monks from escaping over the rear wall... The police hurled figures in orange robs inside the trucks. When one truck was filled and pulled away for Saigon's Chi Hoa prison, another backed up in its place (45).

The drama went on for two hours because some monks had barricaded themselves in their rooms with stacks of furniture. It took the police nearly eight hours to subdue the resistance of students and Buddhists who thought the police had only wanted to take way the corpse of the monk who had self-immolated a few nights before. The exact number of murdered and missing was not known, but according to the Church’s tallies and later confirmed by The Pentagon Papers, more that 1,400 monks were thrown into prison. Thirty monks at Xa Loi were seriously wounded and seven were never heard of again. They were apparently killed and their bodies disposed of secretly. The next day the secret police arrested many laity who were actively supporting the Movement and martial law was declared. Nhu wanted to arrest ringleaders, engage in character assassination by creating scandalous offences and bring them to court. The monks would be screened and sent back to their hometown and while pro-Government elements would be installed to conduct the Church's affairs with the Government's blessings. Nhu tried to solve the problems simply by stamping them out. However he under-estimated the people's resentment which, like the rising tide, was going to sweep away Diem's regime for the Buddhist movement had now become the People's Movement.

Public reactions were clear-cut and fierce. Tran Van Chuong, Madame Nhu's father, resigned from his post as the Ambassador in Washington and briefly declared that 'there was not one chance in a hundred for victory over the Communists' with the current Government. His wife and most of the Embassy staff resigned. The Foreign Minister also resigned, shaved his head like a monk and asked Diem for permission to go on a pilgrimage to India (46). The staff at the University of Hue had resigned a week before and was swiftly arrested in Campaign Deluge. Then the staff at University of Saigon
followed suit. The Dean of the Faculty of Medicine resigned and was immediately arrested. On hearing the news, the university students rioted. A student committee was formed with the aim of lobbying all university staff to resign and the students to boycott classes. On the 24 August, 5,000 students came to the Faculty of Law to hear the Minister for Foreign Affairs, who was also a Professor of Law, address the nation. They drafted a resolution requesting the government respect freedom of religious practice, to release all monks and laity involved in the Movement, to stop barricading the pagodas and to observe the freedom of the press. These objectives were no longer restricted to religious activities but transformed into national aspirations: democracy and freedom. The high school students then joined the struggle. They boycotted classes and organised mass demonstration throughout Saigon. On the 25 August a mass protest was held at the central market and a student was fatally shot. The revolt became even more violent and uncontrollable. In desperation, the Government proceeded to arrest high school students, the children of the bureaucrats, who ran the government. In one morning alone, the military trucks hauled off more than 1,000 students to jail (47). Nhu and Diem then closed both universities and high schools.

Nhu used every means to discredit the Buddhist Church. He set up a committee to protect pure Buddhism to conduct Buddhist affairs in the ‘occupied pagodas’. But not a single faithful Buddhist co-operated. Any Buddhists who were not thrown into prison then were busy joining the mass demonstration this time organised by many secret student groups. A few unimportant monks were despatched to their hometown after being screened by the secret service. The government hoped that these measures would end the Buddhist protests in the capital, which were attracting unfavourable news in the press. Nevertheless on the 5 October a young monk self-immolated in the central market. This showed that most of the self immolations were not a well organised scheme of the Buddhist Movement, but were spontaneous acts of devotion by those who wanted to offer their body to the three Jewels.

Meantime Ambassador Lodge manoeuvred behind the scene to get Diem’s brothers out of the country. The Papal delegation successfully persuaded Archbishop Thuc to go to
Rome to report to Pope Paul VI on the Buddhist events. Two days later Madame Nhu accepted Lodge’s invitation to attend an International Congress in Belgrade and afterwards make a goodwill trip in Europe and America to present the Government case to the international community. But her insensitive and callous comments like ‘provocateurs in monks robes’ ‘monk barbecue show’, her criticism of Washington’s policy, castigation of the press and reference to US soldiers as ‘little soldiers of fortune’ undermined Diem’s cause, rather than strengthened it. Nhu fiercely resisted Lodge’s offer to resign and leave the country. He did not intend to give up any of his broad array of powers, nor did Diem want him to. General Tran Van Don who was one of the key plotters of the coup commented that Diem lacked leadership qualities and that for many years it was Nhu who actually ran the country. Diem was only a figurehead while Nhu was the real power broker.

The press continued to attack the Diem regime, which provoked Madame Nhu into offering ‘gasoline’ to any reporters who might like to barbecue themselves. In a letter to Time on September 13 1963, she explained that it was her noblesse oblige to stop the spreading of a false, ugly and well-organised anti-Catholic propaganda. (48) In the Senate, Frank Church was about to introduce a resolution condemning repression of the Buddhists and calling for an end to American aid to Diem’s government unless this ceased (49). On 8 October the United Nations General meeting agreed to send a delegation to Vietnam to investigate the Buddhist persecution at the request of many Buddhist countries. Diem’s regime became isolated both from its own people and from the international community. To ‘welcome’ the delegation on the morning of the 27 October, another monk burned himself at the main Cathedral. He was the last monk to offer his life to the three Jewels. The regime was overthrown a few days later.

**Ngo Dinh Nhu’s Deluge Operation**

Although the CIA was supposed to shadow Nhu’s every movement, the raid on the Pagodas caught the station Chief, John Richardson unaware. Only a week before, Diem and Nhu promised the departing Ambassador, Frederick Nolting, that they would take no
further repressive steps against the Buddhists. Nolting, who had staked his career on the regime’s defence, bitterly resented this. Nhu’s last playing card marked the end of an era and a policy of sink or swim with Diem. In America the Buddhist crisis was a growing embarrassment for the young Catholic President. The photographs of soldiers beating-clubbing on unarmed and hapless Buddhist monks appeared daily on the front pages of American newspaper together with stories of the appalling loss of life of young American servicemen. Kennedy and his government had to find a way to separate American policy from Diem’s regime. Nhu’s Campaign Deluge also divided Kennedy’s inner circle in Washington as well as the staff at the Embassy in Saigon. The anti-Diem faction included mostly staff at the Department of State including Roger Hillsman, Averell Harriman and Michael Forrestal, while the pro-Diem faction included the most powerful circle like Robert McNamara, Minister For Defence, the CIA Chief and General Maxwell Taylor at the Pentagon. When the news of the Deluge raid reached Washington, most of the Cabinet members were out of the capital and the anti-Diem faction had the opportunity to draft a cable which was approved by Kennedy. McNamara, the Secretary of Defence and Dean Rusk, Secretary of State. It was then sent to the new Ambassador, Cabot Lodge, requesting him to ‘examine all possible leadership alternatives and make detailed plans as to how we might bring about Diem’s replacement, if this should become necessary’ (50). The New Ambassador, Cabot Lodge, who was disgusted with the regime’s inhumane repression, had virtually made up his mind to stage a coup before he arrived in Saigon. He talked extensively with Madam Nhu’s father, Tran Van Chuong, and felt that ‘all the charges against the Ngo’s family were true’. In a cable sent back to Kennedy, he expressed his view that ‘there is no possibility that the war can be won under Diem’s administration’ (51). Later the pro-Diem faction had second thoughts about the ‘alternative leadership’ and blamed the anti-Diem group in the State Department for overstepping the mark, but during the next two months, even though the Kennedy Administration sent out conflicting signals as to whether to get rid of both Diem and Nhu, the cable of August 24 was never rescinded. To show his displeasure and contempt for Diem, on his first morning in Saigon, the new Ambassador Lodge drove to the USAID headquarters next to Xa Loi pagoda where two monks who had escaped the raid two nights before were sheltered, and ordered the staff to bring fresh fruit and vegetables for
them. (52). Like the situation in Washington, there was a pro-Diem faction in Saigon. General Harkins, Head of the Military Mission (MACV) in Vietnam, refused to endorse the plan to overthrow Diem because he thought ‘after many years swimming with Diem, it seems incongruous now to get him down, kick him around and get rid of him’ (53) The Pentagon and the CIA men in Saigon were still convinced that Diem could be persuaded or coerced to make change in policy and personnel. They also tried to minimise the impact of the Buddhist crisis by arguing that ‘in the country side where the war was fought, the peasants were not upset by Diem’s attack on the Buddhists’ and the Buddhist Church was not a real force. Also they argued there was no suitable replacement for Diem. However Lodge authorised the local CIA to assist in the tactical planning of a coup and to make an all-out effort to get the plotters to move promptly. To increase the chance for a successful coup he even hid vital information about the coup planning from General Harkins and later requested the Chief of the CIA Station in Saigon be recalled.

The worsening political situation in South Vietnam forced Kennedy’s Administration to re-evaluate its policy and commitment. Kennedy requested that the military wing represented by Gen. Paul Harkins and the opponent political wing, represented by the new Ambassador Lodge send him separate reports on the prospect of the Vietnam War. Again he received conflicting reports. On September 6 he decided to send a fact-finding mission to Vietnam headed by Krulak, recommended by the military side, and Mendenhall, recommended by their opponent political wing in the State Department. On September 10 when reporting back to the President, Krulak said that ‘everything went according to schedule’ and that ‘Diem was good’ while Mendenhall painted a gloomy picture of ‘the collapse of the civilian morale and an atmosphere of fear and hatred in every city’ while Diem had only succeeded in ‘unifying the whole population against the government itself’. Kennedy was so frustrated by these discrepant viewpoints that he quipped: ‘You two did visit the same country, didn’t you?’ (54)

Because of Kennedy’s indecision due to the conflicting signals sent to the plotters, caused the delay of the October coup. Then Nhu made a move which proved to be fatal. Aware that the American Embassy was actively promoting a coup against him, he
approached both Hanoi and the National Liberation Front. After the national conference on the neutrality of Laos, De Gaulle proposed another conference to discuss the neutralisation of Vietnam. Through the French Ambassador, Roger Lalouette and the Polish Delegate in the International Control Commission (which was set up after the Geneva 1954), Nhu established secret contacts with the NLF. Nhu believed that if Diem was harassed by the Americans, he may have ordered American advisers to withdraw and Hanoi would respect South Vietnam’s neutrality. Nhu’s ploy may have had leverage with the United States, but he was prepared to send his two children to reside in Hanoi as an act of good will. However his flirtation with the Vietnamese communists caused American officials great concern and increased the Administration’s resolve to oust him. Eventually Lodge and Harkins came to the common view that the war could not be won under Diem’s regime so its fate was sealed. To accelerate the coup, Lodge assured the plotters that ‘the US would not thwart a coup, would review Vietnamese plans, other than assassination plans, and would assure the generals that US Aid would continue to another anti-Communist Government’ (55). However Kennedy was still not sure of the prospect of a successful coup, so he sent his Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, on another fact-finding trip to Saigon. During his ten-day stay McNamara found information that was ‘illuminating and disturbing’. He met a previous supporter of Diem’s regime, Professor P. J Honey of the London School of Oriental and African Studies, who said that ‘Diem had aged terribly and had slowed mentally’. Criticism of Diem now came openly, from the military as well as civilian quarters and after the open attack on the Buddhists, in Honey’s opinion, it was impossible to liberalise the regime or change Diem. Even the Papal delegate, Monsignor Asta, said that ‘the regime had established a police state and perpetrated widespread torture’. Even Diem’s most ardent supporter, the CIA’s Saigon station Chief Richardson, expressed his disappointment and asked McNamara ‘to be firm with Diem’. During the meeting with Diem, McNamara issued an ultimatum from the US Government that unless the repression stopped and the unrest was resolved, the war effort would be endangered. In response, Diem blamed the ‘vicious press attacks against his government and his family’, on ‘the immature, untrained and irresponsible students’ but offered absolutely no assurance that he would take any steps in response to the points made to him’ (56). Amazingly when reporting back to the President on October 2, he
proposed a few mild measures like withholding important financial support, monitoring the situation closely and deciding the next move in two to four months. He took no initiative in encouraging a change of government. However that was enough for a shrewd, forceful and tough politician like Lodge. To prevent information from being leaked to Nhu or Diem, he shut Harkins out of much of the cable traffic and had the CIA chief to be recalled to Washington. The set the coup in motion. In mid of October he convinced the White House that, unless the Americans openly betrayed the plotters, a coup was inevitable. He also obtained Kennedy’s approval. The President cabled him that although the US government did not want to ‘stimulate’ a coup, but neither did it wish to ‘thwart’ one. To kill off any lingering doubts from the pro-Diem faction, Lodge informed Washington that ‘do not think we have the power to delay or discourage a coup’. (57) The plotters said it was strictly a Vietnamese affair and refused to divulge any information whatsoever. What Washington could do was ‘sit and wait’!

After 1956 there were many attempts on Diem’s life. After crushing the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, Diem escaped an assassination attempt in 1957 while inspecting an agroville area in Ban Me Thuot. A group of middle ranked officers also organised an abortive coup in 1960 which nearly toppled him. He resorted to the tactic of asking the Commander of the Joint General Staff to negotiate with the rebels, while secretly calling loyal army units to his rescue. In February 1962, two pilots whose fathers were imprisoned for involvement with opposition political party bombed his Palace and destroyed part of it.

Believing that his family was protected by divine force and that he had the Mandate of Heaven, Diem proceeded to crush the Buddhists, idealistic young university students and innocent teenagers in high schools. Ring leaders, General Duong Van Minh and Tran Van Don, who rescued Diem in the battle with the religious sects in 1956, were sidelined because they wanted to be professional soldiers and refused to join Nhu’s Can Lao Party or convert to Catholicism. They sounded out the idea of a coup in early September, secretly recruited the disillusioned officers, many of who were Diem loyal supporters, and carefully planned a bloodless coup, which finally overthrew the repressive regime. On November 11, a Military Revolutionary Committee seized power. The public mobbed
members of the Armed Forces in the streets, garlanded them with flowers and offered them food. For the first time many soldiers in the Republic of Vietnam Army felt proud of their uniform.

The Buddhist leaders had dreamt of an organisation that could unify all sects since 1930's. Now their dream had come true. However, the joy was short lived. In a few months' time, the Buddhist Church was literally thrown into another crisis. This time the opponents were much more powerful, if not the most powerful in the world: the American War Juggernaut.
Chapter Seven

The Main Players in War and Peace

The Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation (UBC)

The overthrow of President Diem opened up an era in which the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation became deeply involved in the political affairs of the country. 'The First November Revolution' as it was called, certainly raised political consciousness amongst the urban middle class and young students, who, in the years to come, became zealous defenders of a burgeoning democracy.

Buddhist leaders may not have expected to play the power broker's role so soon. They focused on regrouping their flocks, examining their losses and consolidating Congregation organisations. The Supreme Patriarch, Thich Tinh Khiet, called everyone to return to their normal life and pleaded with the Buddhists to extend friendship to the followers of other religions. The Buddhist Congregation played virtually no part in forming the revolutionary Government which included mostly bureaucrats and the members of the Military Council. Nhat Hanh described the Buddhist movement of 1963 as a 'holy struggle' because:

During the 1963 struggle no body thought of toppling the Diem government in order to come to power. ...I think the motive of the struggle determines almost everything. You see the people are suffering and you are suffering and you want to change. No desire, no ambition is involved. ...It was so beautiful (1)

However, whether they liked it or not, the Buddhist Congregation leaders were recognised as a powerful political group who were able to exert their political muscle to support or bring down a government. Involvement in politics was no longer question worth considering because many Vietnamese Buddhist monks and laymen saw that it was imperative for them to continue to actively engage in the political and social struggles of their country.
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According to Nhat Hanh the most pressing need was to produce capable cadres to handle the Congregation’s affairs because the monks were reluctant to take up the role of responsible leadership suddenly thrust upon them. Some laymen were capable and dedicated, but they joined the movement voluntarily rather than as cadres trained by the Congregation. Of course there were always opportunistic elements who ‘managed to slip into the entourage of the Congregation leaders and trafficked with influencing the Congregation. This meant then that the prestige of the Buddhist Congregation reached its apex and became a powerful political force in the same league with the American backed governments and the National Liberation Front.

The new Government wasted no time in establishing good relations with the Congregation and a month later, a Buddhist Congress was organised with the participation of almost every practising Buddhist group in South Vietnam. On the December 31 representatives of eleven sects attending the Congress announced the birth of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation (UBC). A constitution determining the structures of Congregation hierarchy was unanimously adopted. This was the first time all regional and ethnic Buddhist sects voluntarily put themselves under the command of the central authority. Commenting on this amalgamation of the various Buddhist groups into one Unified Congregation, G. Kahin in his book ‘Intervention’ noted that even though the division between power groups and individuals could never be overcome completely, unification helped to keep Buddhism a political force with much of the thrust and leverage it had developed in opposing Diem. (2) The role of the laity was also highlighted in the constitution for they could be elected to positions of authority except for the position of Chairman. Buddhist followers were grouped according to administrative units right down to the village level. Administrative responsibility was evenly distributed between regional leaders. Thich Tam Chau, leader of the Northern Buddhists was elected Chairman of the Institute for the Propagation of the Faith. His associate, Thich Tam Giac, was assigned as the Head the Army Chaplaincy which so far had been monopolised by Catholic priests. Thich Tri Quang was appointed to the obscure position of Principal Secretary of the Institute of Elders. The task of regrouping and training Buddhist youth and laymen was offered to Thich Thien Minh, who had masterminded of most political activities. By grouping grassroots Buddhists into administrative units, the authority of the Central Vietnam leaders was actually enhanced because they had the
most organised, disciplined and dedicated followers. The Northern monks could only command a small number of refugee-Buddhists in the Saigon Metropolitan area, while the Ethnic Khmer and Southern Buddhists were less inclined to be involved in politics, and if they were, they had already joined the politicised Buddhist sects of Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, as they were known.

The Buddha’s message of world peace was a central tenet of the UBC constitution proving the Congregation’s commitment to work for peace in the days ahead:

*In line with the ideal of world peace in the Buddha’s teachings, we, the Theravada and Mahayana traditions in Vietnam, actualised the long time aspiration of our Buddhist fellows with the aim to bringing peace to all human beings and our people: this is the pure objectives of the Vietnamese Unified Buddhist Congregation. The Congregation cannot exist in isolation but its survival must be linked to the survival of human beings and particularly, of our people* (3)

In fact unification was only achieved at the administrative level, but not at the doctrinal level for each tradition was encouraged to maintain and develop their own form of worship under the Congregation guidance. In his opening speech, Thich Tam Chau, as First Chairman, outlined the basic responsibilities and duties of the newly engaged Buddhist Congregation:

*The experiences of recent months have shown us that social events can deeply influence the religious life, because Buddhists are at the same time the citizens of this country. This organisation does not aim to dominate, but to guide, educate and aid disciples to fulfil their social duties. What are these social duties? They are the practice of Buddhist doctrine in daily life, the propagation of the doctrine to the people around them. In other words, the Buddhists have to participate in social and cultural activities* (4)

Since social and political conditions could deeply effect a religious life, as demonstrated by their bitter experiences under Diem’s repressive regime, the Buddhists were more determined than ever to create favourable conditions in which freedom of religion could be actualised. There was no turning back. The Congregation
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had to be more pro-active to political events in the years ahead of which the most visible was the escalation of the war. The Buddha’s ideal of world peace therefore was tied up to Congregation activities designed to stop the conflict. After the fall of Diem, realising this monumental task, Thich Tri Quang commented that the Buddhists’ problems were just beginning. To stop the war was to confront the American military might and its docile gung-ho junta. He likened the mission impossible of the Congregation to the act of rowing a boat up to a mountain peak and wading a horse in a very deep stream (5)

The new government which comprised mostly bureaucrats and army Generals, was supposed to play a caretaker’s role fell short of people’s expectations. For instance the main objective of the Buddhist movement of 63 was to have Decree Ten rescinded and its religious status recognised as equal with its Catholic counterpart but the new Government continued to treat the UBC ‘in accordance with the current regulations on religions’ until a new Religion Act could be proclaimed. Thich Tri Quang had to write a series of articles denouncing the government for ignoring the sacrifices of Buddhist monks and laymen in 1963. Ironically the UBC religious status was finally recognised in a decree signed by a man that Buddhists loved to hate: General Nguyen Khanh.

The Pentagon Coup

Only three weeks after President Diem and his brother Nhu had been assassinated, President Kennedy was fatally shot on November 22. This event drastically changed the tempo of the war as well as American commitment to it. From the advisers’ point of view, the American young men were going to be sent to a place ten thousand miles away from home to do what Asian youths ought to be doing for themselves, as President Johnson had pointed out in 1964 election (6) Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were sceptical of Eisenhower’s Domino theory that if you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is that it will go over very quickly. Johnson condemned it all as confusion and alarm. Kennedy was more direct: ‘I am frankly of the belief that no amount of American military assistance in Indo-China can conquer an ‘enemy’ which has the sympathy and covert support of the people’.

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(7) While Kennedy maintained American commitment with only sixteen thousand advisers, Johnson, after defeating the hawkish candidate Goldwater, changed dramatically. Johnson said that he felt he had no alternative but to begin to supply American boys to do the job that the thought a few months before Asian boys should do. (8) Suddenly he sounded like an ardent interventionist: 'Our men in Vietnam are there...to keep the promise that was made 12 years ago!'. (9) In hindsight it seems that President Kennedy understood deeply the political character of the Vietnam war. For his analysis was a precise prediction of what was going to happen more than ten years later: ‘if the war were ever converted into a white man’s war, the Americans would lose as the French had lost’. (10) Meanwhile in early 1964 President Johnson claimed that he would retain the major elements of both Eisenhower’s and Kennedy’s South-East Asian policies, namely that of combating the spread of communism and to demonstrate the ability of the free world to counter Communist wars of liberation. He later confessed that he chose the war because he did not want to be responsible for America’s losing a war to the Communists. (11) To achieve these objectives, a receptive government in South Vietnam was absolutely necessary and the American Administration would go to any length to topple any leaders who dared to act on their own. In fact the American Administration flatly told the Generals, when they were assuming power, that ‘the progress in the war, not progress in popularity, should be its prime objectives’ (12)

After toppling Diem, a Revolutionary Military Commission was formed headed by General Duong Van Minh. All the plotters were promoted and no major purge was carried out as expected. However two powerful Generals missed promotion. One was General Nguyen Khanh who rescued Diem in the 1961 coup and the other, Do Cao Tri whose father was a high ranking member of Nhu’s Personalist Labour Party. Also, according to General Tran Van Don, the master mind of the coup, the Revolutionary Military Council was not consulted when Nguyen Ngoc Tho, former Vice President in Diem’s Government, was appointed Prime Minister. General Don recounted that the oversight was one of the main reasons why another coup, later called the Pentagon Coup, was hatched by these two resentful Generals with the active participation of the American military advisers (13)
Nevertheless a few disgruntled generals could not have staged a successful coup without American support. The new government, which was seen as too moderate, became popular with the public, particularly with urban people and students. The Buddhist Congregation leaders and their followers were so grateful to these generals and so quickly threw their support behind the new government. The Congregation tried not to get involved in power sharing, partly because they wanted to disprove the accusation that they wanted to grasp power, partly because they were busy regrouping their followers. The other religious groups which were fiercely opposed Diem, like Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, also agreed to lay down arms to cooperate with the new government. Apart from the Catholic minority and a few pro-Diem politicians, the new government then actually considerable broadened its support base. Naturally Washington expected that the new government which was run by mostly professional soldiers, would be implacably anti-communist and militarily aggressive toward the National Liberation and Hanoi. The generals were also expected to accept greater American direction in fighting and eventually the bombing of North Vietnam (14)

Ironically, the key members of the Revolutionary Military Council (RMC) were not ready to make all-out war against the rebels and realised the political nature of the Vietnam war. They were determined to shift the arena of struggle from military to politics. They considered a much needed reformed South Vietnamese Government as vital if there was to be any hope at competing successfully with the National Liberation Front (NLF) at a political level. The overthrow of Diem and Nhu offered them a fresh opportunity for settling outstanding issues through reconciliatory means. They tried to build a base of support among groups that Diem’s repressive measures had pushed into the open arms of the Front. These dissidents, members of Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects, Buddhists, students, and urban professionals, joined the rebels, not because they were committed to communism but rather because of their despair and anger at Diem. (15) The leadership of the NLF comprised mostly bourgeois dissidents who became the symbol of opposition to the Diem regime, even though the hardcore communist members may have taken control from behind. If the NLF had been deprived of its major focus of opposition, the organisation would have lost much of its raison d’etre. (16) With the tacit backing of the Buddhist Congregation and most urban people working towards a peaceful solution, General Minh and his
Lieutenants believed they could build a popular base strong enough to negotiate with the NLF on favourable terms.

Acknowledging the role of the American Embassy in supporting the Coup against President Diem, the Vietnamese showed their deep gratitude to the American Embassy but this was about the only period in the Vietnam war when the Americans were lauded. When Ambassador Cabot Lodge resigned to join his Republican members in the forthcoming election, the Vietnamese queued up for more than a kilometre at Tan Son Nhat airport to see him off. When President Kennedy was assassinated, thousands of students spontaneously led a procession to the American Embassy to express their grief at his death. One year later, students formed an alliance with the Buddhists and urban professionals to vent their anger at the escalation of war by holding protests all over South Vietnam.

Minh’s government called themselves non-communist, rather than anti-communist. To them the distinction was a very important one, showing their soft approach to their opponents. The Prime Minister, Nguyen Ngoc Tho, during an interview with Professor Kahin, envisaged that their plan was to form a government of reconciliation which would welcome all elements of the National Liberation Front to participate in an electoral process. They believed the Southern dissidents were strong enough to resist Hanoi’s control so both sides would be able to form a neutral government - a government without foreign troops or bases and whose neutrality in international affairs would incline towards the West. Unfortunately the plans were leaked to the American government (17).

Surprisingly the Front seemed to hold high regard for the Minh Government. Two days after the coup, in a communiqué, NLF officials called on the leaders of the South Vietnamese armed forces to consider a negotiated solution because internal conflicts could likely be settled by negotiation. Since 1960 when the Front came into being, the leaders of South Vietnam were labelled ‘lackeys of the American Imperialists’ while the Front claimed it was the sole representative of the South Vietnamese people. After addressing the South Vietnamese leaders in such a respectful manner, they advised that the coup promoters should know how rely on the people’s strength to ‘resolutely separate themselves from the control of ‘US
imperialists'. Few days later, the Front openly suggested that the parties concerned in South Vietnam should negotiate with one another to reach a cease-fire and solve important problems, with a view to reaching free general elections and to form a national coalition government, composed of representatives of all forces, parties, tendencies and strata of the South Vietnamese people’ (18) The NLF also convened the Second Congress on January 21 1964 and almost immediately after, on January 28, Ha Noi Radio broadcast to South Vietnam the Appeal for Unity via negotiation:

...that all forces...regardless of political view, religion or race, regardless of their past, present political and social position, or their political conflicts should seek the best solution...for the benefit of all Vietnamese. The NLF of South Vietnam maintains that, if the leaders of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces are concerned with the people’s happiness and future, they must consider that internal conflicts can be settled by means of negotiation (19)

Throughout the period when General Minh and his lieutenants held office, the NLF continued to hold out the olive branch which made the American Administration nervous. In the Lunar New Year message to General Duong Van Minh, President Johnson expressed his view that neutralisation ‘would only be another name for the Communist take over’. Defence Minister McNamara also voiced his opposition to any negotiated solution: ‘neutralisation would in reality be an interim device to permit Communist consolidation and eventual take over. (20) During the days of the Diem regime, the pro-Diem group including McNamara, the Secretary of Defence and General Harkins, the Military Chief in Vietnam, only took a decisive stance to overthrow Diem when it was reported that Nhu had been in contact with the NLF. Suddenly a new military government which was expected to be more hawkish, showed greater interest in reaching a compromise with their opponents.

In late December the hostility towards the French Government was suddenly intensified, partly because of De Gaulle’s policy of neutralisation of Indochina. Students’ demonstrations were staged and the Government was asked to end diplomatic relations with France. Even the Council of Notables which comprised most of the French educated members accused the Minh Government of being soft on neutralist elements. The last French soldiers left Vietnam in 1956, but France also left
behind many entrenched cultural and educational institutions that the Vietnamese elite adopted and respected. French schools which catered for the children of the upper social strata, continued to be run without any hindrance from the previous Government. Being able to speak French and understand French culture commanded prestige and respect among university students and the last thing they would do was to demand that French schools be closed or cultural centres, such as the Alliance Française. Anti-French demonstrations were incited by Government’s agents de provocateur, not students’ spontaneous reactions as some would have liked the public to believe. As Le Monde reported on February 1, ‘on many occasions, anti-French demonstration were followed by counter-demonstration favourable to neutralisation’. (21)

Rumours of French agents infiltrated in the government were spread like bush fires and there was no way of knowing they were true or simply planted by conspirators. It was reported that Lieutenant Tran Dinh Lan, who served in both French and Vietnamese Intelligence Units, arrived in Vietnam with suitcases of dollars and these Generals had been bought and were about to declare that Vietnam would go neutralist and sign an agreement to end the war with the North. (22)

Under mounting pressure and threat from the American side, the Minh Government had strenuously to deny that they were inclined toward a neutral and negotiated peace, declaring: ‘The Republic of Vietnam categorically rejects the proposition directed toward the convening of a new Geneva Conference’. Prime Minister Tho also declared ‘that reported French plans to press for a negotiated settlement of the war were sabotaging us, killing us, drowning us in difficulty’ (23) Conspirators used this as a pretext to depose four pro-French Vietnamese Generals.

The American Administration, however, did not act solely upon rumours. Many years later Professor G. Kahin interviewed those involved including figures like Tho, Minh and Don, Tho and Kim admitted that an effort to contact the NLF to establish an open political process was true. Tho said that we thought that the best solution for both South and North Vietnam would be to establish a relationship of peaceful co-existence between Hanoi and Saigon. Somehow there were leaks of our plans, and it is apparent that the American Government got wind of them. (24) Not surprisingly, as
was outlined in a CIA report, the tempo of military action had slowed down and a steadily decreasing number of incidents and this seemed to confirm Americans’ suspicion that a tacit compromise had been reached.

To add insult to injury, clashes between the new leaders and American advisers became more frequent. For instance, the new government replaced Nhu’s strategic hamlet policy with a new program called ‘New Life hamlet’ which was a positive rural welfare program which aimed to attract a large part of the NLF’s non-communists. Unlike Nhu’s program, peasants were allowed to live close to their ancestors’ graves and were free to organise their own defence units. The program encouraged local initiatives and was administered by local village leaders, instead of by alien northern Catholic cadres imported by Ngo Dinh Nhu’s mass migration program. (25) The architect of the program, General Le Van Kim, forbade any American officials to participate in the planning process as well as being denied access to villages, because it was feared this would play into the hands of the Communists in the propaganda war. It was thought that the presence of Americans side by side with local officials would give an impression of colonialism to the whole pacification. (26) The Vietnamese leaders also refused to yield to pressure to allow American military advisers down to sector and battalion levels. Their rational was that the greater the visibility of American soldiers, the less attractive the political appeal. Not only did General Kim appear to be uncooperative, but also General Mai Huu Xuan, Chief National Police, resented the American advisers’ patronising attitude once ordering a top US adviser out of his office. It is reported that he had said: ‘If you, Americans can’t protect your own President, why should we follow your advice with respect to our own internal security?’ (27) The relationship between Ambassador Lodge with the new government was not always smooth either. Lodge thought that he could groom General Minh to become a popular political figure as he had done for President Eisenhower, but Minh politely refused to accept his kind offer.

In hindsight, as General Don admitted, problems started with the American Secretary of Defence McNamara during his visit to Saigon on 19-20 December 64. At that time the Joint Chiefs called for the ‘the aerial bombardment of the key Vietnam targets, using U.S. resources under Vietnamese cover, and with the Vietnamese openly assuming responsibility for the actions’. This strategy was not formally recommended
to President Johnson until January 22 1964, yet the matter was raised earlier by McNamara, with the Vietnamese leaders. It was obvious that American officials had been seeking the new leadership’s backing for bombing the North well before President Johnson agreed to it. (28) The four Vietnamese corps commanders were also approached by American advisers to secure their approval. The Minh government openly disagreed with the strategy. Apart from saying that the Vietnamese Army was not capable of defending South Vietnam had Hanoi decided to launch a ground force advance across the demilitarised zone, General Minh cited two other reasons. The first being it would not have good military results and would harm innocent people and secondly the South would lose its legitimate reason for fighting a defensive war against Communist aggression (29)

But the real reason the American military wing decided to act to displace Minh’s group was the prospect of a pro-neutralist government. If the Minh government somehow accommodated the Vietcong and officially asked the Americans to leave, the United States had no excuse not to comply with that request. McNamara concluded his two-day trip with a pessimistic statement: ‘The situation is very disturbing. Current trends, unless reversed in the next 2-3 months, will lead to neutralisation at best and more likely to a Communist-controlled state’. He recommended that the U.S government ‘watch the situation very carefully, running scared, hoping for the best, but preparing for more forceful moves’. (30) Only two months previously, McNamara had predicted that America could withdraw 1,500 troops by then end of 1965

The Pentagon group, including McNamara, Taylor and Harkins, did not wholeheartedly support the move to topple President Diem. During the planning stage of the coup, the others knew Harkins was close to the old regime and so blocked him out of the coup planning. Ambassador Lodge also denied Harkins communication to and from Washington while secretly asking for him to be replaced. The political climate in which the rumour of neutralisation mushroomed gave the military wing a good opportunity for revenge by supporting a strong man who would be more susceptible to U.S pressures and directions to prosecute the war. The General best fitted that image was Nguyen Khanh.
Unlike the other military leaders, Khanh maintained a close relationship with Harkins and the American military wing. He was regarded by the American administration as the most able General in the RVN army. He was highly praised by McNamara as articulate, forceful, mercurial shrewd, a graduate of a U.S. military training academy and thus possessing extensive experience. (31) As a young man Khanh joined the Communist guerillas. Shortly after returning to Saigon he entered the first special military training class conducted by the French and graduated in 1947. By 1954 he was one of the top Vietnamese officers in the French army with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He was promoted to Deputy Army Chief of Staff under President Diem and in 1960, he secretly rallied his loyal troops to rescue President Diem in an abortive coup. For this reason but also perhaps because of his gregarious character, the new leaders did not entirely trust him. He was omitted from the Revolutionary Military Council but was instead appointed Commander of the first Military Corps which was far away from the centre of real power in Saigon. Receiving encouraging signals from Harkins through his military advisor, Colonel Jesper Wilson, Khanh started plotting another coup with a group of disgruntled Generals. While Khanh acted alone, there were two groups of army officers waiting in the wings. One was a group of Catholic and pro-Diem officers, headed by Generals Tran Thien Khiem and Nguyen Van Thieu. Another well-organised group of middle ranking officers belonged to the Dai Viet Party whose leader, Dr Nguyen Ton Hoan, was still ambushing in Paris. Khanh also secured the assistance of two other officers, General Do Mau, who had been given a powerless position and a maverick officer, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, who led an abortive coup against President Diem in 1960. While these disgruntled officers were busy arranging their troops, the American military wing was also busy lobbying and exerting pressure to tip the balance of troops towards the conspirators.

Meanwhile in Saigon, General Harkins constantly exerted pressure to tip the military balance in favour of Khanh’s group. He induced the Saigon Government to break up the palace guard and to move coup protection Ranger units out into the country side. He also persistently pressured General Ton That Dinh to relieve his command of the vital III Corps. The officer that the U.S. military approved as his successor was none other than Major General Tran Thien Khiem, the main conspirator. Khanh and his co-plotters made their move on January 31. The same units which had helped to
overthrow the Diem’s regime now engaged in a new coup, called a purge, or rectification, of the pro-French and pro-neutralist Generals.

At that time Washington denied any involvement in the coup and claimed that the American Government was taken by surprise. In his memoir, McNamara still contested that ‘Washington neither encouraged nor furthered the coup’. (32) As did some journalists like Shaplen who asserted ‘it cannot be said that the Americans played any role in the Khanh coup’. (33) But twenty years later, after delving into declassified archives, Professor Kahin concluded that the Americans were not only privy to the coup’s planning but also involved in its implementation. (34)

The Administration blamed bickering among the South Vietnamese leaders, lack of direction and ineffectual leadership of the Minh’s government as, the main reason for the second coup. This is hardly justifiable because the new government had only been in power for just only three months. It did not lack direction and purpose, rather its direction put it on a collision course with the President’s men who had already decided that, to win the war, the United States Government must have a show-down with Hanoi. It was very well said in a conclusion to a Citizens’ White Paper that, ‘the United States increased its commitment to a prolongation of the Vietnam war at a time when the drift of the Saigon Junta and of public opinion was in the direction of negotiation for a neutralised Vietnam’. (35) After the Pentagon coup, any Vietnamese governments, religious groups, or individuals, who stood in the way would be crushed mercilessly. Thus, within months a modest number of 16,500 American service men playing advisory roles in Vietnam early 1964 rose quickly to 500,000 American personnel sent to fight an un-winnable war. Well might it be said that from this point on, the Vietnam War became McNamara’s War.

**Bomb Them Back to the Stone Age**

Having placed a new leader in charge who pledged to sweep out the Communist and Vietnamese traitors standing for neutralism, the Americans did whatever they could to lift General Khanh’s public image. During the trip to Vietnam in March, McNamara and Khanh were photographed standing shoulder to shoulder wherever they went.
Only later did the American administration recognised this was a foolish tactic, because it served only to reinforce in the minds of many Vietnamese the view that Khanh drew support not from the people but from the United Stated. (36) Back in Washington, McNamara reported to Johnson that Khanh was entirely in favour of U.S. advisers at all levels and highly responsive to American advice to the extent that he consulted with Ambassador Lodge whom to appoint to his cabinet. Commenting on this Lodge gloated that he doubted if anywhere in the world the United States has a better relationship with a chief of staff than exists here. (37)

However, McNamara painted a desperate picture of South Vietnam’s military and political prospects. Only a few months earlier the Secretary of Defence had assured the late President Kennedy that America would be able to withdraw 1,500 soldiers by the end of 1965. Yet suddenly after the trip to Vietnam on March 16 1964, he claimed that conditions in South Vietnam were unquestionably worse. The optimistic report of military progress in the past year had in fact been doctored by South Vietnamese officials and the U.S. mission. Now the Secretary of Defence decided that Vietnamese leaders showed no talent for political administration, squabbled incessantly and were unable to check the Viet Cong’s progress and the situation was growing worse everyday. Military draft dodging and desertion were rife and rising. And in addition the Viet Cong controlled virtually all facets of peasant life in many provinces (38) In May 1964 the CIA submitted a bleak report on Vietnam, declaring ‘if the tide of deterioration has not been stemmed by the end of the year, the anti-Communist position in South Vietnam is likely to become untenable’ (39)

The McNamara’s group presented President Johnson with three alternatives. First, to do nothing and just wait until the other side won the war or until a pro-neutrality government told the U.S. to leave Vietnam. Second, the war could be carried to the North until the North Vietnam leaders’ will was broken. Third, America could go into an all-out-war including decisive air and ground attacks. McNamara proposed a middle of the road approach which was called a graduated overt plan designed to show the North that they could not win the insurgency in the South. Meanwhile the U.S. would support the South Vietnamese government for as long as it took to bring the NLF under control. McNamara recommended that Khanh be urged to call for national conscription and the U.S. would be ready to fund an expansion of the South
Vietnamese armed forces, to increase the pay for military personnel, and to send additional military equipment and administrative support. (40)

Compared with total warfare proposed by the Chiefs of Staff, McNamara’s proposal to increase U.S. air attacks in the North seemed tame. The bombings would also demonstrate U.S. power and commitment to Asia and the World at large and most importantly, give the government of South Vietnam some time and opportunity to improve itself. (41) As McNamara confessed later ‘we tilted gradually—almost imperceptibly—toward approving the direct application of U.S. military force. We were beginning tragic slide down a slippery slope’ (42)

There was the fourth choice that McNamara group refused to explore. It was true that the Domino theory was initiated by Eisenhower government and Kennedy maintained that commitment, but neither would see the Vietnam war as an American war. Neither wished to change the American advisory role into a combating one. On the one hand, McNamara’s group tried to prohibit the negotiation alternative promoted internationally by President De Gaulle and the U. N. secretary, U Thant, and by George Ball, a White House black sheep and the Under Secretary of State. On the other hand, an ‘inexperienced’ Johnson to be convinced to accept their recommendation. President was unsure how to deal with the Vietnam legacy he’d been given so, although many times Johnson reassured the Generals in Saigon that American would stand by its word, this was all rhetoric only. Senator Mike Mansfield, the major leader in the Senate, told Johnson that his recommendation to Kennedy to adopt the neutralisation of Indochina was still valid and warned the new President of the danger of massive costs to the American people of an ever-deepening involvement in Vietnam. (43) On the international front, General De Gaulle announced France’s recognition of the Chinese People’s Republic and called for the neutralisation of her former colonies. After the fall of Diem, U Thant, then Secretary General of the United Nations, secretly suggested to the United States that a coalition government in Saigon be instituted to include a number of non-communist Vietnamese political exiles. Ironically, Hanoi at that time also eagerly sought openings for a negotiated settlement. Through French communist circles they voiced the opinion that even an indefinite division between North and South would be tolerable if only the United States would withdraw. (44)
The reasons for the escalation of the war given by the McNamara’s group were based on untested premise. The U.S. had to protect South Vietnam as an independent state free the aggression from the North and as well as meeting its obligations and to fulfil its commitment to avoid the domino effects and to maintain U.S. prestige in Asia. and in the world, and of course, to protect the nation’s interest. Ambassador Lodge was not alone in inciting fear and promoting pride to justify U.S. presence in Vietnam despite the undoubted cost in casualties for many years to come:

*If you take a piece of string and put one end of it in Saigon on the map and measure off a thousand miles and make a circle, you’ll find that within that circle are 240 million people, which is Southeast Asia...Loss of this area would be a catastrophe. That would make a lot of Americans think that we’d better resign from the human race.* (45)

Although President Johnson did not believe that the war could be won from the air, he eventually requested an inter-agency study group to draft a schedule for bombing the North. The military chiefs proposed that North Vietnamese ports be mined and bridges, petroleum depots and railroads be destroyed. Curtis LeMay, the Air Force Commander, declared that the North would be bombed ‘back to the Stone Age’. Although the CIA reported that these measures would not affect the insurgency in the South, but the Administration prime aim was to break the will of the North leaders. This group was also busy rewording the draft of a congressional resolution that sought a constitutional sanction of military actions in Vietnam. President Johnson still hesitated. He approved a request from General Westmoreland, the incumbent military chief in Vietnam, for an additional 900 military advisers in June 1964 and a month later, for another 4,200. (46) With an election looming, President Johnson had to play the role of a moderate and responsible leader against that of Barry Goldwater, a hawk whose proposals could have provoked Chinese intervention and started a nuclear war. The President and his advisers patiently waited for an act of aggression on the part of Hanoi. With the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, Washington got what of it hoped for and acted accordingly.
In 1962 a secret plan code name O-Plan 34-A was authorised by the Kennedy administration to collect information and to harass Hanoi behind the lines. Another plan code named DESOTO was to maintain naval surveillance as a show of force. For unknown reasons the destroyer Maddox was ordered to the Gulf of Tonkin on a DOSOTO mission. On August 2 the Maddox was attacked by three Vietnamese patrol boat torpedoes which missed their target. The Maddox crew returned fire, damaged and chased the boats back to their ports. It seemed to be a minor skirmish, but the report on this ‘unprovoked attack’ worried Johnson, who personally ordered another destroyer Turner Joy into the gulf in an attempt ‘to assert the right of freedom of the seas’. On August 4, the crew of the destroyer detected the sounds of a torpedo and for several hours American guns blazed into the dark sea. No one was quite sure what happened in reality. A pilot, James Stockdale, who was flying over the destroyer on August 4, recalled that there was nothing but the black sea and American fire power. Commodore Herrick, on board the Maddox, radioed the Headquarters and suggested a ‘complete evaluation before any further action’. But it was too late. The president ‘s men had already selected targets in the North and at the same time had worked on a new wording of the congressional resolution. The next morning oil tanks in North Vietnam were blown up. (47)

The next morning a resolution was placed before the Congress pledging its approval and support for the determination of the President to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States.(48) The resolution was passed by a vote of 88-2 by the Senate and unanimously by the House. Overtly the resolution designed to promote the maintenance of international peace and security in South East Asia. But covertly it aim was to give President Johnson and his supporters the legitimate power to change the tempo and the nature of the war. Thus the U.S. Air Force under the command of General Curtis LeMay, was sent to bomb the North back to the stone age, but not to win the war rather with the hope of breaking the willpower of the North Vietnamese leaders. Instead, it achieved a different result in which President Johnson, the peace candidate of 1964, had promised the American people he would not seek.

McNamara asserted that the nine days from July 30 to August 7 1964, were the most controversial period in the 25 year war. Firstly Johnson’s men lied about the
‘unprovoked ‘attacks; secondly the second attack never happened as confirmed by General Vo Nguyen Giap who told this to McNamara during his trip to North Vietnam to meet his old enemies. (49) Thirdly the Congress never intended the resolution to be used as a basis for the escalation of the war that followed. Moreover, George Ball, the Under Secretary of State, disclosed in a BBC interview in 1977 that many people who were associated with the Vietnam War were looking for any excuse to initiate bombing’. (50) Ironically during the election he denounced Barry Goldwater as a warmonger who, by recklessly advocating aggression and upheaval in Asia, would carry the seeds of destruction of American freedom too and perhaps of civilisation itself. He also denounced Goldwater’s call to supply American young men to do the jobs that Asian troops should. After winning the election by a landslide, Johnson did just that. His administration used the resolution to justify the expansion of the military action and forces in Vietnam. From 16,000 American advisers in 1964, 550,000 were now sent to Vietnam thereby ensuring deeper involvement and complicity in the Vietnam conflict.

After the election Johnson was pressured by McNamara’s group to move from reprisal bombing to sustained bombing. Air strikes were no longer regarded as reprisals for specific incidents, but rather as a regular occurrence to punish Hanoi for its ‘general pattern of aggression’. On February 13 President Johnson approved ‘Rolling Thunder’ which initiated extensive aerial warfare. This was interpreted by Hanoi as a prelude to the land war and so actually facilitated infiltration and hardened the will of the regime. Hanoi decided to send regular army to the South. In 1966, after 14 months of extensive bombing, McNamara admitted that the North’s infiltration rate was perhaps three times the previous level. (51) As Arthur Schlesinger observed, one step led to another, American troops were sent to Vietnam, first to defend American installations and bases, but inevitably they assumed a combat role on behalf of Vietnamese troops.

On February 21, 1965 General Westmoreland requested one battalion of marines to protect Danang airbase. This was promptly approved on February 26. Two weeks later he asked for another battalion. Not only did the Joint Chiefs approve this, they condoned it. The Pentagon Papers analysts believed this was Westmoreland’s foot in the door tactic. Although some senior advisers had reservations as to the wisdom and
necessity of so doing and believed once the policy of not sending combat troops was breached, it would be very difficult to hold the line. (52) However once the juggernaut of war was set, nothing could stop it. On March 8, 1965 3,500 U.S. marines landed at Chu Lai, Danang, the first time U.S. combat troops had been committed to the Asian mainland since the Korea war. (53) As George Ball, the Under Secretary of State, warned Johnson, ‘once on the tiger’s back you cannot be sure of picking a place to dismount’. Gradually Johnson was forced to change the mission for ground troops, from a defensive role to a combat one. This signalled a new kind war. However, this decision was never disclosed to the public. Acting upon a CIA report that more Hanoi regular units had infiltrated the Central Highlands and the vicinity of the Danang airbase, the Chiefs of Staff requested two more brigades (approximately 8,000 troops) to be deployed in South Vietnam. The senior advisers decided to meet at Honolulu to consider the deployment request. All of them agreed that bombing alone was not the answer to prevent the Saigon government from collapse. This time not only did the military wing request two brigades, they also renewed their former request for two divisions and their logistical units. Civil advisers like McNamara rejected this request, but Westmoreland still got his two brigades. This meant a sharp increase in combat troop numbers from 33,000 to 82,000. (54) Meanwhile the political and military situation in South Vietnam got worse. Ambassador Max Taylor sent Washington a bleak assessment of the Saigon government which he described as plagued with poor leadership, desertion and threatened collapse. Taylor was resigned to the fact that it would probably be necessary to commit U.S. ground forces to action. Then General Westmoreland sent in the worst assessment ever declaring:

_I see no course of action open to us except to reinforce our efforts in South Vietnam with additional U.S. or the third country as rapidly as is practical during the critical weeks ahead... (55)_

This was virtually a request for an open ended expansion of American military involvement. The President was mounting on the tiger’s back and he could not dismount until 1968 he declared that he would not seek for another term. When McNamara met Westmoreland in Saigon on July 16-17, 1965, the General said that he needed 175,00 troops by year’s end and another 100,00 by 1966. In his own word McNamara admitted : ‘we were sinking into quicksand’. Actually General
Westmoreland got more that he bargained for. By the end of 1965 the number of combat troops was 210,000; by 1966 it was 325,000. Undoubtedly the request for troops was unending and no one knew when Westmoreland would stop asking for more men. But his demands went on and on. By March 1967 Westmoreland requested another 200,000 troops which raised the total number of American troops to 670,000. He also urged the President to expand ground operations into Laos and Cambodia and advocated heavier bombing and mining of North Vietnam. He even contemplated an invasion north of the Demilitarised Zone (56).

Rolling Thunder air campaign actually destroyed every possible target in the North. As McNamara admitted, the number of sorties against the North grew from 25,000 in 1965 to 79,000 in 1966 to 108,000 in 1967, while the tonnage of bombs rose from 63,000 to 136,000 and then to 226,000. (57) It was estimated that American bombers dropped more tonnage of explosives each month on the Vietnamese than they dropped on all of Europe and Africa during the second World War.

The type of bombing also became more deadly. General Westmoreland received approval for the regular use of B52 bombers which were designed to deliver nuclear bombs. Carrying 30 tons of explosives, a single mission could devastate an area one-half mile wide by three miles long. A veteran squadron of World War II bombers, Sky-raid ers, were refitted with four 220-millimetre cannons that altogether they fired over 2000 rounds of ammunition per minute. Under its wings the Sky- raider could carry a bomb load of 7,500 pound. (58) U.S. troops usually used mass destructive weapons which obviously could not differentiate between a ‘black clad’ VC and a ‘black-clad’ innocent civilian. Consequently an average of two civilians were killed for every Viet Cong, and in some cases, the ratio was six civilians to one enemy soldier. (59) Other deadly weapons from the air were napalm bombs which burned deep into human flesh. Napalm was used as widely as possible and it became a ‘staple’ part of U.S. military tactics in Vietnam. It comprised approximately 8-9% of the yearly bomb tonnage and it was estimated that 338,000 tons were dropped during the course of the war. (60) However the most extensive cause of civilian casualties were anti-personal weapons, or delayed action bombs, called CBU which was first authorised for use in Vietnam in 1964. These fragmentation bombs, which were
detonated at an altitude of six hundred feet, dispersed fragments that could kill or wound people in an area approximately nine hundred by three thousand feet (61).

The human cost was disastrous. U.S. forces lost 47,253 in combat and another 10,449 died as part of the war effort. There were 313,616 wounded of whom 153,300 were classified as serious. More than 10,000 American service men lost at least one limb. Some 1340 American were listed as missing in action. There are no official statistics from South Vietnam but it was estimated that there were 185,500 killed in the war with half a million wounded. North Vietnam and the Vietcong lost nearly a million with another 400 thousand civilians wounded. In addition nearly 7 thousand allied troops were reported killed. The financial cost was also great. The U.S. estimated that the war cost them $US 150 billion in direct costs which destroyed Johnson’s dream of creating a better society in America. For the first time since the America Civil War, the social fabric of the USA almost disintegrated with internal conflict a dissension over American involvement in Vietnam as well as the draft. In view of the this destructive war, the Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation needed to evolve a means to stop the war and challenge the mighty American war machine. This seemed such an impossible task that Thich Tri Quang described it as like rowing to the top of the mountain and wading the horse through deep troubled water.

The Main Players in War and Peace

The Generals
In his memoirs written 30 years after the war in which he was the main architect, the former Secretary of Defence, McNamara still blamed the Saigon government for its ineffectiveness in conducting the war. Since then a great many documents have been de-classified and the decision-making process of Johnson’s Cabinet has revealed president Johnson’s and his senior advisers’ inner thoughts. Now we know why the President was able to uphold pressures from his advisers to approve the escalation of the war. It was because of the miserable performance of the South Vietnam Government which troubled the President and sometimes he wondered whether it made all the American efforts worthless (62). McNamara also agreed that one of the essential conditions required to win the war was a strong, stable, and effective
government which had the full loyalty and support of the people. In a testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee he confirmed that the primary problem in South Vietnam was not a military problem, but a political and economic one. (63) Yet the Secretary of Defence and all Johnson’s senior advisers paid little attention to the texture and quality of the South Vietnamese leadership which comprised mainly military members. Furthermore, the Administration never spelt out exactly what was meant by a ‘stable’ government or ‘political stability’, because a strong and stable military dictatorship did not seem compatible with a government which enjoyed the loyalty and support of the people!

The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (RVNA) originated from the French Colonial Army and in the Franco-Vietnamese war, the French needed the Vietnamese National Army, both as a token of Vietnamese sovereignty to prove to the world that War was not entirely a colonial one, but a war between nationalists and communists. In colonial Vietnam, the off-spring of the big landowners, bureaucrats and wealthy merchants grasped every opportunity to go to France to study. The military path represented an attractive alternative for upward social mobility for the poor. (64) To join the military Academy it was only required to finish junior high school, so later, most graduates enjoyed wealth and power, but they never rid themselves of the inferiority associated with their social origins, all except a few generals who were born and educated in France, like General Tran Van Don and Le Van Kim. Wealth and power were seen as compensation for humble origins.

Most of the military elite graduated from military training by the French in Tong in 1940. The military Academy was transferred to Hue in 1948 and finally to Dalat. General Nguyen Van Thieu graduated from this school in Hue and he later created a power base from cohorts of associates. Field Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky, in contrast, graduated from the reserve school of Nam Dinh which produced only four Generals during the Vietnam war. It may explain why, in the struggle for power in 1967, Thieu was able to out-manoeuvre Ky for the top job. Amazingly, a good percentage of senior officers had been with the resistance force, then called Viet Minh, some for an extended period. They included General Khanh, General Thieu and General Do Mau. When assuming power, it was well known that President Diem only trusted and promoted those officers who were Catholic. There were at least 15 per cent of officers
who converted to Catholicism in order to fit themselves as Diem’s members of trusted group of officers. General Nguyen Van Thieu was one of these. In a country which was mostly Buddhist, ironically, there were only four Generals who openly acknowledged being Buddhists. All four Generals were well known as the best fighters, among them, Generals Ton That Dinh and Nguyen Chanh Thi, were involved in the Buddhist Struggle Movement in 1966. Others tried to keep their religious affiliation hidden (65).

Since a military career was an alternative path for upward social mobility, the mechanism for material gain had to be found within the system of command. This accounted for the systemic corruption that occurred during the war. For example the district and province chiefs charged fees for services. Also the battalion commanders, who had to pay their corps commanders regularly, had in turn to milk the system by falsifying numbers of ‘ghost’ soldiers to their payrolls. According to Pentagon data, the average Vietnamese combat battalion had a ‘paper’ strength of 640 men present for duty, but in fact this rarely amounted to mere than 370 actual troops in the field (66) In 1965 the Saigon regime claimed to have 679,000 fighting men but in fact it was estimated that a third of these were ghost soldiers. John Paul Vann, who was in-charge of pacification, commented that the Saigon Government had, in fact, evolved a system in which no one was permitted to keep his hands clean. For all to be safe, all had to be implicated. Any one who insisted on honesty immediately became an outsider and was demised from office. On top of the echelon, General Thieu and his wife made so much money that they eventually acquired control of a bank of their own to funnel their graft (67). Narcotic business was usually conducted by Chinese distributors, who had to pay any powerful general who could protect them. When Premier, Ky criticised his predecessors for being entrenched in corruption and only interested in amassing money. But Dr Alfred McCoy, who used inside information from the C.I.A disclosed that Ky was deeply involved in the dirty trade long before he became Premier. In 1961 and 1962, as the Chief of First Transport Group, Ky was responsible to fly intelligence missions for the CIA into Laos. Ky and his pilots used these covert flights to smuggle raw opium to Saigon. When Ky was made Premier in 1965, most of the opium found its way to South Vietnam through the Vietnamese Air Force (68)
Being controlled the Air Force, Ky promoted his class mate and right hand man as his power broker, Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan, who commanded the special forces to suppress the Buddhist uprising in Danang and Hue. Loan's responsibility was to supervise all the various forms of corruption at a general administration level and let his trusted cohorts to do the dirty jobs. An American intelligent expert, Charles Sweet, summarised the four major sources of graft in South Vietnam as follows:

- sale of government jobs by generals and their wives
- administrative corruption (Graft, kickbacks, bribes)
- military corruption (thefts of goods and payroll frauds for phantom soldiers)
- the opium traffic.

And out of the four, Sweet concluded that the opium traffic was undeniably the most important source of illicit revenue. (69)

The Americans knew all the generals' activities but chose to turn a blind eye on corruption, partly because of their unqualified support for Thieu-Ky, partly because their illegal activities could be used as a bargaining chip in case any of these 'strong man' went out of the American political trajectory. Even in 1970 a report confirmed that 14 per cent of American troops were on heroin, the Embassy still defended the military strongmen who had the ability to govern with a firm and despotic hand and the heavy-hand government was the only kind compatible with American interests (70)

There was no such thing as ideological affiliation within the military junta. They stampeded to auction their loyalty to those who could promote them to powerful positions where they could siphon off American aid. The Institute leaders felt comfortable with a small number of generals, like General Tran Van Don, who was the mastermind of the coup d'état against President Diem and highly regarded by friends and foes alike. General Ton That Dinh and Nguyen Chanh Thi were also respected and loved by Buddhists, because they were a few generals who dared to admit that they were Buddhist. General Duong Van Minh was ambivalent bout the Buddhists. Although the Institute leaders were grateful for his role in the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem, they were never close to him, probably because he tried to play the
regional card to create a power base among the Southerners. Generals Khanh and Ky were loners and the Buddhist Congregation was never certain about their loyalty. To the Buddhists, the remaining Generals were either too close to Nhu’s Can Lao party which the Buddhists bitterly opposed, or opportunistic and so willing to convert to Catholicism to advance their career. The most notorious was General Dang Van Quang. He served in the French Colonial Army as a non-commissioned officer but became an officer after completing his training at the Hue military academy. He was a class mate of General Thieu. Under President Diem, he quickly converted to Catholicism. Then in 1963, he reluctantly joined the November Revolution, but soon after supported Khanh in the coup against General Duong Van Minh. General Quang was promoted by Khanh as Commander of the Fourth Corps. Realising that the Americans wanted Khanh replaced by the Young Turks, Quang shifted his loyalty to General Ky. When the rivalry between General Ky and Thieu broke out, he joined Thieu’s camp and became Thieu’s power broker until the Saigon regime collapsed. It was reported in the press that Quang escaped South Vietnam by helicopter from the roof of the American Embassy, carrying two suit cases full of gold. (71) In most cases the Generals were able to act with relative impunity. The worst that was likely was a diplomatic job or a comfortable life in exile. Mostly the Generals supported any leaders who could advance their careers, switched allegiance and staged coups d’etat whenever they saw fit. The South Vietnamese military leaders failed to relate to the population as a whole. Neither were they a politically unifying or a modernising force (72)

The Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNA) and its commanders were not well thought of either. After the Pentagon coup, McNamara praised Khanh, as articulate, forceful, mercurial, shrewd and the most able of the South Vietnamese generals (73). Ambassador Lodge was lavish in his praise too. He described Khanh as a very bright, able and broad minded soldier (74) However only a few months later, when the relations between Khanh and the new Ambassador, Maxwell Taylor, turned sour, Khanh was regarded as a leader without popular political appeal (75) Another two generals who emerged as strong leaders after Khanh, Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky fared much worse. Ky was branded as an ‘unguided missile’ and according to McNamara’s assessment, this flamboyant Air Force General drank, gambled and liked woman too much. He dressed ostentatiously, always with a zipped black flying suit,
belted with twin pearl-handled revolvers. He also had a habit of making extreme statements. When asked by a journalist whom he admired most, he replied: ‘I admire Hitler. We need at least three or four Hitler in Vietnam’. Bill Bundy, a National Security adviser, commented that Ky and Thieu as ‘the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel’. (76).

From the time President Diem had been overthrown until Spring 1965, there were six coups which were either encouraged, monitored or engineered by the Administration. Only Tran Van Huong, who the Buddhists loathed, was the exception. This was a far cry from the view of the Naval historian John Prados that the U.S. was being torn between a desire to stay out of Vietnam politics, and the feeling that supporting one faction or another was the best way to halt the political infighting and get on with the war (77). On a trip in to the U.S. in 1966, Nhat Hanh pleaded that: the U.S. should not support one faction over another, but rather let the Vietnamese people decide who should govern for themselves. The American Mission in Saigon and the field military chiefs may not have told the President and the Secretary for Defence the whole story, but thirty years later, after many classified documents had been made public, it is amazing to hear that McNamara still spoke of political events in South Vietnam as if he was a mere bystander: claiming: ‘the situation is serious. We have had three governments in three months’. (78). Maybe the Secretary for Defence tried to paint the gloomiest situation so that he and the Pentagon chiefs could gently coerce the President into a dead end. A CIA assessment in May 1964 concluded: “If the tide of deterioration has not been arrested by the end of the year, the anti-Communist position in South Vietnam is like to become untenable” (79). Also McNamara had a lingering doubt that the Saigon government could continue to defend itself for long. That doubt was expressed many times in his memoirs in these alarming terms: the final imminent collapse of Saigon Government, the symptoms of defeat, and the odds against the emergence of a stable government capable of effectively prosecuting the war. He wondered if it made America’s efforts worthless (80). The Secretary of State was also less than charitable when he commented on ‘the bickering amongst South Vietnamese Generals and candidly asked what could be the purpose of American commitment, given this situation. General Westmoreland was of the same opinion. He was quoted as saying that, “unless there is a reasonable effective government in South Vietnam, no amount of offensive action by the U.S. has any
chance of reversing the deterioration now under way” (81) In 1965 General Khanh, partly under pressure from street demonstrations led by students and Buddhists, partly he sensed that the American Mission in Saigon wanted him removed, so he made an alliance with the Institute leaders and dissolved Tran Van Huong government against the Ambassador’s wish. This infuriated Ambassador Taylor demanded that the South Vietnamese leaders meet with him then ‘chewed them out as a drill instructor might a squad of raw recruits’ snarling: ’Did you understand my French?’ For the first time he thought of disengaging from an unreliable ally’. With a government which lacked of leadership and direction and was on the brink of total collapse, the Ambassador seemed to panic and wondered what the Americans should do (82). Ironically, internal political turmoil and instability became a blessing for Maxwell Taylor and the hawks in the White House. They urged the President to ‘risk a change’ and Johnson’s decision of not going further until there was a ‘stable’ government in South Vietnam, had to change otherwise it would lead to eventual defeat. Johnson could no longer withstand the he ordered air attacks on North Vietnam in retaliation for guerrilla raids. Twenty three days later, the President initiated the first non-retaliatory bombing raids on North Vietnam.

Not only was the U.S. government critical of the leadership but also the performance of the RVNA came under attack too. In a cable to Washington, Ambassador Taylor described the South Vietnamese Army as an army plagued by poor leadership and desertions and racing toward collapse. When the U.S. troops landed, the Vietnamese army declined to go out to fight the Vietcong regarding the war as an American affair. The New York Post reported from Saigon that ‘the South Vietnamese Army’s desertion rate continues to be a scandal- by American standard at least. By 1965 113,000 troops had deserted, while in the first six month of 1966, 67,000 deserted-an increase of almost 20% (83). The U.S. field commander, General Westmoreland alarmed the president with his assessment of the situation:

So far the Vietcong have not employed their full capabilities in this campaign. The Republic of Vietnam forces on the other hand are already experiencing difficulty in coping with the increased communist capability. Desertions are inordinately high. Battle losses have been higher than expected...As a result R V N A troops are
beginning to show signs of reluctance to assume the offensive and in some cases their steadfastness under fire is coming into doubt (84).

After a trip to Saigon in 1965, McNamara reported to the President that ‘without further outside help, the Vietnamese Army is faced with losses of key communications and population centres. The Secretary of Defence concluded his report in no uncertain terms: ‘The South Vietnam Army is on the run and near collapse’ (85). Indeed by May 1965, the government side lost almost the whole town of Quang Ngai and in June 1965, the Saigon government considered evacuating all five northern provinces along the Central Coast. The generals in Saigon also developed a secret plan to move the Joint General Staff to the Cap St Jacques Peninsular which was considered easy to defend (86). One wondered why all the senior advisers tried to defend a government which was unable to defend itself?

President Johnson was well aware of the unacceptable performance of the Saigon government and expressed his frustration and disgust at its inability to put its house in order. There was a time that Johnson even thought of finding a way to withdraw with honour confiding to an aide that ‘if you make a commitment to jump off a building, and you find out how high it is, you may withdraw that commitment’ (87). So frustrated was that once he exploded to a staff members when he heard that the Generals in Saigon were staging another coup: ‘I don’t want to hear any more of this coup shit’ (88).

In 1982 the CBS Network accused General Westmoreland of having lied to the President by ordering his intelligence officers to understate the enemy strength in order to bolster his claims of military progress. Could this be another deception from the American Mission in Saigon who also lied to the President about the political turmoil in South Vietnam during the period in which the senior advisers busily lobbied the President for the Americanisation of the War? As we shall see later part, the political turmoil in South Vietnam in these years was closely monitored, manipulated and orchestrated by Ambassador Taylor and his men in Saigon. The ‘coup shit’ was actually the result of the mission’s efforts to suppress any one or any organisation that threatened to hinder the process of the Americanisation of the war.

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**International Peace Movements**

The UBC leaders and their followers were grateful for American support, particularly by the new Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, in the 11 November 1963 coup. They knew that without this vital support, the Generals would not have dared to topple President Ngo Dinh Diem. However they were no under illusions that the street demonstrations or even the monks' self immolations actually triggered the collapse of the regime. One of the main reasons why the Americans abandoned the regime was Ngo Dinh Nhu's secret contact with the Front to explore a political solution. At that time Nhu appeared quite receptive to De Gaulle’s proposal to neutralise and unify the divided country and make it independent of external influences. The New York Times reported that as soon as President de Gaulle’s proposed to establish a neutral Indochina, there had been a neutralist sentiments in Vietnam. Therefore when President Diem was ousted, the possibility of South Vietnam voluntarily accepting neutralism appeared to have been eliminated (89). Only three months after Diem’s collapse, General Duong Van Minh Government met the same fate when they flirted with the NLF. During the next three years we shall see how sensitive the U.S. Government was to neutralist sentiments.

In 1966 a group of concerned citizens in St Louis, consisting largely of professors at Washington University, collaborated with some members of Faculty Peace Committee at Berkeley and published a White Paper for discussion at sit-in sessions on American university campuses. After many laborious attempts to study the timing of the U.S. military escalation, the Saint Louis group discovered that:

> *in the juxtaposition of events on the peace front and on the military front, time and time again just as there appeared some possibility of movement toward a negotiated reduction of the conflict, military escalation has been tightened another notch* (90).
In early 1964, deeply concerned about anti-war and neutralist attitudes in South Vietnam, President Johnson instructed Ambassador Lodge ‘to knock down the idea of neutralisation wherever it rears its ugly head’ ...and ‘to stop neutralist talk wherever we can by whatever means we can’ (91). Thus, whenever a movement toward a political settlement gained momentum, it was retarded by renewed military action. That was how the American Administration responded to peace movements initiated whether by international groups or by internal political events, such as the waves of Buddhist activities against the military dictatorship in South Vietnam.

The two figures who persisted in initiating a peaceful solution for Vietnam War were President De Gaulle of France and the Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant. During the Buddhist crisis in 1963, President de Gaulle suddenly stirred up the situation by publicly advocating a united and neutral Indochina of which Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia was the most vocal proponent. Realising that his brother had lost the American support, in desperation, Ngo Dinh Nhu opened contacts with the NLF to see whether they could accommodate each other. Nhu may have just bluffed the Administration and used these contacts as a bargaining chip. However it only exacerbated the American hostility toward the regime. Washington quickly approved the overthrow and sent unambiguous signals of American support to the coup leaders. The regime was promptly ousted.

On January 27, President de Gaulle announced France’s recognition of the Chinese People’s Republic and renewed his appeal for a neutral Indochina. He said that one of the reasons that he had established diplomatic relations with China was to enhance his efforts to achieve a neutralist Indochina. President Johnson immediately rebuffed this attempt by De Gaulle by sending General Duong Van Minh a New Year message with a clear warning: ‘neutralisation of South Vietnam would only be another name for a Communist take-over’. (92)

After Diem’s regime collapsed the Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant suggested to the United States that it should promote a coalition government in Saigon, including some non Communist exiles in France, who long since shared President De Gaulle’s belief that South Vietnam should be neutralised. (93). Had U Thant known the real catalyst for Diem’s overthrow, the UN Secretary General would
not have suggested a neutral government be installed in Saigon!. Only three months later the fate of the Minh government was also sealed simply because General Minh did exactly what Ngo Dinh Nhu had done namely look for a negotiated settlement with the NLF.

Within hours after being sworn in, it was believed that President Johnson uttered his first words on the war: ”I am not going to lose Vietnam’ He and his advisers were determined to win the war with military might. A reporter in the New York Time commented that ‘a change in leadership in Washington was followed by a change in policy, and a change in policy was followed by a change in the Saigon Government’ (94). Whether Johnson set the agenda for war or his senior advisers coaxed him along the path to warfare is not really significant. In early 1964 onwards was the plan for escalating the war was in place and the Johnson Administration would not tolerate any hindrance in its goal of a military victory. Nobody in the White House at this time seemed to ever remember the late president Kennedy’s policy of withdrawing some troops in Vietnam at the end of 1965. Ironically the person who proposed that withdrawal was none other but the architect of the war. His name is Robert McNamara.

Shortly before the Tonkin Gulf incident, President De Gaulle and the Secretary General of the UN U Thant, again called for a peaceful solution. On July 23 the French government renewed its initiatives for a negotiated settlement of the Vietnam conflict. A few days before U Thant had made a similar appeal for re-convening the Geneva Accord. In addition to that, on July 25, the Soviet Government communicated with the fourteen nations that had participated in the Geneva Conference in 1954, asking them to support a proposal to reconvene the conference in the near future. Surprisingly, Hanoi and the NLF, departing from their usual propaganda, quickly endorsed ‘the appeal of reconvening the conference as soon as possible to preserve the peace of Indochina and Southeast Asia’.(95) Even the most militant member in the Communist bloc, China, also quickly agreed.

The Administration’s response was prompt. One day after President De Gaulle announced his peace plan, President Johnson told reporters in Washington that ‘we do not believe in conferences called to ratify terror, so our policy is unchanged’. The
Saigon government, obviously under American pressure, denounced both De Gaulle and U Thant publicly: ‘The Republic of Vietnam categorically rejects the proposition directly toward the reconvening of a new Geneva Conference and is strongly resolved to pursue its struggle against the invaders, in spite of colonial and communist manoeuvres’. (96) The Citizens’ White Paper suggested that there was a correlation between peace pressures and American military escalation. The White House was going to raise the tempo of war up another notch. On July 25, five thousand troops were sent to Vietnam. And on August 2, the Maddox incident happened. The Administration found the excuse they wanted.

The escalation deeply worried the Secretary General, U Thant, who secretly persuaded Hanoi to send an emissary to Rangoon for an informal talk with an American counter-part. Hanoi agreed. When U Thant informed the U.S. Ambassador at the UN, Adlai Stevenson replied that he was told to wait until the election was over. After President Johnson was soundly re-elected, U Thant persistently pursued the matter with the Administration only to be told that the Defence Secretary flatly refused that negotiation attempt. Understandably U Thant was furious over the failure of his patient efforts, but refrained from saying anything publicly at the time. (97).

The political turmoil in South Vietnam (which will be described in the later part of this chapter) worried American politicians. This time the peace pressure came from Capitol Hill. Senator Morse who was an opponent of the Congress resolution, and also Senator Mansfield, jointly expressed serious doubts about the wisdom of the military escalation. The fact that Senator Mansfield changed his outlook and became an opponent of military escalation, was significant and indicative that public opinion had begun to change. Those who had held a hawkish view before were not yet doves, but neither were they hawks, according to reporter Neil Sheehan in his articles written in 1966.

Now the Russian government joined the peace club. It was observed that every time Hanoi wanted to show their willingness to accept a negotiated settlement, they took sides with the Russians. When they were cornered by American intensified bombings, they leaned toward the Chinese. French journalist Jean Lacouture reported in Le Monde in early 1965 the continuing prevalence of pro-Soviet attitudes among the
highest echelons of North Vietnamese leadership (98). In early February 1965 Premier Kosygin announced his visit to Hanoi. It was a clear sign that both Hanoi and NLF were anxious to reach a peaceful settlement, because Hanoi was deeply fearful that if the United States bombed and moved the war to the North, then Chinese foot soldiers would be in there too, on the pretext of helping their comrades to defeat the Americans. The prospect of Chinese soldiers in the North, as had been the case in Korea, was more fearful than anything else and it was the last thing the North Vietnam leaders wanted. The Russians were urged to be more active than ever to secure a negotiated solution. The newspaper Izvestia proposed a meeting between Johnson and Kosygin in Moscow. Apparently Johnson responded positively that he would like to visit the USSR. However when Kosygin arrived in Hanoi on February 6, U.S. planes were all over the North Vietnam sky to retaliate for a minor attack at Pleiku airport. As a result the peace broker was halted, temporarily at least. Considering the time of the bombings, the Citizens’ White Paper concluded this attack had been planned in advance. (99)

Amazingly the Russians did not give up. After issuing a few stern warnings, Kosygin resumed his efforts to promote an international conference on Indo-China. This time he approached President De Gaulle for assistance. De Gaulle called for a reconvening of the Geneva Conference. More importantly this time the French President revealed publicly that North Vietnam had urged France to intensify its efforts for a settlement. De Gaulle also hinted that the Chinese would attend the conference. As was any other responses by the U.S. during this period, it was short and sharp. The Administration said that France had not been given any mandate to seek negotiation on behalf of the American government and the U.S. was not interested in any conference at this time. At this response the UN Secretary General could no longer refrain from bitterly criticising the U.S. In an extraordinary press conference, U Thant revealed that he had pursued a peace settlement for a long time and he could recommend a workable model. Immediately France, the Soviet Union and North Vietnam all voiced their support for U Thant’s recommendations. Meanwhile the UN Secretary General publicly reproached Washington:

*I am sure that the great American people, if only they know the true facts and the background to the developments in South Vietnam, will agree with me that further*
bloodshed is unnecessary. In time of war and of hostilities, the first casualty is truth. (100)

Responding to U Thant’s report, the Administration was not so diplomatic claiming that there are no authorised negotiations under way with Mr Thant. At the same time the U.S. planes were busily bombing new targets in the North and for the first time, the U.S. admitted that American planes had attacked the Vietcong in the South. This was the first public admission by the Americans that they had adopted a combat role.

Humiliated by the intensified bombings and in order to save face, Hanoi and the Front had to be seen to publicly show their hardened stance while behind the scenes, the Eastern bloc leaders kept up their peace efforts. On March 2, President Tito of Yugoslavia wrote to President Johnson urging him to hold negotiations without preconditions from either side. The President of Algeria, Mr Ben Bella, also called a conference of 17 non-aligned countries in Belgrade from in March 1965. The Conference circulated an appeal to all parties concerned to start negotiations as soon as possible. (101)

Finally the religious leaders joined in the peace efforts as Pope Paul VI urged everyone concerned to bring the conflict to the negotiating table:

We have undertaken to approach, or to have approached, in a confidential manner, representative personalities of various governments to ask them with insistence to contribute to an honourable and peaceful solution to various international difficulties that cannot but be gravely worriesome. (102)

On another occasion in October 1965, the Pope addressed the UN General Assembly and reminded the audience of Kennedy’s words: ‘Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind’. (103) Although Pope Paul VI tried to reassure the conservative members of the Vietnamese Catholic Church by saying that his appeal was not intended to see the negative consequences that is unjust and unfair solution, Opus institiiae pax, on January 29, 1966 when the Buddhist uprising was about to explode, His Holiness again spoke out in no uncertain terms:
...We must again wish and hope that the invitations to a negotiated peace will not be refused, and that the solution to the quarrel will not be sought by means of force and destruction, whose consequences are always unforeseeable. (104)

His Holiness' appeal was almost identical with that Nhat Hanh tried to get persuade the war makers in the White House.

Meanwhile Hanoi and the Front attitude toward a negotiated solution fluctuated, depending on circumstances. When the Front was established in 1960, in its ten-point program, it called for a gradual reunification with the North and the establishment of a democratically elected government in the South. The Front held its first Congress from February 6 to March 20, 1962 and its leaders were mostly Southern dissidents. It also underscored a neutralist foreign policy by establishing diplomatic relations with all countries, in accordance with the principles of peaceful coexistence, as put forward at the Bandung Conference (105).

After President Ngo Dinh Diem's fall, the Communists hinted that they would agree to a negotiated settlement with the new government. A week after the 1 November coup, the Front appealed in their clandestine radio for a negotiation between various groups in South Vietnam in order to arrive at a cease fire and a solution to the great problems of the country. Hanoi also departed from their usual hard line and appealed to all forces ...regardless of political view, religion, or race, regardless of their past, their present political and social position to mobilise every capacity to advance toward united actions and seek the best solution of the situation in South Vietnam for the benefit of all Vietnamese people. (106).

With the Tonkin Gulf incident and when De Gaulle and U Thant called for Geneva Conference be reconvened, Nguyen Huu Tho, the leader of the NLF then, promptly endorsed the negotiation plans. He carefully avoided mentioning preconditions and stated the Front was prepared "to enter into negotiations with all parties, groups, sects and patriotic individuals, without regard to differences of the political view or past actions". North Vietnam seemed more enthusiastic in urging the reconvening of the Geneva as soon as possible to preserve the peace of Indochina and Southeast Asian. (107).
In early 1975 when the U.S. Air Forces intensified bombings in Hanoi when Premier Kosygin was visiting the North, it was believed that most North Vietnamese leaders belonged to pro-Soviet factions and so for the first time the Front set up a permanent delegation in Moscow. The Communist side was extremely anxious to have an international conference because they feared a continuation of the war in the South could lead to an escalation of bombings in the North. Also Hanoi leaders nurtured a deep fear that, if the U.S. began a war to the North, Russian and Chinese soldiers might set foot in North Vietnam to 'protect' them in the name of international socialists.

On March 22, 1965, the Front broadcast a five point program which reflected their hardened attitude. But when this program was issued officially in Hanoi, interestingly, it was significantly toned down. While the NLF insisted that the U.S. troops withdraw before any negotiation could begin, Hanoi only requested the U.S. to agree to withdraw. This subtle semantic difference should have been picked up by political analysts at the Pentagon. On April 8 1965, Hanoi also released their own five point program which was much more moderate and reconcilable. It only asked the U.S. to respect and implement to the letter the 1954 Geneva Convention, to cease all hostilities and to establish a government made up of representatives of 'parties, sects and groups belonging to all political tendencies, social strata and classes, religions and nationalities existing in South Vietnam' (108) The South Vietnam government and American Administration dismissed these appeals as mere propaganda and continued to view the Front was a creation of Hanoi which was neither independent, nor southern. The root cause of the war, according to the South Vietnam and the U.S. governments, was Hanoi's aggression against an independent neighbouring country. Therefore Hanoi must withdraw its support of insurgency in the South. Thus for a long time the U.S. refused to recognise the Front as a political entity, and did not want to include the Front in any future negotiations.

After his landslide victory in the U.S. elections, President Johnson was happy to emerge from Kennedy's shadow believing that now he had a new mandate. He was not a moderate and responsible President as projected during the election but he had
decided that he was not going to lose Vietnam and he would not become the first President to see Southeast Asia go the way of the Chinese. (109) Suddenly the dove became a hawk.

The Administration defined the U.S. objectives as to defend a separate and independent South Vietnam and its freedom from attack and allow the people of South Vietnam to guide their own country in their own way. Meanwhile the U.S. government was prepared to go at any length to ensure this. (110) Within three weeks after his inauguration, President Johnson ordered air attacks on North Vietnam in retaliation for guerrilla raids in the South and only twenty days later, he initiated sustained bombings. Shortly after, U.S. planes attacked the Vietcong in the South. In March 1965 two battalions of Marines landed on Chu Lai beach, and their role was to defend the American bases. In April 1965 President Johnson launched a peace offensive and promised that he would not seek a wider war and that he remained ready for 'unconditional' discussions. The day after this speech, Johnson met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff and again emphasized the need to kill more Vietcong. (111). In June 1966, the bombing targets were no longer limited and Hai Phong and Hanoi oil depots were destroyed. American soldiers no longer pretended to be advisers but combatants. By mid-1966 the U.S. units suffered higher weekly casualty rates than their South Vietnamese allies. In early 1965 there were only 23,000 troops. By mid 1966 this number had multiplied eleven times over. If 614,000 regular army men and paramilitary forces the Vietnamese Armed Forces are included, the total allied strength reached 910,000 men, according to official statistics. (112) It was then the Unified Buddhist Congregation decided to launch their all out peace movement.

**Buddhist Leaders**

By early 1965 it seemed that all international peace efforts were being ignored by Washington and the last chance to prevent a full scale war in Vietnam had evaporated. Understandably, the attitudes of Hanoi and the National Liberation Front (The Vietcong) were more intransigent. That was when Thich Tri Quang saw the dilemma of the Unified Buddhist Congregation. The Congregation leaders wanted to keep a low profile so as to unify its organisations, but instead they were being sucked in the political whirlwind. Thich Tri Quang also realised that the task of stopping the war, at the time the United States was determined to seek a military victory, was impossible,
figuratively, wading a horse through deep water or climbing up to the summit of a mountain in a gale.

The Congregation tried to unite all the sects and regional organisations and was supposedly run by a collective leadership. However the power-sharing formula did not satisfy everyone. Thich Tam Chau was elected as The Chairman of the Institute of the Propagation of the Faith, which is called by the Americans as the Institute for short He was the spiritual leader of Northern monks and their faithful followers, who moved to South Vietnam in 1954. His deputies were Thich Tam Giac and Thich Quang Do, who was the spokesperson for the Congregation during the struggle against President Diem. Politically they were more anti-Communist than their counterparts in the Central and the South. This group once was a close ally of a Catholic group which was armed and funded by the French in a so-called Phat Diem autonomous zone. He declared that he was engaged in an anti-Communist activities since 1946 (113). Even though he was the Chairman of the Institute, he claimed that the monks from the Central area i.e. the Tri Quang group, manipulated the decision-making mechanism within the Institute and he became isolated and powerless like ‘a frog in a bag full of crabs’. Nevertheless he worked side by side with other Congregation leaders at least until May 1966 when the Buddhists launched an all-out efforts to have a popularly elected government.

The composition of the Southern group of monks was more complex. Most of the monks were trained in the orthodox Zen sect at Luong Xuyen Buddhist Institute in the Mekong Delta. Some of them even went to An Nam Buddhist Institute in Hue to study. Their solidarity with the group of monks from the Central district overrode their regional differences. There two groups were the backbone of the Buddhist Peace Movement. But, in the South there was another group of laity who founded the Southern Buddhist Studies Association, which was sponsored by successive pro-French governments. It was founded in 1950 and dominated by a group of middle-ranking collaborators in the French Colonial government. It was controlled by an administrator, Mai Tho Truyen, from 1950 until the Buddhist struggle broke out in 1963. He and his followers, as any other French bureaucrats, had been wary of being involved in politics, but somehow, in 1963, Mai Tho Truyen agreed to let the monks to use Xa Loi Pagoda as the headquarters of the Inter-Sect Committee. When the
Unified Buddhist Congregation was founded, Mai Tho Truyen was offered a highest position for a lay person in the Congregation namely deputy Chairman of the Executive Institute, but unexpectedly he withdrew his association with the Congregation, citing fundamental differences with other Congregation leaders as his reason.

However, regional differences do not always reflect in their political leanings. While Mai Tho Truyen and members of the Southern Buddhist Studies Association, true to their colour of a colonial bureaucrat group, quickly accommodated to a foreign power, this time the American one. After breaking up with the Congregation, most of members of this group supported and joined the governments that the Buddhist Institute fiercely opposed. On the contrary, the Southern monks went along with the Central group of monks all the way until 1975. Don Luce, an American peace activist, classified the Institute leaders according to their political affiliation. The first group and the most politically active group was led by three monks, Thich Tri Quang, Thich Thien Minh and Thich Tam Chau. Luce described the group as follows:

*This group was aligned neither with Saigon nor the Vietcong. And this was the group that was able to stage massive street demonstrations at will, shoring up and bringing down governments The headlines were theirs. As the war went on, they became progressively angrier and more anti-Saigon government and anti-United States, though certainly not pro-communist.* (114)

After 1963 Thich Tri Quang and Thich Tam Chau were generally as the influential leaders of the Buddhist movement, particularly Tri Quang who became a legendary figure and much admired. Unknown to many outsiders, Tri Quang was losing his grip in the Congregation hierarchy and so assigned to an obscure position as Principal Secretary of the Office of the Elders, away from the decision making centre which shaped policies and directions. This, even though his influence seemed paramount in the eyes of the ordinary faithful. In 1967 the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, a propaganda arm of the CIA, which secretly conducted a survey among the Vietnamese peasants, found that the peasants supported neither side in the conflict and only wished the war to be stopped. Two men to mind in regard to this wish. They were Ho Chi Minh and Thich Tri Quang. The Communists' assessment of Tri Quang
was somewhat ambivalent. Some high ranking in the Vietcong considered him as a CIA strategist agent, while others saw him as the most influential figure in the Buddhist Institute. They called him the ‘Tiger’ (115). However the two main players behind the scene at the Institute were Thich Thien Minh who was in charge of Buddhist Youth Affairs, and Thich Tam Chau, who commanded loyalty of the Northern Buddhists. Thich Tri Quang with his charisma and legendary image, was to be the most effective person to appeal and mobilise the masses if needed.

The second influential outlook to the first group, but less angry and more thorough-going in their pacifism. Luce also commented that Nhat Hanh did not want to have anything to do with political machinations and was much more interested in pure, spiritually based pacifism, motivated by love and compassion. In the next Chapter Nhat Hanh ‘s peace activities made him the most effective political monk among the Buddhist leaders and the demarcation between pure spiritual and political acts was elusive than ever.
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Chapter Eight

Nhat Hanh’s Peace Activities

Nhat Hanh was a graduate of Bao Quoc Buddhist Academy in Central Vietnam where Thich Tri Quang and Thich Thien Minh served as staff. With his immense intellectual and creative abilities and being younger, he found himself clashing with the older monks whom he labelled as the conservative elements of the Church. So unhappy was he with the Buddhist hierarchy that he and some of his close associates founded Phuong Boi meditation place in the highlands. Phuong Boi means fragrant palm leaves on which the teaching of the Buddha were written down in ancient times. This name expressed Nhat Hanh ideal to strengthen the roots of Buddhist culture (1). What exactly was the nature of the differences with the Buddhist Elders was not clearly spelt out, but Nhat Hanh was bitter toward them. He said that the Church hierarchy had not accepted his group because it decided to speak the truth. He commented:

Buddhism has much to contribute (to bring about social changes) but we cannot wait for the religious hierarchy to act. They are reluctant to bring about change and they have repeatedly neglected our efforts to create an Engaged Buddhism. Our proposals lie in unopened folders on their desks, gathering dust (2)

Nhat Hanh was outside the country on both occasions, when the Church confronted Diem and the U.S. However he contributed a great deal because he was the most successful monk in making the West understand the motives and actions of the Institute and the plights of the Vietnamese peasants. Since he was ten thousand miles away from the decision making of the Buddhist hierarchy, he could not be party to the inner thoughts of the Church leaders.

In 1963 Nhat Hanh was in New York working in the Post-Graduate School at Columbia University. When Ngo Dinh Nhu directed his special force to arrest all the activist monks, Nhat Hanh was busy translating documents on violations of human
rights secretly smuggled out by none other else than the Vietnamese Ambassador to the UN. On October 8 1963, Nhat Hanh presented them to the U. N. General Assembly during the debate on President Ngo Dinh Diem’s suppression of the Buddhists. As a result the UN agreed to send a fact-finding delegation to Vietnam. No one doubted that Nhat Hanh was the best person representing the Buddhist Institute outside Vietnam to raise awareness in and support of, the West.

After Ngo Dinh Diem’s fall, Thich Tri Quang himself sent Nhat Hanh a telegram and a letter asking him to come back home to help the Elders to rebuild the Church. Nhat Hanh hesitated. Columbia University then invited him to stay and establish the Department of Vietnamese Studies. His close confidant, Sister Chan Khong, revealed that in the past Nhat Hanh had received no support whatsoever from the UBC leaders. If he stayed in New York, he would not have to struggle with those conservative monks who had given him so much trouble in his efforts to renew Buddhism. (3) It was a difficult choice for Nhat Hanh.

Tri Quang’s request was short, humble and straight to the point: “I am too old and too old-fashioned to take care of this big responsibility. Please come back and help”. Any one who knew Thich Tri Quang well would have realised this was an extremely rare action by this eccentric monk, but Thich Tri Quang, and along with other Elders obviously recognised Nhat Hanh’s enormous talent. Tri Quang was then only forty, and only three years older than Nhat Hanh, but a great deal more conservative in attitude. His cable moved Nhat Hanh and although in the past Tri Quang was one of the pillars of the conservatism he had struggled against. There was another hidden reason that made Nhat Hanh pack up and go home. In his thinking, whether he liked organised religious institution or not, as he saw it, the UBC could be a very effective means in the efforts to seek peace (4)

Nhat Hanh flew home on December 16, 1963 and wasted no time in placing his ideas before his fellow monks. In January 1964 he submitted a Three Point Proposal to the Executive Council of the UBC. This could have been one of the first items on the agenda which were discussed by the Executive Council because the Unified Buddhist Church was only officially formed on 13 January. Firstly, Nhat Hanh requested that the UBC should publicly call for cessation of hostilities in Vietnam. Secondly the
UBC should help to build an institute for the study and practice of Buddhism to train future leaders and thirdly, a centre for training Buddhist social workers should be set up. Sister Chan Khong reported that in response the Church Elders offered support only for the Buddhist Institute and rejected his proposals for social change. (5)'

However, a little later on, the Executive Council set up the Institute of Higher Buddhist Studies and a School of Youth for Social Service on the 13 March 1964, and the first class started on 17 March 1993. The only proposal that the Church conclusively rejected was the setting up of the Tiep Hien (Inter-Being Order) in which laity could be ordained as monks. The image of an ordained monk who was also a married man or woman was just too much to contemplate for the conservative Sangha at that time.

The Buddhist Institute did not openly appeal to the two sides to cease hostilities in early 1964 as Nhat Hanh proposed. But in the preamble to the Church Constitution it spelt out its long term objective: ‘in line with the ideal of World peace in the Buddha’s teachings, the UBC tried to actualise the people’s aspirations by bringing peace to every one, particularly to our people’. (6) It was an unambiguous message proclaimed by the Church leaders about the new direction and actions in the days ahead. As Thich Tri Quang admitted, after Diem’s regime collapsed the Church faced more problems than it had encountered before; and when the tempo of the war heated up, the Church had no choice but to do all it could to stop the war. (7) The Church’s tactics and approaches have been different from those of Nhat Hanh, but its main objective in the next few years was absolutely clear: to end the war. Sister Chan Khong commented that the Buddhist Church Elders could imagine no way that worked for peace nor could social change succeed. But this may have been too harsh and an unjustified criticism. Sister Chan Khong believed that, if Nhat Hanh’s peace proposal had received the Buddhist Church’s support at that time, ‘we, Vietnamese, might have been able to solve many of our problems without such an escalation of the war and our country would have suffered much less’. (8) If Sister Chan Khong knew the real reasons behind Pentagon’s decision to remove the Minh’s government, she would not have been that optimistic! The peace movement, whether inside or outside of Vietnam, was denounced quickly or suppressed brutally, because Johnson Government was fixated on a military victory and would not tolerate any other
solution.

Apart from Nhat Hanh, a few monks who had studied in India and Japan also returned home and one of them, Thich Minh Chau, was to become Nhat Hanh’s adversary in running the Buddhist Institute. Nhat Hanh’s charisma appealed to a large number of students who volunteered to help him to run the Higher Buddhist Studies Institute. On waiting for the Institute Campus to be built in a nearby suburb, a small temple was used as classrooms and office. Nhat Hanh proudly described his first achievement, the Van Hanh University, saying:

*Van Hanh is an unusual university. It bears none of the distinguished marks normally associated with institutions of higher learning. When its rains, students have to wade through puddles to get to class, wending their way through the crowded market stalls.*

(9)

Nhat Hanh almost single-handedly set up the University, raising money from a network of friends and acquaintances. The administration was staffed with volunteers and the teaching staff in the first instance, was mostly monks who provided their service voluntarily. Nhat Hanh assigned himself a humble position in the publication section which was most suitable for such a creative and thoughtful person.

The syllabus focused on Buddhist studies, Vietnamese culture and languages. Nhat Hanh taught Buddhist psychology (*Yogacarins*) and *Prajnaparamita* literature, a principal trend in the Mahayana. The Chancellor was a senior monk, Thich Tri Thu whose position was purely ceremonial. The Vice Chancellor was Thich Minh Chau who had received a Ph.D. at Nalanda University in India. Thich Minh Chau had been married before he was ordained and after spending a long time in India, he wore Theravada robes and was fluent in Pali and Sanskrit. His ability to study sutras written in Pali made him an intellectual gem in the UBC. Van Hanh Buddhist University grew quickly and became the most prestigious private University—actually it was the first of its kind—in Vietnam. When it was moved to a new campus, Thich Minh Chau invited a former director of the Vietnam Press, Ton That Thien, to set up the Faculty of Social Sciences with a syllabus similar to that of an American University. While Minh Chau’s efforts to transform the Van Hanh University into a modernised institution of higher education were warmly welcomed by students as well as by
educators, his closeness to a former Diem protégé alarmed the Church leaders. Minh Chau was appointed Chancellor whose duties were equivalent to those of a vice chancellor in a Western University. Minh Chau developed a close relationship with the Asia Foundation, a cultural arm of the CIA, which provided most of the operating fund for Van Hanh University. Although the Church leaders were wary of this dubious action, by then Minh Chau had become a highly respected figure in academic circles, so the Executive Council of the UBC could do nothing. However they insisted in appointing academic staff loyal to the Church. Researchers in the West often give credit for the Van Hanh University to Nhat Hanh, but most are unaware of the rivalry for control of the University between the UBC and a pro-American group of academicians tacitly supported by Minh Chau’s faction.

It is believed that Minh Chau’s father, a provincial chief, was murdered by the communists during the Indochina war, so it was understandable that he was strongly anti-communist. Both Minh Chau and Nhat Hanh were gentle and charmed. Nhat Hanh was more charismatic and had an army of followers amongst young people and artists, while Minh Chau was a profound Buddhist scholar. Nhat Hanh was the founder of the Van Hanh University and Minh Chau was its Chancellor who was skillful in dealing with a hostile government and most importantly, he could muster the support from the American Mission in Saigon. Even so, there was a certain level of animosity between these two leaders, which grew. The rivalry was quite intense and when Nhat Hanh went on a peace tour, their relationship collapsed.

Apart from Van Hanh University, another institution that Nhat Hanh and his group were deeply involved in was the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS). Although the UBC agreed in principle to set it up, it was not until September 1965 that it was inaugurated. Nhat Hanh and his associates were given a free reign to run this School which was legally a part of the Van Hanh University. Like any other novel projects of his, it was staffed by a dozen of volunteers and headed by a gentle, 24 year-old monk, who had entered the monastic life at the age of seven. He was Thich Thanh Van. Nevertheless Sister Chan Khong took responsibility in almost every area of the school and became sort of commander in-chief (10). What worried Minh Chau was that the peace activists at Van Hanh Students Union, of which Sister Chan Khong
was President might jeopardise his relationship with Asia Foundation, the main funding agency for Van Hanh University. At a meeting in April 1965, Van Hanh Union students issued a ‘Call for Peace’ statement. Its main call was: ‘It is time for North and South Vietnam to find a way to stop the war and help all Vietnamese people live peacefully and with mutual respect’. (11) Nhat Hanh took this statement with him to Cornell University. That was the opportunity Minh Chau had waited for. Only one week after Nhat Hanh left, Minh Chau, without the approval of the UBC, issued an order dissolving the Student Union and severing the link with the SYSS. Minh Chau also sent a copy to the National Police denouncing Sister Chan Khong as a communist. As Sister Chan Khong bitterly attested ‘calling some one a communist is akin to giving him or her a death sentence’. (12)

This was the time when Field Marshall Ky was about to send in the Marines to suppress the Buddhist Struggle Movement in Danang and Hue. In the eyes of many Buddhists, Minh Chau’s actions were nothing short of a betrayal act to the UBC. From then on Minh Chau changed the direction of the Van Hanh University transformed it into a learning institution with the logo ‘We can only understand our karma with wisdom’. He would not allow any political activities to be held on campus, and he expressly forbade students to bring politics into the learning centre. Ironically, this policy was adopted by Premier Tran Van Huong when confronting the Buddhists in early 1965 and only three years after the Buddhists had engaged in a political campaign to topple President Ngo Dinh Diem.

After the Struggle Movement collapsed, the Americans hatched another scheme to break up the UBC a year later. The UBC was substantially weakened and Minh Chau tested the idea of an autonomous Van Hanh University, taking control away from the UBC. Thich Thien Minh, just recovered from an assassination attempt by Premier Ky’s associates, was furious. An insider of the UBC recounted that, it was the first time Thien Minh had been so upset that he wanted to use his walking stick to rap Minh Chau’s knuckles, a symbolic act of Lin Chi Zen masters to wake up their disciples. Somehow Minh Chau backed off and agreed let the UBC appoint some academic monks to a number of important positions, on provision that they promised not to incite street demonstrations on the campus, and so threaten his pro-American stance. Sister Chan Khong retold an incident which may have explained why Thich
Minh Chau wanted to distance himself from Nhat Hanh’s activities. In June 1966 after Nhat Hanh made a peace appeal in America and Europe, a U.S. private organisation approached the Director of the SYSS, Thich Thanh Van, offering the school a grant of 100,000 US dollars to build a dormitory for students if he denounced Nhat Hanh’s peace activities overseas and severed any links with him. Being one of Nhat Hanh’s closest confidants, Thich Thanh Van refused. But conversely, Minh Chau accepted this offer and agreed to issue a press release, saying ‘the Rector of Van Hanh University declares that Thich Nhat Hanh has no responsibilities whatsoever in connection with this university”. In the same newsletter, Thich Minh Chau offered thanks to the same US private organisation that had approached Thanh Van before, for their generous donation of $100,000 to build a library at Van Hanh University. (13). The Administration used every means possible to undermine Nhat Hanh’s call for peace and to discredit him personally. It is not unreasonable to presume that those members of the ‘private’ organisations shadowed him during his peace talks and challenged Nhat Hanh’s connection with Van Hanh University and SYSS, as a part of the attempt to discredit him. (14) Minh Chau had already denied the legal status that caused numerous problems for Nhat Hanh’s group.

Nhat Hanh often blamed the Church Elders for their conservatism, but this time his adversary, Minh Chau, was his contemporary. Minh Chau was not in any way a villain, but students did not give him the same affection as they did to Nhat Hanh. He was respected as a profound Buddhist scholar. After the Struggle Movement was broken up, Minh Chau secretly harbored many Buddhist cadres hunted down by the police. He gathered many talented scholars under his wing and he used his good relationship with the American Mission to seek funding to expand Van Hanh University and to support a program to send students to the best universities in America. Credit should be given to him for his efforts to transform Van Hanh University into a modern higher learning institution which could be the envy of many public Universities. Minh Chau has never written anything related to the time he was the Chancellor and there is no way to know exactly what was the deal he had made with Asia Foundation, the Van Hanh University main funding body, in return for the act of denouncing Nhat Hanh and other peace activists. As Sister Chan Khong speculated, he may have feared losing the University and his position as a Chancellor if he supported the Unified Buddhist Church’s determination to end the War.
monk with a gentle smile similar to that of the future Buddha, Meitreya, as he was called by students at that time, caused more controversy after the communists victoriously marched into the Independence Palace in April 1975. Minh Chau agreed to cooperate with the new regime and was one of the go-betweens monks that the new regime needed, to rally the former leaders of the UBC to form a new, pro-government Buddhist Church. (15)

The American Embassy in Saigon skillfully applied their policy of divide and rule and eventually penetrated almost every politically active group. The Unified Buddhist Church was no longer unified. The Northern Group led by Tam Chau seceded and formed a rival Church. Student activists who staged anti-American street demonstrations side by side with the Buddhists were also deeply divided. The Embassy spared no efforts and resources to form a pro-American youth group called the Summer Program (Acronym in Vietnamese is CPS). Perhaps Minh Chau and his pro-American faction at Van Hanh University unwittingly served to neutralise or silence peace activists, including the Institute leaders, who trained, ordained and sent him to Nalanda University. We will never fully learn of his motives unless he decides to reveal them. However his decision to revoke the legal status of the SYSS caused enormous damage to Nhat Hanh’s group. The fact that the SYSS was in limbo, no doubt, helped incite violent attacks and murders of young and innocent social workers. Sister Chan Khong always tried hard to subdue her hatred, even of the murderers of her staff, but she openly showed her contempt of Minh Chau: ‘Thay Minh Chau’s hostile act toward us proves his moral values are not worthy of our association with him. (16)

When Nhat Hanh was on peace tour, he was introduced to audiences as the founder of two grassroots Vietnamese institutions namely Van Hanh University and School of Youth for Social Services SYSS). People in the West failed to notice that Van Hanh University had been hijacked by the pro-American group with only the SYSS deserving the status of a grassroots organisation.

Nhat Hanh’s SYSS project was approved by the UBC in 1964, but there were two pioneer villages in an outer suburb of Saigon. The School was only officially opened in September 1965. At the time the sustained bombings had been already authorised
by President Johnson and 53,500 more troops had been landed. Legally the School was part of Van Hanh University although Nhat Hanh was given a free reign to administer it. He served as a Director of the Board of Trustees while Thich Thanh Van was appointed the Director. Nhat Hanh expressed his novel ideas of a grassroots movement:

My friends and I are convinced that a movement to rebuild our country must be based on entirely on different foundation. We want to initiate a war on poverty, ignorance, disease and misunderstanding. (17).

The social workers were volunteers who neither worked for money or power, but with love and awareness. These young men were motivated by spirit of self-help and they were to build many self-help villages around the country. They rejected a life based on materialism but sought only the happiness that a life of service could bring. Nhat Hanh believed there were ‘ten of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands’ ready to join a new kind of ‘university’, one that would train community development workers. Nhat Hanh admitted that his group had no money but he had an objective, good will and a lot of energy. (18)

As a grassroots organisation, the School relied on donations from ordinary people in 1960 and 1961 Sister Chan Khong had already worked in slum areas in the central part of Saigon City. The students’ welfare work was conducted on a much smaller scale than that of normal sized program for rural development. In student days, welfare work was considered as a way to practise giving and nurture compassion, rather than what gave to the poor and the unfortunate. The aim was to follow the footsteps of a living Bodhisattva named Bao Siu, who had been riding a bicycle for fifty years to bring rice and care to thousands of destitute in the city of Hue. Sister Chan Khong then asked her friends to donate a fistful of rice every week and they gladly to be obliged. However, when running the SYSS, she had to feed three hundred young trainees, on top of normal running costs of the School. Nevertheless, one thousand and two hundred Buddhist Youth groups came to the rescue by making a monthly donation. Furthermore, the Inter-Being Group befriended thousands small peddlers, cigarette, vegetable and food vendors on the city footpaths as well as rich families who saw it as a way to practise meritorious work. Sister Chan Khong proudly
claimed that the SYSS was the only social movement that was funded by public
donation rather than by the Government. Not until 1968 when both Nhat Hanh and
Sister Chan Khong worked with the peace movement outside Vietnam, the School
was funded by certain peace organisations in Europe. (19) However the two main
fundraisers were Sister Chan Khong and Nhat Chi Mai. Nhat Chi Mai later burned
herself to death in an appeal for a peaceful end to the war in Vietnam. When Nhat
Hanh was still in the country, money flowed in because of his enormous appeal but as
soon as he left Vietnam, particularly when he openly appealed for a cease-fire, a
financial crisis arose. The wealthy families started withdrawing their financial
support, probably because they were fearful of being harassed by the government.
Sister Chan Khong described the effects of this:

In July 1966 when our SYSS was at its lowest ebb financially, we were at the
beginning of the second and final year of training 300 students, who had arrived
without knowing that we had only $1.00 in the bank account. Most of the money that
our supporters had given to us had been used for the construction of the forty-room
student dormitory on the new campus. When the semester started we ate just rice.
Even though we were vegetarian, we could not even afford tofu, mushroom, bean
sprouts, or gluten. Two hundred and forty one students slept in the meditation hall
and on the verandah around the hall. (20)

They had to ask wealthy and generous friends to contribute rice and other necessities.
This way 37 200lb-bags were donated. Market gardeners donated two truck loads of
old cabbages and mustard greens to make pickles so at least the school was able to
feed a large number of young and hungry trainees for a month. Relatives also helped
out! At the same time the School started some self-help projects, like growing
mushrooms and raising chickens on a small farm as well as selling rice and soap to
supplement its financial shortfall. It was not known if and how the students got their
allowances or expenses when practising social work in the villages, but it seems
highly unlikely they did so in the circumstances.

In 1964 two pioneer villages were set up in outer suburbs of Saigon, ten kilometres
from the GPO. At a later stage a few more villages were chosen as pioneer centres,
one in Binh Phuoc, a district about 50 kilometres from Saigon, and a few more in Central Vietnam, one in Khanh Hoa, one in Thua Thien and another one in the demilitarized zone, Quang Tri. They were called self-help villages where citizens shared collective responsibility for developing the local economy and provide for education and health care. The main objective of these programs was to get rid of old attitudes of passivity—i.e. waiting for someone else to make a difference. While government rural development staff were mostly concerned with ‘lining their own pockets’, trying to siphon off as much foreign aid as they could, the SYSS workers did not work for wages or power, but with devotion and dedication. Workers stayed in the villages and lived and worked with the peasants until they were accepted. In theory the ideal was sound, but in reality, the war made Nhat Hanh’s dream impossible and brought only death and despair to the social workers.

When Minh Chau revoked the School’s legal status and particularly when Nhat Hanh left, SYSS students became the shooting targets for both sides. Sensing that the School was unprotected like ‘a baby abandoned in the middle of a market’, staff and students were harassed, threatened and cold bloodedly murdered. In June 1966 a group of unknown men threw grenades into a campus dormitory, causing seriously injuries to two students, one was permanently paralysed. A grenade was tossed into Nhat Hanh’s room but fortunately, he had left the country two weeks earlier. In February 1967, grenades were again tossed into a school dormitory and two more students died. A student was hit by 600 fragments and another had her liver damaged. In July 1967, five students who worked at Binh Phuoc Village were taken by a group of militiamen to a riverbank and shot in cold blood. Four died instantly and only one young monk survived because he was unconscious and the terrorists thought he was dead. The surviving monk recounted that before executing them, the leader of the militia asked: ‘Are you SYSS students?’ When the students answered in the affirmative, he said: ‘I am sorry but I have to kill you’. (21) Also Tru Loc village, near the demilitarised zone, where some SYSS lived and worked, was bombed three times. Each occasion students tried to help rebuild houses, a school, a medical centre and an agricultural co-operative. However when it was bombed the fourth time, villagers began picking up the guns and retaliating. (22)

However, the greatest loss and tragedy was the death of Sister Nhat Chi Mai who
burned herself in an appeal for peace. In 1963, Thich Quang Duc was the first monk to self-immolate and before the regime collapsed, another eight monks followed suit, but none of the laity were allowed to sacrifice. In the struggle for peace, before Nhat Chi Mai, there were fourteen people who took this drastic action, and despite the ban, at least five laymen took their lives to protest the escalation of the war. In one of her poems, Nhat Chi Mai mentioned the self-immolation of an American:

*Why did an American self-immolate?*

*Why did the whole world protest again the war?*

*Why have the Vietnamese been silenced?*

*And would not dare to call for peace?*

She was referring to the burning of an American Quaker, Norman Morrison on November 2, 1965. On that day Morrison took his infant daughter to the Pentagon. He scaled a retention wall, chose a spot, which was only forty feet away from the window of the Minister of Defence, Robert McNamara and proceeded to burn himself to death. What made his act so horrifying but memorable was that he held his child in his left arm while he soaked himself in petrol and ignited a match with his right hand. Even now nobody really knows if Morrison intentionally released the child before striking a match or if he did so in panic, just as the flames were licking up from his shoes’ top. (23). The next morning, when the Herald Tribune’s headline read, “Human Torch at Pentagon-Baby in Arms” shocked the whole country. It had been only a few months before, in the same city, Baltimore, that President Johnson had addressed the nation about his peace initiative. When the news spread to Vietnam, the South Vietnamese government tried to hide Harrison’s motives and paint him as a mentally disturbed man. The Vietnamese knew the reason for Morrison’s act. Only a week after the Morrison incident, a twenty-year old Catholic, Roger LaPorte set himself on fire at sunrise in front of the United Nations. These young men had brought the war home to the U.S. The impact of these deaths was vastly different from the burning of young people and monks in Saigon. These incidents were right in the heart of America, on the doorstep of the Pentagon. The whole of America was shocked including Defence Minister, Robert McNamara who, it is believed, then urged the President to temporarily cease the bombings to induce the Communists to come to the negotiation table. Eventually McNamara resigned when his advice no
longer reached the President’s ears The Vietnamese pacifists were also shocked. Morrison’s last words to his wife were translated into the Vietnamese language and widely circulated: ‘Dearest Anne. For weeks, even months, I have been praying only that I be shown what I must do. This morning, with no warning, I was shown as clearly as I was shown in August 1955, that you must be my wife...Know that I love you but must act for the children of the priest’s village’. (24)

The pictures of children of the priest’s village, burned to death by napalm dropped by American bombers, were printed in Paris Match. This magazine also recorded the priest’s testimony: ‘I have seen the bodies of women and children blown to bits. I have seen all the villages razed. By God, It’s not possible! They must settle their accounts with God’. By emulating the drastic actions of the Vietnamese monks, Morrison was demonstrating his belief that God wanted him to let the world aware of the suffering endured by the Vietnamese people. Fortunately, in the case of Nhat Chi Mai, she had the opportunity to live and to work with Nhat Hanh in social change projects. She herself witnessed her compatriots suffering and the murders of her co-workers. She was one of the first six ‘cedars’ ordained by the Inter-Being Order and one of the main fund-raisers for the School. Coming from an affluent family she did not see the connection between social activism and peace, and she did not seem to grasp the underlining philosophy of social activism. To her, working with the SYSS was just another charitable act to help the poor and less fortunate, so that when asked about Nhat Hanh’s appeal for peace in the U.S., Nhat Chi Mai hesitated and finally chose words to reassure Sister Chan Khong: “Phuong (Sister Chan Khong), you know I love and respect Thay (Nhat Hanh), especially his vision of social service, but his political activities worry me! (25)

Out of respect and love to Nhat Hanh, Nhat Chi Mai quickly became active amongst the pacifists. She joined the Van Hanh Students Union’s underground peace activities, distributed anti-war literature, such as The Lotus in A Sea of Fire written by Nhat Hanh during his peace tour in the U.S. From a comparatively politically naive girl, she became more a radical and determined to act to make others aware of her people’s suffering. Being a child from a rich family and insulated from the brutal outside world, she was somewhat the innocent in dealing with difficulties and crises. Sister Chan Khong recounted that Nhat Chi Mai had many unrealistic approaches to raising
find as well as many novel approaches to attract world attention to Vietnamese plight. She proposed that Sister Chan Khong organise a fast and at the end of which they would declare a statement to call for peace then disemboweled themselves. In her own words, ‘our act could reach many people and it might move them to end this dreadful war! Her novel ideas about fundraising and peace activities sometimes unnerved sister Chan Khong but whether others agreed with her proposals or not, she always seemed refreshed and in touch with her deeper self. (26) Sister Chan Khong refused to go along with the proposal of disemboweling citing her reason there were a few of the ‘cedars’ remaining with the SYSS who were needed to keep the School running. No one know how much Morrison ‘s burning effected on her thinking and similar to Morrison’s last days, she showed no sign that she was going to take drastic action. Perhaps there might have been some subtle indication but her friends in Inter-Being order failed to notice. Here is Sister Chan Khong’s account: of Nhat Chi Mai’s supposed state of mind in her last days:

On one Saturday in April, when it was Mai’s turn to read the Precepts of the Order of Inter-being, her voice faltered as she said. "Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and build peace: From that moment on, she spoke so softly so that it was nearly impossible to hear her. As we were putting the precept books back on the shelves, a member of the group, Uyen, asked: "What happened, Mai?" And I added: "You seemed to lose your concentration during the recitation". Are you all right?" Mai just smiled and asked to return to her room early that evening. (27)

On the day before her self-immolation, when practicing meditation with her group, she wore a beautiful dress as if she were going to get married. She also brought a banana cake to share with her friends. She cheerfully invited Sister Chan Khong to join her to celebrate the Vesak on the next day at the nunnery. She promised that there would be something interesting happening there.

None of her friends picked up any sign of emotional disturbance. She was as calm as ever. She camouflaged her emotions very well. As Nhat Hanh commented, those nuns and laymen who self-immolated, were like Bodhisattvas who willingly endured the greatest of suffering in order to protect other people. (28) Nhat Chi Mai’s mind was
lucid and calm as she sat down and wrote ten letters, five personal and five public ones, addressing the leaders of the North and South Governments, the leaders of the UBC, the Vietnamese people and finally President Johnson. She chose Tu Nghiem nunnery for her action where she had received her traditional five precepts, and Vesak day, when the UBC celebrated the Birth of the Buddha and on that year, organised a week of Prayer For Peace. Before striking a match, Nhat Chi Mai sat down in a lotus position, in front of two statues of the Virgin Mary and Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. A banner hung behind her saying:

Kneeling down with my lotus shaped hands
I ask Virgin Mary
And Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara
To help me to have my wish fulfilled.

I offer my body as a torch
To repel darkness
To awaken human beings
To bring peace to Vietnam.

She had also written a few poems. The two lines following express fully the frustration of the peace activists in South Vietnam at the time:

When alive, I was not allowed to call for peace
Only death can allow me to say it.

In an open letter to the leaders of South and North governments, Nhat Chi Mai wrote:

Our people do not need ideologies, we only want peace. I beg you to look for a way out for the Vietnamese people, by negotiating to end the war, by granting the Vietnamese self-determination. Please have a compassionate heart. (29)

She then explained why she chose self-burning:
I decided to burn myself to appeal for Peace, for human compassion and understanding, as did Mr Morrison and Bodhisattva Thich Quang Duc. I hope all human beings will be living in Buddha’s loving-kindness and the love of Jesus Christ. (30)

In a poignant letter addressing President Johnson, Nhat Chi Mai said she wanted to speak out on behalf of ordinary Vietnamese, to express horror of, and disgust at the devastating destruction of the war conducted by a country which had the mightiest military machine in the world. She begged the President to have compassion both for the Vietnamese as well for the American soldiers, sent to Vietnam to fight in a meaningless war. She pleaded with the U.S. government to stop bombing and start negotiating with North Vietnam, requesting that they withdraw troops gradually. Finally she called for a free election under U. N. supervision to help the Vietnamese to rebuild their country.

In a letter to her parents, Nhat Chi Mai asked them to forgive her and allow her to follow in the footsteps of Bodhisattvas. She hoped her death would contribute a great deal to the efforts to bring peace to Vietnam and affirmed that, she was neither insane nor fanatical. At the end of the letter she joked with her parents that they could have some of her crystallized pearl-like remains after the cremation.

Writing to Nhat Hanh, her letter was to the point and gently reassuring as well as optimistic: “Teacher, Don’t you worry too much. Peace will come soon”. (31)

After Nhat Chi Mai’s death, the government strictly censored news of her self-immolation, so newspaper editors marked her death by the appearance of a large black band on the front page. The police were ordered to quickly remove the corpse. But news of her death was spreading like wild fire. Students rushed to Tu Nghiem nunnery to guard and prevent her corpse from being snatched away while her parents resisted pressures to have her buried quietly and quickly. Instead they asked the UBC to organise her cremation.

Nhat Chi Mai’s sacrifice moved the hearts of people from all walks of life and helped to swell the peace movement. Her death made people forget their political differences
for a time. Students, merchants, well off families who previously accused her group of being pro-communist and withdrew their financial support for the School, now all flocked to her funeral. Representatives from different religions attended as did progressive Catholic factions who also offered help to have her poems and letters published. The Institute leaders, who were previously caught between the pro-peace elements of Thich Nhat Hanh and the pro-American faction of Thich Minh Chau, now jointed to organise her funeral procession which stretched for five kilometres along the way.

Nhat Hanh must have been devastated by Nhat Chi Mai’s and other students’ death. In 1963, on hearing the burning of a young monk during the struggle against Diem, he composed a poem, The Fires That Consume My Brother

_The fire that burns you_
_burns my flesh_
_with such pain_
_that all my tears are not enough_
_to cool your sacred soul_
(32)

On that occasion Nhat Hanh had not personally known the young monk, but he did know others and was devastated by their deaths. On hearing of the murder of four SYSS students, he cried. A friend consoled him, saying: ‘Thay (Teacher), you should not cry. You are a general leading an army of non-violent soldiers. It is natural that you suffer casualties’. Nhat Hanh answered: “No, I am not a general. I am just a human being. It is I who summoned them for service and now they have lost their lives. I need to cry”. (33)

When a group of unknown men had attacked the SYSS dormitories and killed two students, Sister Chan Khong admitted it was very hard not to hate the murderers while Nhat Hanh felt responsible for the death of those young men because he was the one who summoned them for service. But even so he refused to condemn the murderers and showed his followers that the roots of hatred and anger lie in everyone:
But there are more grenades
than those that burst last night.
There are more grenades
caught in the heart of life.
Do you hear me?
There are more that are yet to burst.

They remain
still
in the heart of men
Unknown, the time of their detonation;
unknown, when they will desecrate our land;
Unknown, when they will annihilate our people.

(34)

In a play, The Path Of Return Continues The Journey, in which ‘all the characters
were based on real people, and all the events had happened, Nhat Hanh let Nhat Chi
Mai repeat what he had been proclaiming for a long time:

Mai: Men kill because, on the one hand, they do not know their real enemy, and on
the other, they are pushed into a position where they must kill. So men kill unjustly
and in turn, are killed unjustly, and it is their own compatriots who kill them. There
were some responsible for the massacre of our people, but they think they have
nothing to do with it, because it is not they who hold the guns and pull the triggers.
Who are really killing us? It is fear, hatred and prejudice. (35)

People’s emotion were likely to overflow into violence, Nhat Hanh never departed
from the non-violent approach that he and his followers had strictly adhered to since
he returned to Vietnam in 1964 and which was expressed so cogently in his Peace
Manifesto:

Our faith is not built on shaky ground or esoteric understanding. It is the faith in the
strength of unconditional love. It asks nothing in return and cannot be shaken even by
betrayal. If you take your deepest questions into the core of your being, into your
blood and marrow, one day, quite naturally, you will understand the connection between thought and action.... This love arises from the individual psyche, and yet the gradual eroding or sudden destruction of that psyche cannot diminish this love. It is transcendent love. (36)

His followers adopted this non-violent manifesto, not merely as a strategy of action, but also as an ethical guideline. As Gandhi always maintained the most powerful approach to move an opponent’s heart was to endure their maltreatment and only hate the deed, not the doer. In less than ten years, SYSS workers were strictly adhering to this principle as they faced betrayal, abduction, murder and rejection...When students were killed, maimed or incapacitated by fanatical groups, the Director of the School always held out the olive branch: “I do not know why you attacked us. I think you are mistaking our position”. Once a young monk, while participating in a street demonstration for peace, had his head spat on by a G.I standing on an army truck In Vietnamese culture, one’s head is considered as a sacred part of the body not to be touched. The young monk was humiliated and furious and wanted to abandon his non-violent principles to join the communists so he could retaliate against American soldiers. Only after a long discussion, was the young monk persuaded by Nhat Hanh to let his anger go and stay a monk.

In 1964 when joining Van Hanh students doing the flood relief work in a remote area Nhat Hanh learnt first hand how much the Vietnamese peasants suffered. Again here is Sister Chan Khong’s account:

We stopped at the most devastated villages, distributed gifts, and stayed the day with people. At night, we slept on our boats after a simple meal on plain rice. The smell of dead bodies was everywhere, y polluting the air. Although this was a remote mountain area, there was fighting between the nationalists and the guerrillas even up there. When we saw wounded soldiers, from either side, we helped them without discrimination. (37)

The most touching story retold by Sister Chan Khong was when she and students of the SYSS tried to pick up corpses in the Tet Offensive in 1968. The communists had attacked every single city in the South, and as a result, the casualties were extremely
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high for both sides. Sister Chan Khong decided to come out of the school area to collect the corpses because the Red Cross workers were shot at by the guerillas. The Buddhist flag was safer than the Red Cross’ flag because both warring sides respected the Buddhist flag and so would not fire on the monks and nuns. Sister Chan Khong wrote of the horrors of that time saying:

_It was an extraordinarily difficult task. At that time, there were no gloves, work clothes, or chemicals to neutralise the smell, so we put peanut oil on our noses, but that didn’t help at all. That stench followed me for months so that the smell of anything organic brought back the nauseating smell of rotting corpse, and I could only eat plain rice, salted rice for many months._ (38).

Buddhist youth became an army of non-violent soldiers, and in the Buddhists’ eyes, they were an army of Bodhisattvas who would go wherever there was human suffering. They practised non-violent action for social change in extremely difficult, if not impossible, conditions. Nhat Hanh assessed results of their efforts at this time:

_Despite the results—many years of war followed by years of oppressive and human rights abuse—I cannot say that our struggle was a failure. The conditions for success in terms of a political victory were not present. But the success of a non-violent struggle can be measured only in terms of the love and non-violence attained not whether a political victory was achieved. In our struggle in Vietnam we did our best to remain true to our principles. We never lost sight of that._ (39)

When invited by Thich Tri Quang to return home in 1963, Nhat Hanh hesitated. Never did he spell out what sort of problems he had had with the elders. He only said vaguely that they had never supported his group in their efforts to create an Engaged Buddhism. Before heading home, he composed a poem expressing his hope as well as his disappointment and pain in the Buddhist hierarchy

_Here are my hands
brought back to you
unhealed beneath their bandages
I pray_
they will not be crushed again.
And I beg
the stars
to be my witness.

It was strange that Nhat Hanh called the leaders of the Buddhist Church Elders. In fact Thich Thien Minh was only five years older and Thich Tri Quang, three. However, this time they fully supported Nhat Hanh’s projects, among them Van Hanh University and the School of Youth for Social Services. When Nhat Hanh decided to go home probably he had two things in mind: one was to set up a self-help program like that of Sarvodaya, a Buddhist activist group in Sri Lanka and the other was to modernise the UBC. He did not envisage that the tempo of the war would increase so quickly. Certainly the NLF had been formed a few years earlier and the guerrillas worried the South Vietnamese Government. But nobody thought the war would escalate with the lightening speed it did in less than twelve months. In 1963 the Americans were only humble advisers to the RVNA but by 1965 they had almost taken over the combat role from the Vietnamese. Admittedly the self-help projects did not attract many students in time of war. From 1964 until Nhat Hanh left Vietnam, only six cedars were ordained in the Inter-being Order who worked closely with the SYSS. Sister Chan Khong had to admit that ‘we are too few’ and used this reason to try to persuade Nhat Chi Mai not to disembowel herself. (40) Although the life and work of these modern Bodhisattvas was so admirable, the urban students would rather participate in the peace movement in the cities than join the epic, but desperate journey, of the SYSS social workers.

When Nhat Hanh took up the peace cause, not every SYSS student supported his activities in the States. They feared that his appeal for peace would harm the School politically and financially. As Sister Chan Khong disclosed, some even refused to go to the war zone to provide services. When doing relief in remote areas, Sister Chan Khong had to work under the name of Van Hanh Students Union of which she was the President, because lack of support of SYSS students. Not only were students confused about the mix of social work objectives with peace activities, but also the School Director, Thich Thanh Van, who asked Sister Chan Khong before she left for overseas, to relay his worries to Nhat Hanh: ‘Please tell Thay Nhat Hanh that we have
been cut off from the UBC and Van Hanh University, and tell him that we need to re-establish our legal status. If he keeps making statements calling for peace, we will never be recognised by this regime. Tell him he has to decide between advocating peace and doing social work”. (41) The pro-American faction of Thich Minh Chau dissociated the SYSS from Van Hanh University probably because they were wary that Nhat Hanh’s peace activities might harm their chances of securing funding. Little wonder why the School Director silently disapproved the peace efforts and wanted to concentrate on social work. (42)

Nhat Hanh’s enormous appeal, however, was not in his rural development project, but in his creative abilities. His writings on Engaged Buddhism were well received by young students and artists. At that time a few monks trained at overseas universities, including Japan, India and America returned home. But these were either too academically or too monastically inclined, and none could be as responsive to the intellectual needs of the younger generation as Nhat Hanh could. He was first and foremost a thinker and an artist. He established La Boi (Fragrant Palm Leaves) publisher and his first two books on Buddhism, Modernised Buddhism and Buddhism In Every Day Life were the best sellers and made him the most authoritative ‘new wave’ scholar. He became a household name and inspired a ‘back to tradition’ movement in which people again studied Asian traditional philosophies and religions. In the colonial period the Vietnamese were brain-washed into believing that Buddhism was a religion of death which no longer played any significant in national affairs. So many Buddhists lost faith in ‘old values’ and were partly to be blamed for Catholics’ patronising attitudes like that of Ngo Dinh Nhu: ‘They (Buddhists) played no part in the intellectual, military or economic progress of the country. The Buddhists are only an obstacle. They have contributed nothing’. (43) Nhat Hanh’s books and essays presented Buddhism in different light that influenced a younger generation who felt that they need not feel ashamed of their traditional heritage for it was in no way negative, withdrawn, pessimistic or superstitious. Nhat Hanh debunked the myths fed by colonialists and made Buddhism relevant for young people. Another work of his, Zen Keys became a classic work on Zen Buddhism. Nhat Hanh also moved into an area where he performed best namely creative writing. He edited a weekly magazine entitled, Sound of the Rising Tide, which became an official herald of the UBC. It had a huge circulation and fifty thousand copies were produced.
However, as the tempo of war accelerated, both the warring sides reached a point of no return. Nhat Hanh changed his focus accordingly to one of how to stop the war. As Nhat Hanh said at the time, he always valued peace and human life above everything else, including the existence of the UBC. His dream of reforming the Buddhist Church and conducting rural development had to take second place. Within two years, with General Westmoreland’s policy of ‘search and destroy’, ‘body count’ and ‘bombing them back to the stone age’, there would be no more rural area to be developed and no more peasants to work with in the self-help projects! Peasants quickly became urban refugees. It was estimated that in 1966, more than a million and a half people fled to the cities and lived in camps.

When working with a team of students in flood relief in 1964, Nhat Hanh had a first hand account of the peasants’ living conditions in remote areas. This effected him deeply

After finishing the work, we stayed a few days with the people. The shooting was directly above our heads. One disciple of mine jumped into the water; he was so nervous. The suffering was overwhelming. I bit my finger and let a drop of blood fall into the river, saying: ‘this is to pray for all of you who have perished in the war and the flood. The day we left, many young women standing along the shore tried to hand their babies over to us, but we knew we could not take care of them. We felt so helpless, we cried. (44)

Published in The Sound of Rising Waves, a poem of Nhat Hanh relating to what he witnessed, shocked the whole country. Many young people, who were inspired by this poem, joined him in the anti-war movement. The images of the peasants’ unfortunate life touched even urbanite whose war was more distant and less catastrophic:

Please come here
and witness
the ordeal of all the dear ones.
A young father
whose wife and four children died
stares, day and night, into empty space.
He sometimes laughs
a tear-choked laugh.

Her husband is dead,
her children dead,
her land ruined,
her heart cold.
She curses aloud her existence,
“How fortunate,” she says,
“those families who died together.

Nhat Hanh saw how the peasants lived and what they thought about the war. When asked which side they supported, they did not hesitate desiring only peace and harmony for themselves and their families:

I hate both sides
I follow neither
I only want to go
where they will let me live
and help me live.
(45)

This was Nhat Hanh’s and the UBC’s stance in the struggle for peace for many years to come. Then Nhat Hanh declared his intention to go on a journey for peace. As a consequence, he was forced to live in exile from 1966.

I have come with you
to weep with you
for our ravaged land
and broken lives.
We are left with only grief and pain,  
britake my hands  
and hold them, hold them  
I want to say  
only simple words  
Have courage. We must have courage  
if only for the children,  
if only for tomorrow.  
(46)

Nhat Hanh was undoubtedly the leader of anti-war artists who both overtly and covertly challenged government censorship simply ignoring the publishing regulations. Many successive South Vietnam Governments tried to silence Nhat Hanh and other anti-war intellectuals and artists by proclaiming a state of emergency. Anyone viewed as a threat to national security could be arrested without trial. Interestingly even the head of state, Phan Khac Suu, could not express his peace aspiration and had to twist his tongue to use a different word Thanh Binh (quietness), instead of Hoa Binh (peace) to avoid censure. (47) Artists and intellectuals took great risks to publish anti-war materials. Despite the risk, Nhat Hanh invited five distinguished writers and intellectuals to write bilingual letters addressing six famous counterparts in the West. The book, “Dialogue: The Key to Peace in Vietnam” was an open challenge to the government. Nhat Hanh wrote a letter to Martin Luther King entitled “Searching for the Enemy of Man” which moved the pacifists in the West and secured an audience with Martin Luther King when Nhat Hanh went to the States. After explaining the symbolism of the self-immolation of monks, he asked Luther King to help voice the plight of the Vietnamese in the United States:

...Hundreds and perhaps thousands of Vietnamese peasants and children lose their lives everyday, and our land is unmercifully and tragically torn by a war which is already twenty years old. I am sure since you have been engaged in one of the hardest struggle for equality and human rights, you are among those who understand fully, and who share with all their heart, the indescribable suffering of the Vietnamese people. You yourself cannot remain silent. You cannot be silent since you have
already been in action, and you are in action because in you, God is in action, too.

(48)

According to Nhat Hanh, when they met a year later, King came out openly against the war in Vietnam in a press conference, even though King’s associates thought it untimely and unwise. By then he was a giant figure in both intellectual and literary circles and probably would have been a huge backlash if he had been arrested for anti-war literary works. A number of musicians inspired by Nhat Hanh’s poems composed anti-war music and formed groups, going from town to town to seek support from audiences. The best known musician was Trinh Cong Son whom Nhat Hanh praised as the finest musician Vietnam had produced in years.

With a guitar, Son and his partners sang ballads before thousands of students and youths, telling sad stories of the devastating war. In the opening line of a book written for the young, “Dialogue with the Twenty Year-Old Generation”, Nhat Hanh wrote about Trinh Cong Son: “I have never cried when listening to music. But I cannot help crying when listening to Son’s songs”. One of Son’s songs included in the following:

_I have a lover who died at Chu Prong_
_I have a lover who died floating in a river._
_Died on the rice field,_
_As if he were dreaming._
_When peace comes back to my country_
_Mother will climb up the mountains to look after her son’s skeleton._

Nhat Hanh also won the heart of another talented composer, Pham Duy, who was moved by Nhat Hanh’s poems. Composer Pham Duy wrote “Ten Songs of The Heart”, using the words in Nhat Hanh’s poems as his lyrics. One of the ten songs, “Our Enemy Is Not Man”, could be heard on every street corner in big cities:

_Our enemy is not men._
_If we kill men, with whom shall we live?_
_Our enemy wears the colors of an ideology._
_Our enemy wears the label of liberty._
Our enemy carries a fancy appearance.
Our enemy carries a big basket full of words.

Getting the support of Pham Duy was a plus for the Peace Movement because, unlike Trinh Cong Son, Pham Duy was known as a pro-American.

Another poetic work causing controversy was *Let Us Pray for the White Dove To Appear*. It was a collection of twenty-four poems written by Nhat Hanh initially printed by xerox and circulated internally among students. Some of the students were quite impressed by them and proposed publishing and circulating them among a larger number of readers. Realising that this collection could never been passed by the government censorship agency, the Buddhist Students Union requested Thich Tri Quang tried to submit it to the Censorship Office in Hue, where Tri Quang still commanded high respect. Three weeks later Tri Quang returned the manuscript and said it could not be passed for publication. He also said if he insisted, the person responsible for censorship would have to obey, but this officer would certainly lose his position. "I do not want to break his pot of rice". Tri Quang said apologetically. The Buddhist Students’ Union had to submit the poems to the censorship office in Saigon. Predictably only seven out of twenty four poems passed uncensored. However with Nhat Hanh’s approval, the book was still printed and distributed as underground literature. Five thousand copies were sold within a month. These poems became the first underground anti-war literature.

The poems were well received by Buddhists, students and, according to Sister Chan Khong, received congratulations from the leftists connected with the NLF. Surprisingly, but not unexpectedly, they were severely criticised by writers on the clandestine NLF radio and Hanoi radio. At first, Nhat Hanh was denounced as an ‘indecisive’ person who could not differentiate between friends and foes. Later stronger words were used to label him such as ‘the lackey of imperialists’. The Front classified Nhat Hanh in the same category as the military junta! To some extent, the Front was smarter than the bureaucrat-writers in the South. The hidden motives of the NLF were to discredit an artist whose charisma and talent appealed to thousands of young intellectuals in South Vietnam and more importantly, because Nhat Hanh was not one of them. In the previous year Nhat Hanh had written an article in a review,
exposing the difference between Buddhism and Marxism. He criticised what he saw as the Marxist narrow approach in literature. (49) The NLF also detected the subtle anti-communist tone throughout Nhat Hanh’s work. The term “Vietcong” was invented by an American historian, Douglas Pike, as was the term Bac Viet, North Vietnam. Their meaning is similar but both imply derogatory overtone. The leftists having connection with the NLF never called themselves Vietcong, but rather they referred themselves as “people of the Front”. Nhat Hanh used these terms repeatedly in his books which annoyed “people in the Front” so much. In one of his poems, Nhat Hanh denounced the “revolutionary war” initiated by the Front:

_Whoever is listening, be my witness:_
_I cannot accept this war._
_I never could, I never will._
_I must say this a thousand times before I am killed._

(50)

In the meantime the Communists paid attention and understood well the Buddhists’ message which clearly expressed the peasants’ sentiments: “We do not follow either. We follow the one who can end the war and guarantee that we can live”. (51)

The Buddhists’ stance was now clearly spelt out. The Front understood that they could no longer expect to secure the support or co-operation from the Buddhist Institute and its leaders, even though the two sides were advocating peace. The NLF also saw the danger that, the Buddhist Church, not the NLF, with its desire to put an end to the suffering of the powerless, would win over the hearts and minds of millions of ordinary Vietnamese, the real victims of the war. That is why the Front kept on attacking Nhat Hanh personally and during his peace tour in the U.S. in 1966. Politically, the Front saw the Buddhists as a real threat in the race to win the support of the people. While urban youth and students wholeheartedly supported the peace protests led by the Buddhist Institute, only a few middle-class professionals, so called armchair politicians, supported the Front, as protest against Diem and successive military governments, rather than of the Front’s ideology. Urban youth’s support for the NLF was _negligible_. Truong Nhu Tang, one of the Fronts organisers confessed that most of the youth, high school and university students, had not supported, nor
were they controlled by the Front, and the cadres had to avoid using any terms or objectives related to socialism, otherwise urban youth flatly rejected it:

*In 1965 we had resurrected the name Vanguard Youth for what was envisioned as a militant organisation of young people recruited from the high schools, universities and factories. This effort, however, had failed to generate much enthusiasm and had been allowed to lapse.* (52)

On the other hand, the Generals clearly saw the Buddhists as the real threat to their power, because the main objective of the Buddhist Struggle Movement was to have a democratically elected government. The military governments were unrepresentative and installed by the American Mission in Saigon and so no Generals would be elected in any fair and free elections. The Americans neither seemed nor wanted to understand the UBC's motives or position. In February 1965, when McGeorge Bundy, a National Security adviser, was sent to Vietnam for a fact-finding trip, he brought with him biographical data on Tri Quang and Tam Chau, and other Buddhist activists. In a meeting, according to his aide, McGeorge Bundy felt 'reeling' because Tri Quang played the mystic and his pronouncements went beyond Bundy's Western logic! (53) It was time the Buddhist Institute sent a representative overseas, who could explain clearly how the Buddhists viewed the war and how a solution could be found to the conflict. In their view only one person could fit that role namely Nhat Hanh.

Nhat Hanh was essentially a thinker and writer. Besides there was so much he could do at home. The voice of Vietnamese peasants representing by the UBC needed to be heard beyond Vietnam. With a background both as a graduate student and a teaching member at Columbia University, he was the most appropriate candidate as "messenger" of the Church, a person who could match men like McGeorge Bundy in Western logic and so enable them to understand the UBC Church's motives and actions. Then an appropriate occasion presented itself for Nhat Hanh. A team from the Fellowship of the Clergymen's Emergency Committee that earlier had appealed to both side to stop the war, went to Vietnam in the summer of 1965 to instigate a dialogue with indigenous religious groups, particularly Buddhists. This group believed that in history and in present conflict, Buddhism had remained loyal to the Vietnamese. The delegation was impressed with Nhat Hanh 's poems and essays,
which deepened their understanding and respect for the Buddhist Institute’s concern for human lives. Delegation members were also deeply moved by Nhat Hanh’s letters, addressing Martin Luther King, which contained a moving and persuasive explanation of the monks’ self-immolation able to be grasped by Western minds. (54) At that stage it was extremely difficult for any church leader to get a visa to go abroad so it was almost a year later that a group of friends at Cornell University invited Nhat Hanh to lecture on “The Revival of Vietnamese Buddhism”. This was to be an innocuous academic tour and such that would not raise any disquiet in the Vietnamese government. From a three-week lecture trip, however it extended to almost three months. Not only did Nhat Hanh travel across the United States, but almost every country in Western Europe invited him to tell the world about the terrible suffering and disillusion of the Vietnamese people and about the meaning of the Buddhist led demonstrations against the Thieu-Ky government. Nhat Hanh explained that the monks were driven to take their actions by their profound compassion for the people’s suffering, and by the fact that there was literally no one who could speak for the war-weary people and their longing for peace. Nhat Hanh’s message was echoed by clergymen, priests, rabbis and other religious leaders in a plea for peace which appeared in the New York Times on January 23, 1966, calling for both sides to stop the war:

_We, who in various ways have assumed the terrible responsibility of articulating the human conscience, must speak or, literally, we should expect the very stones to cry out._ (55)

In the United States, Nhat Hanh was interviewed on television and radio and in print media wherever he went. He met with prominent religious and community leaders, notables in the world of literature and arts, high officials in the United Nations, members of the Senate and House of Representatives and with Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara. Arranged by the Fellowship’s International Committee of Conscience on Vietnam, he had an audience with His Holiness, Pope Paul VI. One person he did not meet was President Johnson. A spokesman for the President, who recently declared that he would meet any one to discuss a solution for the Vietnam War, had designated a lesser official to see Nhat Hanh. The lesser was no one else but William Bundy, whose brother, McGeorge Bundy, had complained that the UBC
leaders were too mystic for him to understand. William Bundy, in turn, designated another lesser official to see Nhat Hanh. Interesting enough, on the day Nhat Hanh was supposed to see the President, Johnson was busy taking a group of passing tourists around the White House!

The Fellowship Committee was extremely efficient in promoting Nhat Hanh tour with the public, concerned politicians and other religious groups. Nhat Hanh left for the United States on May 22. On June 1 he was immediately introduced to the public in a press conference in Washington and presented his Proposal for Peace, which was reprinted in the Congressional Record on the next day. On June 9 his article on underground literature in Vietnam appealing for peace was printed in the New York Review of Books. He was introduced to influential spiritual leaders like Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton who persistently supported the Buddhist objective to end the war. In his Memoirs, McNamara did not record the meeting with Nhat Hanh. Johnson and William Bundy refused to see Nhat Hanh and it proved that the Administration had made up their mind to seek a military victory. What chance did Nhat Hanh and the Buddhist Church have when the White House ignored all the international efforts for peace? But it is necessary to make a content analysis from Nhat Hanh’s proposals in order to understand how the Vietnamese and the Buddhist Institute see the war.

Called A Proposal for Peace, Nhat Hanh mainly tried to address issues that worried the United States the most. On the day that Nhat Hanh conducted a press conference in Washington, June 1 1966, there was a student demonstration in front of the American Consulate in Hue in which students turned out to be violent and burned down the American Library. Nhat Hanh quickly reassured the Americans that the Buddhists were not anti-American. They were only against U.S. policies of war. On the contrary, most of Vietnamese ‘do have a great respect and admiration for America for her democratic and freedom tradition. The Vietnamese just showed their frustration of being excluded from participation in the determination of their country’s future. If anti-American sentiments were simmering because the American Administration continued to support the unrepresentative and submissive Saigon government to govern without a popular mandate and to follow policies contrary to the people’s aspirations’. (56)
At the time Nhat Hanh presented his proposal for peace, the U.S. Mission in Saigon provided Ky with tanks and logistics support to brutally suppress the Buddhist-led Struggle Movement, Nhat Hanh’s mind was naturally occupied with this event and tried to persuade the U.S. to withdrew support for Ky.

*The United State chooses to support those elements (ie Thieu Ky, government) in Vietnam that appear to be most devoted to the U.S. ‘s wishes for Vietnam future. However, the Vietnamese people have never accepted these military leaders as their representatives. Diem was not, nor were Diem’s successors. Thus, it has been the U.S. government’s antipathy to popular government in South Vietnam, together with its hope for an ultimate military solution, that has not only contradicted the deepest aspirations of the Vietnamese people, but actually undermined the very objective for what we believe Americans to be fighting in Vietnam.* (57)

As a graduate from a U.S. University, Nhat Hanh had faith in the American commitment to defend democracy and freedom for South Vietnam. Apparently the American objectives in Vietnam were to preserve an free and independent South Vietnam and to help the South Vietnamese to guide their own country in their own way as affirmed by President Johnson in his Johns Hopkins University Speech. But in fact, there were other objectives that the American public was never told. The Assistant Secretary of Defence, McNaughton, in a memorandum to the President, weighted the U.S. objectives in Vietnam as follows:

70% to avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat,
20% to keep South Vietnam territory from Chinese hands, and
10% to permit the people of South Vietnam to enjoy a better and freer way of life. (58)

Secondly Nhat Hanh wanted clarify the political stand of Buddhist activists. The fight to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people was a trio contest: the NLF, the anti- communists and the non-communists. It was convenient for the military governments to label the Buddhists, the urban intellectuals, students as neutralist or pro- communist because these activists openly challenged the military authority and wanted the unrepresentative and corrupt generals replaced by a democratically elected
government. But the peace activists were truly nationalists who dared to speak their mind and had been subject to persecution and arrest by Diem and successive governments. These activists may come from different political spectrum from urban intellectuals, self esteemed politicians who refused to identify with anti-communists elements, students, anti-war artists and of course Buddhists.

Nhat Hanh believed this group would play an important role in confronting with the NLF when the final show down would come: the election time:

*The force of Vietnamese nationalism is such an alternative. Indeed, this is the sole force that can prevent the complete disintegration of South Vietnam and it is the force around which all Vietnamese can unite.* (59)

But unfortunately the truly nationalists could not develop its potential in the current political climate, where if they joined the opposition to the government, they would be persecuted; if they identified with the corrupt and unrepresentative government, they would be discredited in the eyes of the people. That was why they did not like to call themselves “anti-communist”, but non-communist or just nationalist. The repressive measures used by Diem and successive junta governments actually drove them into the arms of the Front even though they were wary of hard liners manipulated behind the scene. One of the Vietcong who was the first organiser to establish the NLF admitted that ‘had Ngo Dinh Diem proved a man of breadth and vision, the core who filled the NLF and its sister organisations would have rallied to him. (60) A majority of Buddhists chose to stay back because they maintained strong faith in their religious values. Except for a minority Catholics from the North, most of urban activists chose religions over the Front. This was true with most believers in religious sects that showed an anti-colonialist past, like Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, particularly Buddhism. The UBC in the struggle against Diem and the Generals could mobilise thousands of faithful members from all walks of life and social strata at will, and up until 1966 the Buddhists were an influential political force as opposed to military governments and the NLF. Most of urban activists answered the call for peace under the Buddhist banner, rather than to the NLF. In 1968 when the NLF attacked all the cities in South Vietnam, uprising that the communists expected to happen, never materialised: Buddhism became a symbol of hope:
Today, the mean for nationalist expression rests mainly with the Vietnamese Buddhists, who alone command sufficient popular support to spearhead a protest for popular government. This is not a new role for Vietnamese Buddhism, for in the eyes of the Vietnamese peasants, Buddhism and nationalism are inseparably entwined. The historic accident that made the mass conversion to Catholic in Vietnam coincident with France’s subjugation of Vietnam created this image. (61)

It was quite clear now that there were three forces participating in the struggle to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people. While the junta government and the anti-communists backed by the Administration, the NLF backed by Hanoi and the UBC and the non-communists representing the hopes and aspirations of the majority of the Vietnamese people.

The Americanisation of the war inevitably brought social upheavals in South Vietnam. When the American GIs flooded the cities, hundreds of services were needed to satisfy a new and unexpected demand in housing and recreations. In turn thousands of job were created for the whole army of American employees and contractors who saw the war as a profitable business. Actually the most vocal anti-communists were the ones who made huge profits from the war. In other words, anti-communism had become Vietnam’s most profitable business. The military commanders, who were supposed to kill more Vietcong as requested by president Johnson, busily lobbied positions for themselves and their own cronies and used these positions to conduct big businesses like heroin traffic while their wives ran open-secret businesses selling rice, medicines for the NLF. The Catholics moved to South Vietnam in 1954, clustered in ghettos on the fringe of Saigon, which was a well-known protection heaven for those who wanted to dodge the draft. Those who possessed wealth and power could afford to buy off the draft or send their children overseas. Nhat Hanh summed up this irony:

The most vocal anti-communists in fact, are doing very little against Communism. On the contrary, by their support of the existing government and the American effort, they succeed in perpetuating the situation that strengthens Communism. Thus the people with whom the government deals with as ‘good’ anti-communists are in fact those
who causes much hatred of government and contribute more than any one else to support of the NLF. (62)

The longer the war dragged on, the richer they became. They were comfortably housed and lived safely in the big cities, had neither desire to give up their way of life or to end the war which was the source of their wealth.

The urban activists were well educated enough to understand what went on in Russia and China. If they come from the North, they probably heard or experienced the short reign of orthodox communism. Obviously they did not like Marxism yet they did proclaim themselves anti-communists, simply because they did want to be identified with the parasitic elements who benefited from the war. The pacifists saw the struggle movement led by the Buddhists was the only chance of grouping non-communists who were able to fight the NLF in the political front on an equal footing. They were able to rally the support of peasants because they were determined to end the roots of their suffering. They would appeal to a majority of people, from the urban activists to peasants, the third force, to form a government that combined the genuine will of the people for independence with the profound aspirations for peace. This group could unite the whole spectrum of a non-communist force which would gather enough political strength to negotiate with the Front and Hanoi for a peaceful solution. In order to win the war on the political terms, instead of supporting the corrupt and incompetent government, and a vocal group of anti-communists, the United States should have supported this non-communist force.

Nhat Hanh's mission in the States was now much clearer. He came to the States to persuade the Johnson Administration to support the non-communist elements rallying in the Buddhist Struggle Movement. Supporting the corrupt and unrepresentative military government and the anti-communists was backing the wrong horse. He reassured the U.S. government that the Buddhists did not consider Americans as their enemies, but as friends, as an ally for peace not for war. Nhat Hanh articulated so well the UBC's policies and objectives. That was the third possibilities that the Buddhist had been pursuing for at least three years from 1964 to 1966. The UBC had tried to build up a politically strong non-communist force that could negotiate with the NLF on an equal footing.
They (the Vietnamese People) do not agree that there is no alternative to a military dictatorship. The force of nationalist Vietnamese is such an alternative. Indeed, this is the sole force that can prevent a complete disintegration of South Vietnam, and it is the force around which all Vietnamese can unite. But nationalism cannot attain its effective potential in the present Vietnamese political climate, where opposition to the government invites open persecution upon oneself and identification with it (corrupt military dictatorship) discredits oneself in the eyes of the people. (63)

The Buddhist Struggle Movement during the years of 1964 and 1966 used their grass roots support to bring down, or to boost up many governments, not because they wanted to grasp naked power, but their main concern was the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese Government. Or as in Nhat Hanh own words, a government that combines the genuine will of the people for independence with their profound aspiration for peace. (64). Had there been an popular elected government, this coalition government would command respect from every one and the NLF had to reason to refuse to negotiate with it. If it did, the NLF would lose the support of a majority of Vietnamese peasants and urban activists who longed for nothing but peace. Nhat Hanh optimistically predicted that if such a democratically elected government came to power, it would have the support not only of the vast majority of non-communist Vietnamese, but of those who supported the Front and even of many who were in the Front.

In a press release on June 1, 1966 Nhat Hanh revealed a five-point proposal which addressed directly Johnson Government. In the first three items he requested that the Administration to cease bombings, reduce military actions, or declare a cease-fire and if the NLF responded positively, later the U.S would show intention to withdraw troops in the future. The fourth item Four was the core of Nhat Hanh’s proposal:

4- A clear statement by the U.S. of its desire to help the Vietnamese people to have a government truly responsive to Vietnamese aspirations, and concrete U.S. actions to implement this statement, such as a refusal to support one group over another. (65)
What Nhat Hanh insisted was Johnson government should stop support the parasitic elements like Ky who, ironically, with tanks and logistics provided by the Americans, was about to suppress the Buddhist Struggle Movement in Danang and Hue in the summer of 1966.

Nhat Hanh did not mention the NLF and seemed to continue annoying the NLF analysts by calling them the derogatory term, Vietcong. Neither did he talk of negotiations because the NLF and the non-communists which he saw it as a ‘internal affairs’ of the Vietnamese people. He advised the American Administration to sidestep the issue and let the Vietnamese people exercise their right of self-determination. Only at the end of the peace tour, he took some time out and wrote The Lotus in the Sea Of Fire to sum up his proposal and the Buddhists’ political stand in details.

Nhat Hanh said it was time for the U.S. government to change its policies. Americans could not win the war militarily, because the root of the problem was in the heart of the Vietnamese peasants. The undiscriminating bombings and killings intensified the hatred of the peasants for the Americans and the longer the war went on, the more the Vietnamese would support the NLF. But if the U.S government sought a negotiated settlement, which acceptable and legitimate South Vietnamese Government would come to the negotiating table with the communists? The negotiation must be conducted between the Vietnamese themselves and the South Vietnamese at large must be included in any negotiations. The incumbent military leaders represented no one. They were there because the U.S. wanted them to be there. The urgent task must be done was (1) to establish an interim government that would represent the religions and political paries with national stature, because these were almost the remaining centres of loyalty of the population. (2) The interim government would request both sides to accept a cease-fire, or at least to cease offensive actions, until a popularly elected government comes to power. (3) The elected government would request the U.S government to withdraw a number of small units as a token of good faith to the Vietnamese people and the communist side. The new government would ask the NLF to form a coalition government for South Vietnam and also request the North Vietnam withdraw a token of their troops and (5) the coalition government would negotiate with North Vietnam to establish normal relations of trade and
diplomacy. The discussion for reunification would be held but there was no rush, the two
Vietnams would be re-unified whenever both sides felt comfortable with each other, in the distant future perhaps. (66)

Nhat Hanh humbly admitted that he was not a politician, nor his proposal was a rigid blue print, but these were first steps toward a peaceful solution, or at least, it could offer a chance for the adversary sides to sit together for preliminary talk. Indeed it could have saved thousands of lives if Johnson Administration at least listened to this gentle monk. And at least Johnson did not have to anywhere to talk to any person about peace, as the President promised in his Baltimore address. This gentle peace-loving monk came to Washington and requested an audience with the President. What would have happened if the President, instead of taking the tourists around the White House on that day, could have granted Nhat Hanh some time to present him the Buddhist viewpoint? Or at least the National Security Adviser, William Bundy, could have seen Nhat Hanh to find out whether this graduate from Columbia did have a logic that his brother, McGeorge Bundy could understand. The Secretary of Defence, Robert, McNamara did see Nhat Hanh, but his proposal for peace left no trace in his memoir, In Retrospect, The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam. Only one person saw Nhat Hanh’s vision of peace and did not hesitate to nominate Nhat Hanh as a candidate for Nobel Peace Prize, it was Martin Luther King. Perhaps these two people, Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King, communicated with each other by the same language, the spiritual language. Perhaps the White House advisers used different kind of logic which George Ball, the Under Secretary of State called ‘logic on its head’. What the President and his men did was history: more bombings were ordered, more troops were sent in, more bodies were counted. Until one day they realised what Nhat Hanh said was prophetic: the continuance of the war was more likely to spread communism in Vietnam rather to contain it. (67) And two weeks after Nhat Hanh had presented his proposal for peace, the U.S. government provided tanks, armammunitions and logistics for Ky’s troops to suppress the Buddhist Struggle Movement in Danang and Hue. The last hope for the non-communist Vietnamese to restore peace was finally dashed.
Chapter Nine

The Climax of the Confrontation: The Buddhist Uprising in the Summer 1966

While on a peace mission, Nhat Hanh tried to make the Unified Buddhist Church’s overt and covert agenda known to the outside world. Inside Vietnam the UBC was so well organised as to bring down governments. It was the most visible organisation that was both able to stage mass demonstrations and civil disobedience and as well as lobby with the American Mission and generals. It was banner headlines. Why did the Institute leaders, as the American administration called them, get involved in so much politics? Were they power hungry?

After Diem’s fall in November 1963, the Buddhists emerged as a major force to be reckoned with in South Vietnam and just as powerful as the Vietnamese Army and the communists. Surprisingly, in a war allegedly fought for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, America paid attention only to the Buddhists in crisis situations otherwise they were completely ignored. (1)

However during the struggle against president Ngo Dinh Diem, the Buddhist leaders were really appreciated by the Vietnamese people who gave them unconditional support. Thus Buddhist Church became a significant organisation in harnessing the support of the majority of the Vietnamese who, during many times in modern history, were denied from helping to shape their country’s destiny. The Geneva accord in 1954 was a case in point. The Vietnamese nationalists were left out in the cold while the super power discussed and determined their fate.

In his inauguration speech, the first chairman of the Buddhist Institute, Thich Tam Chau, re-affirmed the Buddhists’ social and political commitment for the future: ‘The organisation does not aim to dominate, but to guide, educate, and aid disciples to fulfill their social duties’. (2) After the Pentagon Coup engineered by General Nguyen Khanh, Johnson’s senior advisers desperately looked for a stable government which would endorse a policy of expanding the war to the North. At that time the Institute leaders
felt that they had not had enough time to recover from the previous suppression, but ironically they soon found themselves in a dilemma. Instead of using resources to strengthen their organisations, they had to confront American power and might to prevent the war further escalating and to give the majority of ordinary Vietnamese a chance to influence the political agenda. The Institute leaders had to become immersed in political manoeuvres and so became heavily politicised. They carefully showed the Americans they were allied in protecting a ‘free’ and ‘independent’ South Vietnam, yet they clearly disagreed with American war strategies which were seen as unnecessarily destructive. These war measures, expressed by key American military personnel in terms like ‘bomb them back to the stone age’ or ‘destroy the North to save the South’ were soon rejected by both students and academics at American Universities and by 1966, the American public too. These protectors also destroyed the President Johnson’s political career, in particular his dream of a great society. A collision course between the Americans and the Buddhists was inevitable, as S. King observed in her book, Engaged Buddhism:

*The United States was very unsympathetic to any talk of neutralism for a negotiated political settlement, believing that would result in defeat for perceived U.S. interests and victory for the North Vietnamese Communists. As the voice claiming to represent the majority of people, the Buddhist movement became increasingly identified with ‘neutralism’ (the refusal to side with North and South) and a negotiated political, as opposed to military, solution to end the war. Here was the basis for the subsequent chasm between the goals of the American government and those of the Vietnamese Buddhist Movement.* (3)

Some Americans unsympathetic to the Buddhists’ cause tried to cast some doubt on the Institute leaders’ motives and strength. It was commonly believed that eighty percent of the population in Vietnam were Buddhists but the Americans tried to belittle the significance of the Buddhist Struggle Movement by arguing that in fact, the true followers were substantially fewer. In actuality, the Institute could rally thousands of street demonstrators at will including students, professionals, academics and public servants. Indeed even some elderly Buddhists who had never previously dreamt of breaking the law joined street demonstrations calling for the downfall of the South Vietnamese governments. During 1963 to 1966, many elderly with black teeth and
brown dress, many of them humble Vietnamese women, poured out into the streets and battled the police with bare hands. Although the military governments tried to buy off some high school and university student groups, the numbers of anti-war protesters were arriving rapidly. The Buddhist may have accepted their Institute leaders’ orders, but thousand of students all over the country who may not have ever set foot in a temple, spontaneously and voluntarily joined the protests. If they joined the Buddhist movement it was largely because the majority of ordinary Vietnamese, peasants and city dwellers, were weary of the war. As a result, aspirations for peace were no longer exclusive domain of the Buddhists. Joined as one, they represented people power which could have lived on in international student protests in following years, like the Thai student movement against the military junta, the French students’ revolution in May 1968 and U. S. University teach-ins and anti-war protests in the US. As outlined in Nhat Hanh’s analysis, demands for peace became the common link between many anti-war groups, including the progressive Catholics in South Vietnam. This explained why the urban Vietnamese, students, intellectuals, small business people and workers continued to support the Institute leaders in their efforts to end the war. Perplexed by the relentless activism of the Buddhists, some thought that the Institute leaders wanted power for themselves. (4) But their summation was wrong, for the Buddhists wanted power for the people to participate in the process to find a solution for the conflict. Attacked on the integrity of the Buddhist leaders were really only a smokescreen created by some ‘pundits’ who tried to minimise the problem and to belittle the Institute leaders. (5) Obsessed by political malice and out dated knowledge about Buddhism, these pundits argued that modern Vietnamese monks had abandoned the Buddha’s command to be ‘still and motionless ‘ and had rather plunged deep into politics while at the same time more of them were busy issuing political manifestoes:

_Above all, it is in South Vietnam that political Buddhism is making a most vigorous, most open attempt to seize temporal power. (Vietnamese) Buddhism may be as great a threat to the embattled country as the Vietcong- if not greater._ (6)

To be precise, the above comment could have read ‘as great a threat as to the Americans in their attempts to broaden the war’. Some Institute leaders were criticised by being described as the ‘Enlightened Ones with a hand grenade’ who incited riots in which the believers tossed grenades from the sanctuary of Buddhist headquarters while
teenagers ganged up on policemen and old people and children were used as human shields ahead of demonstrators (7).

Even so the U.S. government had formed a more sophisticated official view of the Buddhist leaders. In 1963 CIA analysts compiled profiles of many Institute leaders and noted that, there had been neither evidence that the Communists instigated or influenced the Buddhist demonstrations, nor that Tri Quang was a pro-Communist, or neutralist. The CIA also concluded that the Institute leaders did not appear to desire the responsibilities of office or direct participation in government, nor did they deliberately work for a Communist victory. (8) Despite this declaration of innocence it did not prevent some journalists who muddying the water and planting the suspicion of the motives of the Institute leaders, particularly a Tri Quang, and referring him as the Vietnamese Makarios. a reference to the Cypriot Archbishop.

On his Vietnam trip in 1964, McGeorge Bundy actually brought along with him biographical data of the principal Institute leaders like Tri Quang, Tam Chau and other Buddhist activists. While in Saigon, he ignored an opportunity to set up a dialogue with the Institute leaders, as he also did with Nhat Hanh in Washington in 1966. His aide, Charles Cooper, who did meet with the Buddhist leaders admitted that Bundy had been unnerved because Tri Quang played the ‘mystic’. Another important player in the war, Defence Minister McNamara admitted that the U.S. did not know enough about Buddhist objectives, and so he did not want to go to war against them.(9)

While the claim that they did not know the Buddhists’ motives was intentionally exaggerated, the American mission in Saigon and senior advisers desperately wanted to get the Institute leaders to endorse their war efforts. A CIA report indicated that there was no way to work with the Buddhists. Also the American President, it was reported, gave Ambassador Lodge an instruction to get tough with Tri Quang. In 1965 when political turmoil seemed never-ending, the President even thought of getting out of Vietnam and then taking position in Thailand instead. (10) Meanwhile McGeorge Bundy proposed to buy off the Buddhists by funnelling unofficial aid to the Buddhist leadership. Out of desperation Ambassador Taylor proposed that his Holiness The Dalai Lama and other world Buddhist leaders visit Vietnam ‘to educate Vietnamese bonzes on the perils of communism and their civil duties. (11) While America could
use its foreign aid to control and interfere with the South Vietnamese government affairs, relationships with the Buddhists were of a completely different nature. The Generals depended on American handouts to survive day by day but the Buddhist movement was in no way dependent. Their authority was deeply grounded in broad popular opposition to the war. Also, their ability to identify with, and speak for, a powerful current of nationalism that rebelled at the kind of American patronage so readily acquiesced in by the most important military leaders. (12)

It is hard to accept that the American Mission in Saigon as well as Johnson's senior advisers were not aware of the Buddhists' ultimate political goals. With the formidable support of the majority in South Vietnam, the Buddhist leaders wanted to end the war by negotiating peace with the NLF. Like Buddhist monks in general, they wished to reaffirm the first precept:

*After all, there is an ultimate aspiration that the war will end, so that both Vietnamese and American soldiers could be safe. At that time, there was only one path to follow, namely to end the war. When practising Compassion, you have to follow this path and there is no other path. You cannot wish one side wins and the other side loses.* (13)

At the opposite end of the scale, the Americans desperately needed a 'stable' government to endorse their policy of escalation, including bombings in the North and landing more American troops. The Administration's deepest fear was that a neutralist government inspired by the Buddhists would insist upon negotiating a settlement on its own terms. (14) During this time of upheaval, both Ambassadors, Lodge and Taylor, were fiercely opposed to any kind of civilian government. Lodge advised Khanh against establishing a civilian government until the South Vietnamese military situation became stronger, and when the populace was ready for it. Taylor also opposed any form of civilian rule because he feared the Buddhists might well have been able to exert a dominant influence on such a government which would tend toward neutralism. (15) What Washington meant by a 'stable and strong' government in Saigon now became clear. It was to be a government led by the military rather than popularly elected and strongly endorsing the bombing phases I and II policy which was persistently advocated by the senior advisers. This position is made clear in Professor Kahin's book, *Intervention*, as he notes:
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The abiding problem for American officials was that the more broadly based and responsible to public opinion a Saigon government became, the less disposed it would be to continue with the fighting, and the greater the popular pressure it would be under to negotiate a neutralist political settlement incompatible with a continuing U.S. presence (16).

As a result, any government which was acceptable to the United States would be unacceptable to the Buddhists and the Vietnamese people. The claim that the U.S. did not understand the Buddhist leaders’ motives and actions was at best, dishonest, and at worst, deceitful. From the time General Minh’s government was deposed until the final confrontation between the Buddhists and the American war machine in 1966, the Buddhist leaders’ objectives were always crystal clear, namely to work towards a popularly and democratically elected government which could claim its legitimacy as well as negotiate with the NLF to end the war. To the Buddhist leaders, the rise and fall of governments were trivial and accidental. If the Buddhists wanted any power, it was people power which could help the Vietnamese to decide their own destiny in a war that they did not accept.

The Two Chaotic Years

Whether General Khanh was in at the beginning of the Pentagon coup or came on board at the last minute, his reign was a stepping stone for the Americans to expand their policy of war to the North. Khanh was a very complex person. He was a loner in the Military Revolution Council, while most of the plotters belonged to a closely knit group of Catholic officers close to Ngo Dinh Nhu’s Can Lao or Dai Viet party. At that time Khanh was a protégé of the Field Military Chief in Vietnam, General Paul Harkins. He was regarded as clever, shrewd and ambitious. Neither friend nor foe trusted him. One of his victims, General Tran Van Don, while admitting Khanh’s cabinet was far more representative than that of General Minh, also commented that it was Khanh’s personality that made his coalition Government unworkable. (17) One co-plottter, General Nguyen Chan Thinh, who later became a powerful member of the Young Turks, complained that he was duped by Nguyen Khanh into believing that the plot was to remove a bunch of half hearted revolutionaries in Minh’s government.(18)
Khanh utilised all of his Machiavellian political skills to play a power game with different pressure groups, and miraculously survived the political turmoil for the whole year during which time the policy of escalation was hatched and developed by the President's senior advisers.

The relationship between General Khanh and the Institute leaders was also a complicated one. Although the Institute leaders regretted that General Minh was toppled only after three months in power, they were pleased when General Khanh signed an order to annul the Decree 10 which was the catalyst for an all-out campaign against President Diem. Owing to Khanh, the Unified Buddhist Church became a legal religious organisation on a same par with the Catholic Church. (19) Probably the Institute leaders did not know that a minister in Minh's government committed a fatal miscalculation of Washington's tolerance of a neutral solution in Saigon and an accommodation with the NLF, which was the real reason for its demise (20). Had the Institute leaders known the real reason for the coup, they would have had a different reaction. To appease the Buddhists, Khanh also requested two 'Buddhist' politicians to join his coalition government. In order to please Diem's victims, Khanh set up a Revolutionary Court to try the alleged murderers in the Hue Radio incident which had sparked the protest movement in the previous year. President Diem's younger brother, Ngo Dinh Can, and one of his followers were executed by a firing squad and Diem's family's assets were confiscated. Khanh provided the Buddhist Church with every resource available to ensure that the Buddha's birthday on May 26 became one of the biggest ceremonies ever. With Khanh 's support, the Church was able to raise nearly 20 million for the construction of the new Buddhist headquarters in the heart of Saigon. In July 1964 Khanh signed a Decree to allow the Buddhist Church to establish a Buddhist Army Chaplain. Furthermore, an inside informer revealed that Khanh showed his respect and affection to Thich Tri Quang by ordering a bunch of freshly cut roses from Dalat, a holiday resort 250 kilometres from Saigon, to be delivered daily to the doorsteps of the An Quang pagoda.

In order to win over the Catholic side, Khanh told the Catholics that the reason he joined the plotters to overthrow General Minh was because he wanted revenge for Diem and of his brother, Nhu. Khanh ordered that the man suspected of murdering Diem be executed. Thus, in the eyes of vengeful pro-Diem factions, Khanh became
their 'man'. To level the balance of power between the Buddhists and the Catholics, Khanh channelled money to a fanatical group of Catholics led by father Hoang Quynh, and encouraged them to stage counter-demonstrations every time the pro-Buddhist groups poured out into the streets. This tactic led to bloody confrontations between students, Buddhists and Catholics during his reign. Khanh also 'bought off' some student leaders by urging them to voice their support of his government. However the students were clever than Khanh gave them credit for. Sensing their leaders no longer expressed faithfully their wishes, a new Inter-Faculty Student Committee was voted in to replace the old one in early 1964. This new body spearheaded the organisation by staging countless demonstrations that forced Khanh to abandon his dream of becoming the Vietnamese Napoleon.

However, a group of army officers and civilians belonging to a closely knit party called the Dai Viet was causing Khanh a headache. They were the main plotters behind the Pentagon coup, some of them were Catholics and, in the past, very close to the late President Diem. Khanh had to reward them with positions both in his cabinet as well as in the revamped Military Revolutionary Council (MRC). To counter this group's influence, Khanh quickly promoted certain young colonels who later became a powerful group of officers within the RMC and nicknamed the Young Turks. Among them were Generals Nguyen Van Thieu, Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Chanh Thi who all played significant roles during the period in which the Struggle Movement led by the Buddhists revolted against the central government in the Summer 1966. To appease any resentment in the armed forces, and with the tacit approval of the Pentagon, Khanh raised the pay of all privates and corporal by 20 percent thereby ensuring their loyalty. (21)

Naturally, Khanh knew that without strong support from the Americans, he would soon meet the same fate as President Diem and General Minh. Even when the Pentagon coup was in process Khanh hinted that he was eager to turn to Ambassador Lodge for political advice. Soon after the coup had been successful, he met with Ambassador Lodge to ask for help as to the sort of the government he should form and who would make a good premier. (22)
He also quickly revoked General Minh’s policy restricting American Military Advisers into the lower levels of the armed forces and the civil administration. As Peter Grose of New York Times reported, the United States became involved in the Vietnamese Government at all levels. As promised right after the coup, Khánh met with Ambassador Lodge three times a week or more, to ask for political advice. Appreciating Khánh’s receptiveness, the Ambassador intended to groom him to be for presidency.

Khanh also sanctioned and began participating in a covert operation designed and directed by the U.S. code named OPLAN 34-A which air-dropped Vietnamese and Nationalist Chinese (Taiwanese) personnel on sabotage missions into North Vietnam. This operation led to a confrontation between North Vietnamese patrol boats and the Maddox warship which was then used as a pretext for the Johnson Administration to request the Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin resolution.

Khanh’s tractability and dependence on the U.S. earned him high praise from the American Mission in Saigon which quickly reached the era of the Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara. He recommended that American personnel at all levels in Vietnam should continue to make it clear to any potential coup plotters in the Dai Viet Party that the Americans fully supported the Khánh government.

The American Administration did whatever they could to shore up Khánh’s image. President Johnson in a cable in April, instructed the American Mission to help the Vietnamese government ‘do the job’ not letting any arbitrary limits on budget, manpower, or procedures stand in the way of Khánh’s success. As a consequence, by September 1964 total U.S. aid had increased to almost two million dollars per day. On a fact finding trip in March 1964, McNamara and Khánh toured the country together and the Secretary of Defence demonstrated his unstinting support of the new leader. Pictures of the Defence Secretary, McNamara, beaming benignly down on a diminutive, Premier Khánh, with their hands joined aloft in a sign of victory, appeared in newspapers throughout Vietnam and the United States. Unfortunately these failed to raise General’s charisma or appeal to the public. McNamara, shouting a slogan ‘long live Vietnam’ in Vietnamese (Việt Nam muôn năm), became a subject of ridicule among the more cynical Vietnamese at that time for McNamara’s pronunciation in
Vietnamese was not polished enough, so that by changing the tone of the third and the fourth words, the slogan’s meaning changed to ‘Vietnam wants to lie down’ (*Viet Nam muốn nằm*). To prevent another coup against Khanh (which was recorded by American intelligence as early as the first week of February 1964 and planned by the Dai Viet group) the CIA was instructed to monitor the plotters’ activities and discourage them from carrying out the coup. The Americans also made it clear to any other group opposing Khanh that the Administration backed him completely.

Ambassador Lodge and senior advisers in Washington were now more confident that the Saigon government was more than ready to endorse any strong overt U.S. military action against North Vietnam. Unpredictable as ever, in March Khanh was reluctant to endorse any escalation beyond an existing covert one unless the southern bases were strengthened with additional air defence provided for South Vietnam. However, seeing that American support was vital for his political survival, Khanh informed the army Chief of Staff, General Wheeler, who was visiting Vietnam at that time, that he now fully endorsed any American bombing programs against the North each time insurgents in the South mounted major attacks against his forces. (25)

Khanh’s intention was to declare martial law, suspend all civil rights, call for national mobilisation and get rid of his opponents. Ironically this time Washington was reluctant even though escalation was in the pipeline, because of a poor showing by the Saigon government. McNamara reported in the National Security Council meeting that, out of fourteen million South Vietnamese, Khanh’s government controlled only eight million and that 90-95 percent of Vietcong forces were actually recruited in South Vietnam! Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, asked the American Mission in Saigon to ‘devise incentives to enlist the full co-operation of people both in the cities and in the countryside to pursue the struggle as one in which they are personally involved’. (26) In May 1964, during another fact-finding trip of the Defence Minister, Khanh changed his mind and told McNamara that an attack on the North was the best way to cure his government’s shortcomings because a declaration of war would engage his people’s hearts in an all-out effort. Two months later he met with Dean Rusk, and suggested that prolonging the war would strengthen South Vietnamese national unity and mobilise patriotic reactions in the face of a more clear-cut external threat. When asked what the
reaction would be if the Chinese intervened, Khanh said that he had no quarrel with American use of nuclear arms.

In fact the Americans administration got more than they had expected for, not only did the Saigon Government endorse the extension of the war, they actually advocated it. However, at an administrative conference in Honolulu, it was decided that ground work was needed before advisers could recommend to the President any ‘binding commitment to serious action’, and as result they agreed to put the bombing attacks against the North on hold. (27) This would be in line with American domestic policy at that time. Ambassador Lodge, one of the most vocal advocates of bombing attacks at the Conference, threw his caution away when returning to Saigon. On arrival, Lodge went straight from the airport to meet Khanh and informed him that the U.S. government would now prepare the American people to accept action against the North. This information made Khanh to bold enough to lay plans for a major re-organisation of his government along more authoritarian lines to increase his own power. Lodge even warned Washington not be upset by news of more changes in Vietnam. This re-arrangement of power led to the introduction of a new constitution called the Vung Tau Charter.

Khanh’s hardened attitude was helped by American domestic politics. Aspired presidential candidate, Barry Goldwater, now regarded as a serious contender for the Republican nomination, proposed the use of low-yield atomic bombs to defoliate forests as well as the bombings of bridges, roads and railroad lines bringing supplies from Communist China. Ambassador Lodge, who so far had strongly supported Khanh, resigned so he could spend time working for the Republican candidate. Maxwell Taylor, a former Joint Chief of Staff, was now made the new Ambassador. Khanh was encouraged by these changes and so he called for a ‘March to the North’ on the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Accord. Two days later his de-facto deputy, Air Marshall General Nguyen Cao Ky, revealed that combat teams had been sent on sabotage missions into North Vietnam. Ky also boasted that his pilots were being trained for possible large-scale attacks and he actually flew a plane over North Vietnam on one such mission. The new Ambassador reprimanded Khanh and Ky but they defiantly asserted that, if the idea of a March to the North was not yet American policy, it was now South Vietnamese policy. However Ambassador Taylor viewed
these public statements as a desperate effort to keep Khanh’s foundering regime afloat. (28)

A week before the Gulf of Tonkin incident happened, Ambassador Taylor was authorised to alert Khanh to the possibility of an important incident planned so that the Americans could resort to using bombs as a retaliatory action. While American bombing against compatriots and relatives in the North was not popular amongst Southerners, the Gulf of Tonkin incident provided Khanh with an excuse to declare a state of emergency that gave him and his subordinates absolute power. The new constitution called the Vung Tau Charter, in full consultation with American officials, made Khanh President while still remaining the Chairman of the powerful Military Revolutionary Council. Khanh was thus able to oust General Minh whom he loathed, and General Khiem, whom he feared. On August 16, Khanh curtailed civil liberties, imposed strict censorship and restricted political activities. However in his zeal, he severely under-estimated the reactions of the students and the Buddhists who almost immediately launched a new wave of protests against his military dictatorship.

Right after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Institute leaders held a meeting to discuss the consequences of extending the bombings in the North. They knew what the Americans were up to but offered no concrete reactions at this time. The Buddhists had achieved their objectives of establishing a Unified Church which they had wanted since 1956. The United Buddhist Church constitution was officially recognised by the government and a national pagoda was being built. Premier Khanh had signed a decree to abolish restrictions imposed by the Diem regime and granted the Buddhists the same rights as Catholics. How would the Buddhists now respond to Khanh, as friend or foe?

As believers in peaceful means, the Institute leaders knew that they had to act to stop Khanh’s war plan from being realised. Inside information revealed that Tri Quang hesitated and offered no plan of action. More than a year previously he had also hesitated when the Buddhist elders in Hue decided to launch their campaign against Diem, because Diem’s youngest brother, Ngo Dinh Can, had supported Tri Quang in many temple building projects. Since assuming his role of power Khanh had known to treat Tri Quang fairly. Khanh also sent his power broker, his brother-in-law, to meet with Thien Minh and offered Buddhist politicians cabinet posts and a blank cheque.
However on the eve of the first anniversary of the Dehuge Campaign, when one year earlier Nhu had ordered his special force to arrest all the Buddhist leaders, Thien Minh had given the green light to students at Hue University to start the campaign against Khanh. On August 20, 1964 at the University of Hue, the president of the Union of Hue students declared an anti-dictatorship and anti-war declaration in front of ten thousand students. The chain reactions resulting from this reached Saigon almost immediately:

*As opposition to Khanh’s new government mounts, Saigon plunged into virtual anarchy. The Buddhists charge the government with ‘anti-Buddhist’ holdovers from the Diem era. Students mounted widespread and violent demonstrations—marching on Khanh’s office, storming the national radio station and stoning US Army billets.*

On August 22, ten thousand students surrounded Khanh’s compound to demand that he revoked the Vung Tau Charter. When his Cabinet secretary told the protesters that Khanh was away for business, the students refused to disperse. In the afternoon, Khanh was forced to confront them. They demanded the Vung Tau Charter immediately be revoked, a new and uncorrupt government be formed and that the generals go back to their military duties. They also demanded that former Catholic Can Lao members be excluded from government positions. Khanh promptly promised to carry out all these demands. The next day, students invaded a Saigon radio studio and called for the director to stop broadcasting distorted news. When the Director refused to see them, the students became violent and burned his office. Khanh was not unprepared for these protests and a counter-demonstration staged by a group of students, armed with deadly weapons was orchestrated by the National Police. This group ransacked and burned down the Saigon Union of students’ office in retaliation. It was believed that this group had been financed by Khanh’s power broker, the same person who had tried to buy off the Institute leaders.

On August 25, twenty five thousand students and Buddhists got together to commemorate the anniversary of an incident in which a school girl who had been shot by police. Afterwards they surrounded Khanh’s office and repeated their demands. Khanh and his vice premier, Nguyen Xuan Oanh, had to come out to appease them. Trying to placate the crowd, Khanh made an obsequious and undignified address from the top of a car, denying that he had ever wanted to be a dictator. Joining together with
the students' cries, he shouted 'Down with military dictatorship'. When the crowd still refused to disperse, he discreetly withdrew to his military quarters' (30)

A few months previously Khanh had been so confident that he held all the political trump cards. The suddenly he found out he became the target of protest and dissent. Those young officers who had been waiting in the wings for his political downfall were against him. The Catholic Dai Viet group was also actively and openly plotting against him while the Buddhists and students poured on to the streets to protest against the Vung Tau Charter. Then the Northern Catholic group previously financed by him, staged street demonstrations denouncing him for supposedly doing the Buddhists too many favours. This Catholic group was further antagonised by witnessing some of the Can Lao party members associated with President Diem received heavy sentences imposed by a special Court set up by Khanh. Thus he was no longer regarded as one of their men consequently they re-affiliated themselves with the Catholic Dai Viet group.

Apart from the Americans, Khanh was suddenly isolated and unsupported. He knew that the Catholic Dai Viet officers were busily plotting his downfall. The Young Turks were sitting on the fence to wait and see which way the Americans leaned. Realising the Buddhists were now a formidable political force who did not protest against Khanh personally, but only to his intention of grasping absolute power, Khanh sought an agreement with the Institute leaders, amongst them, Tri Quang, Tam Chau and Thien Minh. As their price, they demanded that Khanh abolish his new constitution, establish a civilian government, assure full freedom of religious expression and schedule free elections for November 1, 1965. Meanwhile the Buddhist leaders realised that Catholic pro-Diem followers would come back to power and if they did, there would be another deadly confrontation. In the Military Revolution Council, Khanh, Air-Marshall Ky and General Thi were the loners, as opposed to the tightly knit Catholic generals. The Buddhist leaders agreed to accept a marriage of convenience and allied themselves to Khanh as long as he divorced himself from the military and civilian elements regarded by the Buddhists as the remnants of the Diem's control organ, the Can Lao Party. Khanh was aware that the Young Turks in the Military Revolution Council had never fully supported him, so he re-installed the four generals of Minh's government, in order keep the power check and balances with the Young Turks. Khanh realised that his alliance with the United States was not sufficient to maintain his position for long so
eventually he turned to the only organised non-communist political force in South Vietnam, the Buddhists. By allying with them, he hoped to gain additional leverage against military rivals, more room to manoeuvre and shore up support in times of crises. (31) Weighting the options available to him, finally Khanh agreed to the Buddhists’ requests, announcing that he would revise the new constitution, reduce press censorship and permit orderly demonstrations.

Their two key-demands, namely the establishment of a civilian government and free elections, became the Buddhists’ objectives until at least Summer 1966, when the bloody confrontation that they envisaged exploded in Hue. The CIA saw only too well that the Buddhists’ ultimate objectives, commenting that ‘a desire for a quick solution to the long struggle against the Vietcong may be an important factor underlying the current agitation’. (32)

The Institute leaders realised that their authority and appeal were grounded in broad popular opposition to the war and their ability to identify with, and speak for, a powerful current of nationalism. This had ensured them of a formidable popular backing and so they were confident that their ultimate goal should be no less than a negotiated settlement with the Front to end the war. In a CIA report, the Americans admitted that such a Buddhist-leaning government would jeopardise US interests and objectives in Vietnam, meaning to hinder the bombing projects lobbied by the senior advisers and Ambassador Taylor. The CIA also viewed Tri Quang as a fanatical nationalist who undoubtedly was anxious to see the US out of Vietnam at the earliest possible opportunity. (33) To deflect attention from these long-range objectives, the Buddhist leaders emphasised mere short-term objectives. Their efforts were focused on how to influence the existing government’s policies on less explosive issues, such as promises of elections, freedom of expression and religious practice.

The alliance between Khanh and the Buddhists, however, angered the North Vietnamese Catholics who were probably going to create havoc and riots in Saigon. Religious rights are accepted as natural in a democratic country, but the Catholics, who were used to being treated favourably by the French colonialism and Diem, were upset at seeing their religious monopoly taken away. Also, the Catholic hierarchy felt
threatened when many members of Catholic Can Lao party were tried and given severe sentences.

In order to avoid any unnecessary conflict, the Institute leaders appealed to their faithful to be absolutely non-violent regardless of any provocation. A group of Northern Catholics led by Father Hoang Quynh declared that they would stage a public demonstration on the Buddha’s Birthday (Vesak Day). This was a direct insult to the Buddhists and likely to incite bloody clash between both Catholics and non-Catholics. The Archbishop of Saigon diocese, Archbishop Nguyen Van Binh, had to denounce this aggressive move and forbade any Catholics to stage demonstrations on Vesak Day. However the Northern Catholics had never obeyed orders from the diocese of their Southern counterparts, but only from their Northern priests, who behave like warlords towards the Catholic hierarchy in the South. Even so the Vesak ceremony passed without any serious incidents. But only two weeks later, on June 7, thirty five thousand Catholics demonstrated in Saigon to denounce what they alleged was government favouritism towards the Buddhists. (34) A week later, on June 16, the Catholics in Hue took to the streets to show their solidarity with their counterparts in Saigon. Again the Institute leaders appealed to their followers to refrain from reaction which might ignite bloodshed.

Thus, while the protest of twenty-five thousand students and Buddhists was absolutely peaceful, the Ho Nai group armed with deadly weapons, surrounded the Joint Chief of Staff compound and demanded to meet with the Military Revolution Council who were at a meeting to deliberate the fate of the Vung Tau Charter. Their banners and placards expressed their confusing objectives from supporting the Military Revolutionary Council, to denouncing the pro-Communist and neutralist elements. When they were refused entrance to the military compound, they became violent. A soldier was slashed and several were wounded. In retaliation, the soldiers shot at the protesters and killed four and wounded another eleven. (35) In the colonial period, the Catholics’ main target were Confucians, but now they vented all their anger directly at the Buddhists. In the past their true friends were the French colonialists, now their loyal friends were the Americans and those who fully supported American war policies, like the Dai Viet Catholic group. Eventually they considered the rest of the South Vietnamese as their enemies. Thus, in the afternoon on the same day, they marched to the Saigon Radio
office demanding their right to broadcast. They immediately destroyed the premises when this demand was refused. They scuffled with students at a few technical colleges for no apparent reasons. During the fight, thirteen Catholic protesters were wounded and another eight were kept prisoners by the students. Two students were stabbed to death in the confrontation. The office of the Saigon Catholic Diocese and the UBC jointly called for all sides to be calm, but to no avail. On August 28 the technical students took revenge. They surrounded a Catholic school, this time with home made weapons, and the brawl lasted until midnight. Paratroopers were sent in to control the crowds. Two more were killed and fifty injured (36)

A bloodier clash between the Catholics and the non-Catholics took place in Da Nang City, a hundred kilometres from Hue. When ten thousand demonstrators marched towards an American army post, an American guard shot in the air on panic. The demonstrators, also panicked, scattered and mistakenly ran into a Catholic village. Thinking the protesters were going to attack them, the Catholic local force shot at the ‘invaders’. Eleven demonstrators were killed and another forty-two were wounded. The crowd was out of control. They burned down 450 out of 500 hundred houses in the village as well as two Catholic churches. A thousand villagers had to flee in boats. The riots continued in the street for two days. An American hospital was ransacked and four patients were dragged out of their beds and beaten. The government had to declare a state of emergency.

Believing these chaotic events were only a smokescreen for a plot being hatched by the Catholic generals, the Chairman of the Institute, Thich Tam Chau, warned the government: “The events in the past few days showed that the Buddhists were still threatened by the dark elements. The Government had to be determined to deter the elements associated with the former government from attacking the Buddhists. If our demands are not met on or before October 17, we have no choice but to act.” (37)

The threat of a resurgence of the Catholic military officers was very likely. The brawls in the streets caused by the Northern Catholics were just a prelude to a power takeover by pro-Diem generals. On September 13, there was an aborted coup, led by two Catholic generals, Lam Van Phat and Duong Van Duc, plus a number of middle
ranking officers from the Catholic Dai Viet party. Together with some civilians closely associated with the Can Lao party, they were angered by the growing influence of the Buddhists. The plotters read an eulogy to President Diem on Saigon Radio and publicly advocated the restoration of the previous ‘glorious’ regime. This time Khanh survived only because he still had American support. Right after the coup the Voice of America Radio quickly made an announcement that the United States backed only the Khanh government. Field Commander, General Westmoreland, also made an all out effort to apply sustained pressure on the commanders of some units whom the coup leaders most counted, and persuaded them to disengage their forces and get out of Saigon. General Westmoreland himself met the coup leader, General Duong Van Duc, and told him in no uncertain terms that the U.S. government did not in any way support his move. Westmoreland wryly reported that ‘Duc said he understood and thanked me. He seemed to be a shaky and insecure young man’. (38)

The ‘Young Turks’ did not throw their weight against the rebels until the American opposition to the coup was clear. Only did they rescue Khanh, so that they could reduce his power and increase their leverage. However the mounting threat from the Young Turks made the bonding between Khanh and the Buddhist leaders closer. The Buddhist leaders feared that the Can Lao Party members would grasp power again and thought Khanh was the lesser evil of the two, who, at least, did not pose any serious danger to the Buddhist Church unlike that of the Catholic generals.

After Diem’s fall, the Buddhist Church was mostly on the defensive. On the one hand, they did not hold any activities which could have been seen as provocative or vengeful to the Catholics. On the other, they were busy putting their own Church organisations in order. As Tri Quang admitted, many problems that troubled the Church began to emerge, such as how to find a compromise formula for power sharing between different sects with different traditional practices, personnel and even political affiliation in a ‘unified’ organisation. The last thing in the monks’ mind was to exercise their power to support or dislodge a particular premier or government as some accused the Institute of. However sensing the resurgence of the former Catholic Can Lao party members sneaking back to power, the Institute leaders were highly alarmed. At the same time, the tempo of the war increased at a dizzying speed, causing the Institute a dilemma for, the more the Institute engaged in anti-war activities, the more it became politicised.
The price the Institute leaders asked of Khanh in return for their support was that a civilian government be formed immediately and a popularly elected one in the near future. It seemed a reasonable demand by any standard. However, Ambassador Taylor, could detect the Buddhist covert agenda very well. Taylor rightly feared that a government less dominated by the military, would be less likely to support the policy of escalation that the White House senior advisers had carefully laid down in the last few months.

At first, Taylor advised Khanh against trying to establish any form at all of civilian rule, arguing that such a government would be too weak and tend toward neutrality. However, on seeing thousands of students and urban people spontaneously joining street demonstrations, Taylor had to map out a new political system that locked out the Buddhists. While a civilian government was to be established, the supreme power was still in the hands of the Military Revolution Council and the Buddhist sympathisers were locked out of the key positions. Khanh continued to be the head of the Military Revolution Council and still had political influence and ultimate authority in the new government. The Americans also agreed to exile two generals opposed to Khanh. One of them, General Khiem, was the leader of the Dai Viet group that Khanh feared the most. Khanh appointed a legislative council, called the National Supreme Council, led by Phan Khac Suu, who was acceptable to both Buddhists and Catholics. Soon after, Suu appointed Tran Van Huong Premier on October 30. The Buddhists immediately launched an all-out campaign to dislodge him because the Buddhists regarded him as yet another American puppet. On his trip to Washington, Ambassador Taylor was instructed by the President to restore a stable government which ‘should speak for and to, its people’ and if necessary, to create a new Diem. (39) Even Tran Van Huong was not Taylor’s first choice, although the Ambassador had at least achieved, his goal of denying the Buddhist influence in the new government. After meeting with Huong and Khanh, Taylor announced a new inducement for the Saigon government in which the Americans agreed to pay for an increase of Saigon’s armed forces by 100,000 men, bringing their total strength to 600,000. This announcement provoked almost instant protest from both students and Buddhists. The support for the increase of the Saigon armed forces signified the Administration’s intention to follow the war-path and crush any opposition to it. Huong, a former teacher under the French colonial period, was

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closely associated with a regional extremist group who had wanted to secede the Southern part of Vietnam into an independent country, called Nam Ky Quoc. His former colonial public servant mentality was reflected in his political policy and demonstrated in his maiden speech when assuming the Premiership. He wanted to restore ‘law and order’ and the authority of the central government as well as to separate political activities from religious and educational institutions, there by ignoring that, less than a year previously, it was the Buddhist movement that had rescued him from obscurity. Huong warned the Buddhists that he would not hesitate to use force, which he did. When the protesters refused to heed his warnings, his threats became very offensive. He described the Buddhist leaders as ‘hooligans in monks’ robes, performing monkeys tricks’ which was slightly less civilised than Madame Nhu’s description of the monks who self immolated as ‘barbequed monks’. Huong’s cabinet comprised mostly octogenarians who had served in the cabinet of the last Emperor, Bao Dai and members of a Catholic group that had a formative influence on the Can Lao Party. However, the main reasons why the Buddhists decided to unleash an intense campaign against Huong, was not so much because of his personality, but because Huong was instrumental in the American attempt to bring the war to the North. Those who accused the Institute leaders of being power drunk or politically ambitious, were missing the point which was that the motives of the Buddhist movement and of the American policy makers were mutually exclusive. The senior advisers and Ambassador Taylor hoped that the sustained bombing would inject some life into the dejected spirits in South Vietnam, but ironically President Johnson only approved it on the condition that the generals and politicians in Saigon ‘pulled up their political socks’ to achieve political stability. In the eyes of the hawkish advisers, the Buddhists represented too formidable an obstacle for the Americans to have any hope of forming a stable government to endorse the expansion of the war. As Bill Bundy recognised when he made a trip to Saigon, a government acceptable to the U. S. would be unacceptable to the Institute leaders and the instigation of a pro-American government to sanction sustained bombing the North would inevitably mean clash with the Buddhists before, during and after such a government was born. (40) In other words, confrontation with the Buddhists was inevitable.

Ambassador Taylor acknowledged that the majority of the South Vietnamese wanted peace and that the Buddhist movement now provided a channel for the anti-war
sentiment. If the Buddhist leaders had a say in any government they could create an atmosphere conducive to demands for a cease fire then a negotiated settlement with the Front and, eventually, the departure of the Americans. (41) Hence the Buddhists had to be denied power at any cost.

Unlike in the struggle against Diem, although they had sympathy of the non-Buddhists, the Buddhists fought the battle by themselves. Now mass demonstrations were initiated and organised by university and high school students. The Buddhists had a high profile because they were the best organised groups and their leaders clearly voiced their opposition to any attempt to bring the war to the North. Huong was appointed Premier on October 30, 1964 and his cabinet was approved by Phan Khac Suu, the Head of State, on November 4. While the Patriarch, Thich Tinh Khiet, appealed to the Buddhists for calm and patience, the Saigon University Union almost immediately castigated Huong’s cabinet men were only a group of octogenarian bureaucrats. Two weeks later a student delegation had an audience with the Head of State and asked him to disband the cabinet. (42) The high school students also joined the protest and boycotted classes. In a desperate response, Huong appointed one of his henchmen as the police commissioner and ordered the police crack down on the students. He also asked the U.S. to supply combat police units with sophisticated crowd control weapons. Not deterred by Huong’s brute force, more and more high school students joined the demonstrations until Huong was forced to close all high schools and Universities in Saigon and to impose a curfew. On November 25, a school boy was fatally shot by the police. Huong’s reactions were almost identical to those of Ngo Dinh Nhu in his last days. Both did not hesitate to use brute force against teen-aged sons and daughters of the middle class people who supported the regime. Like Nhu, Huong applied divide and rule tactics by buying off bogus Buddhist groups. As a result, both turned the whole urban community into an effective opposition to the regime.

The anti-Huong protests which turned out to be violent and had anti-American overtones, exploded everywhere, particularly in Saigon and in Central Vietnam where the Buddhists’ influence was overwhelming. In Saigon and Hue, students ransacked the American libraries and demanded that Ambassador Taylor be recalled. The year when President Kennedy was assassinated, the students held a spontaneous commemoration for him and requested his statue be erected in a park. Now to vent their frustration at the
U.S. Embassy, they pulled down Kennedy’s statue. It was a popular uprising against the Americans and their submissive generals and politicians. This was not a case of the Buddhist Movement versus Premier Huong, but rather that Buddhists’ organisations constituted the main channels for nationalist expression. It was Huong and the American hawks versus the people. The Institute leaders became popular because they were in tune with the increasingly widespread popular opposition to the war and the mounting fear of an imminent American-instigated escalation. (43)

Then there happened an incident which brought the alliance between Khanh and the Buddhists closer. Khanh and the Young Turks insisted the National Supreme Council, which was largely a ceremonial legislative body, to pass a law to retire nine generals and thirty other officers with more than twenty years of service. This was a blatant attempt to rid of four ‘neutralist’ generals in the previous government, whom the younger officers feared one day might make a come back. With Taylor’s tacit encouragement, the National Supreme Council refused. However the Young Turks and Khanh would not tolerate any such challenge from this powerless body, and so renamed their military group the Armed Forces Council and went on dismissing legislative members. Infuriated, Ambassador Taylor summoned the Young Turks to a meeting at the Embassy in which he issued a thinly veiled threat: ‘Now you have made a real mess. We cannot carry you forever if you do things like this’. Incensed at the way Taylor had lectured them, the Armed Forces Council announced their decision to carry on with the dismissal. The next day, Ambassador Taylor rang Khanh and asked him and some other officers to resign and leave the country. Unknown to Taylor, Khanh taped the whole telephone conversation. Khanh was impressed with the Buddhists’ disciplined yet fierce campaign against Huong and he also knew that Ambassador Taylor secretly negotiated with the Young Turks to replace him. He decided to come to an agreement with the Institute leaders, called the January 22 treaty by the American Embassy. On that day, at a press conference, Khanh issued a warning against ‘foreign intervention in Vietnamese affairs’ and denounced Taylor of abusing his position as an Ambassador. Khanh went further by threatening to declare Taylor a persona non grata. According to inside information, the Buddhist leaders promised to support Khanh in exchange for an elected parliament in the near future. The political stand off between Khanh and the Ambassador lasted another month. Khanh finally decided to take sides with the Buddhists and on January 27, he removed Premier Huong in a
bloodless coup. This was the one and only coup that the American administration was presented with a *fait accompli*. The Armed Forces Council gave Khanh a mandate to resolve the political crisis by taking charge of the government. Taylor, the former Joint Chief of Staff was out-maneuvered by the ever unpredictable Khanh and deeply hurt.

He was deeply worried too. Taylor immediately cabled Washington saying that the alliance between Khanh and the Tri Quang-led-Buddhist Institute had caused the coup, and that most senior generals had supported the action. He noted that the Institute leaders now appeared to be in a position of dominant power and influence in the country. Taylor observed that although Khanh hoped to use the alliance with the monks to his advantage, it looked much more likely that it would be the Buddhists who would use him. His inner thoughts are revealed clearly in this cable which he sent to Dean Rusk:

*The most sinister aspect of this affair is the obvious danger that the Buddhist victory may be an important step toward the formation of a government which eventually leads the country into negotiations with Hanoi and the National Liberation Front.* (44)

The ‘unholy’ alliance was seen by Taylor as a union of two elements adverse to U.S. interests, and for the first time Washington considered quitting Vietnam. Seeing that the flame of anti-American emotion could be fanned up any moment, Taylor also agreed to evacuate American dependents from South Vietnam lest they be in danger from protesting mobs.

U.S intelligence reported that South Vietnam was on the brink of social and political disintegration and revolution. The outing of Huong plunged South Vietnam into further turmoil. Nobody really knew if Khanh or the Buddhist Institute was in control; nor if a deal with the Front was being brokered. The CIA warned that power was in the hands of a militant nationalistic and potentially xenophobic group lead by politically minded monks and students. Most importantly the CIA confirmed that this was a *revolution quite distinct from the Vietcong directed insurgency*. (45)

Thus, senior advisers in the American Government were able to use this looming social chaos to persuade President Johnson to order the Flaming Darts operation, i.e. sustained
bombing, without a precondition of a stable government in South Vietnam. The President declared: ‘Stable government or no stable government, we’ll do what we have to do. I’m prepared to do that. We will move strongly. Khanh is our boy’. (46) Taylor was deeply hurt by this out-maneuvering and he no longer regarded Khanh as ‘his boy’. Before being deposed by Khanh, Huong actually sought Taylor’s approval to bring about a coup against Khanh by cooperating with the Catholic officers and install General Khiem, who was the Vietnamese Ambassador in Washington, to replace Khanh. Realising that the coup was poorly prepared and involved difficult logistical problems, such as providing US transport for Khiem from Washington to Saigon, Taylor refused to endorse Huong’s coup, but promised sanctuary to Huong should the coup failed. Meanwhile Taylor kept on looking for a ‘first team’ in which the military would have dominant power. One thing was certain, he did not intend to include Khanh or the Buddhists. (47) Taylor mounted a renewed effort to oust Khanh by casting doubt in the Young Turk officers’ mind that Khanh was about to lead both Vietnam and the United States into a type of negotiated settlement possibly favourable to the Communists. Ironically, just a year previously, Khanh had used the same excuse to remove Minh’s government. Now, when himself pushed into a corner by Taylor, he decided to follow that same path. General Tran Van Don, Khanh’s adversary and critic, concluded that Khanh had to go because of his contact with the National Liberation Front. This may have been the case, because President Diem and General Minh met the same fate when they had done what Khanh just did. But the CIA had known that Khanh and Huynh Tan Phat, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Front, exchanged letters in late December. At that time Khanh still enjoyed backing from Bill Bundy, the National Security Council adviser and McNamara even though the Ambassador had made up his mind to remove Khanh. Not until had Khanh established a close alliance with the Buddhists in mid January 65, did the Americans decide to abandon him. Politically the Americans were wary of the growing influence of the Buddhist Institute that that of the National Liberation Front.

Taylor approached the key military figures who had taken a firm position in attempting to control the Buddhist Institute ‘agitation’. He gave them the green light to move against Khanh. In particular, Taylor tried to convince Ky and other top generals who were seen as candidates to replace Khanh, such as generals Nguyen Van Thieu, Nguyen Huu Co and Tran Thien Khiem, that the United States in no way backed Khanh. With
the exception of Co, the other three belonged to the Catholic Dai Viet group that the Buddhists feared and disliked.

Even though the Americans needed a new Premier as reliably pro-American as Huong, in order not to provoke the Buddhists unnecessarily, Taylor had to accept Khanh’s choice, Dr Phan Huy Quat, as the next Premier. Dr Quat was appointed by the Armed Forces Council and thus he could be controlled. Furthermore one of the Catholic generals, Nguyen Van Thieu was appointed Minister for Defence. Luck was with Taylor too. The Dai Viet group could wait no longer. Although Taylor did not endorse the coup plotters (because their successful prospect was nil!), they still launched their desperate move. Only three days after Quat’s cabinet had been sworn in, General Lam Van Phat and Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao led troops in Saigon. They quickly seized the Radio station and announced that General Khiem in Washington would replace Khanh. The coup leaders openly announced that the ousting of Diem was wrong. They broadcast a long eulogy to Ngo Dinh Diem and promised a return of Diemist officers, as well as possible retribution against those who had staged the 1963 coup. Buddhist reaction was fierce, particularly in Central Vietnam. Ambassador Taylor had never had the best opportunities to oust Khanh. On one hand, Taylor negotiated with the rebels to withdraw from the city, on the other, he asked Khanh’s rescuers, General Ky and Thi of the Young Turks to hold off the anti rebel campaign to the last minute. Ky and Thi agreed to withdraw their support of Khanh and cooperate with the U.S. mission for the twin objectives of ousting Khanh and keeping the Catholic officers from taking power. On February 24, Khanh pleaded both Taylor and Field Commander General Westmoreland, by agreeing to leave Vietnam while accepting the position of ‘roving ambassador’. Seeing Khanh on to the plane and watching it off, Taylor felt immensely relieved commenting: ‘Stinker no 1 finally put into orbit!’. (48) Within a year, from the most able general of Vietnamese Armed Force, General Khanh became ‘stinker no 1’. But there were many more ‘stinkers’ in the coming months. Right after Khanh left, Taylor advised Washington that a major impediment to attacking the North had been removed and that it was safe to carry out ‘Rolling Thunder’, the sustained bombing against the North. (49)

Taylor would rather have had a more reliable supporter like Huong, but Dr Quat’s government was a symbol of political continuity and a legitimising civilian cloak that
many American officials wanted to maintain. Dr Quat was overshadowed by the triumvirate of generals Thieu, Ky and Thi and he publicly endorsed the reprisal bombings. Even so the Americans were not sure he could withstand the rising neutralism or the growing peace movement. On February 27, a peace movement called ‘The Self Determination Movement’ openly conducted a petition signing campaign in Saigon and other major cities, calling for both the South Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front to cease fighting and seek immediate negotiation. This secular group was able to collect at least four thousand signatures in just three days. This particular peace movement was led by Dr Pham Van Huyen, who had been a cabinet member and Commissioner for Refugees under Diem’s regime. His daughter, Mme Ngo Ba Thanh, a law graduate from the Universities of Paris, Barcelona and Columbia, served as a chief judicial adviser to President Diem. This family of celebrities could not be accused of being communists, or communist sympathisers. Even under intense pressures from the Americans and the Armed Forces Council, Dr Quat seemed to waver to use harsh measures to suppress this group. His cabinet held a two-day meeting to work out a policy for dealing with anti-war sentiment. Eventually, Quat dismissed three hundred public servants who signed the petition for peace and arrested nearly one hundred more. The three ring leaders was ‘deported’ to the North even though none of them were members of the National Liberation Front, let alone members of the Communist Party! On March 1, Dr Quat made a public announcement that the American officials had been waiting for. He declared that ‘there can be no peace until the Communists end the war they have provoked and stop their infiltration. (50)

As many American historians observed, by the end of February 1965, all the most important U.S. policy initiatives were in place and the process of Americanisation was proceeding at full speed. Commenting on this process, Frederik Logevall wrote:

On the thirteenth of that month, the administration formally agreed to initiate regular, sustained bombing of North Vietnam and enemy-held area of South Vietnam. On the nineteenth, U.S. planes attacked Vietcong forces, in which no South Vietnamese airmen were involved. The assault, carried out by waves of F-100s and B-577s, would last a week and would be expanded to targets throughout the South. On the twenty-sixth, the White House after minimal discussion, agreed to William Westmoreland’s
request for two more battalions of marines to guard the airbase at Danang, thus introducing the first U.S. ground troops to the war. Neither Congress nor the South Vietnam government was consulted about these decisions. On March 2, six days before the marines splashed ashore, more than one hundred American planes hit targets inside North Vietnam. It was the first attack carried out in non-retaliation. It marked the start of Rolling Thunder. (51)

The tempo of war increased at a dizzying speed and it seemed that all was lost on the peace front. However, the Institute leaders’ peace efforts also intensified. The CIA reported that Tri Quang and his associates were moving towards an ‘openly espoused neutralism’ while articulating with increasing intensity popular sentiment for peace. The Chairman of the Institute, Thich Tam Chau, had put aside any perceived differences with other Institute leaders, and, had gone further than any other members of the Buddhist Institute to publicly call for peace. In face of this, Dr Quat seemed indecisive. Even though he had fired the public servants that signed the peace petition, he appeared quite lenient towards a monk, Thich Quang Lien, a graduate of Yale, who organised a group called ‘the Movement to Protect Peace and Happiness of the People’. Quang Lien recommended that North Vietnamese troops withdrew from the South and called upon the Vietcong to lay down their weapons. In return for this gesture the American troops would also withdraw and allow the South Vietnamese to determine their own future. The first two proposals were identical with official American demands. But ‘withdrawal’, ‘negotiation’ and ‘self-determination’ did not sit comfortably with hawkish elements in the White House! At that time Cabot Lodge had just been appointed Ambassadorship when Taylor’s term expired. He stopped over in Saigon on 28 April and at a meeting with Dr Quat, Lodge flatly advised the Premier to use harsher measures against the Buddhists, such as arresting Quang Lien and destroying his peace movement as decisively as Quat had done with other non-Buddhist dissenters. Lodge also was critical of Dr Quat for not showing more determination in taking all necessary measures to prosecute the war and wasting efforts by looking ahead to cease fires and negotiations. Dr Quat finally yielded to American pressure and forced Quang Lien to leave the country for ‘medical treatment’. He was then banned from returning to Vietnam for two years. Even though Dr Quat publicly denounced Communists’ aggression and somewhat reluctantly endorsed the retaliatory bombings, he did not ‘invite’ American marines to land in Chu Lai as the official version stated.
He and his deputy, Tran Van Tuyen, were afraid that rapid Americanisation could not be disguised and the more American forces landed in Vietnam, the more his government would seem like ‘a lackey of the Americans’ as the image in the Vietcong propaganda described it. Like his predecessor, Dr Quat also had an agreement with the Institute leaders who requested the same condition to apply as was the case with Khanh, namely an election for a constitutional parliament to be held in 1966. Dr Quat told Thien Minh, the principal tactician of the Institute then, that the Buddhist agenda were premature. Instead, he signed a decree to allow an election for the representatives of the main municipalities, towns and cities. Quat also agreed to disband many fragmental secret services and transferred their responsibilities to the central National Police. Dr Quat also ‘played’ his Buddhist card. He appointed General Thi, who was the only Buddhist ‘cherished son’ in the Armed Forces Council, as Commander of the I Corps, as well as Colonel Pham Van Lieu (once considered as Nasser of Vietnam) as the Commissioner of the National Police. Almost over night, Colonel Lieu replaced over half of precinct chiefs in Saigon- a move that enhanced Thi’s power base as well as antagonising some other generals in the Armed Forces Council. (52)

Although relations between Dr Quat and the Buddhists were not always close, but rather tactical, Dr Quat became a subject of harassment by the Northern Catholic group. When the Catholic officers affiliated with the Ho Nai group, failed in another desperate coup on May 20, the Armed Forces Council members, including general Thieu, agreed to get rid of the ‘trouble makers’ who were closely identified with the Can Lao Party. However, the Northern Catholic group intensified their efforts to dislodge Dr Quat. There was an attempt to assassinate him and Dr Quat’s government was denounced by the Catholics as pro-neutralist and pro-Buddhist. Dr Quat was a member of a party that was well known for their anti-communist and anti-colonialist sentiments. He was jailed by Diem but this stigma did not seem to stick. Dr Quat had never been popular with the American Mission. Not only did he show respect for the Institute leaders who ran a disciplined and effective campaign against Huong, but he was also reluctant to acquiesce in the introduction of large numbers of U.S. and South Korea ground combat forces. Citing Quat’s inability to work out an accommodation among the competing political and military interests, the American Mission in Saigon cabled Washington that they would have to access the situation and consider various alternatives, including a more active military involvement in the political situation. This could be best from both
a political and a military standpoint. As correspondent Jack Langguth reported in the *New York Times*, the United States mission’s efforts began to shift from maintaining Dr Quat in power, to paving the way for an orderly transfer of the Premiership to someone else—namely, the Saigon generals. (53) The fate of Dr Quat was sealed. His was to be the last civilian government in the history of the Vietnam war, until the total collapse of the Saigon Government. After a series of clashes between the Premier and the head of state, Phan Khac Suu, about who had the right to appoint the Cabinet, Dr Quat asked the Armed Forces Council to intervene and solve the deadlock. One of his Chiefs of Staff and his protegé, Bui Diem, proposed Dr Quat transferred power temporarily to the Generals. Dr Quat agreed but in doing so signed his own death sentence. Unknown to Dr Quat, Bui Diem was a go-between of the Americans and the Armed Forces Council. General Thieu and Ky quickly seized power, but not with temporary intention. Thus not long after the Armed Forces Council appointed Ky Premier, Bui Diem was rewarded by being made the Vietnamese Ambassador to the United States.

**The Final Showdown in Summer 1966**

Ky was not America’s first choice because many White House officials were concerned about his personal character and his political abilities. Ky was described by the Deputy Ambassador, Alex Johnson, as an unguided missile. He was a flamboyant character. He drank Jim Beam bourbon in the middle of a press conference, he gambled and womanised heavily, dressed ostentatiously and always sported a zipperred black flying suit belted with twin pearl-handled revolvers. Bill Bundy, a senior National Security Council adviser, described Ky as ‘the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel’. (54) Actually the American mission’s first choice had been General Thieu, but some U.S. officials felt that if a Catholic assumed the leadership now, the Buddhists would be provoked into another reaction of equal, if not greater, force than the one that had driven Huong from office a few months ago. Also, even Thieu seemed to occupy a ceremonial position for he was the Head of the Armed Forces Council, which it seemed, was very influential Even though Ambassador Lodge was contemptuous of Ky, the Mission had to settle for him. Lodge advised the United States not take the Government of Marshall Ky seriously and proposed the Administration to ‘do whatever we think we ought to do regardless of what the Saigon government does’. Senator Mike Mansfield described the situation as farcical commenting ‘there was anyone who
represents anybody, in a political sense'. (55) Nevertheless no one could have been more cooperative with respect to the introduction of large U.S. combat forces than Ky, who repeatedly urged that additional troops be sent to Vietnam, soon requesting even more than were available. (56)

The Institute leaders’ deepest unease concerned the Dai Viet Catholic group, now represented by General Thieu, and who had been close to both president Diem and Nhu’s Can Lao party. They wanted veru much to support General Thi, if he agreed to assume power. Thi was the rebel leader who had staged an unsuccessful coup against president Diem in 1960, thus he was distant, if not host, to the pro-Diem officers. He was also a nominal Buddhist and a son of Hue, stronghold of the Buddhist Movement. Thi was well known for his volatile and fierce temper. During the dispute between the Young Turks and Ambassador Taylor, the CIA reported that Thi exploded and threatened that ‘if he was pushed too far, he would blow up everything by the end of the week. I will kill Phan Khac Suu (the Head of State), Tran Van Huong (Premier) and Nguyen Khanh and put and end to all of this. Then we will see what happens!’ (57) Even though regarded as the most able and incorrupt general, Thi was never the Mission’s favourite. At the meeting of the Armed Forces Council though, Thi somehow mustered enough votes to be appointed Premier. The prospect of a pro-Buddhist general as Premier alarmed the U.S. mission. However, one of Thi’s top advisers, Colonel Pham Van Lieu, persuaded Thi to turn down the offer and wait for a few months until another opportunity presented itself. To the great relief of the American mission, Thi agreed. The Buddhist leaders had to choose between the ‘bad’ and the ‘ugly’, reluctantly supporting Ky. So, the American Mission and the Buddhist Institute both had to settle for their second choice.

Less than one month after he had been installed as Premier and so as not to disappoint the Americans, Ky urged that the total U.S. expeditionary force be expanded to two hundred thousand. Ky declared that the Vietnamese government desired more U.S. troops not because the Vietnamese were unwilling to fight but rather that would relieve the Vietnamese Army for important pacification tasks, or in Ky’s own words, ‘reorganise the rear’. (58) Ky assembled his war cabinet calling for total mobilisation and closing down all daily newspapers in Saigon. To show the people of South Vietnam that he was in deadly earnest, Ky announced an interim constitution and a
twenty six point social and economic program which had been approved by Taylor on July 1st 1965. (59) Ky described his new government was a government for the poor. He rounded up all the Chinese merchants in Saigon and threatened to shoot them if they hoarded essential consumer goods demonstrating his seriousness by bringing a Chinese merchant before a firing squad! While the Minister of Defence dispatched a gloomy report to President Johnson on July 21, saying that the situation in South Vietnam was worse than the year before (when it had been worse than a year before that!) and that South Vietnam was on the run and near collapse (60), Ky publicly advocated a ‘march on the North’ to liberate the Northern compatriots. As Lodge commented in a meeting of the decision makers in the White House on July 21, this was just a ‘propaganda move and nothing more’. McNamara in the same meeting doubted that the Government of Vietnam could raise the necessary forces to counter increasing Vietcong capabilities, let alone having enough forces to march on the North! A Vietnamese historian, Chanh Dao, in his book Politics and Religion, summarised Ky’s social revolution as no more than empty rhetoric:

*Ky’s social program was no more than band aid measures for a patient who has terminal cancer. Only the merchants benefited from the war. Corruption was widespread. The third ranking in the Armed Forces Council, General Nguyen Hiu Co was involved in the drug trade. Ky’s relatives, in-laws and cohorts were all involved in illegal trade of diamonds, American dollar and, drug. They monopolised the distribution of rice and salt in Central Vietnam. Also the setting up of Cam Ranh Industry Area provided the high officials with opportunities for becoming rich quickly.*

(61)

In a meeting to discuss the decision to release more ground troops, none of the decision makers in the White House believed Ky would last long. Lodge treated Ky with obvious disdain, saying that the Americans should not take Ky’s government seriously. The Minister of Defence, McNamara predicted that Ky would quickly fall. So did President Johnson. Yet Ky miraculously survived for more than six months, because the Buddhists supported him on the conditions that Ky would hold an election for a constitutional assembly in 1966. The Institute leaders had placed the same conditions on Ky’s predecessors, from Khanh to Quat, in exchange for the Buddhist support
because a legitimate government, elected freely and democratically, had been the main objective of the Buddhist movement.

Ky’s survival surprised even the White House who could not have been happier. Bombing phase I and II was implemented smoothly with the concurrence of the ‘South Vietnamese government’, regardless of how unrepresentative and repressive it was. From a mere two battalions of marines landed in Da Nang in March, the American ground troops increased to 186,000 at the end of 1965. It was time to reward the newly found ‘American boy’, by showing American commitment to him. At a hastily arranged ‘summit’ meeting in Honolulu on February 7 1966, Johnson publicly embraced Ky, symbolising the new commitment to Ky’s government. The American delegation was impressive and included the President, Lyndon Johnson, the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, Defence Minister, Robert McNamara, the Chief adviser, McGeorge Bundy, the Joint Chief of Staff, Earle Wheeler, General Westmoreland, former Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, and finally the incumbent Ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge. Little wonder that Ky felt the American Government at this time would go all the way with him! Ky proudly repeated Johnson’s compliment: ‘Boy, you speak just like an American’, and said that he ‘derived new strength and authority’ from the Honolulu Conference. (62) Ky’s position now much more secure and he began thinking of eliminating his potential rival: General Thi. The relationship between these two young generals had been cordial before Ky was elected Premier. Then Ky had openly praised Thi as the most courageous paratroopers, but after Honolulu Conference, Ky reported that he had been watching Thi’s every movement and suspected him of trying to manipulate the students and Buddhists to strengthen his own power. Also Thi did not hide his contempt for Thieu and Ky, maybe out of jealousy, and challenged many orders from their Central government. Thi retold incidents in which the Secretary of the Armed Forces Council, Pham Xuan Chieu, was held ransom by the people in Hue. Thi had to persuade the people of Hue, predominantly Buddhists, to release him. In another incident after the Honolulu Conference, when Ky went to Danang to report his achievements at the conference, a representative of the people, criticised Ky obviously with Thi’s concurrence, that after eight months of his reign, the Vietnamese poor could not be poorer. (63) According to Thi’s account, this incident was the breaking point of their co-operation. Thi was highly respected and regarded by General Lewis Walt, commander of American marines in Danang, as the most able officer in the country, but
he was feared and loathed for his fiercely independent attitudes by the Americans. Like the generals in the previous Minh’s government, he clashed with local American advisers and CIA agents. Thi recalled an incident, in which he scolded a CIA operative and told him that he resented the patronising way American advisers treated his officers and if the Americans continued to behave like French colonialists, their presence would only make the Vietnamese giving up fighting against the Communists, and consequently, the Americans would lose the war. (64)

Ky knew that both Ambassador Lodge and Field Commander Westmoreland were critical of Thi, and of course, Thieu and his Dai Viet Catholic group were more than happy to see the two tigers fighting, for, as an old Vietnamese saying goes, one must die and the other must be wounded! This was an opportunity Thieu’s group had been longing for as the Armed Forces Council dismissed Thi on March 11th. On hearing the news in Washington, McNamara informed the President of Ky’s move and his endorsement of this. Taylor showed his disgust by commenting: ‘He’s a bad character and good riddance’. (65) In Saigon, both Lodge and Westmoreland applied pressure and urged Thi to leave gracefully, offering him the pretext of a face-saving physical examination in the States. However Thi was able to resist American pressures for another two months and almost everyone under-estimated Thi’s popular support in Central Vietnam.

The day after Thi’s dismissal, people poured out into the streets to demand the rescinding of the order for Thi’s removal. The students joined in protests and demanded a national election for a constitutional parliament be held. They also called for the military Junta to be replaced by a civilian government. Even paratrooper units in Saigon left their barracks and marched in support for their former commander. On the next day, March 13, one Buddhist Institute leader, Thich Ho Giac, repeated in front of a crowd of ten thousand identical demands namely that a popularly elected assembly should be held and that military men be denied a political role.

Thi’s dismissal was a catalyst for the uprising in Central Vietnam but soon the Institute leaders capitalised on this to broaden their demands to include the establishment of an interim legislative assembly, an exact schedule for elections to a constituent assembly and the end of military political leadership in Saigon public support for the Institute
dramatically and openly grew throughout most of the seven provinces in the Central region as well as in Saigon. Under the leadership of the Institute, Buddhists, students, soldiers and their officers, academics, the common people and even the police force formed an umbrella organisation loosely called the Struggle Movement. Now the struggle was no longer just that of the Buddhist faithful, but the struggle of all the Vietnamese people who were opposed to a submissive military government and Washington’s war policies. Alarmed by this uprising, the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, instructed the Embassy to persuade the Institute to drop their ‘unrealistic demands’. When the mediation failed, Lodge threatened that, if the Buddhist leaders persisted in their present ‘irresponsible and destructive course’, not only would the Buddhists lose official sympathy, but they well bring about a situation of chaos and anarchy in which U.S. government support of Vietnam would no longer be effective. (67)

Thi’s replacement, General Nguyen Van Chuan, recognising the strength of the Struggle Movement, refused to employ forces to suppress it urging Ky’s government to find a political solution. After discussions with Lodge and in what the Ambassador termed as a calculated risk, Ky allowed Thi to come back to Central Vietnam to calm the situation. Here is Thi’s account of the people’s response to his release:

*When arriving in Danang, I could not believe what I saw. The people queued up from the sports ground to the airport to greet me. I know the crowd came to welcome me ‘home’ partly because they love me, partly because they want to know what responses from the central government to their demands were. But Ky and his cohorts considered the uprising as the result of an individual conflict.* (68)

A few days later when Thi arrived in Hue, a bigger crowd was there to greet him, including soldiers, officers and wounded veterans. Thi knew that his re-instalment was only a small part of a broader objective of the Struggle movement for the establishment of a legitimate government for the South Vietnamese people so as to find a peaceful solution to end the war.

Anti-government feeling was swelling in Saigon. On March 19, Tam Chau, as the Chairman of the Institute, officially called for elections. In front of a crowd of twenty
thousand faithful, he stressed the key demand of the Struggle Movement that 'the government must have a legal basis accorded by the warranty of the people'. (69)

To stem the rising tide of support in Saigon and to steal the initiative from the Struggle Movement, Lodge and Thieu Ky secretly organised meetings with the Institute leaders on March 12, 13 and then 17. After consulting with Lodge, Ky announced that elections for a constituent assembly would be held in the current year and a presidential election in the following year. The promises made by the two military leaders were ambiguous, but after a long discussion with the Institute leaders, Tri Quang informed Lodge that, if Ky kept his promises, the political crisis would end. But behind the scene, Ky and Lodge met on March 22 and worked out tactics on plans for elections for a constituent assembly. Lodge advised Ky to use vague terms that could be open to interpretation. Lodge advised Ky to drop pernicious words like 'constituent assembly' in favour of 'constitutional convention', pointing out that the latter body would simply meet to adopt a constitution and then disband, whereas a constituent assembly, which the junta and the Buddhists had already agreed, would remain and makes trouble for an indefinite period. (70)

As with their demands of previous governments and in return for the Institute's support, the Buddhists asked for only one condition, the setting up of a constituent assembly that would serve as the legal basis for a legitimate government in South Vietnam. Without this legitimacy, the South Vietnamese would not be allowed to talk to the Communist side on an equal footing. Professor Kahin, who had close discussions with the most important Institute leaders, clearly understood Buddhist motives and tactics as he describes here:

_The ultimate objective (of the Buddhist Movement) remained as an end to the fighting and a negotiated political settlement with the National Liberation Front. But to avoid a confrontation with the American Power, their leaders recognised that they could not openly declared this. They emphasised instead the intermediate aim of elections, a step awkward for the U.S. mission to oppose, which, if reasonably honest, would ensure Thieu and Ky's replacement by a Saigon regime in tune with these Buddhist aims. When premier Phan Huy Quat had announced plans for an election of a legislative assembly to be held in August 1965, U.S officials, however had then disapproved,
fearing unpredictable and probably adverse consequences, and when Ky and Thieu assumed power, the plans had been shelved. But once out of the bottle, this genie could not be put back, for the idea had widespread appeal. (71)

What Lodge and most of the senior advisers wanted was to maintain a junta government in power and avoid elections, ideally until the war had been won, or at least until after the Saigon military were solidly and in control, Ky had to undertake damage control. Even though Thi was the most favoured general to work with, the Institute leaders, agreed to support Ky for the presidential position against the Catholic General Thieu, on the condition that Ky honoured his promises to hold elections. Inside information revealed that the Institute also agreed to support either General Thi or Colonel Lieu for the position of Premier. In his memoirs, surprisingly Ky only mentioned the personality clash with Tri Quang. Ky resented that Tri Quang did not seem to treat him with due respect, because he was only thirty-five and a non-professional politician, Tri Quang thought Ky could be easily manipulated, or in Ky’s words, he would be putty in Tri Quang’s hands. (72) Ky also revealed to Lodge that Tri Quang had agreed to have Thi replaced as the Commander of Corps I. This claim seems dubious, because the General who replaced Thi was the one who came to Diem’s rescue when Thi staged the unsuccessful coup 1960. Furthermore the Buddhists had accommodated Ky’s government for more than half a year and waited patiently for elections that Ky and Thieu promised. They had no reason whatsoever to stir up the situation. Probably Ky felt that he was double-crossed by the Institute leaders when the Buddhists joined forces with other people in Central Vietnam against the government. It is more likely that the Institute leaders could see that Ky’s government, after nine months in office, had not delivered a single promises nor had they made any move towards a more democratic state of affairs, so now it was the time to act to change the status quo. But this move brought with it all sorts of difficulties, not least that the Buddhist Institute leaders now lost control of the Struggle Movement which moved beyond their leadership.

When Thi refused to return to Saigon, and openly called Thieu and Ky lackeys of the Americans, the Struggle Movement demanded more than just Thi’s dismissal. Suddenly Tri Quang, academics and students at Hue University grubbed the political initiative and determined the Movement agenda while popular backing for the
Movement continued to grow in Hue, Saigon and most of the coastal towns in Central Vietnam. The Mission in Saigon was alarmed when soldiers and officers of the Army's First Division began openly to side with the Movement. (73) Not surprisingly as a result the Administration became increasingly hostile to the Buddhist leaders. The Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, criticised that their demands as unrealistic while Lodge had no interest in seeking a compromise with them. He also dismissed a suggestion from Rusk to call a conference of the contending parties arguing that the Buddhist leaders were not only now regarded as the opposition, but were card-carrying Communists as well.

Ky, coached by Lodge, became vague when speaking with the Buddhists so as to make it easier to renege on some of his important pledges to them. He no longer talked of a constituent assembly, nor even a constitutional convention but instead and as had suggested to him, of a Constitutional Preparatory Commission, whose members would be hand-picked by Thieu and Ky, to draft the constitution, while the military remained in power. The junta therefore was free to apply pressure to the body drafting the constitution, and election proceedings. The elections, if they were ever to take place, would be carried out under their aegis (74) Ky was even vaguer about the date of the elections which he promised to hold sometime in 1967. He now declared that the election date depended on the progress against the Vietcong and would be deferred until the Saigon government controlled 75-80 per cent of South Vietnam's population. In 1965 the CIA had reported that the Vietcong controlled at least 25 per cent of the population during the day and about 50 per cent at night! General Pham Xuan Chieu, Secretary of the Armed Forces Council, admitted that, according to the provincial chiefs, the population under government control was under 50 percent. In the other words, Ky was intimating, the elections were a long way off. In addition Ky threatened that he would use very strong measures, if the Buddhists and their supporters resorted to street demonstrations once again.

Public reaction was swift. On March 22, demonstrators occupied Hue Airport followed by a call for general strike. Demands this time were broadened for not only did they call the military rule to end and be replaced by a civilian government, but the demonstrations were decidedly anti-American in expression too. To the amazement of the American Mission, a group of progressive Catholics joined in to demand the end of Thieu-Ky regime. The demonstrators questioned the role of the U.S. government in the
Vietnam War, while certain newspapers in Saigon openly asked if the Americans were genuinely helping the Vietnamese to fight and contain Communism. In a demonstration in Saigon, anti American banners began to appear. The American mission in Saigon reported to Johnson that there was almost total absence of any organised popular support, or even sympathy, for the American backed regime. In Danang and Hue, the police, civil servants, and large elements of the local 1st Division backed the Struggle movement and in Hue General Pham Xuan Chieu, Secretary of the Armed Forces Council, was detained by students in the midst of what was planned to be a reconciliatory trip.

With impatient urging from Lodge and Westmoreland plus logistical support, Ky suddenly denounced the Struggle Movement as being directed by pro-communists elements and, as far as the government concerned, Danang was already in Communist hands. Ky threatened to use force to liberate Danang and shoot the Mayor of Danang, Dr Nguyen Van Man. Unfortunately for Ky, Dr Man although appointed by Thi, was a Catholic. Dr Man declared that he sided with the Struggle Movement because the junta was too weak and too corrupt to rule’. On hearing Ky’s threat, Dr Man scoffed that he did not think Ky would be so stupid as to go to Danang with his troops.

Ky obviously did not dare to act without the guarantee of military support from Field Commander, General Westmoreland. To prepare for the task of the supposed liberation Danang, Ky set up within the American compound, a clandestine radio with American technical support. This purported to be the ‘voice of the Struggle Movement’ and beamed broadcasts to Saigon that made the Buddhists appear to embrace Communism. With twenty thousand American marines stationed in Danang, Ky’s allegations sounded absurd to General Green, Jr., the Marine Corps Commander, who happened to visit the city on that day. He declared that he did not see any insurrection in process and added that the situation was calm. The local Commander, General Lewis Walt, who admired Thi’s military skills and sympathised with the Struggle Movement, believed that a political solution should be reached between the Saigon government and the rebels. (75) General Walt was not informed the conspiracy between Ky, Westmoreland and Lodge. Here is a dialogue between Ky and Walt cited in Ky’s memoirs, Twenty Years and Twenty Days:

300
"Why did you send troops here?" (Walt)

"Is it really any business of yours?" (Ky)

"But I am in command of the American marines here! I think in view of my position I might have been told what was happening!" (Walt)

"It's none of your business and you don't have to know about it" (Ky)

"But you know Danang is quiet. My marines can go out in the bars for a drink. I don't see why you have to send in troops!" (Walt)

"What I am trying to do is to restore the authority of the central government." (Ky) (76)

Without Lodge and General Westmoreland's backing, Ky could not have spoken to Walt in that manner. But according to Lodge's cable to the White House, Ky was in very different mood when he came to see Lodge to plead for support. The meeting went like this:

Ky turned to Lodge with a very serious expression on his face and looking somewhat shaken, said: 'We have waited too long. Now we must be very firm. All these different groups and minorities and sects make an infernal combination. We face a great Communist conspiracy to take over the government, ask the Americans to leave and turn this country over to Hanoi.' Ky requested the Americans to provide planes to move three battalions to Danang and one division from Corps IV for security in Saigon. He also said that he knew Westmoreland was ready but needed an order from Lodge. When the Ambassador promptly granted his request, Ky seemed moved, commenting: 'History will judge whether I have done well or not, but I am ready to make the supreme sacrifice'. (77)

The White House was not pleased with this dramatised report from Lodge. President Johnson thought that 'Ky had gone, the last gap' and that he had made a bad judgment in ordering that the Mayor of Danang ought to be shot. Taylor, at the time was a special adviser to the President, agreed to cut losses by letting Ky go but keeping the rest of the military junta in place. Then Washington sent Lodge a cable saying to the effect that they did not want to become involved' and approving the proposal for an alternative government after Ky's fall. Despite Washington's refusal to give Ky total support and Rusk's admonishing Lodge not to provide Ky clearly identified facilities, General Westmoreland did just that. On April 5, ten huge C-130s, piloted by Americans and
specially flown in from bases outside Vietnam, began shuttle flights carrying nineteen hundred elite South Vietnamese troops. In addition, came ten M-41 tanks, sixty armoured personnel carriers, and other equipment flown from Saigon to Danang airport. During this operation, U.S and Vietnamese planes transported at least four thousand troops. They were protected by U.S. marines who ringed the adjacent South Vietnamese troops who had rallied to the Struggle Movement. Thus, Ky had been provided with a privileged sanctuary in the heart of the dissidents’ stronghold. (78) General Chuan, who had been sent by Ky to Corps I to replace Dinh, now openly married the Movement’s causes. Deploying the soldiers under his command, Chuan blocked all the routes from the airbase and warned Ky that there would be a bloodbath if Ky’s troops moved out from the airbase. Chuan announced that the problem was political and had to be solved by political means. The next day in Hue, General Phan Xuan Nhuan, Commander of the Division I, with his men backing him, declared his support for the Struggle Movement and threatened to fight Ky’s troops if they came to Hue city.

This little blitzkrieg quickly collapsed and consequently Ky had to eat the humble pie by apologising publicly to the citizen of Danang for having called them Communists. It was Ky’s most auspicious moment!

However, in the dissidents’ eyes, Ky was untrustworthy and so lost credibility. In Hue, the Commander of Division I, General Nhuan began a military program to train students and those who volunteered to join the local defence forces. Weapons were freely distributed. Nevertheless crack in the Institute leadership began to appear. Tam Chau denounced the extremist elements in the Movement but still insisted in demanding a civilian government within three months and after that a constitutional assembly. On April 6 Tam Chau declared Buddhist headquarters closed temporarily and went for a holiday! Whether Tam Chau and Ky had reached any agreement, nobody would ever know. Even though Tam Chau and Ky wrote their memoirs, neither has explained why the Chairman closed the Institute headquarters and took a holiday at that critical moment. Nevertheless Tam Chau decided to support Ky when the rest of the struggle movement realised that they had reached a point of no return. In Saigon demonstrations were staged almost every day and night in the streets and clashes between students and combat police became more common. In Hue students, public
servants and police joined forces to take up arms to defend the city. In the Danang and Quang Nam areas, the local commander, Colonel Dam Quang Yeu, a former subordinate of Thi, also declared for the Struggle Movement and brought with him a regiment of Local Defence Forces, a battalion of military police and six thousand public servants.

On April 9, General Dinh was appointed Commander Corps I to replace General Chuan who had been on the job for only one month and secretly sneaked back to Saigon. Dinh masterminded the coup against Diem and was one of the most senior and talented general in the Armed Forces. He was accused of being a neutralist and so was duly removed by Khanh in the Pentagon coup and placed under house arrest for nearly six months. Now Dinh worked hard to defuse an explosive situation and united many factions.

To convince the Struggle Movement that the central leadership this time was sincere in its effort to reconcile with the dissidents, a political conference was organised but most of delegates were hand picked by the government. Even so, at the conclusion of the convention, the delegates released a ten-point proposal which met almost all the essential Buddhist demands, including a promise to establish of a constitutional convention to prepare a draft constitution, a promise not to punish those who took part in demonstrations against the government, a promise to release those dissidents who had been in jail and lastly to withdraw marines from Danang. As the Head of State, Thieu together with Ky, read a decree on behalf of the junta, promising that elections for a constituent assembly would be held within three to five months. Thieu also promised to honour all the demands that the Buddhists and the National Political Congress wanted. Ky, also, had agreed in writing not to punish or retaliate against anyone who had taken part in the demonstrations (79).

Confidential information since showed that Tri Quang was the person who vouched that Tam Chau would be elected Chairman for the second term, against the wishes of both the monks in Central and South Vietnam. At that point of time, Tri Quang and Tam Chau then agreed to cease all further protests for the time being. Tam Chau decided to take some weeks off by attending a Buddhist Conference in Ceylon and Tri Quang flew to Hue to pacify dissidents, who vowed to keep up fighting until Thieu &
Ky resigned. Did Tri Quang make an error of judgement or a tactical blunder by agreeing with Tam Chau to persuade the Struggle Movement to declare a truce with Thieu and Ky? It seems so in the light of events to follow.

Tri Quang then went to Hue to persuade different dissident groups to accept the truce. He addressed a large crowd of students, academics and eminent politicians at the University of Hue telling them that he had changed his tactic and giving reasons why:

_We must look to the major concerns of the future, not the minor ones, such as the existence of a government for three months. We must look forwards to see how a constitutional assembly can be elected, not how we can overthrow a government. The demands of the people were met by the government and this is a people’s struggle. Your demands do not meet the general consensus, so you must curb them. This is the start of democracy._ (80)

Despite Tri Quang’s charisma and enormous appeal in his home-town, his audience was neither convinced nor satisfied. The polite silence after his speech spoke volumes. One student representative openly voiced his disagreement: ‘Venerable Tri Quang’s argument neither convince us nor changes our attitude’. Then, at a meeting at Dieu De Pagoda, even the faithful were sceptical. Tri Quang’s name had been identical with the Buddhist Movement since 1963 and now suddenly he was asking his followers to unconditionally believe Ky’s promises. Why did Tri Quang put his own prestige and his future leadership on the line at that critical moment? On the day Thieu issued a decree promising to establishing a constitutional assemble, a Catholic newspaper reported that Tri Quang had received personal assurances from Ambassador Lodge: ‘Ambassador Lodge pledged on his honour to the Venerable Thich Tri Quang that the U.S. would never allow suppression of the Buddhists in central Vietnam to take place if the Buddhists agreed to put and end to their struggle after April 14, 1966’. (81)

In Danang and Hue, the dissidents were still suspicious. An American reporter, Takashi Oka, who closely followed the 1966 uprising, observed that the government led by Thieu and Ky did not achieve a single concrete result in the field of progress towards democratic civilian rule. All it did was to make endless promises. The question needs to be asked how could such a government overnight become a champion of democracy?
But when Tri Quang pledged that he would stay in Hue until the elections were held, the demonstrations and organised opposition to Ky subsided, even though Central Vietnam remained without effective government control. (82)

After the fiasco of April 5, the White House advisers were evenly divided. Recognising that the Buddhists now constituted the major organised political force apart from the Vietcong, some advisers pressed for a deal between the Saigon government and the Buddhists. But the newly appointed National Security Adviser, Walter Rostow, viewed the political dominance of the Vietnamese military as crucial to U.S. interest, and thus urged a tough line be taken against the Buddhists. Rostow argued for a contrary viewpoint and was fearful of a Buddhist uprising. He compared the existing situation in Vietnam to that of Paris in 1789 and St Petersburg in 1917, commenting that:

*Tri Quang is going for the jugular. Assuming he is not a Vietcong himself, the VC obviously regard him as a potential Kerensky. We have to bring into place the factor in the equation that was not present in Russia in 1917: the presence of U.S. force. In the face of defeat in the field and Kerensky’s weakness, Lenin took over in November. This is about what would happen in Saigon if we were not there; but we are there. And right now we have to find the ways to make that count.* (83)

Rostow recommended that a two-pronged strategy be implemented. Firstly sufficient concessions were to be granted to win the temporary support of both Buddhists and non-Buddhist proponents of civilian government. Secondly, attempt would be made to divide the Buddhist leadership. In addition strong measures would be taken against future Buddhist and student demonstrations in Saigon and finally plans would be accelerated for a second military expedition against Danang. The American officials recognised that these forceful measures would probably cause bloodshed and advised caution. Then the American administration did indeed go to war against the Struggle Movement. (84)

The American mission and Ky implemented this strategy with ease for handpicked members of the National Political Congress proposed recommendations almost identical with the Buddhists’ demands. Also, Thieu was more than eager to sign a decree to organise elections with three or five months. Lodge himself met the Venerable
Tri Quang to assure him that the U.S. mission would never let Ky suppress the Struggle Movement. He promised that all dissidents would be promptly released from jail and Ky agreed in writing not to punish any protesters! Little wonder a group of Buddhists staged a silent demonstration to celebrate their supposed victory! Small wonder that the Chairman of the Institute took a holiday in Ceylon and ordered to cease all the activities. Little wonder Tri Quang, a poet who loved classical music and orchids, also called off anti-government agitation and restored order in the seven northern provinces.

The second prong in Rostow’s strategy was to divide the Unified Buddhist Institute. Previously Diem and Huong had set up bogus Buddhist organisations to compete with the Unified Buddhist Institute, but to no avail. These bogus organisations comprised mostly unorthodox-trained monks whose main task was to perform funeral rites. This time Ky successfully wooed the most important monk in the Buddhist hierarchy, The Institute Chairman, Tam Chau. In 1965 Tam Chau was considered by the CIA as one of the most vocal proponents of peace, and until the last minute, Tam Chau totally agreed to most of the Buddhist demands. How could the most vocal peace activist, the Institute Chairman, suddenly sided with Ky, a warmonger determined to remove the menace of Communism from Vietnam, even if one had to move on the World War III? (85) There was only one sticking point between Tam Chau, Tri Quang and the rest of the Buddhist Institute leaders, namely the fate of Ky’s government. Inside information revealed that Tam Chau had refused to demand that Ky step down immediately, on the ground that ‘it had been for a long time now, since there had been a Premier who was a Northerner. However, other Institute leaders, partly mistrusted Thieu and Ky, while recognising that the momentum of the Struggle Movement was unstoppable and that it was a tactical error to cease applying pressure to remove Ky and install a civilian government, so that elections could be freely held. Even so, Ky succeeded in securing Tam Chau’s support while the government propaganda machine painted Tam Chau as a moderate, and the remaining Buddhist leaders, as militants. The division of the two Buddhist factions was Ky’s biggest and the most successful coup, and resulted in the unification of Buddhist organisations surviving for only two years.

After implementing the first two steps in Rostow’s strategies, the American mission’s final goal was to help Ky to launch a second attempt to suppress the Struggle Movement. Dinh, the third Commander appointed in three months, were quite popular
with the Buddhists in Central Vietnam because of his role in removing President Diem. Dinh assured the dissidents that he had come to reconcile opposing sides and that there would be no reprisals against those who had participated in the struggle. He persuaded eight thousand students in a self-styled Karnikaze group to turn in their weapons, distributed by Thi and Chuan in the previous month. Dinh worked patiently and tactfully to restore harmony between hostile communities and also tried to dissolve hostilities towards the Saigon government. Ironically, on the day Ky launched his second attack, May 15, General Dinh had planned a reconciliation dinner in the evening, to which he invited General Walt, Buddhist, Catholic and other religious sect leaders, as well as political party leaders. Obviously Dinh and Walt did not expect that the American mission or Westmoreland would permit Ky to launch the second attack. Degrading Dinh’s efforts to work toward reconciliation, Westmoreland opined ‘Dinh’s actions and words are very dangerous, causing serious disturbances’. (86) He urged Ky to remove him. Lodged expressed the same view.

To prepare for a second assault on the Buddhists, Ky suddenly replaced Colonel Lieu with one of his cohorts, Colonel Loan, a man who had became known worldwide for his cold-blooded execution of a Vietcong, recorded by an American cameraman. Lieu, like Thi, was exiled to Cambodia when their coup against Diem failed, and likely they had developed camaraderie. It is likely that Ky noticed that Lieu had never ordered combat police to act brutally towards the demonstrators in Saigon for, on May 7 he suddenly announced that he had changed his mind. In the inauguration ceremony of the Can Tho Airport in the Mekong Delta, Ky told reporters that it would take at least another year before a new civilian government could be elected. Using the precise words Lodge had prepared for him, Ky said ‘the constituent assembly would only draw up a constitution. It will not be the congress of a new government. The national assembly must be elected some time in 1967. This disclosure may be premature and may alarm the dissidents unnecessarily. The newspaper carried large blank spaces on the front page concerning Ky’s speech, his remarks had been heavily censored by himself. The only English Sunday paper in Saigon ran the banner headline ‘Military government stays- Ky expects another year in office’ (87)

Although some officials at the State Department were alarmed at increasing anti-American sentiment at this time, Lodge and Westmoreland went ahead and encouraged
Ky to mount a second attack. This time the preparations were much more thorough to make sure Ky had substantial superiority in both man power and weaponry. A stream of elite units were flown by Ky’s Air Force and commercial flights into his enclave inside the American protected Danang airport. Together with the units from a previous airlift, Ky now commanded troops equivalent to two-thirds of a division. The American advisers meanwhile persuaded General Dinh to sent most of his local forces to the adjacent provinces to fight the Vietcong.

General Dinh reported that on the evening of the attack, forty US heavy tanks of a kind never previously used in the first corps area, were off-loaded from ships in the US-managed quarter of the port of Danang. Dinh was tricked into believing that the tanks had been brought to Danang to fight the North Vietnamese forces and expected that they would be turned over to him at the ceremony he had planned for the next evening. His soldiers were not able to operate these new tanks which quite obviously were not for Dinh’s use, but rather were to be deployed against the Struggle Movement. It was these heavy tanks, driven by American soldiers, with their 90-mm cannon that made the crucial difference in military balance between Ky and the local defence forces. (88) The next morning these tanks that were supposed to be delivered to general Dinh, instead surrounded his house. Dinh escaped to Walt’s headquarters and was promptly given asylum. Walt did not expect Westmoreland to permit Ky to attack Danang for the second time, so he made a call to McNamara. Dinh was shaken by what he heard from the Minister for Defence. McNamara told Dinh that the pacification operation, a term used for action against the Vietcong, was not aimed at him personally. The next day when the head of the political section at the Embassy, Philip Habib, contacted him, Dinh was informed that the operation had President Johnson’s approval, and that the United States would support the junta in this operation. (89) Habib tried to get Dinh to go to quietly and without protests to Saigon by guaranteeing his safety and a diplomatic post but Dinh refused. Instead he flew to Hue and promptly joined the dissidents!

With Dinh safely removed from office, Thieu and Ky appointed another General, the fourth in two months. This time, he was a Catholic, Huynh Van Cao. When Cao was flown to Hue by American marines, his immediate subordinate, General Nhuan, declined to attend the reception ceremony, citing ill-health. On hearing that Cao had landed in Hue, the students broadcast a special announcement denouncing him and
vowing to stop him from leaving Hue. Dissidents swarmed military headquarters so Cao hastily retreated into a helicopter, and in the melee, a lieutenant was shot dead by an American guard. Amazingly, after flying back to Da Nang, Cao also refused to use force against the Struggle Movement. Later he confided to one of his close friends, General Paul Vann, that the other generals in Saigon forced him to accept the command of the First Military Corps because none of them wanted the post! Ky’s newly appointed police chief, Colonel Loan, demanded that Cao to attack the Pho Da Pagoda, which the Buddhists and army dissidents were using as their headquarters. Attacking a pagoda was sacrilege, and so Cao refused to follow the order. Furious, one of Loan’s officers put a pistol to Cao’s head and the General prepared to die. Miraculously an American adviser walked in on the scene before the man pulled the trigger. Like his predecessor, Cao was given sanctuary in the U.S. military headquarters in Danang and so Ky and Loan had to execute the assault plans without him. (90)

Alarmed at Ky’s surprise move, the Buddhist Institute issued a stern warning that, serious betrayal by the government would lead the nation into civil war and tragedy. Meanwhile Tri Quang sent cables to President Johnson and Ambassador Lodge pleading for help. In Saigon Thien Minh announced a forty-eight hour hunger strike while Tam Chau, attending the World Buddhist Sangha Conference in Ceylon, refused to go home to deal with the crisis. The Institute declared that the government had broken the truce and denounced the police who began to round up those who had participated in the Struggle Movement. Still hoping the Americans would restrain Ky, Tri Quang appealed for calm and ordered demonstrators off the streets. Hue radio also tried to cultivate American support by not criticising them. Tri Quang met the American Consulate in Hue three times during one day. He received a reply from President Johnson, but it was non-committal. (91) However Tri Quang still had a ray of hope in Rusk’s declaration that Washington still supported elections and that internal conflict had to be resolved by the Vietnamese themselves. In hindsight, the statement should have been read the American administration washing its hands of any further responsibility, but perhaps Tri Quang misread it.

Although Ky’s elite troops were superior in numbers, weapons and heavy equipment, the Americans tried to make sure that the dissident troops who still backed the Struggle Movement would be neutralised. Colonel Dam Quang Yeu’s troops, from a garrison in
Hoi An, some twenty miles to the South from Danang, were unable to reinforce their counterparts in the City. The US marines seized the only bridge leading to Danang across the Tournue River, and refused to allow them to cross. Without Colonel Yeu’s troops, the dissidents were outnumbered five to one. While Ky’s planes strafed positions held by the local troops, American marines threatened to turn US fire power against the local forces if they shelled Ky’s military units and his air-force installations within the base area. (92) Later Neil Sheehan witnessed Ky’s mopping up operations in Danang and reported the aftermath:

The tanks led the way, hurling shells from 90 mm cannon and raking foxholes, concrete blocks and sandbags, machine-gun positions and houses along both sides of the streets, with a hail of bullets from machine guns. (93)

After two days of fighting Ky’s forces captured the Struggle Movement’s strongholds, including Pho Da pagoda, which after the battle, described by Sheehan as looking a charred house. Seven hundred local troops, along with a hundred monks, Buddhist Boy Scouts, students and other civilians aligned with them, were arrested. To ensure that there would be no further resistance, Americans marines evicted Colonel Yeu’s troops from a large ammunition store that the dissidents had threatened to blow up if Ky’s troops crossed the bridge. Meanwhile, a political adviser from the Embassy went from one dissident unit from another, urging them to surrender. Group by group they gave in. (94)

In Saigon the Buddhists were enraged by what had happened in Danang and that the expected condemnation from Washington had not been forthcoming. The demonstrators in Saigon turned ugly. They overturned and burned American military trucks and slogans like ‘Kill the Americans’ ‘Yankee Go Home’ began to appear. The mob shouted that the ‘Americans should go home and take their dirty shooting war with them’. The combat police units under Loan’s command, and with fixed bayonets and tear gas, began a brutal suppression. In addition two thousand monks and nuns in the Institute headquarters were cut off from the outside world without water or electricity while demonstrations happened in Saigon continued every night unabated until the end of June.
Dissident reaction in Hue was even fiercer. Students and Buddhists now vented their anger and frustration at the Americans. Students staged an indefinite hunger strike in front of the American consulate demanding a response from President Johnson. When nothing was forthcoming, they held a meeting and voted to burn down the American Cultural Centre with the resulting loss of ten thousand books. The crowd became hysterical and uncontrollable. Windows were smashed and furniture was set on fire. Then the next day when the provincial Chief deployed troops associated with the Catholic Dai Viet from Phong Dien to retake the Hue radio station, students burned down the American Consulate. For the third time, Tri Quang appealed to President Johnson to intervene, but there was no response to their plea. In desperation, a hundred monks and nuns staged another hunger strike. They presented the Consular General with a letter written in blood, addressing the President and requesting him to stop supporting Ky.

During the struggle against President Diem in 1963, those who had sacrificed by self-immolation were mostly ordained monks and nuns. But during the events in 1966, some who chose self-immolation were high school students. Just before the resistance collapsed, a nun, Thanh Quang self-immolated at Dieu De Pagoda. She had asked permission to burn herself three times, but each time it was refused. She wrote a letter to President Johnson, the Congress and the people of Unites States to ‘raise the tragic voice of the Vietnamese people’, protesting the irresponsible attitude of the American government in approving the massacre of the Buddhists. The American Embassy expressed their sympathy to the Buddhist Institute and President Johnson said that these sacrifices were unnecessary and should be stopped.

By now Tri Quang understood the American message loud and clear namely that they wanted the war proceed without any obstacles, therefore the Buddhist challenge must be crushed so that the junta’s power was complete. The climax between the Struggle Movement and the junta was reached on June 1st, when an attempt was made on the life of Thien Minh. An American-made MK-26 fragmentation grenade was tossed under his car. The explosion drove fragments through the floorboards of the car and into Thien Minh’s legs and buttocks. His assailant escaped on a motorbike in a busy street. Ky did not bother blaming the Communists for the attack and so it served as a blunt warning to those who still insisted that he should step down. When Thien Minh was incapacitated
and Tam Chau openly sided with Ky, Tri Quang became a disillusioned and broken leader. This gentle Venerable, who loved classical music and orchids, had been duped by Ambassador Lodge into believing that the Americans would never allow Ky launch a brutal repression of the dissidents. As a result and without any effective leadership, even though there were further demonstrations and self-immolations, the dissidents’ acts began to reflect a state of anarchy and desperation.

Ky’s troops now began the mopping up operations in Saigon and Hue. Police and airborne troops blockaded the Institute Headquarters and a few days later, stormed the compound. They arrested many monks, nuns and activists. Tri Quang was desperate, and, as an act of abdication of leadership, decided to begin an indefinite hunger strike. On May 10, Colonel Loan’s police, with the assistance of the US police advisers, launched an operation in Hue called ‘an act of retribution’. Although there were few troops to defend the old imperial capital, the whole of first Division was lured to Quang Tri province for a military operation against the Vietcong. As in Danang, Ky’s paratroopers were protected by US Marines at Phu Bai Airport. Ky deployed two airborne and two marine battalions and four hundred combat police, all under the direct command of Colonel Loan. At least two of these battalions were transported from Saigon in U.S. air-force planes, and American police advisers accompanied Colonel Loan. On May 19 Ky’s troops controlled the city of Hue and arrested several hundred Buddhist monks, university and high school students. On Lodge’s advice, Tri Quang was flown to Saigon for his own ‘protection’. Many other University students who evaded arrest felt that they had no other option but to take to the mountains and join the National Liberation Front. (95) Tri Quang’s last controversial act was to order the faithful to bring family altars into the streets. When President Johnson finally delivered the verdict that the immolations were both wasteful and unnecessary, Tri Quang finally admitted that the Vietnamese Buddhists had no other means of protest against the United States other than by sacrificing their own lives. Tri Quang may have defeated, desperate and broken, but he acted with wisdom. This is how Jerrold Schecter described the scene during the last days of resistance:

*The faithful responded quickly and fervently. The family altar is a private place of worship. On a small wooden table there is a coloured picture of the Buddha graced with grass candlesticks, incense burners, a vase of flowers, and daily offerings of fresh*
fruit and rice. Above the altar are hung pictures of the departed one. The people of Hue moved the altars from their homes into the centre of the streets and stood solemnly by them. In some streets the altars were only fifteen feet apart, in other one hundred feet. In Saigon the call for altars in the streets was also raised and the Buddhists responded, clogging the main road from the airport to the city. (96)

Perhaps this act was the desperate gesture of a leader who felt that he had let down his followers by trusting Lodge too much. When self immolations no longer had any effect on the President, who was just about to send half a million young men to fight a war ten thousand miles away from home, Tri Quang’s action was a last attempt of a determined and compassionate monk to stop the apocalypse peacefully. Nhat Hanh described it as a spiritual response to a violent situation:

In 1966, when the people of Hue and Danang learned that Field Marshall Ky was about to bring tanks and troops from Saigon to suppress the Movement, the people of those cities brought their family altars, the most sacred objects in their homes onto the streets, relying on their culture and tradition to oppose the forces of destruction. Some people were critical, saying they used religion for political purposes, but I disagree. They were using their most potent spiritual force to directly confront the violence. (97)

The struggle was almost over. Lodge publicly praised Ky’s for his stand against the Buddhists, calling it as ‘a solid political victory’. The electoral rules, written two weeks previously by the National Political Congress, whose members were mostly handpicked by Thieu and Ky, were rejected and re-written in such as way to allow Ky’s government to remain for another year. By then the junta had no trouble in ensuring the means to keep the presidency in their grasp. By August 1967, Thieu out-manoeuvred Ky and became President. Later when living in exile in the States, General Thi gave his perspective on events at the time:

The blood of the people and soldiers in Central Vietnam was spilt unnecessarily. Afterwards it was said that a constitution was needed for the legitimacy of the regime. The question is: why, when the people in Central Vietnam asked for just this, were they brutally repressed. The answer is easy to understand. If the requests of the people had
been satisfied, we may have had a true democracy, but the American stooges wanted only to create a faked democracy as camouflage for a military dictatorship. (98)

To discredit the Institute leaders, propaganda at the time presented them as extremists, militants, xenophobic and uneducated monks, so-called enlightened men tossing hand-grenades and card carrying Communists etc... But in reality the policy makers in Washington knew that, in 1966, the Struggle Movement had such popular support popular that, unless the U.S. military power supported Ky and Thieu against it, Buddhists' demands would have had to be met. Many Buddhists found that it was hard to understand why the Americans strongly supported them in 1963, but behaved differently in 1966. The main reason the United States supported the coup against Diem in 1963, was not because of Kennedy's concern about the Diem regime's repressive actions, which the American press had fully covered, but rather because the administration understood their adverse effect on the U.S. public's support of the war. In 1966, while Ky's government fully supported the U.S. objectives, the Struggle Movement was committed to peace and to ending American military and political power in Vietnam. (99)

The suppression of the Struggle Movement polarised the Vietnamese further, as Professor Kahin pointed out:

_The middle ground that the Buddhists had been building up between the Saigon government and the National Liberation Front was cut away and prospects destroyed for anything resembling a viable third force. This even more rigid polarisation now imposed upon the people of South Vietnam continue to deny them the option of political compromise, permitting only two active choices—supporting the National Liberation Front or a Saigon regime shaped by and dependent upon the United States._ (100)

The question which intrigued many people was, 'why did they chose war'? In his Baltimore speech, President Johnson proclaimed that 'we seek only to ensure that the South Vietnamese have the right and opportunity to control their destiny'. The Struggle Movement in 1966 sought an opportunity to also control their destiny and affirmed their rights to do so. But these rights were denied and taken away by tanks, cannons, submissive military leaders and Machiavellian politicians. The rationale for U.S.
involvement in Vietnam such as defending the right of self determination would continue to ring hollow, and was essentially a cynical exercise as Frederik Logevall commented in his analysis of American suppression in Vietnam:

Though U.S. policy makers constantly claimed that all they wanted for the South Vietnamese was the right of self-determination, they worked to thwart that right whenever it appeared that southern leaders might seek to broaden their base of support by shifting the emphasis of the struggle from the military to the political plane. . By the start of 1964 certainly, and probably long before, the wishes of the very people the United States claimed to be defending in Vietnam had essentially ceased to matter to senior American advisers. No doubt they believed that what they were doing served Vietnamese ultimate interests, and that the inhabitants of the South would be grateful in the end. No doubt this assumption made them sleep better at night. But it had little to do with why they acted. (101)

Nobody can ever be sure if the advisers at that time continue to sleep well at night, when learning that fifty-eight thousand American young men and two hundred thousand Vietnamese counterparts were dead by the end of the Vietnam War. As Tri Quang said: 'Can we, the Buddhists, who had a tradition of buying live birds and fish then releasing them, sit down and do nothing when we know that thousands of people are going to die, as Buddhists, we must act'. In the footsteps of Bodhisattvas, the Buddhists responded decisively to the awful sounds of suffering of their compatriots in the summer of 1966.
Chapter Ten

An Assessment of Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism

A New Face of Buddhism

Modern Buddhist movements in Southeast Asia, from Sri Lanka, India, Burma to Vietnam, shattered the standard image of Buddhism in the West as a passive and docile religion. American policy-makers expected to see saffron-robed monks with alms bowl in hand, eyes downcast, walk down the streets accepting offerings from their faithful, or Zen masters deeply in meditating, seeking inner peace. Instead, they witnessed monks who burned themselves to death, and militant street demonstrators who carried out guerilla warfare with combat police in the streets of Saigon and Hue. Buddhism was no longer the docile religion as the West envisaged. Rather it had become a faith in flames. (1)

Buddhism may appear with a new face from time to time as the situation demands but it is by no means new. Engaged Buddhism has been inherent in its tradition for thousand years. Ambedkar called it Navayana, New Yana, and rewrote the ‘Buddhist Bible’ but he had no intention to try to establish a new religion. The Buddhist essence has remained untouched, but beliefs, basic tenets and rites have to be changed to adapt to new context in modern era. Engaged Buddhists, whether ‘hobby-farmers’ in the West or political activists in Asia, hold a common thread that identifies them first and foremost as Buddhist, not as secular social reformers.

Engaged Buddhists have understood the Bodhisattvas’ message very well and see, hear and respond to the cries of fellow human beings, as well as of non-human living beings-who face abuse, injury, or violent death all over the world. No longer do they consider sitting in meditation as the only essential task of a Buddhist, but they are impelled to act against social injustice, institutional evil and political oppression. (2) They have merely shifted their emphasis to the other end of the scale, namely action, service-based and world-transforming Buddhism. (See Chapter 3)
The focus of Engaged Buddhism has been on social rather than individual enlightenment, even though without inner enlightenment Buddhists are no longer Buddhists. Any one who defines Engaged Buddhism as ‘an application of Buddhist principles to everyday life’ only confuses the issue. As Rahula affirmed, Buddhism has only meaning when it is based on service to others. Engaged Buddhism must have the strength of re-orientation towards social reformation. The order of the path in primitive Buddhism, precepts-meditation-wisdom, has been changed into a loop of action-meditation-action-meditation and along the process, hopefully, compassion-wisdom will develop. Engaged Buddhists ventured into un-chartered waters and the results were unexpected. Equipped with a fresh world-view and a new praxis, they began their journey under the guidance of the Dharma. How were the Ambedkarites, Sarvodayan and the Vietnamese activists different after being baptised in the waters of social and political activism?

Engaged Buddhism is still endowed with many basic tenets like inter-dependence, non-self, non-attachment, skillful means, compassion etc... but new interpretations of these tenets are needed to guide actions. Most Engaged Buddhist leaders are the intellectual products of Western education and so there is little wonder that they incorporate many Western values in their interpretations such as human rights, justice and democracy. Engaged Buddhism is not really traditional in this sense. Some even called it Protestant-Buddhism. (See Chapter 2)

While their counterparts in the West became pre-occupied with almost every area of social experience like human rights, environmental destruction and even genre relations and sexual orientations, modern Asian Buddhists have had to respond to life and death experiences like social injustice, war, invasion and oppression. Their engagement is aptly called radicalism (see appendix) or as in the case of Vietnamese Buddhists in the 60’s, peacemaking. To change unjust systems or to stop the war, inevitably Buddhist leaders had to be involved in political activism. They were both spiritual as well as political leaders, thus they had to use spiritual means and political tactics to deal with their opponents to achieve the desired social reform. Because they did not fit in the image of docile monks as the colonial administrators or war leaders perceived them, they were fiercely denounced. Their critics denounced both them and their followers as power hungry, violent opportunists disguised as spiritual masters. Such was the impact their new image made.
Unlike secular social reformers, Buddhist activists undertook spiritual practice while engaging in social and political actions. They had to be committed and were not to use any means that contradicted their spiritual end. This criterion is crucial in assessing their success or failure in terms of the politics of enlightenment. The important question to ask is how much did self-transformation help to make the Buddhists less violent, less angry and less vengeful than other revolutionaries engaged in political struggle?

Vietnamese Buddhism Is Always Engaged

The Americans were stunned witnessing Buddhist youths staging street demonstrations while 'militant' monks pouring gasoline on themselves and burning themselves to death in the streets of Saigon. CIA agents in Saigon rushed to find files on these Buddhist leaders and President Kennedy questioned his close aides who the Buddhists were and what they wanted? An American historian Prados sarcastically commented that in a war fought for the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, it was odd that America tended to pay close attention to South Vietnam political and social dynamics only in crisis situations! The best illustration of this propensity is probably the case of the Buddhist religious movement, which had marked political effects in South Vietnam between 1963 and 1966. (3) Knowing that Buddhism had been decadent for a long time under the colonial period, the Buddhists were under-estimated by those who were educated by the West. Ngo Dinh Nhu, in an interview with Jerrold Scheeter, dismissed the importance of the Buddhist revolt. Nhu did not hide his disdain by saying: 'Their (the Buddhists) only record is the barbecue of Quang Duc. They have played no part in the intellectual, military or economic progress of the country. The Buddhists are only obstructive to progress. They have contributed nothing' (4) American policy-makers viewed Buddhism in the same light. They ignored, or tried to ignore, that Buddhism was the source of power in Southeast Asia that had rallied the faithful to fight against the intrusion of Western culture and imperialism. Particularly in Vietnam, the Buddhist Sangha was seen as the main source for nationalist political inspiration. In modern Vietnam, when the last Confucians admitted defeat in both the military and the cultural front, Buddhism became the torch carrier for nationalism, precisely because of its social, cultural and political roots could be traced back to the tenth century, when Vietnam regained its independence from China. The links between Buddhist leaders and the political and social developments in eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries were well documented in the history of Vietnamese
Buddhism. Le Manh That, a renowned scholar, summed up this crucial characteristic of Vietnamese Buddhism as he wrote:

_Buddhism showed that it was a national ideology to mobilise the people to fight off the invaders. It participated in an awakening campaign to make the public aware of the need to protect their burgeoning independence. It motivated both monks and laity to unify and to fend off invasion._ (5)

Zen Master Van Hanh’s involvement in the national affairs is well documented in Chapter Four. He helped successive dynasties to repel the Sung army from the North and pacify the Cham rebellion in the South. He did not hesitate to plan a coup d’état to overthrow a repressive King and to replace him with another worthy monarch. Buddhist ethics permeated every aspects of social life, from the legal code to individual behaviour. Thus it is not possible to discuss Vietnamese culture without reference to the Buddhist tradition. (6)

In the thirteenth century when the Vietnamese established their own identity as a country and a people, a pure Vietnamese Buddhist sect, _The Bamboo Forest_, was formed and headed by the Tran Kings. There has not been any other dynasty to compare with the Trans. Like Asoka, these Kings are Vietnamese who served the welfare of their people in accordance with the Dharma, as instructed in one of Asoka’s edicts. They were Kings and generals, deeply involved in national affairs and yet, most of them abdicated early to become Zen masters. They struck a perfect balance between social duties and spiritual pursuits, between inner transformation and national affairs. They served as role models for other God-Kings in history: kind but firm, compassionate but fair and none of them showed any attachment to temporal power. Nhat Hanh describes them as follows:

_We have the father king teaching the Dharma as he walks from village to village, and the son is sitting on the throne running the country according to Buddha principles. So the whole country is protected by the teachings of the Buddha. There was frequent danger of invasion from the North, and it was so important that the country be unified in their practice._ (7)

In troubled times, Buddhism served as the national ideology to unify the whole people and it was identified with patriotism. Never can Vietnamese Buddhists say that they would rather lose their country than their religion, simply because Buddhism could not exist without a
country and a people. To the Vietnamese Buddhists, talking about the period of the Lys and the Trans is not just a sentimental and nostalgic allegiance to a glorious past, but rather it serves as a reminder that Vietnamese Buddhism has always been an engaged religion of both monarchs and people.

In the nineteenth century, Buddhism provided a distinctive countervailing force against the infiltration of Western culture and imperialism in every Buddhist country in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, when the last Confucians admitted defeat in the military resistance and Confucianism was pushed to the backstage, Buddhism was the only traditional cultural force able to carry on the struggle for national independence. Particularly when Catholicism, sided with the colonialists and became a part of the colonial oppression. Buddhism became the obvious choice of patriotic Vietnamese to represent their nationalism.

To be able to play the role of the champion of nationalism, Buddhism had to be reformed and revived. The Dharma had to be re-read and re-interpreted in a new light that could be palatable to a new generation, who knew more about Western culture than they did about the Sages and Bodhisattvas in their tradition. (Chapter 5) The Buddhist revival movements in India, Sri Lanka, Burma, China and Vietnam were not coincidental. They were reactions to colonialism. Like their counterparts in Southeast Asia, Vietnamese monks and laity had to convince their compatriots that Buddhism deserved being their national torchbearer. The reformers had to shake off the image of a superstitious religion and an army of idle funeral-rites performers, as Ambedkar called the decadent Sangha. They had to transform Buddhism into a renewed religion that showed concern for social injustices, particularly those created by colonialism. Engaged Buddhism had to fit the mould of Ambedkar’s vision of a religion that had a social dimension and which was involved in the struggle for social justice and equality.

Not only did Vietnamese Buddhism become the national ideology, it contributed a large number of anti-colonial fighters. Side by side with other patriotic Confucians, many temples all over the country became the secret meeting place for anti-French groups and many monks led rebel troops, like Vo Tru’s uprising in 1898 that was called the Monk War by the French. Most of the leading monks in the Buddhist Institute had joined the anti-French fighters, even though they were fully aware of the orthodox view on religion by the Marxists. At least five hundred young monks were thrown into prisons, tortured or murdered by the French secret service. (Chapter Five)
Instead of trying to understand the ethical and psychological value of the Buddhists, the American propaganda machine launched an all out attack on the Buddhist leadership and its motives. The Americans often questioned the validity of mixing religious and political affairs, not knowing that the withdrawal model of Buddhism had been discredited in the eyes of engaged Buddhists a long time ago. The Americans wasted much of their time engaging in character assassination of the leading monks, accusing the monks of using violent means and manipulating the faithful to seek power. They also implied that the Buddhists leaders were ungrateful in view of massive aid from the United States and that the Buddhist movement hindered the efforts of the South Vietnamese to win the war. Some Catholic extremists went to extra lengths to accuse The Buddhist Movement of being an accomplice of the Communists.

However Engaged Buddhists knew very well why they had to start a journey to enlightenment through history, or to use a motto of the Buddhist Movement in the 60’s, they followed Asoka’s politics of enlightenment by serving their compatriots and their country under the guidance of the Dharma.

The Critics of the Buddhist Movement

From 1965 onwards the Buddhist Movement did its utmost to achieve a cease-fire between the warring sides so that they could sit down and find a negotiated solution. On the night of August 20, 1964 during a sit-in at Hue University, a student leader declared that whether to wage war or make peace, the South Vietnamese people must be the ones to control their destiny. Self-determination was the movement’s main objective and a popularly elected government in the South would bring the Communists to the negotiation table. In order to achieve this objective a constituent assembly must be freely and fairly elected. The peace keeping efforts rattled the American senior advisers who were determined to pursue the escalation policy (Chapter 7 and 8), The Movement was also seen as a threat to the Saigon generals and the so-called anti-Communists whose main business was making profit from the war. The Buddhists, while attracting some progressive Catholics, were fiercely denounced by fanatical elements of the Northern Catholics. Sadly some Buddhists in the Southern group
also voiced their objection to the Buddhist peace movement. The Americans and the pro-war elements usually accused the Buddhists of bringing disrepute by mixing politics and religion, of using violent means to achieve their aims and of aiding and abetting the National Liberation Front. These are accusations that I will deal with using the above criteria of what constitutes Engaged Buddhism developed in Chapter 3 to assess the Buddhist peace movement in South Vietnam from 1963 to 1966.

The Americans

Those who had vested interests in the escalation of war were obviously most critical of the anti-war monks and laity. In his memoirs written thirty years after the war ended, the architect of the Vietnam War, Robert McNamara still considered the Buddhist uprising in 1966 as undermining the Saigon Government’s fragility and lack of popular appeal. McNamara said that the uprising forced the South Vietnamese government to battle yet another war while the enemy pressed at the gate. He viewed political turmoil caused by the Buddhist Movement as a “terminal sickness”. At the same time he deeply regretted that he did not give De Gaulle’s proposal of neutralisation of Indochina in 1964 the place it deserved and did not initiate a probing debate about whether it would ever be possible to forge a winning military effort on a foundation of quicksand. (8) The Buddhist Movement clearly expressed the same view that a military victory was not possible and too destructive and suggested that the Americans should consider a negotiated settlement with the Vietcong. The Secretary of Defence did not say so out loud, but implied that, had the Buddhists not begun their uprising in 1966, the South Vietnamese Government would have brilliantly fought the enemy at the gate and eventually won the war.

However the Commander of the U.S. Marines, General Lewis Walt, who witnessed the whole episode of the Struggle Movement in 1966 assessed the Buddhist uprising more favourably. Working closely with the people of Danang and Hue, Walt recognised the legitimate complaints of people in Central Vietnam at the time because they were dissatisfied with the corrupt and unrepresentative Saigon Government. The Marines Commander thought that the uprising was a political crisis that required a political solution. Reviewing what Ky’s troops did in Danang, Walt lamented that what the American Marines had accomplished in psychological warfare in almost a year, was totally destroyed by Ky’s gung-ho approach. Walt observed that even ‘the Vietcong seemed as shocked and surprised as we’ for, in the
and, the Vietcong had shown how weak and ineffective they were, while during the uprising, the Communists failed to capture the momentum of the Struggle Movement, the Buddhist revolt, the Army and the people. (9) Even the Ambassador Cabot Lodge, who helped overtly helped Ky’ force to crush the uprising, agreed that the Vietcong neither started nor ran it (10) thus admitting the popular support for the Struggle movement.

Nevertheless the American propaganda machine launched an all-out campaign to belittle the Movement by casting doubt on its motives and fabricated evidence for purposes of character assassination. Time Magazine, which honoured General Westmoreland twice as Man of the Year, described the threat of Vietnamese Buddhism:

It is in South Vietnam, political Buddhism is making the most vigorous, the most open attempt to seize temporal power. Buddhism may be as great a threat to the embattled country as the Vietcong, if not greater. Saigon has just passed through a week of riots to which the believers in the reverence for life tossed hand-grenades from the sanctuary of the Buddhist headquarters, teenagers, supposedly raised in the ‘Middle Way’ ganged up on policemen, and the disciples of the gentle Buddha pushed old people and children as human shields ahead of the demonstrators. (11)

The article went on to denounce Quang Duc’s self-immolation as a calculated act of propaganda and claimed that hard core Communists had infiltrated the Buddhist Movement. The article also ridiculed the claim that Buddhism represented “the people” was a gross exaggeration. However, reading between the lines, the article revealed what the Americans feared most was the Buddhist leaders would seek a peaceful solution for the war. Neither did the Buddhists hide their motives or attempt to keep them secret. Time’s reporter understood well the Buddhist Institute’s neutralist position. It said that there was no doubt that many leaders believed that, the choice between capitalism and communism was unnecessary because the Buddhists could tame Communism with spirituality that could overcome Marxist materialism. The article also accused the monks of living dangerously in the cloister by holding that view (12) But as far as the Buddhists saw it, in their history, there have not been any dynasties, organisations, regimes, including the Communist Party, that have had the kind of relationship like the one that existed between Buddhism and the Vietnamese people. The Communist Party has only had seventy years of history while Buddhism is rooted in the Vietnamese soil and so, became the driving force of the Vietnamese people. This explained
why the Buddhists firmly believed that they could win a substantial number of seats in any election that was free and fair.

Naturally American officials considered the Buddhist leaders, especially Tri Quang, as troublemakers. A CIA report called Tri Quang ‘a fanatic nationalist’ who was capable of allying himself with the Communists at any time and had ‘his own political ambitions and religious objectives—two causes he views as one’, although they never spelt out what they meant by ‘ambition’ (13). Even though Ambassador Lodge became friendly with Tri Quang in 1963, he became so frustrated with the Buddhist uprising in 1966 that he angrily called Tri Quang ‘a card-carrying Communist’. He scorned the Buddhist uprising as set for an irresponsible and destructive course. (14) Another American Ambassador during this period of turmoil, Maxwell Taylor, called Tri Quang unscrupulous opportunist and unreliable ally who was hungry for naked power. Taylor also considered Tri Quang as a dangerous conspirator who, if not actually controlled by the Hanoi leaders, often conducted himself in strict conformity with their interests. (15) An American journalist, Jerrold Schecter, ridiculed Tri Quang as a political holy man without good education except that of the texts of Buddhism. According to Schecter, Tri Quang seemed to be directed toward power as an end in itself rather than toward any nation-building purpose. (16) These fierce criticisms were just a smokescreen for American fear. In 1964 and 1965, Ambassador Taylor feared that an alliance between Khanh and Buddhists may lead to the establishment of a neutral government in the South that would quickly seek a political solution with the National Liberation Front. In 1966, Ambassador Lodge feared that if the Struggle Movement was not put down, the Central Vietnam would secede from the rest of the country. (17)

Tri Quang happened to be inside the compound of Hue Radio when the massacre of eight children occurred. Since then, he had become a legendary figure and was revered as much as Quang Duc, the first monk who self immolated. In 1967, JUSPAO, an arm of American psychological warfare, conducted a survey in the battle zones, controlled by the Government by day and by night. When asked which of the Vietnamese celebrities was most revered, a majority of peasants cited Ho Chi Minh and Tri Quang. (18) The Americans ignored these survey results and so continued to under-estimate the national significance of Buddhism and the Buddhist leaders.

In fact, the Buddhist leaders had proved that they could win over the hearts and minds of the
majority of the Vietnamese people despite their wide spectrum of political colours, including progressive Catholics. Eleven Catholic priests released a manifesto on January 11, 1966 to support the Buddhists’ peace campaign. In his peace tour of the United States in 1966, when asked what if the Communists did not accept his peace plan, Nhat Hanh answered with conviction: “If the National Liberation Front refused to cooperate with such an elected government (in South Vietnam), and to continue the war, it would lose all claims in the eyes of the peasants to any defense of either peace or patriotism. A refusal to participate in an effort that was clearly in the direction of peace combined with independence, would brand the Front as the enemy of the people”. (19)

The National Liberation Front

Nhat Hanh’s strong comment was an adverse assessment of the Front, casting doubt on the Communists’ support and ‘mandate of people’ as the Front had ambiguously claimed. Nhat Hanh did not even assign a clear role for the Front in his peace plan. This enraged the Communist commissars who wasted no time in strongly attacking Nhat Hanh. The Front’s weakness was exposed. If the peasants did not necessarily support the Front, what hope did the Front have of capturing the support of the Buddhists, students, youth and urban people? According to an undercover organiser of the Front, Truong Nhu Tang, there was no hope at all. While the Buddhists and the students were able to incite an uprising, forcing General Khanh to revoke his Vung Tau Charter, the Front was only able to set up an organisation called The Movement For Self-Determination, of which the key figures were mostly middle-aged Saigon bureaucrats and professionals, disdainfully described by youths at the time as ‘arm-chair’ politicians. On the order of the Communist Commissar in Saigon, Tang tried to find a way to use volatile and militant youth to heighten the confrontation between the junta and the urban population. However Tang finally confessed that, the scheme to mobilise urban youth and drive them into an umbrella organisation controlled by the Communists, had failed miserably. In Tang’s own words: “This effort had failed to generate much enthusiasm and had been allowed to lapse”. (20)

However, the Communists held high regards for the Institute leaders and their faithful activists. Particularly, the Struggle in 1963 received unusual high praise from the Front for an organisation outside their control. The Buddhist Movement was seen as ‘a patriotic
nationalist movement to fight for social justice and assessed as the only political campaign having far-reaching consequences in South Vietnam’. (21) Another high ranking communist cadre in charge of Religious Affairs, praised the An Quang Unified Buddhist Institute as “the biggest religious organisation served by many well educated and talented monks, which enjoyed the support of the masses and gained high respect from the international Buddhist communities.” (22) Another top-ranking Communist cadre, Xuan Thuy, who jointly received the Nobel Peace prize with Dr Henry Kissinger in 1972, lamented the independent stand taken by the Buddhist Institute:

An Quang Unified Buddhist Church is a religious, social as well as political organisation. It is a nationalistic and patriotic movement that has enormous support from the masses. Its members are talented and held in high regards by the international Buddhist communities. Importantly, the (Vietnamese) Communist Party has never been able to control the Church affairs and policies. Its appeal to the masses will make it a formidable pressure group that the Party and the (Communist) Government have to reckon with. As experiences have shown us, whoever working closely with Tri Quang, sooner or later they will come under his influence. (23)

The head of the undercover insurgents in Saigon, Tran Bach Dang, even suspected that ‘Tri Quang may have been a ‘CIA strategic spy’ and cited a few incidents in which the Front’s campaigns were undermined by the Buddhist Institute’s activities. That first incident occurred in 1964, when the whole Central Vietnam was heavily flooded. The Front wanted to destroy all the isolated outposts in the countryside where the South Vietnamese soldiers were stranded. According to Dang, Tri Quang then orchestrated a Flood Relief Campaign to help the victims. The Buddhist flags were hoisted everywhere and the South Vietnamese soldiers were rescued by boats, out-boards and even by helicopters! The second incident happened when the Buddhists launched a huge protest about Khanh’s Vung Tau Charter that would give him absolute power. The Front tried to manipulate people’s hostilities toward military dictatorship to their advantage, but Tri Quang instructed his men to form a People’s Committee to Save Our Fatherland to attract the opposition. The third incident that presented a great opportunity for the Front to agitate the public occurred when the American Marines landed at Chu Lai. The Front utilised the motto ‘Fighting Against American Invasion’ to stir up anti-American feelings. However, Tri Quang organised a Prayer for Peace Campaign, which minimised the effects of the Communists’ political push. These incidents may have
been coincident, but Tran Bach Dang’s comments proved the communists regarded the Buddhist Institute’s members as serious opponents who could win over the Vietnamese people.

**The Right Wing Catholics**

The Catholics, particularly the Northern refugees, the Ho Nai Catholics, were hostile to the Buddhist Struggle Movement. One writer described this time as three chaotic years. They openly blamed Buddhist activism for hindering the war efforts and ten years after the Saigon government had collapsed, continued blaming the Buddhists for the loss of Vietnam. What the Catholics did not know, though, or pretended not to know, was that Robert McNamara, the Main architect of the Vietnam War, had admitted as early as in 1965 that the unrepresentative military government in Saigon had no hope of winning the war.

**Other Right Wing Buddhists**

Not all criticisms came from the opponents of the Buddhist Movement. Some self-proclaimed pundits cast doubts on the campaign for peace that the Institute leaders waged in 1966. Some advised that it was unwise to lock horns with the most powerful country in the world. A Vietnamese historian, Nguyen The Anh, while praising the Buddhist leaders for their sacrifices and bravery, commented:

*Believing in the support of millions of Buddhists, the monks at An Quang and Tu Dam pagoda, the headquarters of the militant monks, engaged in the struggle to find solutions for basic contemporary problems. They demanded a government representing people with different political viewpoints to find a solution for the Vietnam War, but they were inclined towards a neutralist government that was a subject of debate and made people worried. Their commitment to a reconciliatory government to the end proved unrealistic.* (24)

Regrettably, Nguyen The Anh did not reflect on questions like, who would worry about a neutralist solution or object to a reconciliatory government? And why would a peaceful solution be unrealistic? Or what would be a realistic outcome?

During the struggle, the military government and the American administration tried every
tactic and method to infiltrate and damage the Institute’s prestige and neutralise the Movement’s influence. One method was to plant personnel in the Institute’s organisations. The common method used by the Secret Service was to kidnap monks, steal their identities, then plant bogus monks alongside authentic monks. Some bogus monks were even recruited from taxi drivers! (25) But there was another more subtle method of infiltration that caused serious damage to the Institute’s prestige. Some imposters were groomed to become Buddhist ‘celebrities’, sowing confusion and discord within the Buddhist community. For instance, one self-proclaimed Buddhist scholar, Dr Tran Ngoc Ninh, pointed out American invincibility and insisted that it was therefore futile for the Institute leaders to confront the American juggernaut. This Buddhist scholar accepted a ministerial post with the Ky government right after the Struggle Movement had been brutally suppressed. He also agreed to form a youth organisation called The Summer Program (CPS) which was directly funded by a political adviser at the Embassy. There was no doubt at all that the objectives of this pro-American group were to neutralise other student activists, who then still roamed the streets in large South Vietnamese cities for many years to come.

At Van Hanh University, Minh Chau and other academics under his wing used the same argument that Premier Huong had used a year before as a pretext to suppress the Buddhists and the students, namely that there must be a demarcation between education and politics. In his address on the inauguration day of the Faculty of Education in 1970, Minh Chau reaffirmed that Van Hanh University was a ‘pure’ educational institution without involvement in politics, particularly the anti-war movement. He denounced students and staff who had shown their opposition to the South Vietnamese Government and the American war machine, in the name of Van Hanh students. (26) This was seen as a thinly veiled denunciation of Sister Chan Khong and Van Hanh Students Union’s activities in collecting signatures for a peace petition that Nhat Hanh brought with him to the U.S.

Some academics at Van Hanh University calling themselves ‘revolutionary thinkers’, not only refused to join the peace activists, they also tried to belittle anyone who showed anti-war sentiments! In the Van Hanh University Journal, Tu Tuong (Thought) they claimed Buddhists should strive to relinquish desire, including the desire for peace:

> Desire for peace is the main cause of war...People are looking for a peaceful solution: a two-way, three-way and four-way negotiation. But the more the peace proposals, the fiercer the
war became. (27)

These thinkers did not explain why seeking for a peaceful solution increased the speed of war. Their way to end the war was to appeal for the restoration of traditional values, based on Vietnamese Buddhism of the Lys and the Trans. This empty rhetoric may have soothed those self-seeking academics who tried to justify their inactivity by pursuing a purely intellectual path, claiming that Vietnamese Zen Buddhism inspired them, but in reality they followed the path of the lone enlightened Buddha. Their motto was ‘peace in your heart brings peace to the world. Finish drinking your cup of tea, the war will end!’ One wonders how anyone could enjoy a cup of tea under the torrential rains of napalm bombs!

Admittedly, not all Buddhists would condone the inevitable confrontation with the Americans nor did they respond to the war in the same way as the Struggle Movement did. Facing a particular political crisis, not all Buddhists would make the same political choice, not only because of their different in level of enlightenment, but also because an individual’s perception of historical dimension plays a crucial role in shaping what they do and how they react. On the path to mitigate collective and individual karma, there are many possibilities to choose from and thus one’s own destiny is of one’s own making. For example the laity in the Southern Vietnam Buddhist Studies Society soon exited from the Buddhist Institute’s chosen path and decided to cooperate with the Americans. Their group leader, Mai Tho Truyen, later accepted a ministerial post with the military government. To them, foreign intervention was not so bad after all, probably because they strongly believed in the myth that the French then, and the Americans now, wanted to help the Vietnamese fight Communism!

Tam Chau’s group was another example. They had got along well with other engaged Buddhists in the fight against President Diem, but quickly broke away on the question of ‘to support or not to support’ American escalation came up. The ambivalent choice of the Vietnamese Buddhists was no better or worse than that of the American Buddhists’ when President Bush decided to punish Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War and when President Clinton used military operations to prevent the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo.

Tam Chau’s defection to Ky, however, was the biggest loss ever for the Buddhist Institute. Like other monks, Tam Chau wrote nothing about his relationship with the other Institute leaders until 1993. Bach Thu (The White Paper) was written out of anger and badly
conceived. It offered no new information why he had decided to turn his back on the Buddhist Movement in 1966. In the White Paper, Tam Chau accused young monks of becoming militant and committing vindictive acts against him. He went on to claim the Buddhist Institute’s leaders were manipulated by peace activists and left-leaning elements. Ironically in 1965, Tam Chau had been described by the American Embassy as one of the most vocal advocates for peace. Thus it was clear that, whatever he intended, the Americans regarded Tam Chau as an ally and supporter after the uprising.

Why did Buddhists leaders Become Political Activists?

From the Engaged Buddhist Perspective

The severest criticism was that religious leaders should not muddle into political affairs. It is quite easy to explain the Movement leaders’ motives in term of these guiding principles, since the raison d’être of Buddhism is to stop individual and collective sufferings. Any Buddhist can quote the first precept to justify their engagement in political actions: ‘Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war’. Tri Quang expressed it simply for ordinary practising Buddhists: ‘We, the Buddhists, have a custom of buying live fish and birds, then we release them back into their habitat. Can we just sit there and do nothing when witnessing thousands of innocent people going to the slaughter?’ At a meeting with Ambassador Lodge in 1966, when Tri Quang revealed to him that the Buddhist Institute would launch a campaign for peace, Lodge disagreed with the plan commenting that ‘peace will come when the war dies down’. Their conflicting viewpoint on peace made the events of the summer 1966 inevitable. (28)

On one occasion when asked by Thomas Merton, ‘How’s everything in Vietnam?’ Nhat Hanh replied despondently: ‘Everything is destroyed’, illustrating the seemingly unstoppable destruction of the war. Nhat Hanh emphasised that he always put peace and the sanctity of human life above everything else, so the survival of the Vietnamese people was far more important than even the survival of Vietnamese Buddhism. Nhat Hanh cherished the popular theology that one of his students explained as: ‘In the time like this when people suffer so much, the Bodhisattvas do not stay in the temple; they are out here (in the battlefield). (29)

Nhat Hanh also referred to scriptural principles, such as the Bodhisattva’s ideal, to justify his activism. Monks must engage in social and political actions because ‘Bodhisattva had left the
This rhetoric may have moved some people, but the young students in the Struggle Movement needed a more concrete historical version. Tri Quang, as usual, used a simpler language to show why the Buddhist Institute decided to take political actions to stop the war:

*Our most sacred duty is to preserve our faith and to advise our followers... If our country is lost, then our people would lose their identity and Buddhism could no longer survive. In other words, the Buddhists must vigilantly protect their country's interests, because that is in the interests of their own faith.* (30)

Tri Quang equates the survival of the Vietnamese people with the survival of their Buddhist identity. To him they are one and the same—lose one, lose the other. Nevertheless most Vietnamese Buddhists agreed with Nhat Hanh’s and Tri Quang’s vision that the survival of their compatriots was far more important than everything else, including their religion. As a religious group first and foremost, the Buddhists tried their best to serve their compatriots in accordance with the Dharma and what is better than the gift of life?

**From the Historical Perspective: Buddhism Has Become The Torch Bearer of Vietnamese Nationalism**

When Confucianism collapsed at the beginning of the Twentieth century, Buddhism became the natural torchbearer for nationalism and emerged as the **only viable alternative** cultural force to counter the West. The reform of Chinese Buddhism and the revival of the Buddhist movement in South East Asia had also encouraged the Vietnamese Sangha to re-organise their associations and renew training for a new generation of monks. The Institution leaders who led the Struggle Movement from 1963 onwards were the products of this reform. These monks, who were ordained in the 30s and the 40s, had been groomed for leadership in the 50s, just in time for a direct confrontation with Diem’s regime. Those who had been educated in western universities, like Ngo Dinh Nhu, did not recognise the special relationship between Buddhism and the Vietnamese people and tended to regard Buddhism with contempt. Yet the youngest brother in the Ngo family, Ngo Dinh Can, the least educated of the family, realised the important link between the Vietnamese people and Buddhism. Little wonder he was the only one in the Ngo’s family who did not condone President Diem’s directive forbidding the Buddhists to fly the flags on Vesak Day!

The close connection between the Vietnamese people and Buddhism may have resulted from
the way Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam. As Thien Minh observed, Buddhism came to Vietnam like a stream of fresh water, permeating deeply into the soil. It was never presented as a dogmatic religion, but only a way of life. It penetrated their spiritual world as peacefully as morning dew wets one’s garments unnoticed, as a Zen Master poetically expressed it. Buddhism has never caused culture shock and yet, once people accepted it as their way of life, they would not easily convert to any other form of religion. This may also be a reason why the Buddhists had never been afraid of confronting the Front and firmly believed that, should there be an open and free election, the majority of peasants would support the Buddhist Institute and not the Communists.

In addition to that, most anti-colonial groups did not seem to have much faith in tradition in formulating their political platforms. The patriotic Phan Boi Chau looked to the Japanese model while Phan Chu Trinh looked to the ideal of the French democracy and the Nationalists copied the party’s name and platform from the Chinese Nationalists. The most organised and efficient political group, the Communist Party, re-cycled International Socialism. Meanwhile, the President of the First Republic, relied on his family and a small clique of Catholic refugees from the North and considered Catholicism and a second-class theory of personalism from an obscure Catholic philosopher, Emmanuel Mounier, as his official ideology.

Since it did not have any rigid dogma, Buddhism was also an antidote for the fanatical views from both sides. ‘The Vietnam War was, first and foremost, an ideological struggle’, and on behalf of ordinary Vietnamese, Nhat Hanh many times affirmed ‘I cannot accept this war. I never could, I never will.’

**From The Political Perspective: A Military Victory Was Just An Illusion**

As Hassler recalled, Nhat Hanh was warmly welcomed in the United States and his audience moved when he spoke about the suffering that the Vietnamese ‘voiceless peasants’ had to endure. But the audience, moved though it was, wanted answers to other questions, political answers, such as how could the war be stopped? Nhat Hanh tried to steer a delicate path in his answers, but finally he was forced to present the Buddhist political vision to explain and justify the Buddhists’ protests. He did not come to the U.S. and appeal for peace as a spiritual leader, but as a political monk. At meetings with the key religious and political figures, he proposed a detailed and concrete plan to end the war. In his book *The Lotus in the Sea of
Fire", written at the time when the Struggle Movement was brutally suppressed, Nhat Hanh pleaded with the Americans to change their war policy and stop supporting Ky's government. He talked about the destructive effects that the Vietnamese would have to endure, if the war went on. Though in his own words he was not a professional politician, Nhat Hanh's view proved prophetic:

*First the introduction of troops into South Vietnam was thought to be enough to stop the aggression. Then it was necessary to bomb Ho Chi Minh Trail, to stop the flow of men and ammunition into South Vietnam. When it did not work, and indeed the Vietcong seemed to be growing stronger, the next solution was to bomb North Vietnam in order to bring that country to the conference table. North Vietnam did not come to the conference table, so that the United States decided to bomb Hai Phong and Hanoi. The more the war is escalated in Vietnam, the more clearly it demonstrates how seriously mistaken the American policy is...Each bombardment has the result of pushing more people to the other side and giving more strength to the Front.* (31)

Indeed, it seemed that **continuance of the war in Vietnam was more likely to spread communism in Vietnam than to contain it.** The growing support the Front enjoyed over the years proved Nhat Hanh's prediction was deadly accurate. From a group of amateur agents, like those in Truong Nhu Tang's group, in 1968, it had reached a stage when people associated with the Front infiltrated everywhere and everyone suspected the person next door to them could belong the Front or was at least a sympathiser. (32)

Even the architect of the Vietnam War, Robert McNamara, expressed his regret at not forcing a debate about whether it could ever have been possible to achieve a winning military effort on a foundation of a political quicksand. Nhat Hanh came to Washington with the express purpose of exposing that foundation of quicksand, but nobody in the White House listened to him. Neither did they listen to the Pope or the UN General Secretary or anyone else outside their own mistaken advisers. In his Memoirs, billed as a *mea culpa*, the Secretary of Defence finally admitted his error:

*Today it is clear to me that we should have begun our withdrawal from South Vietnam. There was a high probability that we could have done so on terms no less advantageous than those accepted nearly six years later-without any greater damage to U.S. national security and at
McNamara agreed to meet Nhat Hanh in 1966 who cautioned McNamara of the illusion of a military victory. Later McNamara failed to mention Nhat Hanh’s visit in his memoirs, nor did he show any apparent remorse for the sufferings that the Vietnamese had endured during the war. Maybe he could not face the ghosts of the past, included 58,000 Americans and 225,000 dead Vietnamese (according to a conservative estimate) McNamara later secured a job with the World Bank, and McGeorge Bundy (both implacable opponents to peace in Vietnam) was offered a job with Ford Foundation which, in McNamara’s own assessment, was the largest foundation in the country spending approximately $200 million a year to advance human welfare around the world! Or, as in a savagery ironical comments of Hendrickson in The Living and the Dead:

"McNamara’s regret cannot be huge enough to balance the books for the dead soldiers. The ghosts of those unlived lives indeed have circled close around McNamara. Surely he must in every quiet moment hear the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry, dying in tall grass, platoon by platoon, for no purpose. What he took from them cannot be repaid by prime-time apology and stale tears, three decades late". (34)

The Vietnamese boys who ‘died like they were dreaming’ as sung by the anti-war musician Trinh Cong Son, were not so lucky. McNamara offered them neither tears or apology!

Are Buddhist Leaders Power Drunk?

The American propaganda machine, in full throttle, tried with all its might to belittle and discredit the Buddhist leaders by devious means. Jerrold Schecter, in The New Face of Buddha, admitted that Tri Quang’s own personal life had always been beyond reproach, yet he remarked that Tri Quang’s zeal seemed to be directed toward power as an end in itself and that Tri Quang was attached to nothing, loved nothing, except power. (35) Schecter fanned a rumour that Tri Quang was offered an advisory position in General Duong Van Minh’s government after the 1963 coup, but refused. Schecter did not know about an incident that froze the relationship between these two men. At a reception celebrating the November Revolution, General Duong Van Minh refused to acknowledge Tri Quang’s presence.
expecting Tri Quang to come and greet him first and show deference to the Chairman of the Military Revolution Council! As childish as it may seem, Tri Quang did not and the two had only exchanged pleasantries! When Nguyen Khanh staged a coup d'état three months later, Tri Quang did nothing to defend General Minh. The only general in the Military Revolution Council towards whom Tri Quang showed warmth and respect, was General Tran Van Don. Tri Quang publicly thanked Don for his part in the overthrow President Diem. Schechter's rumour was a typical blatant effort to discredit Tri Quang and other Buddhist leaders. Others who also wanted to discredit Tri Quang called him “the Makarios of Vietnam”.

Some academics writing about Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism, like Professor Sallie King, fell into the propaganda trap. King comments that the attitude of the Institute leaders towards political power was difficult and controversial. King said that the vocations of ordained monks and politicians markedly differed and that it is inappropriate for a monk to hold political office and the Institute’s actions in mobilising tens of thousands of protesters to oppose or support a specific government or prime minister should raise some concerns. (36) Did these monks go too far into power politics and so become corrupt? In defence of those who worked with the Movement leaders they knew that the idea that monks eventually would be offered a ministerial post or premiership was ridiculous in view of their spiritual calling.

Power Is Worth a Pair of Worn Shoes

While Nhat Hanh’s activities and those political activities conducted by the Institute were concerted efforts in the whole campaign for peace, some differences emerged in the process, particularly in the tactics used to deal with the Americans and their military strong men. After President Diem had been overthrown, the Buddhists became the most powerful pressure group in the country. However the laity recognised that Buddhism was a political reality, and they could achieve little without the monks’ sanction, for the Buddhist masses still responded to their spiritual leaders, rather than to the laity. To realise the full potential of Buddhist power, the monks had to be in the front line.

The Institute also engaged in participatory politics and the activists working with the Institute leaders disagreed with Nhat Hanh, who wanted to distance himself from power. King questioned the validity and practicality of the demarcation between social work and political actions, as Nhat Hanh perceived:
It is unclear to me how such a line could be drawn, especially during the times of political crisis. For example, during the war in Vietnam, it was the political system itself that largely responsible for the suffering, it was impossible to avoid engagement in politics. Moreover, after the fall of Diem, the Buddhists had political power, whether they wanted it or not. The real question was how were they to respond to that reality in a responsible way. (37)

Activists in the Movement were fully aware of the potential of power to corrupt, but they had never shied away from its reality convinced that one had to be baptised by the fiery politics of enlightenment. The concept of mitigation through Karma was a good starting point because every action one committed was seen as an act of paying back one's debts from the past in order to lighten the burden of individual Karma, not to create more karmic effects. This is Nagarjuna's concept of politics of enlightenment, which views self-transformation as the basis for world transformation, and in return, when engaging in actions, the maturation process is greatly enhanced. As long as one's motive was pure, activism could lead to liberation. In the literature of Engaged Buddhism, a figurative imagery was often used, such as that one has to go over the bridge of history before entering Nirvana. This is another and simpler way of explaining the Bodhisattva's vow: if I do not go to hell to save sentient beings, who will?

Pure motivation requires selflessness and fearlessness and liberation is the ultimate aim. Every Buddhist is well aware that the main source of suffering is craving for, or attachment to worldly things, including power. The Movement attracted thousands of young people who were willing to abandon their schooling and careers to join the protests. This was an awakening process and the participation of youth created a new group of non-violent activists, who had no desire to seek power for themselves. They were a new breed of selfless intelligentsia who dared to take risks, including being jailed, conscripted into the front line and death. Writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan, commented on the impact of the Buddhist Youth Movement on the political arena:

*In Vietnamese modern history, with the exception of the August Revolution in 1945 led by the Communists, there has not been any movement that created the enormous impact as the Buddhist Youth Movement did in 1963 onwards. It was non-violent yet it was able to maintain its impetus for a very long time. High school or university student boycotted classes, began*
fasting and staged street demonstrations. The small traders with a shoestring budget were ready to throw in their support in by stopping all commercial activities for a day or two. Even public servants who were normally very obedient to the government, staged stop work meetings to show their solidarity with the students and the masses. The number of pagoda goers rose. In 1966 all the high school teachers and University lecturers resigned en mass. Spectacularly, all the armed forces in Tactical Zone I rebelled against the central government and threw their support in with the Buddhists. The Buddhist Movement actually made history. (38)

Not every one passed over the bridge of history unscathed however. Some were corrupted by power and glory; a few lost patience because of the slow progress of the non-violent approach of the Movement and so they took up weapons and joined the Front. In the Call for Peace in 1969, the Supreme Patriarch, Thich Tinh Khiet, appealed to all the faithful ‘to be clear-sighted and not to allow themselves to be influenced by any kind of parties or forces’. The Patriarch asked that ‘the honest Buddhists and all the Vietnamese who truly care for the country, should resolve not to side with any parties who are now the tools of some unenlightened international forces’ (39)

Engaging in participatory politics implied moving from a pressure group into a political party- or a quasi party- within the legal framework designed by the government of the day, even though this legal framework was far from satisfactory. After the brutal repression in 1966 the Buddhists, plus any opposition parties in South Vietnam, knew that the dominance of the instrumental government could not be contested, so long as the Americans stood solidly behind them. The repression of 1966 actually destroyed the middle ground that the Buddhists had been building up between the military and the Front with both sides determined to destroy anything resembling a viable third force, that is, the Buddhists and their allies. (40)

After 1966, the political appeal of Buddhism was in no way diminished. The presidential and parliamentary elections proved that the faithful still strongly supported the Institute. The number of Buddhist candidates elected was a third of the voters (despite vote rigging). Nhat Hanh was weary that the so-called Buddhist politicians only used the Institute and many of them had never joined the Buddhist struggle. (41) No doubt, there were opportunists among the Buddhist politicians, but living in exile in a far away land, Nhat Hanh did not know that.
under Thien Minh’s encouragement and supervision, former activists in the Struggle Movements formed a political party called the Buddhist Socialist Party with a clear political platform, ready for an open and fair election promised by the Paris Peace Conference. Even if one agrees with Nhat Hanh that the monks ought not to get caught in the power web, what should a million of Buddhist laymen do to stop the war?

Means and End Are the Same: We Are Not an Angry Mob

Street demonstration were severely criticised by the Americans and right wing Catholics as hampering the war efforts, particularly the burning of the American Library and the Consular Office in Hue, as well as the bloody clash between the street protesters and the Catholics in a fishing village in Danang. The writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan, when questioned about these, explained that none of these incidents was planned or executed by student leaders. Many agents de provocateur were planted by the American Mission among the protesters and the Consulate officials and the CIA agents surely knew who were responsible for these violent acts. (42)

Nhat Hanh’s moderate model of resistance was obviously preferable to street demonstrations staged by the Institute activists, because it was less violent, less political and spiritual intent. The Trappist priest, Thomas Merton, considered Nhat Hanh to be the least political compared with other Institute leaders. Others, like Don Luce, regarded Nhat Hanh’s activities as representing a different Buddhist faction and that Nhat Hanh did not necessarily support all the acts of the Struggle Movement. Unless politics equates only with street demonstrations, nothing is further from the truth! In fact, Nhat Hanh was the most effective political spokesman that the Institute ever produced. It was unthinkable for the frail and gentle poet-monk to join street protests with raised hands and clenched fists and what more is it would have been a waste of political talent to let him to do so! He may not have been as politically charismatic in public as Tri Quang, but his quietly persuasive power of his poetry and anti-war writing had won the hearts and minds of a whole generation of intellectuals and youth. When Nhat Hanh went to Washington, the battle between the Struggle Movement and Ky was at its climax. Then Nhat Hanh wholeheartedly endorsed every thing that the Buddhists and the students did in Hue and Danang. He acted as the foremost person of the Institute outside Vietnam presenting the Buddhist case to the American administration and the public. At a press conference in Washington on June 1, 1966, when Ky’s troops entered Hue to
sweep out the last dissidents, Nhat Hanh’s words clearly demonstrated his total support of the dissident Movement:

Just this morning, the U.S. Consulate in Hue was destroyed by angry Vietnamese youths. In the past four days, five Vietnamese have immolated themselves, some of them leaving behind messages explaining that their actions were in protest against U.S. policy in South Vietnam. The demonstrations, self-immolation and protests that we are witnessing in Vietnam are dramatic reflections of the frustration that the Vietnamese people feel at being so effectively excluded from participation in the determination of their country’s future. (43)

There was never a hint that showed Nhat Hanh’s disapproval of, or disassociated from, the dissidents’ actions in Hue. Nhat Hanh painstakingly explained and then justified the reasons why the Buddhists acted as they did. Nhat Hanh’s pain and anger at the continued bombing of Vietnam and the suffering of the people: the suffering caused by bombing and oppression hurt us too much. We have to react and go out to demonstrate. (43)

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Nhat Hanh dedicated his life teaching Westerners the art of mindfulness and as a consequence, this may have softened perceptions about Nhat Hanh’s image. In retrospect only now do his groups appear less angry and more pacifist than the Struggle Movement with more interested in pure, spiritually based pacifism.

No doubt the images of monks burning themselves were too shocking to Westerners. However it should be kept in mind that Nhat Hanh supported every action taken by the activists in the Struggle Movement, even though he did not directly participate in them. As a spiritual leader, he talked about non-duality, inter-being or compassion, but as a political leader, he also discussed matters about bombings, social change, cease fire and negotiations. Nhat Hanh is a classic example of a religious leader who fought for his people’s survival, like Gandhi, Ambedkar or Rahula in other part of South East Asia. What made these men different from other secular activists was that they were motivated by religious ideals, not by political ambitions, and they always strictly adhered to non-violent principles. Nhat Hanh was the finest exemplar of the new Engaged Buddhists in the footsteps of Gandhi.

Also it must be remember that the Struggle Movement was not a personal crusade by a charismatic religious leader, it was a grassroots popular movement. Crowd control was not
always possible, and since many groups spontaneously congregated, it was realistic to expect
and demand peaceful behaviour, added to which the Americans planted many agents de
provocateur to stir the crowds. Nhat Hanh’s position in the Lotus in the Sea of Fire reflects
faithfully his thinking, his motives, approaches and methods for achieving peace and they are
identical with those of the Struggle Movement. There has never been any concrete evidence
proving that Nhat Hanh wanted to dissociate from the Struggle Movement, as some scholars
have suggested. (40) Nhat Hanh was assigned a job which was best suited to his talent,
namely to inspire Vietnamese intellectuals and youths inside Vietnam and amass support
outside the country in the international arena for peace in Vietnam. Furthermore, he showed
deep compassion for the suffering of his people. He once cried on hearing that some of his
students had been massacred at Binh Phuoc village, admitting that he did not want to be a
general in a non-violent army, but only an ordinary human being. After 1966, Nhat Hanh had
undergone other personal traumas, like being forbidden to return to Vietnam and being
denounced by the military junta as well as by the Front. A close student, Nhat Chi Mai,
decided to take the drastic action of self-immolation in response to his call for peace in 1966.
Two of his Dharma brothers, who had served as Directors of the School of Youth for Social
Service, were accidentally killed on the job while the University he almost single-handedly
founded, the Van Hanh University, was taken over by Minh Chau’s group and the legal status
of the SYSS was revoked... Not many people could withstand so many personal setbacks
without some expression of anguish. However, in 1969, when being appointed as the Head of
the Buddhist Peace Delegation in Paris, Nhat Hanh described people’s resistance vividly, but
calmly, without any sign of disagreement with the Struggle Movement:

During the struggle, many scenes of love arose spontaneously- a monk sitting calmly before
an advancing tank, women and children raising their bare hands against barbed wire;
students confronting military police who looked like monsters wearing huge masks and
holding bayonets; young women running through clouds of tear gas with babies in their
arms; hunger strikes held silently and patiently; monks and nuns burning themselves to death
to try to be heard above the raging noise of the war. (44)

In a democratic society, street demonstrations would be regarded as an acceptable form of
protest. But the Americans tried to paint the Buddhists as ‘militant orange-robed monks’ and
called them ‘violent Buddhist street mobs’ with the aim of destroying the image of a passive
and docile religion that teaches the faithful to reject power and passion. (45) But as Nhat
Hanh later confirmed, ‘we did our best to remain true to our non-violent principles ‘we never lost sight that the essence of our struggle was Love itself’. To dispel any lingering doubts on the Buddhist principle of non-violence, in 1969 The Patriarch Thich Tinh Khiet reaffirmed that “in the past we have more than once demonstrated the efficacy of the non-violent methods in our campaign against despotism. Now and in the future, we shall not depart from this method in our campaign for peace for our country. If sacrifice is needed, we are ready to sacrifice ourselves to enlighten our opponents, but not to crush them’. (46)

In order to distance themselves from the secular social revolutionaries, like the Marxists, Buddhists never engaged in any actions which would betray their commitment to non-violence. There were numerous exemplary cases during the struggle, like old women and children with bare hands pressed against barbed wires, weaponless students confronting combat police who were armed with batons and bayonets; monks sitting calmly before advancing tanks in Danang. Not to be forgotten was the sixteen-year old girl who chopped off her hand during the struggle against Diem. During one incident at a street protest, an American soldier spat on a young monk’s head. He was deeply humiliated and so enraged that he wanted to join the Front and fight the Americans with guns. He only changed his mind after Nhat Hanh persuaded him not to. When thousands of students surrounded General Khanh’s compound in 1964, the demonstration was without incident! General Khanh was so impressed in general with the peaceful and organised demonstrations that he eventually joined forces with the Buddhists and the students!

Non-violent protest was met with brute force. Premier Huong once requested the American Embassy to provide him with sophisticated crowd-controlling weapons like tear gas, suffocation gas, grenades, batons and bayonets! After the Struggle Movement had been decimated, monks, university and high school students were all thrown into prison; public servants and dissident soldiers were dismissed and according to Hassler nine years after Ky’s troops had entered Hue, many monks and students were still held in prison. (47)

In one poem, Nhat Hanh appealed to his students to take a vow to never commit any violent acts even when provoked:

Promise me,
Promise me this day,
Promise me now,
Even they strike you down
With a mountain of hatred and violence
Even as they step on you and crush you
Like a worm,
Even as they disembowel you,
Remember, brother, remember
Man is not our enemy. (48)

In the summer of 1966, admittedly violent incidents caused by the perpetrators did occur, but the Movement leaders were helpless to prevent them and they always did their best to adhere to the spirit of non-violence.

**Self-Immolation Was Not Suicide: It Was an Act of Love**

The most powerful weapon utilised by the Buddhists was the act of self-immolation. Some critics in the West have been unable to accept self-burning as a valid form of protest. One American Buddhist encapsulated the doubts and reactions of many to these acts of self-sacrifice:

> Let me state my own conclusions, as an American Buddhist and as a Buddhist scholar, as clearly as possible. At the end of the day, the actions of (self-immolators) Thich Quang Duc and Nhat Chi Mai remain profoundly challenging. Like others, I am in awe of their courage, selflessness, and capacity of love. But I remain troubled by the lingering moral issues, which, to my mind, remain unresolved. Buddhist Institutions have a duty as far as possible to prevent these actions which in many ways embody the Buddhist religion at its best. (49)

Obviously while the Institute did seek maximum political impact in order to elicit support from the outside world, most self-burnings were carried out without the Institute leaders’ knowledge, with the exception of Quang Duc’s first sacrifice and the Institute only approved his self-immolation after many repeated requests and when the stand off with President Diem was deadlocked. The remaining self-burnings, particularly those of young people, were carried out spontaneously by those who were desperate that the peace efforts were fruitless and ignored by the White House. Of these, Nhat Chi Mai was the most well known example. She had planned her own sacrifice in absolute secrecy and even her closest friends did not
know what she intended to do. Hassler, the head of the Inter-religious Delegation in 1969, saw with his own eyes a young Buddhist monk who, before a congregation of three thousand, held his finger in a flame for an hour and fifty minutes, until it was completely burned. (50) The total number of those who chose to sacrifice their lives from 1963 to 1970 was thirty-one, among them seven young girls. Indeed these deaths were shocking and horrible, but as in the tradition of non-violence, the acts were not just blatant attempts to maximise political sympathy, rather they aimed to win over and to transform opposition by self-sacrifice. As Gandhi noted, when all else failed, the Satyagraha 's final and purest weapon was to inflict sufferings, not on the opponents, but on the victims themselves. Self-burning became the ultimate weapon of the Buddhists to move their oppressor's heart. However, not everyone was moved by his or her bravery of appeals. President Johnson denounced it 'wasteful acts' and previously Madam Nhu's comments were even more chillingly dismissive as she questioned the significance of the loss of a few 'barbecued monks'.

Even Daniel Berrigan, one of the closest friends of Nhat Hanh, many years later still found burning as 'vexing and mysterious'. Following this, when a catholic worker, Roger Laport, later burned himself in front of the UN to protest against the Vietnam War, Daniel Berrigan got himself into trouble with the Catholic hierarchy when he raised the question whether Laport's death could be called suicide. In a letter addressing to Martin Luther King two years before his peace tour, Nhat Hanh passionately defended the acts. Its aim he said was for the monks to move the hearts of the oppressors while calling attention of the world to the suffering endured by the Vietnamese. It was also a manifestation of an individual's identification with the suffering of the whole Vietnamese people. In the Mahayana tradition, a candidate-monk is required to burn one or more small spots on his head to prove his serious commitment in taking a Bikkhu's vows. Likewise, these self-immolating monks endured the greatest suffering as evidence of their desire to protect their own people as well as identify with their pain and death. According to Nhat Hanh, self-immolation therefore was an act of love, not one of destruction or suicide as some in the West mistakenly viewed it:

*The Vietnamese monks, nuns and laymen who burned themselves were saying with all their strength and determination that they were willing to endure the greatest of suffering in order to protect their people.* ...*Suicide is an act of self destruction based on the inability to cope with life's difficulties.* ...*Those who burned themselves had lost neither courage nor desire to live. They were extremely courageous and aspired for something good in the future.*
sacrificed themselves in order to seek help from the people in the world. (51)

Engaged Buddhists have no problems in finding justification for self-immolation from the Buddha’s teachings. For instance, in the Lotus of the True Love Sutra, a Bodhisattva named Bhaisajyagaraja, ate incense and sweet-scented substances and drank scented oil for twelve years. The he wrapped himself in divine road clothes, bathed in perfumed oil and set fire to himself as an offering to the Buddha. His body, according to the text burned continuously for twelve thousand years. (52) In the same sutra, there is a comment that, burning a finger, a toe or a part of the body as an offering to the Buddha, is more meritorious than offering wives and children, or any treasure trove! This story shows that the act of self-burning is not alien to the Buddhist tradition, but rather an integral part of it.

Even so, this act was a most powerful form of protest and planned so as have maximum political impact on public opinion. Here the demarcation between religion and politics is blurred for immolation was neither a purely political or purely spiritual act. Unfortunately also, it did not always have the expected impact. Just before Ky’s force entered Hue, when being informed of the self-burning of a nun, Thanh Quang, President Johnson saw it not as an act of devotion or identification with the oppressed, but rather as an act of desperation and futility:

_It is tragic, in the present turmoil, that some choose acts of desperation to express their beliefs. This unnecessary loss of life only obscures the progress being made toward a constitutional government. It only clouds the sacrifice of thousand of lives already made for the cause of independence and political hope in South Vietnam_. (53)

The president’s message was loud and clear. He could not grasp the significance of the acts and also he continued to endorse Ky. After condemning the President for committing the most serious mistake in the history of Vietnam, Tri Quang went on: “Burning oneself to death is the noblest form of struggle, which symbolises the spirit of non-violence. The Vietnamese Buddhists have no other means to protest against the United States President than by sacrificing their own lives. (54) Many years later The Dalai Lama said almost the same words when His Holiness was not able to persuade some Tibetan Youth from abandoning the act of self-burning in India a few years ago. It was widely reported in the press that His Holiness lamented: “I have done whatever I could. I do not know what else that I could
But to a true Buddhist believer, death is just another passing phase of life in the whole cycle. The photographer, Malcolm Browne, who took exclusive photos of Quang Duc’s immolation, had the same ethical dilemma. Ought he to have rushed forward to rescue the old monk or should he just carry on photographing the event like any other journalistic opportunity? In Nhat Chi Mai’s case, even her closest friends, like Sister Chan Khong, did not have a faintest idea that she was going to choose that drastic form of protest. Either way these devoted Buddhists knew their acts reflected their utmost determination to try to protect their people from further suffering. The bottom line is, as Rahula commented, self-immolation may not be compatible with the Middle Way, and yet whatever one thinks of it, it must be said that it is better to commit this form of ‘suicide’ than to kill others; it is better to burn oneself than to burn others. (55) These acts are the purest weapon that one can use, because burning inflicts suffering on oneself and not on one’s opponents. It identifies with the sufferer. It should be noted that during the Vietnam War, there were many burnings, but no suicide bombers.

**Bringing Altars into the Streets: Tradition versus Cultural Imperialism**

While self-burning may have troubled Westerners, Tri Quang asked the faithful in Hue to commit another controversial act by bringing their family altars onto the streets. This was a desperate act when the dissidents were facing defeat and was fiercely denounced by no other than Tam Chau, who then had openly supported Premier Ky. Tam Chau said that the act of bringing altars onto the streets hindered the military advance and allowed Communist agents to escape. Tam Chau also said he was distressed when seeing the Buddha’s pictures fluttering in garbage heaps around Saigon. He issued a directive forbidding the faithful to continue doing so, but by then, the Buddhists considered him as a traitor and disobeyed his order. (50) Tam Chau must have had more military information than General Walt did at the time, because the Marine Commander recalled that there was very little activity from the enemy during the uprising. Furthermore those who were familiar with Zen literature would have known the story of a Zen Master who chopped a wooden statue of Buddha to pieces to use it as fire-wood to warm him and his disciples on a chilly winter evening. Horrified when seeing his master committing an act of sacrilege, a disciple chastised him: “Buddha’s statue is sacred. Why did you do it?” The Zen master answered: “Show me what is not Buddha, so that I can use it as firewood”. Likewise Tam Chau disregarded the fate of hundreds of
dissidents, who were being imprisoned by Ky and his forces, yet was so concerned about the Buddha’s pictures and wooden statues. Most importantly, Tam Chau helped Ky to destroy the last hope of the emergence of the middle ground, which would have enabled, a peaceful end to the Vietnam conflict.

Tri Quang’s desperate act of taking the altars onto the streets was fiercely attacked by right wing Catholics, using the same argument as Tam Chau. Nhat Hanh, who was then in Washington, defended this controversial act and regarded it as a symbolic gesture, using the Vietnamese culture and tradition to oppose the forces of destruction, and probably as a most potent spiritual force to confront violence. Nhat Hanh also asserted that, like the act of self-immolation, taking the altars onto the street was not just a political act, but also an act of love. (57) Writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan, a student leader in the Struggle Movement, explained that the act was designed to avoid civil war. Despite Ky’s superiority in weaponry and troop numbers, the advance of Ky’s troops was heavily slowed down in Hue because of a fierce resistance of elite rangers in the dissident army. These elite troops, named Black Panthers, refused to surrender and inflicted many losses on Ky’s forces. Realising their hopeless military situation, the student leaders persuaded the Black Panthers to lay down arms. The altars on the streets became places where the dissident forces and students could return their weapons. Amazingly, apart from Ky’s combat police, even the special forces brought to Hue by Ky refused to remove the altars as ordered. In this case, the demarcation line between political and spiritual action was very thin indeed. This was Tri Quang’s last act before retreating to fast for one hundred days, as an admission of his error of judgement in entrusting Ambassador Lodge, who had promised that he would never let Ky to suppress the Struggle Movement. Lodge was not the prime mover in this. Rather he executed an order from someone higher up namely National Security Adviser Walter Rostow. It was part of his three-phrase plan to quell the Buddhist uprising of 1966.

**Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist Leaders: They are in the Same Team**

Nhat Hanh was out of the country when the struggle against President Diem began in 1963 and against Ky in 1966. In 1963 he was at Columbia University. When Ky’s troops entered Hue and destroyed the dissidents’ last posts in 1966, Nhat Hanh was invited by the Peace Fellowship for a tour to the U.S. His absences on both occasions did not in any way reduce
his significant role in the struggle. In 1963, Nhat Hanh had lobbied heavily the United Nations, requesting this organisation to send a fact-finding delegation to Vietnam. He went on a hunger strike and disseminated information about Diem’s repressive measures. In 1966 his peace tour was successful in mobilising paciftists’ support, from Martin Luther King to Thomas Merton. He was well received by international celebrities like Pope Paul VI, the Archbishop of Canterbury also the Canadian and Swedish Parliaments, The British House of Commons and the Queen of Holland. He was invited to talk to worldwide audiences, from Europe to Australia, and as far away as Japan and the Philippines. Ironically Nhat Hanh failed to persuade a few key figures, who had the power to make or stop the war, like President Johnson and Bill Bundy! On the day that Nhat Hanh requested an audience with President Johnson, Johnson was busy showing tourists around the White House, while Bill Bundy was also ‘busy’ working on another peace offensive so that he delegated another minor official to see Nhat Hanh! In the John Hopkins peace offensive, Johnson had declared that he would be ready to go anywhere, at anytime to talk to anyone in order to find a solution to the war. Yet when Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist leader who represented the largest religious community in Vietnam, arrived right on his doorstep to present him with a comprehensive peace plan, the President refused to grant him an audience! The Buddhist Institute could not have chosen a better representative to enable the West to understand Vietnamese’s grievances and the Buddhist position in the war for Nhat Hanh was undoubtedly the best-qualified peace ambassador, yet the President refused to talk to him.

Apart from not being a decision-maker within the Struggle Movement, it must be said that Nhat Hanh had always been a maverick. He was a non-conformist and a solitary figure amongst his contemporaries. He had never held any official position within the Institute, only accepting editorial roles on many Buddhist reviews, which suited his prolific writing ability. As far as a vision of a modern and engaged Buddhism was concerned, Nhat Hanh was light years ahead of other members of the Sangha, and so little wonder many monks were uncomfortable with his charisma. He sometimes complained about the conservative elders in the Buddhist Institute. In *Fragrant Palm Leaves* which reflects on his youth, he asserts his identity and lay claims to his individuality, commenting that he and his group had ‘to sew our own clothes and not accept society’s ready-made suit’, also declaring ‘I must be who I am I cannot force myself back into the shell I have just broken out of. This is a source of great loneliness for me’. (58) He did not wear the burden of his country lightly.
Nhat Hanh criticised the Buddhist ‘elders’ for their reluctance to change and their clinging onto ‘old ways’ and ‘narrow views’. According to Nhat Hanh, while Buddhism had much to contribute to society and could play a pivotal role in Vietnam history, the Buddhist hierarchy was very slow to react. Nhat Hanh also complained that his proposals to create an Engaged Buddhism were repeatedly rejected or ‘laid unopened on their desks’ (59) This may be a harsh criticism and one which obviously reflects Nhat Hanh’s frustration but, his proposals for a Buddhist University and a School of Youth for Social Services were two proposals approved by the Buddhist Institute. The Buddhist College for Higher Studies, the pre-model of Van Hanh University, was established on March 13, 1964 and the first courses began on March 17. The School of Youth for Social Work was also set up as a part of the College. (60) Nhat Hanh was also given free reign to run these two institutions. Nhat Hanh and his group raised funds, borrowed pagoda halls for classrooms and recruited staff. Considering that the Unified Buddhist Institute had been formed just two months previously, the ‘elders’ showed neither sign of obstruction nor resistance to change. The monk, who took control of the University, was not an ‘elder’ either, but a monk younger than Nhat Hanh, Minh Chau was. Only one proposal was shelved, a training monastery for monks, who, like their Protestant counterparts, could marry and raise a family while preaching the Dharma. Nhat Hanh was years ahead of the Buddhist leaders at the time in his thinking that the elders were not ready to accept ordained married monks into their ranks!

In his biography, written by Hope and Young, it is recorded that Nhat Hanh stepped off the well-trodden path orthodoxy and asked the monastery staff to change the curriculum to include more emphasis on philosophy, literature and foreign languages. When this request was rejected, Nhat Hanh and four other left. (61) It is not sure how accurate this information is, but it was officially recorded that Nhat Hanh was ordained as a Bikkhu in 1949, meaning that Nhat Hanh had completed his monastic training. Before 1954, however, there was only one University in the whole country, located in Hanoi. There was a group of youth leaders who had a Western education and were able to speak French fluently. Buddhist sutras were taught in the monastery as a religious vocation, as well as philosophy and Vietnamese literature. There were many monks who were trained at the Monastery and at the same time attended government schools to learn Western subjects. Thus, what Nhat Hanh objected to the training curriculum was not clear, but apparently he was a lone figure among his peers. After moving to Saigon, he found An Quang pagoda, which later became the Headquarters of the Buddhist Institute. Yet soon after, a certain jealous monk tried to have him evicted from it
by removing his name from the household register! In 1964 he almost single-handedly founded the Van Hanh University, raised funds to get it started, invited teaching staff from overseas to come home, among them, a Nalanda University Ph.D graduate, Minh Chau. Just two months after Nhat Hanh had left on the peace tour, Minh Chau released a public announcement, declaring Nhat Hanh was *persona non grata* within the University Campus. "The Rector of Van Hanh University declares that Thich Nhat Hanh has no responsibilities whatsoever in connection with this University" a press release said. According to Sister Chan Khong, it was an attempt by the Americans to undermine Nhat Hanh’s call for peace in the U.S. We will never know what went on between the two men, because Nhat Hanh never mentioned Minh Chau, and Minh Chau has never said anything about this turbulent relationship. According to Sister Chan Khong’s account, she was also victimised by Minh Chau. Chan Khong was the President of the Van Hanh Union of Students which, in April, issued a 'Call For Peace', asking 'the North and the South Vietnamese Government to find a way to stop the war and help all Vietnamese people live peacefully and with mutual respect'. Minh Chau ordered the Union to be disbanded and severed the link with the School of Youth for Social Services. Minh Chau also sent a copy of his statement to the National Police. According to Sister Chan Khong. To discourage others from supporting the School of Youth for Social Service, Minh Chau told many supporters that 'he did not know if Nhat Hanh was a Communist, but certainly Cao Ngoc Phuong (Chan Khong) was. (62) Even though Sister Chan Khong tried not to hate others, even the murderers of students of the SYSS, twenty-seven years after this event had happened, she was still bitter at Minh Chau’s actions. Sister Chan Khong commented that 'Minh Chau’s act toward us (SYSS) proved that his moral values were not worthy of our association with him’. On hearing of Minh Chau’s cooperation with the Communist regime after 1975, Chan Khong was more critical:

*I was not surprised to hear that he (Minh Chau) was among the first to cooperate with the new regime, ignoring all reports of human rights violations, again "we should not mix politics and religion" (quotation marks are of Chan Khong). During the Communist regime, Thay Minh Chau and a number of other monks who have cooperated closely with the regime have been able to continue translating sutras from Pali into Vietnamese. I understand their attitude and do not complain about them, but it is easier for me to understand the Buddha when he said, “During forty-five years of teaching, I did not say a word". (63)*

Again Nhat Hanh felt betrayed by the elders because no one at the Buddhist Institute raised
any concern about Minh Chau’s denunciation. But after the Struggle Movement was brutally put down in June 1966, there was virtually no effective leadership to conduct the Institute’s activities. Tam Chau was in hiding from militant and anarchist young monks. Thien Minh was nearly assassinated and seriously wounded. In a last desperate act, Tri Quang went on a indefinite hunger strike and was brought to Saigon under hospital arrest (his hunger strike lasted 100 days and he only stopped fasting when Thien Minh, who had to walk on a stick to see him, relayed the Patriarch’s directive ordering him to stop). The ‘divide and rule’ policy was ruthlessly executed and the split of the Buddhist Institute was imminent. Tam Chau was induced to hijack the leadership by creating a new Institute called Vietnam Quoc Tu (The Vietnamese National Pagoda), installing a totally obscure Southern monk named Thich Thien Thuong, to be the Executive Chairman of the new organisation. Minh Chau was probably encouraged to have the Van Hanh University seceded from the Unified Buddhist Institute and to make Van Hanh an independent institution. Unknown to outsiders, and to Nhat Hanh, Thien Minh, who was recovering from the assassination attempt, was outraged at Minh Chau’s intention. Thien Minh intended to walk on a stick to Van Hanh campus to teach Minh Chau a lesson, as many Rinza Zen Masters did to their students in ancient times but Minh Chau, who was spiritually indebted to many monks in the Central Vietnam, somehow backed off. The Buddhist Institute was almost powerless to sack Minh Chau and had to come up with a compromise. Thinking the Institute leaders had abandoned him once again, Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong had every reason to feel bitter toward the ‘elders’ of the Church.

Nhat Hanh called the Institute leaders ‘elders’ but in fact, they were higher in the Buddhist hierarchy, but not much older in years. Thien Minh was born in 1921, Tam Chau, 1922, Tri Quang, 1924 and Nhat Hanh, 1926. Nhat Hanh had never spelt out the nature of conflict he had with Tri Quang or Thien Minh. Sister Chan Khong, who virtually acted as his spokesperson, said that Nhat Hanh hesitated when Tri Quang asked him to return home. According to Sister Chan Khong, in the past, Nhat Hanh had not received any support from the Buddhist hierarchy in his attempts to renew Buddhism, especially Tri Quang. Meanwhile Columbia University invited Nhat Hanh to establish Department of Vietnamese Studies. If he stayed in New York, he would not have to struggle with the conservative monks, who had given him so much trouble! The main reason why Nhat Hanh decided to return home and help to rebuild the Buddhist Institute was because he wanted to promote peace and social change. (64)
Yet Nhat Hanh had never had anything negative to say about Tri Quang. He considered Tri Quang and Thien Minh as the two most outstanding monks in the Central region. He commented ‘Tri Quang is a man of action, courage, and intelligence, whose life is exemplary.’ (65) When Tri Quang had been fasting for 100 days, Nhat Hanh sent him a letter smuggled in by Sister Chan Khong, begging him to stop. Sister Chan Khong, pretending to be a nurse, passed through a cordon of secret agents to meet with Tri Quang and implored him not to die because ‘the entire generation of Buddhists is waiting for you to eat again and lead us to peace.’ (66) Nhat Hanh glowingly praised Thien Minh and when the Communists poisoned him in 1978, Nhat Hanh composed a poem to commemorate him, praising Thien Minh as ‘the most brilliant monk I ever knew.’ (See Nhat Hanh ‘s poem in the Appendix)

While Nhat Hanh did an excellent job on the peace tour, the other projects, Van Hanh University and the School of Youth for Social Service, did not succeed, as he would have expected. Van Hanh University was taken over by Minh Chau’s group and transformed into a politically neutral higher-learning institute. It was no longer a grassroots learning centre as Nhat Hanh originally desired it to be. On the other hand, impact of the School of Youth for Social Service on the peace campaign front was far more difficult to assess.

**Social Work and Peace**

I have known Sister Chan Khong since student days when we both joined the Buddhist Students Association and worked in a social welfare program in slum areas around Saigon. To us, this was a charitable work and a good way to practise *dana*, the act of giving, and the first ethical principle for laity. When Nhat Hanh came home from Paris, I had the privilege of meeting him at Truc Lam pagoda, where we briefed him on the latest events related to the Buddhist Institute affairs after the Diem regime had been overthrown. Later I joined a group of students working on a pioneer social project in a village ten kilometres from Saigon. For two or three years I had a language teaching job at a high school a long way away from Saigon, but I continued our association and joined the program every time I was free from work. In 1967 I was seconded to work as an administrator at Van Hanh University. Nhat Hanh had left the year before and I did not know of the breakdown of the relationship between Nhat Hanh and Minh Chau. I sometimes attended a weekend retreat on the SYSS campus and knew all the first six people who were ordained in the Inter Being order and was
asked by Sister Chan Khong to participate. In 1966 I was only 22 years old, militant, wild, adventurous and my generation’s and my idol was Zorba the Greek! Through books written in English, the Vietnamese baby boomers felt very close to our counterparts overseas. We were idealistic or utopian as some labelled us. Nevertheless, after the events of 1966, the Buddhist activists became more hostile to the military government and Americans. I knew I was not suitable to be a monk because of my generation’s wild behaviour, even a half-ordained -half laymen, as we jokingly called our friends in the Inter-Being Order. In 1967 onwards, the student leaders in Hue and Danang hunted by Ky’s police force, re-grouped under Thien Minh command and so instead I joined this group and continued my activism.

I was one of the firsts who ran to the School of SYSS on hearing about a grenade-tossing incident. I was stunned because I had spent the previous weekend at the school! Seeing two mutilated corpses lying in the dormitory, we all wept and became very angry. Like the peasants in a village which had been bombed three times by the Americans, retold by Sister Chan Khong in her book, Learning True Love, we strongly desired to take up weapons and fight back. The Saigon press later discovered that terrorists who threw the grenade were not the Vietcong, but the militia from a Catholic Church nearby! The ‘angry mob’ in Thien Minh’s camp, although loving and respecting her group, did not fully agree with her approach, practising social change for peace, particularly in an escalating war. We did not want to become a shooting target for both sides, including an insignificant group of the local Catholic militia.

When Sister Chan Khong’s first social project started in early 1964, the White House senior advisers had already prepared the groundwork for the escalation of the war. General Minh was overthrown and replaced by General Khanh, the America’s newly discovered strong man. Some villages were only ten kilometres away from Saigon and relatively safe from the war. Yet while staying there Nhat Hanh was occasionally disturbed by sounds of distant gunfire or the constant screaming of jet planes. Only a year later, the war demolished everything in a few minutes.

After coming back from the States, Nhat Hanh only spent two and a half years in Vietnam, during which he was deeply involved in creative writing, editing newspaper and establishing Van Hanh University. Sister Chan Khong worked as the ‘field Marshal’ with SYSS and as she disclosed, was its first Director, Thanh Van had silently dis-approved Nhat Hanh and
Sister Chan Khong’s peace activities. When Sister Chan Khong went to see Nhat Hanh in Hong Kong, Thanh Van gently asked her to relay his concern to Nhat Hanh: ‘Please tell him (Nhat Hanh) to decide between advocating peace and doing social work!’ Sister Nhat Chi Mai did not seem to agree with Nhat Hanh’s call for peace either. When asked about it, Nhat Chi Mai sat silently then replied hesitantly: ‘Phuong (Chan Khong) you know I love and respect Thay (Nhat Hanh), especially his vision of social service, but his political activities worry me!’ In retrospect, we have to ask if these two close associates would not recognise the inter-relation between social change and peace efforts, who would? Little wonder some supporters of SYSS withdrew their financial assistance to the School as soon as they heard Nhat Hanh had made waves in Washington!

When Nhat Hanh returned home at the beginning of 1964, nobody expected the tempo of the war would increase with such lightning speed. Within less than two years, from seventeen thousand military advisers, the U.S. government increased this number to half a million combat troops. While we wholeheartedly agreed with Nhat Hanh that a social revolution was needed as a weapon to win the hearts and minds of those who could neither support the corrupt and unrepresentative military men in Saigon, nor the Communists, but the intensity of the war made this social project impossible. Sister Chan Khong was disappointed that many of her friends who had shared her vision and aspirations, but did not join her social work project. Not because they married and had children, and always had excuses for not helping with the work, but because they viewed social work as impractical in time of war. Her friends, out of love and respect, could not bring themselves to tell her the whole truth. In just two years, everything in the countryside was destroyed and there were no rural areas left to be developed. The majority of peasants under free bombing zones had to move to big cities and became refugees in their own country. These young friends of Chan Khong in fact joined the underground peace movement or street demonstrations against a government, whose laws made peace activities punishable by the death penalty or life imprisonment. And as a result of their choice, thousands of young intellectuals and students were thrown into prison and it was estimated that 200,00 political and religious dissenters became incarcerated. Many remained in jail for many years and a few still remained there until after the regime collapsed in 1975. (67).

Regardless how aloof Nhat Hanh was from the other activists in the Struggle Movement, he played his part brilliantly. He conquered the hearts and minds of Vietnamese intellectuals.
artists and youths inside Vietnam. In particular he ensured the voice of the hapless Vietnamese was heard outside of Vietnam: He was praised as a peace campaigner *par excellence*. Unfortunately American politicians did not listen to him. At that time, the senior advisers in the White House listened to no-one at all, including the UN Secretary General, U Thant, The President of France, De Gaulle, Pope Paul VI or the British Prime Minister! And we agree with Hassler’s assessment that Sister Chan Khong was an exemplary pacifist, yet she was so humble. When asked by Hassler if she were a pacifist, she smiled and replied ‘Not yet’. If there is anyone who deserves to be called a Bodhisattva of our time, this person must be Sister Chan Khong.

**The Impact of the Peace Movement Inside Vietnam**

Nhat Hanh cautiously evaluated the success and failure of the Movement as follows:

> I cannot say that our struggle was a failure. The conditions for success in terms of a political victory were not present. But the success of non-violent struggle can be measured only in terms of the love and the non-violent attained, not whether a political victory was achieved. In our struggle in Vietnam we did our best to remain true to our principles. We never lost sight that the essence of our struggle was love itself, and that was a real contribution to humanity. (68)

It was a subdued Nhat Hanh replying to Catherine Ingram in *In the Footsteps of Gandhi*. Nhat Hanh then said that ‘maybe if Gandhi had not succeeded, my being influenced by him would have been less’. He went on to comment that it was a superficial way to understand non-violence which ‘cannot be judged on whether or not it brings success’. (69) All the Vietnamese Engaged Buddhists would have agreed with him that the non-violent struggle for peace in Vietnam was heroic and had positive repercussions on the political arena, outside as well as inside Vietnam.

A few pundits were critical of the Institute’s confrontation with the Americans and wished the Engaged Buddhists were less militant, like the social workers in Nhat Hanh’s camp. Nhat Hanh himself, although endorsed every action taken by the Institute, cast some doubts on street protests and political manoeuvres. He thought if the US wanted to escalate the war, the Vietnamese could not stop them and even changes of government would make no difference.
He did not believe peace could be achieved by means of political manoeuvring or through elections. (77)

The Institute activists had a different idea. While admiring their fellow social workers' determination, patience and calm, they believed people power was a more attractive and less violent alternative to carry out a social revolution. Furthermore, the new breed of young intelligentsia was not timid in their reactions to social injustice, unlike their predecessors during the colonial period. Neither were they so self-conscious of self-interested. They lined up to go to jail as if they were going on picnics! Writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuân has commented that there had not been any previous youth movement which created such an enormous impact on the political landscape in Vietnam or was able to maintain its impetus for a very long time. **Everyone was drawn into its momentum.** (70) To the Buddhist activists, although they did not succeed in achieving their objectives in the 1966 uprising, something of much greater importance did happen, namely the awakening of the whole young generation who engaged in the Bodhisattva’s path with conviction.

Many times in their history, the Vietnamese showed they knew how to struggle against the odds. Their forefathers fought against the Chinese, the Mongols and more recently the French. None of these foreigners proved to be invincible. Even if they were, the Vietnamese would not say: ‘we cannot do it. The oppressors are invincible’. They would have said exactly what a political leader had said before: “If I do not succeed, at least I can do my duty”. Or if they are deeply religious, they could repeat the Supreme Patriarch’s saying: ‘If I die, pray for my killer’. In June 1966, three thousand students fully armed, instead of joining the guerillas, laid down their arms and waited to go to prison! In total, five thousand Buddhist monks, nuns, lay leaders and students were arrested after the 1966 uprising in Hue and Danang alone. In 1968 Nhat Hanh told an audience at a university teach-in at Montana University, at least twenty thousand non-NLF political prisoners were detained. This number was not exaggerated. The United Agency For International Development (USAID), in November 1966, confirmed that the vast number of political prisoners were not tried and had no idea when or how they would be released. (72)

These young men, however, did not want to become martyrs but they knew what was waiting for them: prison, loss of jobs or career, conscripted into the army camp etc... They knew that Americans were determined to go on fighting a war that their own people desperately wanted
to be stopped and in order to implemented its war policies, the US would go all the way to
condone and finance a totalitarian government by totally suppressing individual rights, and
by imprisonment and torture.

The activists were neither naive nor optimistic to think that peace could be achieved through
the ballot box. Actually they knew the objectives of the Movement could be achieved and in
hindsight, they were not be able to stop the war in 1966, but the Struggle Movement created a
favourable atmosphere for peace talks.

The Buddhist Institute activists were the most disciplined and powerful pressure group in
South Vietnam, as powerful as the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and the Front. The
Buddhist Institute, or Tri Quang, could mobilise two thousand protesters on the streets in half
an hour, while all the Front could do was to form a few peace groups, full of armchair
politicians and opportunists. The Communists had dreamt of inciting an uprising like the one
in 1966, but they had never been able to do it, even in the Tet Offensive of 1968, when the
guerillas infiltrated every city in the South. In 1966 it was not totally right to call the uprising
the Buddhist Struggle Movement, because it was supported by almost all the citizens of Hue,
Danang and Saigon, including those who were supposed to use weapons against the
dissidents, like the local police force and the soldiers in the Tactical Military Zone One. All
four Commanding Generals, two of them were Catholic, sent by Ky to quell the uprising,
either joined in the dissidents or refused to use force against them. In 1964, witnessing these
disciplined and well-organised protests, General Khanh was so impressed, so that he was
willing to make a pact with the Buddhists. A civilian premier, Dr Phan Huy Quat, a member
of Dai Viet Party, which had never been on good terms with the Buddhists previously, agreed
to hold an election of municipal representatives in order to test the water before organising an
election of Constituent Assembly at a later stage. Far from being extremist or militant as the
Americans painted them, the Buddhists were always flexible in dealing with the military and
the American Mission. What they consistently asked for was a free and fair election, which,
by any standard, was reasonable and moderate. The Buddhist leaders courted any generals
who agreed to set an agenda for the constituent election to create a legal framework for the
South Vietnamese government. In exchange, they would support whoever responded
favourably to this fundamental demand, from General Khanh, Dr Phan Huy Quat to Generals
Thi and Ky. Their hidden agenda was, had there been a legitimate government in the South,
surely the Front would be forced to sit down and seriously negotiate with that government to
find a solution to the war. As long as the South Vietnamese regained their rights for self-determination, there would be a better chance to restore peace. A veteran correspondent since the Franco-Vietnamese war, Bernard Fall, recognised this ultimate aspiration of the Vietnamese people commenting that:

*If they (the Vietnamese) were to believe voices heard in Washington, nothing would please anyone more than if the good South Vietnamese would vote themselves a government which would ask for an end to the war; call for direct talks with the Vietcong; and request a gradual departure of American troops to be replaced with the South East Asian equivalent of an inter-American Peace Force.* (73)

Anyone, who still had doubts about these aspirations of the Vietnamese people, should look at the level of support that the Buddhist Institute had enjoyed since 1963. Those factions or leaders who defected to the military were ignored by the faithful. *Xa Loi* pagoda of Mai Tho Truyen and *Viet Nam Quoc Tu* of Tam Chau quickly became ghost pagodas. Nobody knew the name of the Chairman of the pro-government organisation, founded and financially supported by the military. Tam Chau faded into oblivion. Furthermore the Buddhist Institute, called *An Quang* after 1966, probably was the only group in South Vietnam that could not be corrupted by the Americans and constantly posed a serious threat to the military leaders and the Americans. Even after the Struggle Movement was crushed, the American Mission continued to pledge for the Institute’s support and in 1970, Ky himself approached Tri Quang, asking for the Buddhist support in the 1971 Presidential election, after he had been sidelined by Thieu’s skilful manoeuvres.

**The Impact of the Peace Movement outside Vietnam**

The political impact outside Vietnam should not be under-estimated either. There were two occasions in the history of the Vietnam War that President Johnson contemplated the possibility of withdrawing troops from Vietnam. One was when Khanh made a pact with the Buddhists and overthrew Premier Huong, and the other was when the Struggle Movement mobilised the populace in Central Vietnam against Ky’s government. Just a few days before the uprising was crushed, the Assistant Secretary of Defence, John McNaughton, submitted a proposal, saying that the United might have to negotiate with the enemy to end the war.
When Ky destroyed the last post of the dissidents, President Johnson and his advisers heaved a collective sigh of relief and thrust aside the withdrawal option, and as the Assistant Secretary of State, Bill Bundy, recorded that, they all relaxed. (74)

The political impact of the Buddhist uprising on the American public’s view of the Vietnam War was complex. At the beginning of the war, most Americans believed that their young men arrived in Vietnam full of enthusiasm and with the best of intentions. They were angry when later Buddhist protesters poured out onto the streets, shouting slogans like ‘Yankees Go Home’ and burning the American library and Consulate. Some well informed citizens, like Neil Sheehan, one of the most well known and respected journalists reporting on the Vietnam War, wrote about how he viewed early involvement of the American servicemen in the conflict:

*When I first walked across the tarmac of Saigon’s Tan Son Nhat airport...I believed in what my country was doing in Vietnam. ...The United States was attempting to help the non-Communist Vietnamese build a viable and independent nation-state and defeat the Communist guerilla insurgency that would subject them to a dour tyranny. This seemed to me a worthy cause and something that needed to be done if other Southeast Asian peoples were to be allowed some freedom of choice in determining their course of history. Although I often disagreed with the implementation of American policy during my first two years, I was in accord with its basic aim* (75)

Despite what Sheehan wrote then, he became disillusioned with the American role in the war when he was posted to Vietnam for the second time. When he had left his post at the end of the first term, there were seventeen thousand American servicemen in Vietnam, yet he still believed that one-day the Americans would triumph and Vietnam would be free of Communists. But by the time Sheehan went back for a second term (1966), there were three hundred and seventeen thousand combat soldiers and the prospect of losing the war loomed. Sheehan began to think that he was naive in believing the anti-Communist Vietnamese could defeat the Communist insurgency to build a decent and progressive social structure (84)

He finally recognised that many of the peasants were so weary of the fighting that they would accept any settlement if it brought them peace. More importantly, many patriotic Americans like Sheehan realised that, unlike in the Second World War and the Korean War, where the
Americans had acted with clear moral justification, in the case of Vietnam, this was not longer the case. Sheehan’s conclusion was identical with Nhat Hanh’s message brought to Washington in June 1966:

_The Vietnamese people have become more pawns in the struggle. Whatever desires they might possess have become incidental. The United States can no longer make any pretense of fighting to safeguard South Vietnam’s independence. The presence of 317, 000 American troops in the country made a mockery of its sovereignty and the military junta in Saigon would not last a week without American bayonets to protect it._ (76)

Although deeply disappointed, Sheehan was not yet ready to become a dove, because he did not see how the Americans could do anything else but continue the war! But many other Americans at home, by then, feared that more and more U.S. troops would be sacrificed. Like most patriotic young Americans at that time, eighteen-year-old David Kaiser, was proud to be a citizen of the greatest country in the world, and glad to assume the burden of defending freedom around the globe. Now as a well-known historian, the Vietnam War irrevocably changed his view for he realised that America, like any nation, was liable to make mistakes on the same scale as its triumph. Professor Kaiser admitted the Vietnam War had opened his eyes and the eyes of many others’ of the young generation of 1965. When the President Johnson announced that the United States would continue fighting the war in Vietnam until to victorious, the young generation of America came to regret the high price of that promise for both themselves and their Vietnamese counterparts (77)

In 1966 the anti-war campaign gathered momentum until it was strong enough to force President Johnson to give up all hope of a military victory while also declaring that he would not seek a second term in Office. The first anti-war reaction in America was from the religious sector. A moderate religious group, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who hosted Nhat Hanh in the U.S., published a full page statement in the New York Time on April 1, 1965, signed by two thousand and seven hundred ministers, priests and rabbis. It was headed “Mr President, In The Name of God, STOP IT”. With Martin Luther King’s blessing, a fact finding delegation was sent to South Vietnam in 1965 and on this occasion, the delegates met with the Institute leaders and were particularly impressed with Nhat Hanh, a young graduate from Columbia University. A year later, they were able to arrange his peace tour. In New York a group of prominent clergymen formed a “Clergy Concerned About Vietnam” group
and campaigned for a bombing halt. But Johnson was most irked by a group of congressional
critics, who in the previous year had fully supported the Tonkin Gulf Resolution. Senator
Fulbright had been the most active Senator in lobbying his fellows in the Senate to pass the
resolution. But in 1965 he was concerned that the government tried to expand the war with
the knowledge of Congress. As the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he
conducted a televised hearing on the Vietnam War. Fulbright said that the inquiry filled a
deeply felt need on the part of the American people for an exploration of the reasons why the
United States was once again involved in a war thousands miles from home.’ (78) By the end
of the hearing, Fulbright’s office received ten thousand responses from concerned Americans.
They ran seventeen to one in favour of Fulbright ’s hearing. In late January 1965, the
Lawyers Committee on American Policy Toward Vietnam released a letter to the press,
challenging the legality of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Thus, Johnson’s government was
challenged on both moral and legal grounds. The Buddhist uprisings in Danang and Hue in
1966 were reported in detail in the New York Times and received considerable publicity. It
made those who had strongly supported the war wonder why the United States was trying to
help people who did not want its help. In April when Ky was preparing for his final assault,
anti-war activists organised many demonstrations to express solidarity with the Buddhists and
nearly five thousand protestors ringed Times Square in New York. (79)

While some of the radical protesters advocated support for the Front, a large number of
moderate liberal pacifists, committed to non-violence, strongly supported the claims of the
Buddhists trying to create a third force between the government and the Front. (80) One
sensational form of protest, obviously imitating the Vietnamese monks, was the threat from a
20-year-old Boston University student, Arthur Zinner, that he was going to burn himself in
front of the White House. Wearing a raincoat and tennis shoes, he walked amid a crowd of
tourists near the White House gate, lifted two plastic jugs and began sloshing himself with
gasoline. As he was trying to strike two matches, the police pounced on him, then led him
away. Another occasion a group of six activists went to Vietnam to challenge Premier Ky’s
dictatorship any one who dared to advocate peace. The activists met with the Buddhist
leaders during their weeklong stay. Of course Ky did not execute them but spirited them
away to the airport after they demonstrated at the U.S. Embassy. (81)

Meanwhile American student and academic protests were growing daily. Three hundred and
tifty students occupied the University of Chicago for 3 days. Draft resisters also started a
campaign to burn their draft cards and incite civil disobedience. Teach-ins were organised to let opposing sides debate the war. The first teach-in took place on the campus of the University of Michigan during the nights of March 24-25 1965. About three thousand students and faculty members spent part of the night attending lectures, discussions and debates on the war. The next morning six hundred remained to demonstrate against escalation and demand a negotiated settlement. Teach-ins quickly spread to other campuses: thirty-five the following week and one hundred and twenty by the end of the academic year. The biggest of them all was the one on the campus of the University of California Berkeley, where twenty thousand students took part in a thirty-six-hour marathon on May 21 and 22.

Nhat Hanh’s charisma and dedication were powerful enough to persuade the American religious circles to support the Buddhist stand. The civil rights leader, Dr Martin Luther King, originally praised Nhat Hanh and nominated him for a Nobel Peace Prize, and gradually King came out openly to support the Buddhists’ call for a cease-fire and a negotiated settlement. It was a big break through for the Buddhist peace cause because, in reality, the Johnson administration had done more to advance the civil rights of the Black Americans than any other administrations since 1865 black activists were loathe to alienate Johnson by criticising his conduct of the war. No one felt as deeply as the dilemma of reconciling support for civil rights with speaking out against the Vietnam War as King did:

*King initially kept his doubts about Vietnam to himself. By late 1966, however, King believed that silence gained nothing in terms of further progress on civil rights, while it undermined his authority to speak out on issues of political morality. He therefore became a prominent opponent of the war in Vietnam. King joined hundred of other religious leaders in condemning the U.S. position in the war.* (82)

Finally in 1967, King called for an alliance of the civil rights and peace movements and later became the Co-Chair of a moderate group, ‘Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam’, condemned the Johnson government as ‘the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today’ and declared ‘this madness must cease’. His proposal was almost identical to that which Nhat Hanh had tried to convince Johnson’s top advisers the previous year but without much success: ‘the great initiative in this war is ours. The initiative to stop it must be ours!’ (83) Sadly not long after his open opposition to the Vietnam War, King was assassinated.
Soon the intellectuals, who had mainly supported the Democrats since 1930, joined the anti-war campaign. Many prominent academics addressed teach-ins, challenging Johnson's top advisers to come and debate the war. In most cases, they refused to face their critics and tried to belittle them as Beatniks or radical "rat-bags". In 1965 and 1966, although most Americans did not want an immediate withdrawal of the U.S. troops, they began casting doubts on the morality and validity of U.S. involvement. Their awakening started to change the American perception of the war.

On November 2, 1965, Norman Morrison, a Quaker activist also decided to initiate the same drastic act of the Vietnamese monks. While one arm held his daughter, the other poured fuel over his head and he struck a match to burn himself. A week after Morrison's self-immolation, a Catholic worker, Roger Laporte, took his life in a gasoline immolation in front of the United Nations Headquarters in New York. Laporte's last words were not so different from Nhat Chi Mai's: 'I am a Catholic worker. I am against all wars. I did this as a religious action'. (84)

The anti-war protest was gathering force and in 1968, there was the largest demonstration in New York to date which demanded a negotiated settlement and reduction of the U.S. role, and even withdrawal. Now Americans without any political affiliation joined the protests and did all sort of things to stop the war. The so-called 'napalm ladies' comprised four housewives who blocked trucks loaded with napalm bombs. Another group of women tried to bring child victims of napalm to U.S. hospitals because they felt Americans were morally obligated to treat burned Vietnamese children. Soldiers started resisting the draft as well. Three privates filed a lawsuit challenging orders to serve in Vietnam on the grounds that the war was illegal. The upper class from the Republican Party also refused to believe the U.S. soldiers were being sent to defend the freedom of South Vietnam. Protesters shadowed the top advisers everywhere. McNamara once was surrounded by James Bond styled students when he addressed a select group of fifty elite students at Harvard. The crowd shouted at him "Child murderer!" It was reported some one had drawn a plan of his house, probably preparing for an attempt on his life. After he had retired from the Johnson administration, someone actually attempted to throw him off a ferry at night, hitting him and pinning him against the railing. McNamara was not the only war maker who was harassed by anti-war protesters. Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, National Security adviser, Rostow and President Johnson were subject to constant disruption. The White House staff was amazed that the anti-
war organisers could mobilise such a large numbers of people. A familiar chorus was “Hey
hey! LBJ! How many children did you kill today?” In Sydney, on October 22, red paint was
thrown at the visiting President’s car and some protesters threw themselves down in
Liverpool Street to block the motorcade, The New South Wales Premier, Sir Robert Askin,
ordered the police “to run over the bastards”. In 1970 The Vietnam Moratorium Committee
organised the biggest protest ever in Australia. An estimated hundreds of thousands protesters
marched through the streets of Melbourne, while twenty thousand protesters campaigned in
Sydney. Rallies in all capital cities took the numbers involved in the nation-wide day of
protest to more than 200,000. Last, but not least, many top advisers’ children in the USA
showed their displeasure at their parents’ involvement in decision making about the war. For
instance, McNamara’s son tackled a small Vietcong flag that his dad had brought back from
Vietnam onto one wall of his bedroom. On the opposite wall, he hung an American flag
upside down. Dean Rusk’s son, Richard, had a nervous breakdown because he was ‘caught
between love for his father and the growing horror of Vietnam.’ The children of other
officials like Paul Nitze, Bill Bundy, William Colby were all active in the anti-war
movement. General Westmoreland’s daughter once joined a demonstration in which the
protesters burned her father’s effigy! (85)

The Vietnam War produced those who supported the war as a patriot duty. But for the
majority of war protesters, liberals and ordinary American citizens, the war between America
and Vietnam was morally indefensible. At the end of 1966, a sample of residents from a
suburb in Detroit City was asked: ‘Are you in favour of an immediate cease fire and
withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Vietnam so that the Vietnamese people can settle their
own problem?’ Forty one per cent answered ‘yes’. Anti-war sentiment was spreading but the
administration turned a deaf ear! But in late 1968, the White House could no longer afford to
ignore the protesters. Both McNamara and Bill Bundy were on their way out of the White
House while the President declared that he was not going to ask for the presidential
nomination for a second term, and it became clear that Johnson was beginning to have serious
misgivings about American involvement in Vietnam.

The financial cost of the Vietnam War has been estimated at about 200 billion. The
Americans lost 58,000 lives but the casualties from the Vietnam side were much higher.
According to an official figure released by the Communist government, there were 11
million fighters who died between 1954 and 1975. It was estimated there were between
185,000 and 225,000 RVNA soldiers and another two million civilians killed during the war. Defoliants destroyed thirty six per cent of forests in Vietnam and 1.6 million tonnes of bombs were dropped on the North and the South. According to one journalist, twelve tons of bombs were dropped on every square mile of territory in both North and South Vietnam, that is a hundred pounds of explosive for every man, woman, and child. All this to prop up a corrupt and unrepresentative government!

The war ended in 1975. We, Buddhists, are not vengeful and think the most appropriate comment on the war should focus on the deed, not the doer, as in the tradition of *Satyagraha*: *the sin is too large.* (86)
Conclusion

The Middle Path: The Politics of Enlightenment

In the world of Machiavellian politics, particularly when the Cold War was at its peak, many people raised doubts about the motives of the Buddhist leaders. Some praised the activists’ courage and their sacrifice, but still questioned whether it was necessary to confront the most powerful country in the world. It seemed that the Movement achieved too little compared with the price the Buddhist community had to pay. I have tried to respond to the question ‘Why’ by examining the ultimate motives that urged the Buddhist leaders to act. There are three reasons ‘Because’ in three different perspectives, religious, historical and political. Relating to the accusation that the Movement leaders were power drunk, I have demonstrated that this was an attempt by American propaganda to discredit the Movement. In the Buddhist tradition, any monk who sought to benefit himself, would be treated with disdain by the faithful. In principle a monk has to share the common goods with their fellow Sangha and by choosing the monastic life, a monk knows that he will be allowed to possess two robes, a bowl and literally does not know where the next meal will come from. Certainly there are a few corrupt and idle members in the Sangha, but they are the exception rather than the rule. The majority of monks are inspired by the Bodhisattva’s ideals and by-gone legendary figures in Lys and Trans who regarded their thrones were no better than a pair of worn shoes. What power were they seeking?

The young students in the Movement were exemplars of the selfless and non-attached life of a Bodhisattva. They laid aside their books, lost their careers and risked everything to stop the war. All were well educated and no doubt, one day they would have become leaders of the country. So why did they risk so much? When Hassler went to Saigon in 1967 as the representative of an inter-religious group, he was impressed with the student leaders in the
underground peace movement. Twenty-seven kids (as Hassler called them) planned a mass immolation on the steps of University of Dalat to awake the conscience of the American public. Here are Hassler’s impressions of this group:

*They were of tremendous in their courage; they had to dodge about the city, sometimes having to sleep in a different location every night to avoid the police, sometimes escaping three jumps ahead of the police raiding a meeting, but never giving up. Never, either, losing their sense of humour...These youngsters were full of honour, quick, sharp and subtle. I could not bear the thought of their self-destruction ... because of the sheer, indecent waste of such lovely humanity.* (1)

Power hungry? Self interested? Hassler did not think so and it seems the verdict of history will support his view.

I have also responded to the accusation of violence. Years after the war ended, an American historian, John Prados, praised Nhat Hanh as the finest example of the South Vietnamese Buddhists who refused to permit political potentates to stop them from doing what they knew to be right. However he was very critical of the street demonstrations and political activities of the Buddhist Institute. I have shown that Nhat Hanh was part of the team of Engaged Buddhist leaders. Even though his social work program was the most peaceful, the majority of Vietnamese youth at that time thought that people power, once awakened, was the most potent means to sway American public opinion and the war policy makers. On at least two occasions the American Government thought of moving their defence line to Thailand. The first time was when Khanh made a pact with the Buddhists in 1965 and the second when the 1966 uprising mobilised the whole people of the Central Vietnam against the Saigon government. I have also described that after 1963, the participants in the Peace Movement were not exclusively Buddhists. It became the People Movement and the activists were mostly urbanites from a large spectrum of political colours, including many progressive Catholics. Some youths did undoubtedly step over the line in some situations and certain actions like burning the American Consulate and the library were carried our by agents de
provocateurs planted by the Americans to discredit the Movement and to provide a pretext to suppress it. From 1963 to 1970 there were thirty-three self-burnings of which twothird were young people. In 1966 many young monks were sitting down in front of the advancing tanks in Danang. Thousands of students were thrown into prisons without trial and some were still there until 1975. After several attacks on the students and their school, the director of the School of Youth For Social Service, Thich Thanh Van, released a message to the attackers, pledging:

Now, once again, we solemnly promise never to hate those who kill us, above all never to use violence to answer violence...We recall our pledge that people, no matter what their origin, are never our enemies. Help us to keep steadily this non-violent mind in our social work by love that asks for nothing in return. (2)

In 1969 the Patriarch, Thich Tinh Khiet, said that the Buddhists always supported a non-violent campaign for peace and considered liberation by non-violent methods was true liberation. This attitude was in stark contrast to the South Vietnam leaders. In 1963 President Diem sent these last words to his loyal men: ‘If I am going to be killed, revenge me’ while the Patriarch asked that ‘if I am going to be killed, pray for my killer’. Facing with the peace movement in 1969, President Thieu threatened the Buddhist leaders vowing that ‘My government can fall because of those pacifists, but before we die, they will have to die first!’ (3) One of the most dramatic actions in the Hue uprising was bringing family altars out on to the streets. Hassler considered this is a classic example of non-violent resistance. The people of Hue brought the most precious possession of a Buddhist family to halt the advance of Ky’s oncoming tanks and symbolically, used their tradition to resist the invasion of cultural imperialism. The Buddhist activists were never an angry mob, but fought violence with love.
A final question to be answered is why did the Buddhists refuse to side with either the Americans or the Communists? What was their ultimate goal in the struggle?

The Americans and the Saigon Government could not understand why the Buddhist activists staged a relentless anti-American and anti-military dictatorship campaign, while the Institute leaders repeatedly confirmed that, there would be no place for spirituality in Marxism. Commenting on Nun Thanh Quang’s self-immolation in June 1966, President Johnson did not hide his bitterness, saying, “This unnecessary loss of life only obscures the progress being made toward a constitutional government. It only clouds the sacrifice of thousands of lives already made for the cause of independence and political hope in South Vietnam”. (4) The Americans were so frustrated with the Buddhists’ relentless anti-war and anti-American activism, they wondered why the Buddhists did not join the National Liberation Front and fight the ‘American invaders’ and ‘Thieu-Ky puppets’. Why did the Buddhists identify with the third force?

Certainly the Communists wondered why the Buddhists did not support them. Alfred Hassler asked the same question when he met twenty-seven underground students who planned to burn themselves to death on the steps of University of Dalat. Hassler wondered why these young kids (as he called them) were willing to struggle to give up their lives in a fashion far more difficult than the random chance of death in battle. Why didn’t they just join the Vietcong and fight the United States and the military government directly? Indeed why? Hassler, like Professor George Kahin, had a chance to meet and discuss this issue with the decision-makers such as Tri Quang and Thien Minh in the Buddhist Institute like Tri Quang and Thien Minh. Hassler said an answer to this question was the key to understanding the Vietnam conflict and probably the key to ending the war. (5).

Again this question can be examined from both a religious and political perspective. The Buddhists regarded both warring ideologies as fanatical, for they always remembered the Buddha’s warning on attachment to views. Non-
attachment is considered the most important precept and Nhat Hanh did not hesitate to re-order the old precepts and elevate it to the first position:

_Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhism. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth._ (6)

Unlike other religions, no Buddhist monks have ever been expelled or excommunicated because of heresy, and they have been given a free reign to form their own schools of thought. Buddhism can be defined as a journey or search for truth. The only thing that is certain to prevent one from completing this journey is the conviction that one has already found the truth. In Zen literature there are many sayings aimed at shocking practitioners and one of them is ‘if you meet the Buddha, kill Him!’ To a true Buddhist believer, the raft is not the shore or the finger pointing to the moon is not the moon. As the followers of such an enlightened and liberal philosophy, it would have been unthinkable for them to convert to a group of ideologues like the Communists, who had determined that they owned truth and who never liked being questioned or challenged. The anti-Communists and the right wing Catholics were no less fanatical as far as the Buddhists were concerned. The Vietnamese remembered the political purges in Russia and in China, but also further back in history, Inquisition in the Dark Ages. The power structures of the Catholic Church and the Socialist States were identical, including the hierarchical Bishops and Political Commissars. Nhat Hanh once commented that both Communism and anti-Communism were born of both Western fanaticism, while Buddhism rejects all forms of fanaticism, religious or Communism.

The Buddhist Patriarch called the warring sides unenlightened forces that hatched unenlightened schemes and activities to create suffering for the Vietnamese people. Western Colonialism was inspired by greed and the socialist revolution was a response to the exploitations by the ruling elite in the industrialised countries and by the colonialists in the third world. Hatred of the oppressors was often used as the means to motivate the oppressed to fight for social justice. Buddhists are taught that these feelings are the basic
cause of all suffering as taught by the Buddha in his first Dharma talk. While agreeing with the socialists’ goal of creating social justice the Buddhists do not condone their means of achieving their objectives. The gap between an ideology and a liberal religion like Buddhism is wide. An ideology is used to preserve the identity of a race and of a nation and to protect the privileges of a certain group or class. Buddhism is concerned with reverence for all life, living or non-living sentient. That was why Nhat Hanh prized peace above all else, saying that if he had to choose between peace and Buddhism, he would choose peace. He went further by saying that, if he had to choose between the survival of the Vietnamese people and the survival of Vietnam as a nation, he would choose the survival of the people. (7) The Catholics claimed that they rather lose their country than loose God because they believe they have the Kingdom of God to go to, but it is nonsense for Buddhists to say such a thing. There cannot be Vietnamese Buddhism without Vietnamese people.

The Buddhists were against American policy and the Saigon military government because both were instrumental in the escalation of the war but they were not against either the government or the American people as such. “We do not consider the powers that create suffering to Buddhism and to our people as enemies’ the Patriarch said in his Peace Declaration in 1969. Rather:

*It is because of the religious conscience in us that we cannot accept the war, that we cannot accept the presence of foreign troops and of troops whose actions are influenced by foreign governments, for this massacre of our people and each other.* (8)

The Buddhists’ stance in regard to the National Liberation Front was more delicate. In the eyes of the ordinary Vietnamese, particularly the peasants, the Communists appeared to carry on their mandate of anti-colonialism. Since the Americanisation of the war, when the Vietnamese troops played a lesser role in the battle field, what the peasants saw was poorly equipped Vietnamese guerrillas fighting against the most powerful soldiers, just like they had fought against the French in the colonial war. That was also the image that Nhat Hanh conveyed in Washington in 1966: ‘the more the war goes on, the stronger
communism becomes, and the more Americans become colonialists'.

The Buddhist leaders did not want to give the Communists an excuse, however minor, to accuse them of taking sides with the ‘foreign invaders’ therefore, discrediting them in the eyes of the general populace. After the Communist Tet offensive in 1968 when the Communists punished many Buddhists in Hue because they refused to incite or join an uprising, as they did against Ky in 1966, the American mission approached Tri Quang and requested him to condemn the Communists for these horrible crimes. Tri Quang refused. Nevertheless the Buddhists would have lost all their credibility if they had appeared to side with either the Americans or the Communists. But in his Peace Message in 1969 the Patriarch clearly denounced the violence used by both sides:

*Liberation does not mean using rifles to kill those who do not share the same ideology. Liberation in modern time cannot tolerate violence, even for the sake of emancipation of human beings and nations, because, as long as violence is used, it will be challenged by violence.* (9)

The sticking point that separates spiritually inspired activists from ideologically motivated one could not be clearer. A religious leader cannot adopt an attitude of ‘kill now, save later’. The Vietnamese people, therefore, could not understand Cardinal Spellman’s attitude when he came and blessed the GI’s in the war he called “sacred one” against the demonic Reds. When committing or condoning killing, paradoxically, a Buddhist is no longer Buddhist. The Communists, or any justifiers of violence, often said that it was necessary to take up arms to overthrow a repressive regime. However if they gained power by violence, in the future, they would not hesitate to use violence again to suppress any opponents or enemies of the state. Thus there was no real difference between those in power and those who were seeking power. (10) One must understand this Buddhist background of rejection of violence in order to understand why thousands of activists stayed in the cities and faced prison rather than escaped to the jungle to join the Communists. Even though the economic and social program of the National Liberation
Front may have attracted them, the dogmatism and repression of dissents in the Communist world repelled them. The Americans wanted to destroy everything to save Vietnam, using the spectre of Communism as a threat to coerce the Vietnamese, while the Communists did not hesitate to use punitive measures against those who did not take their side in the villages, towns and hamlets. As a result the Vietnamese people were caught in the web of violence and suffered enormously.

Lastly, Buddhism, in a sense, is by its nature anti-establishment and non-conformist. Buddhism does not amount to a number of temples and organisations. Even without a temple or even a monk, one still can be a Buddhist in one’s heart and life. For example in the ninth century, the extremist Hindu and Muslims massacred ten thousand monks in India. Temples and statues were destroyed. The surviving monks fled to Nepal with their manuscripts. Afterwards Buddhism flourished throughout Asia. Had these monks organised a violent resistance or retaliated, Nhat Hanh argued they might have preserved ‘something’ -called ‘Buddhism’, but it would not have been pure or true. The act of killing, promoting or condoning killing in any shape and form contradicts Buddhist essence, as we know it. That was why the Buddhists relentlessly denounced the American war but never supported the National Liberation Front either. Hopefully this explanation may shed some light on the reason why the Buddhists seemed neutral in siding with neither the Americans nor the Communists, like Sallie King’s question:

*How are we to understand this (the neutral stand)? This is not an idle question; the question at stake is that it might be possible to reconcile Mahayana non-dualism (here, unity with oppressed and oppressor) with concrete social action? (11)*

Mahayana non-dualism does not mean to be indifferent or weak. By rejecting unenlightened forces, Engaged Buddhists heard the voice of the sufferers, in this case the Vietnamese peasants, and did whatever they could to end the source of their sufferings.
In the realm of politics, a typical question asked by the American public and directed at the Buddhists was: ‘if the Buddhists were well aware of religious restrictions under Communism, why did they stage fiercely anti-American protests? If an Engaged Buddhist scholar like King was not sure how to understand the Buddhist position, it is quite legitimate for ‘innocent’ Americans to be perplexed and even angry:

*Why, after all we’ve done for them, are those Vietnamese so anti-American? Americans back home would ask in hurt astonishment. Others read about the demonstrations and decided that the only answer was to “bring the boys back home. If the Vietnamese don’t want us”, the argument went, “to hell with them”. (12)*

In reality the Buddhist leaders confirmed many times that they did not object to the American presence in South Vietnam but only strongly disagreed with the way the Americans conducted the war. Nevertheless no one would expect the Vietnamese to show their gratitude to war makers who dropped one hundred pounds of bombs on every man, woman and child in their country! One American student in the International Voluntary Services (IVS), Don Luce, who worked closely with student leaders in Hue, understood their deep feelings. According to Luce, student leaders in the Struggle Movement said to him that, they had no problem with the American presence in Vietnam, and accepted it as a necessity in the ‘special situation’. The students also considered America as their ‘best allied country’ but as far as the issue of defending their national sovereignty and self-determination was concerned, there could be no compromise at all. In other words, the Buddhists were not anti-American, but objected to Johnson’s policy of supporting an unresponsive military junta under the leadership of Thieu and Ky. They may have appreciated American assistance, but there had to be a better solution than a series of military dictatorships in Saigon. The Buddhists had no choice but to side with their own Vietnamese people, who were caught in the maelstrom and suffered enormously.

There was another political reason why the Buddhists had to take a neutral
stance. As peacemakers who wanted to stop the war and as they perceived it, there would be no winning side in the foreseeable future. As early as 1964 the leaders warned both sides that there could be no military victory and if there was, human costs would be high. The unpopular and unrepresentative Saigon government had no hopes whatsoever of winning the hearts and the minds of the people. General Westmoreland’s ‘search and destroy’ tactic only made the political situation worse. How could the Americans win the war when they did not know who their enemy was? The Americans prosecuted the war with many restraints because they knew China and the Soviet Union watched their every move in exercising their power. China and The Soviet Union actually could do more to assist their North Vietnamese comrades, but they were careful not to provoke the hawkish elements in the United States so that the administration could incite public opinion and call for American patriotism to prolong the war.

On the other hand, the National Liberation Front and its North Vietnamese allies had not much chance of a militarily victory either. Unlike the French in 1954, the Americans possessed too much power and resources to be defeated by poorly armed guerillas. The war makers in the White House invested so much in the rationale for the escalation of war and they would not give up easily. In order to protect their careers, these senior advisers constantly promoted fear of a ghostly Domino theory of Communism, and treated the anti-war elements in the United States as unpatriotic Americans! The Americans could maintain their military domination for a long time, as long as hawkish politicians were still in power and the American public was not weary of the war. The best the Communists could hope for was a political victory when the weariness of the American public was growing so that they would pressure their leaders to find a way out. In 1966 more than sixty per cent still supported the way President Johnson conducted the war the prospect of an American withdrawal was still a long way off.

Deep down the Buddhists perceived that Vietnam was just a hot spot in the cold war where the two powers tested their tactics and weaponry. The victory of one side was too destructive to contemplate and the Buddhists did not want
the Vietnamese to be sucked into either power bloc. Permeated by a Buddhist tradition of tolerance and compassion, they found the ideologies that both sides claimed they fought for, were alien. Even Western democracies tolerated freedom of speech (on the surface at least), individual rights and religious freedom, but to the third world people, no one could forget colonialism initiated by the West. The Buddhists could not accept the imposition of socialism. There was a striking resemblance between the Communist and Buddhist social and economic plan, but the suppression of dissidents and of minority religions in the socialist states repelled them. After all if the raft is not the shore, to the Buddhists, no one can own the truth or suppress the thoughts and opinions of others.

Politically, the Buddhists did not see the National Liberation Front as invincible. The Communists often claimed they were ‘the authentic voice of the South Vietnamese people’. However in terms of political power structures, the Communists were a class-based organisation. Their claim of having the peasant support was a dubious one. A clique of ruling elite controlled the NLF, like the Saigon Government, and if they won the war, state power would be controlled by this class elite, while Engaged Buddhism was a mass base movement that was not compatible with a party nor an organisation controlled by an elite bureaucracy.

The Buddhist leaders called for a cessation of bombing, a cease-fire, a de-escalation of war and a negotiation table. Tri Quang appealed to both sides: ‘the most urgent need is for an immediate cease-fire so that the massacre and destruction of the people and the country might end’.

The reactions from both sides were swift. President Thieu called the Buddhist Institute ‘the CIA of the Communists’. Students, monks, academics, writers were tortured, imprisoned, exiled, deported to the North and murdered. The Americans were at best, skeptical, and at worst, scornful. The National Liberation Front leaders were not willing to share power with any one except among their power elite. The Communists also talked of reconciliation and peace too, but only as a tactic. As a warring party, the National Liberation
Front wanted nothing short of a total victory.

And the Buddhists were aware that many more innocent Vietnamese and American troops would be killed or wounded. The costs were too high to be accepted. Joining one side or the other would only prolong the war. Using people power as a spiritual and political force the Buddhists hope that one day, the South Vietnamese would be enlightened and strong enough to ask the two sides to lay down their arms and sit together at the negotiating table. Ten years later, the Americans did exactly what the Buddhists asked of them, to listen to reason: there could not be a military solution for the Vietnam War. By then so much damage had been done.

A Journey of Awakening

The leader of the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka once said: ‘We made the road and the road made us.’ By engaging in social and political activities to transform the outside world, our inner world is strengthened and we become mature. This is a crucial point that distinguishes Buddhists from secular social activists. There were no movements that could have mustered the support of people from all walks of life and of different political persuasions as the Hue uprising did in 1966. Not only did the Buddhist activists, the academics and the students participate in the struggle, but also soldiers, police, public servants and ordinary families confronted and dared to challenge the mightiest country on this planet and their ruthless military machine. The struggle during these years awoke them all. The Buddhists no longer felt marginalised as they had during the colonial period. They were able to shrug off their passive image and retrieve an old treasure hidden in the heart of their religion, as a fable in the Diamond Sutra. They discovered, or rediscovered rather, an active and more human form of Buddhism. They found a new praxis, based on Buddhist tenets that could be integrated with the social and political circumstances of their time they knew that the politics of enlightenment, as opposed to Machiavellian politics, was possible. The beacons were not strangers, but some old Buddhist fellows in their tradition, like Asoka, Nagarjuna, the Lys and Trans Kings. Never in Vietnamese history
had there arisen such an army of selfless, fearless and non-attached youths who defied prison, torture and even death to work for peace. Utopian they may have been, but they made the Bodhisattva’s ideal a reality to strive for.

This discovery was nothing short of an **awakening process**. A new theory of action emerged. By practising right action, Buddhists could contribute to the mitigation of the individual as well as the collective Karma. The young Bodhisattvas proved that throughout history, Buddhists have always been present in all the struggles for independence and the survival of their people. Buddhism has become the backbone of the Vietnamese culture and it is virtually impossible to study Vietnamese culture without a thorough understanding of Buddhist values too. The interdependence of Buddhism and Vietnam, as a country, is undeniable. Buddhism has contributed much in terms of shaping Vietnamese culture and history. It has transformed Asoka’s political ideal ‘to serve the welfare of the people under the guidance of the Dharma’. Practising the Dharma was longer practising something abstract, but required protecting their compatriots right now and right here. What did the Engaged Buddhists want? Simply, and in the lyrics of a popular song at the time **Give Peace a Chance**. On behalf of the Vietnamese Buddhists, the Supreme Patriarch declared in 1969:

*Peace has true meaning only when it can guarantee the right of self-determination for the nation and the rights for basic democratic freedom for the people in the community of the world.* (13)

The Buddhist Movement aimed at realising the twin goals of self-determination for the nation and basic democratic rights for the Vietnamese people. Neither is too much to ask in our modern societies. Years after the Buddhist uprising, some critics still questioned the Institute’s decision to confront the South Vietnamese government and the United States on the ground that it was wasteful, unwise and damaging for the development of Buddhism in Vietnam. They forget to ask themselves, what sort of Buddhism did the Vietnamese need and cherish? They did not need a religion of the dead, but for the living, not an irrelevant Buddhism, but instead an engaged,
relevant and compassionate Buddhism. They needed a stream of fresh water, not a stagnant pond. As Tri Quang proudly declared: ‘Whenever a Buddhist reminisces about the Buddhist Institute’s activities in this period, he can be proud of his religion’ (14)

The impact of the Peace Movement was not always visible, but it is hard to deny that the Buddhists, after 1963, dramatically changed the political landscape in Vietnam. The participation of the young generation and the emergence of people power created a formidable grassroots force that shook America to its core. The idea of a third force was not a mere wishful thinking. In 1969 the Movement could mobilise half a million people, out of three million inhabitants, to demonstrate in the streets to appeal for peace. Unlike the Saigon military government and the Front, the Buddhist movement was the only group that did not rely on external support. Their ideal of the middle way was vindicated. In May 1968, the Paris Student Revolt Movement broke out, denouncing both Capitalism and Communism. ‘Ni Marx! Ni Jesus!’ the students chanted. The American students used the Buddhist non-violent methods to protest the war, including self-immolation, street and campus sit-ins, class boycotts, burning draft cards...The dependent co-arising principle namely this arises because that has arisen, bears witness to the awakening process that once started, was impossible to stop. The advisers at the White House were able to contain the peace movement for two years or so, but from 1968 onwards, it became unstoppable. To conclude, let me quote Professor Sallie King’s words as a final summing-up of the impact of Buddhist participation in the struggle to bring about peace in Vietnam:

It can only be said that theirs (the Struggle Movement) is one of the great examples of courage, altruism, and activist spirituality of all time. While they are in the company of Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement and Martin Luther King Jr’s civil rights movement, they differ significantly in that theirs was not a movement led by a single, outstanding, charismatic leader. The Buddhists who participated in the Struggle Movement, who worked in the countryside to help peasants survive, who immolated themselves for peace, these people were moved, in fact, by the ideals of their Buddhist faith. (15)
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(31) Ibid., p. 111.
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(35) Benz, Ibid., p. 44.
(36) Ibid., p. 48.
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(43) Phan Boi Chau, Oh God! Oh Chris, p.36.
(71) Sulak, Sivaraksa, *Seeds of Peace*, p. 68
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(74) Hoang Nguyen Nhuyn, *From Exile*, p. 172.
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7. Ibid., p. 225.
8. Detailed accounts can be found in *The Historical Secrets Under Diem’ regime*, Cuu Long Le Trong Van.
16. An ex-member of Cao Lao Party who exposed the party cruelty in his work after the fall of Diem received numerous death threats and was seduced to be bought out by a large sum of money. He was smart enough to send a few copies to his American friends in the US Embassy and after 1975 it was reprinted in the US. See Chu Bang Linh, *The Personalism Labour Party*.
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Appendix A

Buddhist Glossary of Terms

Abhidharma: Commentary of the Sutra
Ahimsa: Non-killing, non-harming
Anatman: No-self
Avalokitesvara: Qan (Kwan) Yin Bodhisattva; Bodhisattva of Compassion
Bodhi: State of being awakened
Bodhisattva: A person who determines to attain full Enlightenment in order to help others. Only found in the Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddha: an awakened one
Bhikkhu: monk
Bhikkhuni: nun

Dharma: the teaching of Buddha
Dukkha: suffering, dissatisfaction
Karma: intentional actions; the effect of action; cause and effect
Mahayana: the form of Buddhism practiced in the northern countries of Tibet, Mongolia, China, Japan and Vietnam.

Nirvana: cessation of suffering, liberation freedom from the cycle of birth and death

Paticca-samuppada: Dependent co arising
Pratyekabuddha: Lone enlightened One
Saba: Conditioned existence
Samsara: Conditioned existence
Sangha: Communities of monks.
Sutta (Sutra): dialogue, discourse, usually by the Buddha
Theravada: Early Buddhism usually practiced in the Southern Asian countries of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and Burma.

Vinaya: Precepts
Appendix B
People & Places in the Vietnam War
During 1963-66

Ball, Georges W. (1909-): U.S. Undersecretary of State 1961-66. In 1961 Ball predicted "the most tragic consequences" if the United States committed to a military role in Vietnam, and said that within five years 300,000 US soldiers would be mired in a hopeless war. He was one member in the Johnson administration argued against military escalation proposed by McNamara and Co. His viewpoint on the Vietnam War is mentioned in Part VII in his book *The Past Has Another Pattern*.

Berrigan, Daniel (1921-) A Jesuit Catholic Priest became active in the anti-war movement in 1964. He and his group broke in Selective Service offices in Catonsville and burned draft records. He and his brother Philip served 16 months and 32 months, respectively, for the crime. Phillip, was an active spokesman for Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV).


Bui Diem (1923-) Special Minister in Dr Phan Huy Quat 's ministry who double crossed Dr Quat to transfer power 'legally' to a military government in 1965 and later awarded the position of Ambassador for the U.S. by General Thieu.

Bundy, McGeorge (1919-1996) National Security Adviser 1961-66. He was one of the key players in formulation of U.S. Vietnam policy from the early days of the war.


Can Lao Party: Personalist Labor Party was organized by President Ngo Dinh Diem’s supporters in 1954 in an attempt to have him installed as the Prime Minister. It was controlled by Ngo Dinh Nhu and supported by the Catholic refugees. After Diem became Prime Minister and President of the first Republic, Can Lao members were awarded with government positions.

Catholic Peace Fellowship: A non-violent Catholic group set up in the spring of 1965 to resist the Vietnam War. The fellowship’s leaders include Berrigan brothers and Thomas Merton. The group helped Catholic conscientious objectors to avoid the draft.

Chan Khong: (Sister) She was one of the first ordained sisters in the Inter-Being order founded by Nhat Hanh. She was the driving force behind the School of Youth for Social Service. She has been a close confidant and an assistant of Nhat Hanh in the Peace movement since 1968. Author of *Learning from Love*.

Church Frank (1924-1984) U.S. Senator 1957-1981 He was an outspoken liberal against the Vietnam War in 1965. He was nominated as the Democrat presidential candidate in 1976.

Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV) An ad hoc committee formed in 1965 by anti-war American clergymen composed largely of liberal Protestants with some Jewish and Roman Catholic members.

Cooper, Chester (1917-) A senior member of U.S. National Security Council, 1964-67. In 1966 Cooper questioned the ability of the U.S. to win a guerilla war. He met the Buddhist leaders in Saigon and said that Tri Quang was mystical figure.

Dal Viet Party: A non-Communist Party formed in Hanoi in 1939. When moving to the South, the party was divided into many branches and one of them, clustered a number of Catholic Officers.
Danang: It was the second largest city in South Vietnam and where the U.S. Marines landed in 1965. When Premier Ky dismissed General Thi, the Buddhist uprising broke out in here.

Domino Theory: The theory originated with the Truman doctrine in 1947 when the U.S. officials worried about communist activity in Greece and Turkey. President Eisenhower used the domino theory to justify U.S. aid for the French in Indochina. They believed that if Vietnam falls, it would lead to a communist takeover of countries from Laos to the Philippines to India.

Duong Van Minh (1916-1997) Known as Big Minh, he received military training in France. He was one of the main plotters to overthrow President Diem and chaired the Revolutionary Military Council. He was toppled by General Khanh only three months later. When President Thieu and other generals fled, he agreed to take over the position of President of South Vietnam with a view to negotiate with the Communist forces to avoid bloodshed. He was arrested and sent to a prison camp and later allowed to immigrate to France.


Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) Established in 1914, the FOR was the most influential pacifist group in Great Britain and the U.S. In October 1964 the FOR issued the Declaration of Conscience against the War in Vietnam, endorsing draft resistance to protest the increasing number of U.S. military troops being sent to Vietnam. It hosted Thich Nhat Hanh during his peace tour in 1966.

Flaming Dart, Operation: The Flaming Dart was the code name for February 1965 U.S. retaliatory air raids against North Vietnam.

Forrestal, Michael (1927-1989) National Security Council aid, who, together with others in the anti-Diem group, sent a cable signaling the U.S. government’s willingness to abandon President Diem, an action led to the overthrow of Diem’s regime.


Geneva Conference, 1954: On 8 May 1954, the day after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, representatives of China, France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, U.S., Cambodia, Laos, The State of Vietnam and the Vietnamese Communists met in Geneva, Switzerland to decide the political fate of Indochina. After 2 months of negotiation the delegates reached an agreement. Vietnam was temporarily divided into South and North Vietnam. A free election will be held in 1956 to reunite the country. The Eisenhower administration and Ngo Dinh Diem, who was then appointed Prime Minister by the last Emperor Bao Dai, refused to sign. The Americans, however, pledged to abide the Geneva agreement. When Diem became the President of the first Republic, he refused to hold an election as promised in the accords.


Gulf of Tonkin Incident: On 2 August, the U.S. destroyer Maddox was fired on by Vietnamese patrol boats and it was reported that another destroyer, Turner Joy was also attacked. Although the second attack was dubious, but President Johnson ordered retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnam.
Johnson also asked the Congress to pass a resolution called The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving the President the authority to wage war in Vietnam.


Hoa Hao: A Buddhist Sect in South Vietnam founded by Huynh Phu So in 1919. He was regarded as a faith healer and a prophet. He was arrested by the French but in WWII the Japanese freed him and armed his army. His troops turned against the Viet Minh after So was assassinated by the Communists. His army also opposed Diem. Their hero, Ba Cut, was lured to surrender, but eventually guillotined by Diem administration.

Hue: South Vietnam’s third largest city, 75 kilometers south of the demilitarized zone. It was the stronghold of the Buddhist Movement in Vietnam.

Indochina: The name given by France in the 19th century to its colonies in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.


Krulak, Victor: Lieutenant General, U.S. Marines. He and his subordinate, General Walt, emphasized on pacification and strongly disagreed with General Westmoreland’s search-and-destroy tactic. Interestingly the unknown beach where the U.S. marines landed in 1965 was after his Chinese transcribed name, Chu Lai.

Le Van Kim: (1918-) general Army of South Vietnam. He was the brain of the plotters in the coup against Diem in 1963. Toppled by General Khanh and under arrest in Dalat with other Dalat officers, Tran Van Don, Ton That Dinh and Mai Huu Xuan.

LeMay, Curtis: (1906-1990) U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff 1961-1965. General LeMay believed that air power could achieve most military aims. He was the one who advocated that the U.S. should bomb them (the North) back to the Stone Age.

Lodge Henri Cabot Jr (1902-1985) U.S. ambassador to Vietnam. He served two terms. In the first term (1963-64) he supported the Buddhists’ cause and gave the green light to the Generals to overthrow Diem. In the second term, he actively supported Ky to suppress the peace movement in Danang and Hue.

McCone, John (1902-1991) director of the CIA from 1961-1965. He was a supporter of President Diem and opposed the 1963 coup.

McNamara, Robert (1916-) U.S. Secretary of Defence 1961-1968. He was the main architect of the Vietnam War, which is also termed McNamara War. In 1995 he published his memoirs, In Retrospect, in which he admitted that ‘We are wrong, terrible wrong’.

McNaughton, John T. (1921-1967) Assistant secretary of defense 1964-1967. As a hawk, he advocated increased military involvement and endorsed bombing of North Vietnam. However later he changed his view and no longer believed in the Domino theory.

Napalm: Gasoline based compound that burns at about 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Napalm kills by burning anyone it comes to contact with and caused many civilian casualties in Vietnam.

National Liberation Front: Also called the Front was founded in 1960. It was designed as a broad based organization to attract the opposition of President Diem. Its leadership, however, included many Communist Southern returned cadres.

Ngo Dinh Can: The youngest brother of President Diem who controlled the Northern Provinces around Hue. Ironically he refused to support the decree forbidding the Buddhists to hoist the flags in 1963. He was tried and executed in 1964 while General Khanh was in power.

Ngo Dinh Diem: (1901-1963) Appointed Prime Minister by the last Emperor Bao Dai in 1964 but will the support of American power brokers, Diem founded the First Republic and voted himself as President. Born into a Catholic family, he only trusted the Northern Catholic refugees and their cronies. He attended the French School of administration and served as the Minister of Interior under Emperor Bao Dai in 1933. From 1950 to 54 he lived in Europe and stayed briefly in a Seminary in New Jersey where he met Cardinal Spellman, Senators J. F. Kennedy and Mike Mansfield. He delegated most of his authority to his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu and his sister-in-law, Madam Nhu. He and Nhu were assassinated in the coup so-called the November Revolution in 1963.

Ngo Dinh Nhu (1910-1963): Chief adviser of President Diem and the Head of Can Lao Personalist Party. He graduated from the elite French Archivist school, Ecole De Chartes and worked as an archivist in Hanoi. After Diem gained power in 1954, Nhu served as Diem regime's ideologue and directed the secret services. Can Lao party was a combination of private political machine and mafia, and membership in it was a prerequisite for advancement to high-ranking government positions. He was assassinated together with his brother in the 1963 coup.

Ngo Dinh Nhu (Madame Nhu): (1924-) wife of Ngo Dinh Nhu and surrogate first lady of the Diem regime. Her father was the Ambassador to the U.S., who resigned to protest the oppression of the Buddhists in 1963. She married Ngo Dinh Nhu and converted to Catholicism. She wielded enormous power under the Diem regime. Her outspoken public statement against the Buddhists caused embarrassment to Kennedy regime and the American administration requested Diem to remove her hand her husband, Diem refused. She called the self-immolated monks 'barbecued monks' and offered gasoline to reporter Halberstam, a fierce critic of the regime, to burn himself. After dust was well settled, according to an inside information, in 1980's she sent her son, Ngo Dinh Trac, to see a representative monk in the United States and offered her belated apology for her outburst.

Ngo Dinh Thuc (1897-1984) The eldest member of the Diem family. He was the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Hue when the Buddhists protests broke out in 1963.

Nguyen Cao Ky (1930-) One of the Young Turks officers who was the Prime Minister from 1965 to 1967. After the Honolulu Conference in February 1966, blessed by Johnson, Ky tried to out his rival, General Nguyen Chanh Thi, which sparked the Buddhist uprising in Danang and Hue.

Nguyen Chanh Thi (1923-) Another Young Turk officer whose dismissal ignited the whole Central. Thi was incorrupt, talented, energetic and loved by his subordinates. In 1960 he and other officers staged an abortive coup against Diem.

Nguyen Khanh (1927-) When the Americans found that General Duong Van Minh and his colleagues in the Revolutionary Military Council did not respond positively to the policy of escalation, General Khanh was encouraged by the Americans to stage another coup to overthrow Minh's government only three months after it had been formed. Khanh used the Tonkin Gulf incident to draft a new constitution called the Vung Tau Charter so he could be appointed President. Seeing the well-organized protests from the Buddhists and after having a clash with the new American Ambassador, Maxwell Taylor, Khanh made a pact with the Buddhist leaders. For this reason, the American mission in Saigon manipulated the Young Turks to remove him in 1965.
Nguyen Ngoc Loan (1932- ) General in the Air Forces of South Vietnam. He was General Ky's right hand man in the campaign to suppress the Buddhist uprising in Danang and Hue. However he was well known to the outside world by a photograph taken by an AP reporter in which Loan executed in cold blood a Vietcong suspect.

Nguyen Van Thieu (1923- ) A newly convert Catholic general who was elected President of the South Vietnam from 1967-1975. He was also one of the Young Turks who supported Khanh in early 1964. But when Khanh fell from grace with the Embassy, Generals Thieu, Ky and Thi became the most powerful officers in the RVNA. After Ky stripped Thi 's power after the Buddhist uprising, Thieu out-maneuvered Ky and became the President of the Second republic.

NLF: National Liberation Front- sometimes called the Front.

Nolting, Frederick E. (1911-1989) U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam from 1961-63. He was one of the most ardent supported of Diem and Nhu. When he left for Washington to report the political situation to President Kennedy, his assistant, Trueheart actually triggered the successive incidents which led to the 1963 coup against Diem.

OPLAN 34A (Operation Plan 34A) One of the covert operation against the North which led to the Gulf of Tonkin incident.


Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) Anti-colonial leader and advocated using violent means to fight the French colonialism. Arrested by the French in 1925 and under house arrest in Hue in 1940. Therefore he was also called the Old Man of Ben Ngu.

Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926) A reformist Confucian who advocated modernization as a principal means of anti-colonialism. Jailed by the French in 1908 and lived in exile in France for seventeen years. His funeral in 1925 was the biggest procession ever witnessed in modern Vietnam history.

Phan Huy Quat (1901-1975) Prime Minister of South Vietnam, 1965. A physician from Hanoi University who enjoyed a brief U.S. support as a possible replacement for Ngo Dinh Diem in 1965. He was appointed Prime Minister in 1965 by General Khanh who was deposed a short time later. He supported the Buddhist experiment for a popular elected body as a legitimate government to settle the war with the 'other' side. However realizing the Americans would not accept a constituent assembly, he only signed a decree to organize an election for local council representatives. His adopted son, Bui Diem, duped him to transfer legitimate power to the Armed Forces Council headed by General Thieu and Ky.

Phan Khac Suu: An agricultural engineer belongs to Cao Dai Sect. He was appointed Chief of Staff by the Council of Notables from September 1964 to June 1965. His friction with Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat was used as an excuse by the military to seduce Quat to hand power to them.

Pleiku: A province in the Central Highlands. On 7 February 1965 the Vietcong attacked the helicopter base and American army barracks. Eight American soldiers were killed and ten aircraft destroyed. Johnson administration used this as an excuse to start Operation Flaming Dart, a retaliatory bombings targets in North Vietnam.

Rolling Thunder Operation: The sustained bombings designed to bring the North to the negotiation table from March 1965 to 31 October 1968.


Rusk, Dean (1909-1994) Secretary of State 1961-1969. Being a hawk, Rusk, McNamara, McGeorge Bundy strongly urged Johnson to do whatever was necessary to prevent a North Vietnamese Victory.
Sheehan, Nell (1936-) One of the young reporters during this period. UPI correspondent and Saigon Bureau Chief 1962-1964. His well known saying was ‘if I were a young Vietnamese peasant, I would have joined the Vietcong’. In 1968 Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers to him. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize with his book A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam.


Spock, Benjamin M. (1903-1998) A leading anti-war figure. He participated in much protest and published an anti-war treaty Dr Spock on Vietnam. He was indicted for conspiring to aid and encourage resistance to the draft but later his conviction was overturned.

Struggle Movement. Term for a series of national wide protests led by the Buddhists in 1966. It is also called the Buddhist Peace Movement or Buddhist uprising.


Taylor, Maxwell D: (1901-1987) U.S. Army General, Ambassador to South Vietnam 1964-1965. At first he recommended bombing North Vietnam, rather than committing U.S. combat troops. But when becoming a special White House consultant, he called for more troops and escalated bombings. He clashed with General Khanh and had the General removed when Khanh decided to make a pact with the Buddhist leaders.

Teach-Ins: The first teach-in took place at the University of Michigan on 24 March 1965. The professors debated the war with three thousand students who attended the all-night session. On 15 May 1965, a special radio link connected 122 campuses nationwide for a national teach-in.

Thich Nhat Hanh: Born in 1926, ordained in 1949. In 1956 he and other young monks founded Fragrant Palm Leaves Retreat in the Central Highland. He attended a post graduate course in Comparative Religion at Columbia University. During the struggle against President Diem, he staged a hunger strike and lobbied the United Nations to send an investigative delegation to Vietnam. Returning to Vietnam at the Buddhist leaders’ request, he worked as an editor for a number of Buddhist magazines. He was one of the leaders of the anti-war underground literary movement. He almost single handedly founded the first Buddhist University. Ban Hanh and with Sister Chan Khong, the School of Youth and social Services. Invited by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, he went for a peace tour, first in the U.S., and later all the countries in Western Europe and as far as Japan and Australia. Forbidden by the military to return home, he has lived in exile ever since.

Thich Quang Duc: Born in 1907. Thich Quang Duc, usually revered as Bodhisattva Thich Quang Duc, was the first monk who self immolated on a Saigon street on 11 June 1963.

Thich Quang Lien: Studied in Japan and later at Yale University. In 1964 he founded The Movement to Defend Peace and People’s Happiness. He was forced to exile for 2 years in Thailand.

Thich Tam Chau: Born in 1922 in the North. He fled South after 1954 and established his faithful base in around Saigon. He was the chairman of the Inter-Sect Committee to Defend Buddhism. He was elected the first Chairman of the Institute of the Propagation of the Faith of the United Buddhist Church (UBC). In 1966 he defected to Ky’s side.

Thich Thien Minh: Born in 1921. Ordained in 1943. Joined the resistance for a short time. He was the commissioner for the Buddhist Youth. An excellent tactician, he was chosen as the Head of the Buddhist Delegation to negotiate with Diem’s government. In 1966 he was assassinated by Ky’s secret police, but only incapacitated. Since then he walked with a stick, hence given the nickname ‘the old limping man’ by his associates. He was arrested by Thieu in 1967 and sentenced for 10 years hard labor. Bowed to the mounting pressure from every political corner, especially Ambassador Bunker, he was released after only nine months in prison. He was arrested soon after the Communist tanks have
crashed the gate of the presidential palace. He was released but re-arrested right after he launched the Human Appeal, on behalf of the UBC.

**Thich Tri Quang:** Born in 1924. He was in the same class with Thien Minh at Bao Quoc Monastery. Joined the Peace Movement in 1954. He was at the compound of the Hue Radio station when government tanks crushed nine children. He escaped to the American Embassy next door when Nhu's Special Forces raided Xa Loi pagoda on the 20th August 1963. Duped by Ambassador Maxwell Taylor, he went on a hunger strike for one hundred days. Abdicated the leadership to Thien Minh after the summer 1966, even though to the public, he was still a legendary figure.

**Ton That Dinh** (1930-) South Vietnam Army General. He was one of the main plotters to overthrow Diem. He and other four generals were toppled by General Khanh and under house arrest in Dalat. Hence they were called four Dalat Generals. When sent to the Central by Ky to quell the Buddhist uprising, he joined the dissidents instead.

**Tran Van Don** (1917-) South Vietnam Army general. He was the main plotter together with General Duong Van Minh and Ton That Dinh. His memoirs, *Our Endless War*, were the most reliable and truthful ever told by a Vietnamese General. He was one general who commanded respect from the key Buddhist leaders, particularly Tri Quang.

**Tran Van Huong** (1903-) South Vietnamese Prime Minister 1964-1965. He was seen as a protege of Ambassador Taylor. The Buddhists launched an all out campaign to topple him in early 1965. When general Khanh sided with the Buddhist leader, he was toppled.

**Truong Dinh Dau:** A Saigon lawyer who ran against Thieu in 1967 presidential election. With the Buddhist support he amassed a large number of votes. Without vote rigging from Thieu and Ky, he could have elected president. Thieu punished him by arrested him for a trumped charge of currency violation.

**Truong Nhu Tang:** A covert organizer of the National Liberation Front. Disillusioned after 1975 he fled to France. His memoirs, *Portrait of a Vietcong*, retold the days he was active with the Front.

**United Buddhist Church (UBC)** formed after President Diem had been toppled. Also called the Buddhist Institute or The Institute.

**U Thant:** (1909-1974) Burmese Diplomat; Secretary General of the United Nations from 1961-1971. In 1966 he called for a halt of the bombing of North Vietnam and a negotiation including every involved party, including the NLF.

**Vu Van Mau** (1914-1998) South Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs under Diem's government. He resigned in protest over the persecution of the Buddhists. Like Duong Van Minh he accepted the Prime Ministership after all the generals had fled before the Communist advance in Saigon to avoid bloodbath.

**Walt, Lewis W.** (1913-1989) General, Commander of U.S. Marines corps. He was the Commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force. He witnessed the whole episode of the Buddhist uprising in Danang and Hue which he recorder sympathetically in his memoirs, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*.

**Westmoreland, William C.** (1914-) General, U.S. Army, Commander of U.S. Military in Vietnam 1964-68. From 1965 to 1967 Westmoreland was instrumental in raising the U.S. Forces in South Vietnam. His Search and Destroy was proved to be a failure in fighting the insurgents.
Appendix C

PORTRAIT OF A LEADER
The Writer Hoang Nguyen Nhuan

My formative years

I was born in 1938, the last peaceful year of humankind in the second part of this century. When I was one year old, the Second World War broke out. When I was five, Vietnam had a new colonial master: The Japanese overthrew the French for a short period. When I was 7, peace returned all over the world except Indochina. The Indochina war gradually escalated and lasted until I was 37. My country has had many ups and downs, so have million of Vietnamese people. It is my political vision and my belief, which have tied me to the historical and political events in Vietnam and in any future struggles it may experience.

When my country was still under foreign rule, I firmly believed in sovereignty and self-determination. While living under authoritarian regimes I continued to believe in freedom and democracy. When the Cold War became the dominant ideology in the world, I dreamt of peace. Because of these against-the-current beliefs of mine, I have suffered greatly. After graduating from Hue University, I taught there for two years. Then because of my political beliefs, I was forced to take an firm stand against the Government of the day, but engaging in political activities in Vietnam then and even now is actually the shortest way to end up in prison. In 1963 I was thrown into prison for the first time and only released after the first Republic collapsed. The second Republic power brokers again arrested me and kept me in the army (a way of punishing those who were dissidents) until Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City. In 1975 the communist conquerors jailed me for another 3 years. After being released I was nearly 40 years old. I had two options: either to stay in the country to be humiliated by the power-drunk luminaries who really believed in the miracles of ideology; or to flee overseas to become a displaced person. I chose the latter and adopted Australia as my new country since 1982.

I chose the more difficult road to achieve my dream, probably because of my Karma (it is easy to blame one’s Karma though!). Was I a prison warder in previous lives? Am I an ideologically fanatic? Am I the victim of what Buddhism calls obstacle created by knowledge? I do not really know! But what I am certain is that I have never lost sight of the temporal goals that I firmly believe in, during my social and political activities. My objectives are independence for our country, peace and reconciliation of my beloved people who were dragged into an ideological war and a social revolution, which brings about social justice. On the ideological front the objective is mitigating the Karma- De-colonization- De-mystification of Western values. These objectives are derived from the contemplating and experiencing the Vietnam situation from my own life as an activist. I believe that Buddhism provides the essential guiding principles for social actions to achieve these objectives.

The three religions, which have been integrated into the Vietnamese culture, are Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. If we understand religion as a way of life, Confucianism teaches us how to engage in political actions, Buddhism shows us how to live our lives and Taoism enables us to retreat into our individual world.

Buddhism has never appeared as a threat from outside or from above, as an indoctrinating process or a stimulus-response condition. Buddhism is accepted by millions of people as a spiritual practice and which once accepted, is penetrating as peacefully as morning dew that wets our garments unnoticed. Buddhism has never resulted in culture shock. Whether people accept it or abandon it, it would not cause spiritual crisis. But whenever it is accepted as a way of life, it is very hard to be converted to anything else. Buddhism is home for many prodigal children. As for me Buddhism highlights my own Karma and is the rationale for all my social activities.
My family lived in Phu Cam, Hue. In the whole village, there were only two non-Catholic families. One was my family. There is the biggest Cathedral in the city. Phu Cam is the first President’s hometown, after the country had been divided into two parts according to the Geneva Accord. Phu Cam is only a stone’s throw away from Tu Dam Pagoda. My parents’ pagoda, Van Phuoc, is also not far from it either.

On the way to the Pagoda, I had to go past the patriotic Phan Boi Chau’s worship place. I did not know what it was, until my grandma once told me that Nam Giao area had been raided by the French soldiers because in front of the Old Man at Ben Ngai’s (Phan Boi Chau’s nickname) house someone had put up three buffalo heads which were painted in a tri-color pattern. My grandma explained that some one wanted to depict the French colonialists as...animals. I have never forgotten the patriotic old man’s name since then.

I went to a French school and the subjects I liked included history, literature, the arts and French philosophy. But I did not really know why but I was not being able to bring myself to love French. Probably nobody in my family ever praised the French colonialists or encouraged me to love them. Partly when I was 7 years old, the August revolution started. Most of my family members participated in the resistance against French colonialists. As a seven-year old child, I thought anti colonialist activities were acceptable and normal.

A year after 1945, the French legionaries came back to Hue so we had to move to my father’s village. Unfortunately, my village was on the way where the French army went past in order to reclaim the old city of Hue. They arrested all the men in the village for the purpose of screening. One evening, I heard one man screaming while running. He looked like Dracula in my imagination. The French shot him but somehow how he went on running until he died. That man’s house was only a hundred meters away from my family. I heard him scream until midnight. I will never forget that sound or his image either. I hated death and hated the French.

My grandmother was a Catholic. My grandfather was a Buddhist. They loved each other but because they followed different religions, they were not allowed to get married. However their love proved to be stronger than religious obligations and they eloped, fled the country and reached a compromise. Their daughters would be baptized Catholic while their sons were to take refuge in three Jewels and become Buddhists.

Although religious denunciations were rigid and clear, there was no attempt in my family to enforce any tedious religious education (indoctrination, rather) program. As soon as I was born, I was brought to the pagoda and took refuge in the three jewels. I only went to the pagoda on Vesak Day, New Year days, family anniversaries and prayer sessions. I did not have any formal Buddhist training and did not remember any sutras, except the names of Sakyamuni Buddha, Amida Buddha and Quan Ying Bodhisattva that I heard people pray to at the pagoda. There was a small altar next to our ancestors’ altar for flowers and incense offering to the Buddha. However, my grandma way of worshipping her God was completely different.

My grandma lived with us. She recited the Bible every evening and went to masses every Sunday. Sometimes she took me to Church if I insisted. My parents had a busy working life and I hardly saw them during the day. I spent most of my time with grandma. Even though the task of converting a non-Catholic was a ‘sacred’ job of any Catholic, she never tried to educate me in the way of her beliefs. My parents also simply tried to educate me to be a ‘good person’ rather than to be a Buddhist. To them and to most Vietnamese, Buddhism was only a way of life, a natural way of life like a fish living in water. It was not the choice, as we understand it, let alone a “revelation” which may have turned one’s values upside down. Even through the help of my family, Buddhism became my belief I only gained a much deeper understanding of this religion much later in my life by chance. I learned the appeal, or the threat, of Catholicism from school including notions of Hell, Heaven, angels, monsters, baptism, confession and absolute obedience to priests...I was so happy with my family upbringing that I did not really want to enter Heaven. But as any child would be, I was so frightened of fire, Hell and monsters that I decided I wanted to go the Heaven. Also I was told that it was easy to go there!
I went to an infant school, which was run by the Brothers of St Joseph Order near the cemetery where the late father of the first President of South Vietnam was buried. It was a traditional Catholic school in a Catholic village. In the morning I learned how to read the Bible, then was taught about Catholic theology, Saints’ stories, before any worldly subjects, like writing, drawing, mathematics etc. could be taught. I read the Bible before the break, after the break, in the afternoon, before the class was dismissed...I was the only non-Catholic who practiced a Catholic way of life there!

When I was in grade 3 the French Army reoccupied Hue. The Vietnamese French war broke out. My family had to take my grandma when we fled to the countryside. The Vietnamese resistance fighters had to withdraw from the city to start a guerilla war and to let the French to re-establish the colonial rule. When we moved back home, my schooling took another turn. I was transferred to another school run by De La Salle brothers and educated as a true Catholic believer.

In primary school I learned Vietnamese subjects, but when I was in high school, a French syllabus was taught. French was the medium of instruction and Vietnamese was only taught as a second language. We learned nothing about Vietnamese literature, geography or history and never called Vietnam “our country”. We were trained as outsiders who were supposed to help the French to maintain the status quo of colonialism and to be a good Catholic.

I loved reading and I read whatever I got my hands on. I knew Buddhism by reading the fairy tale of the Monkey’s adventures which depicted the pilgrimage to India of Hsuan Tsang in the seventh century. A lot of Vietnamese then were illiterate and I was able to earn some pocket money by reading Chinese stories to those who could not read. The first serious book about Buddhism I read was Anh Dao Vang (The Golden Dharma) telling of the Buddha’s life. Western movies also helped me to see the horizon beyond Mother French and Catholicism taught in school. As I said I read whatever books I could lay hands on. Some French authors like Hector Malot, Edmond De Amicis, a Korean writer whose name I did not remember, showed me in his book, Liberation, that fighting for social justice and national independence means to challenge insurmountable obstacles. Of course I read nearly all the books written by Vietnamese writers at that time.

During my school years I witnessed the brutality of the French colonialists against our classmates. Some students who worked for the resistance were arrested at school. One afternoon after leaving school, we were rounded up and lined up for an identification parade. A person who was covered from head to toes with only two holes at eye level tried to identify his “comrades”. I knew that even some children at my age who actually participated in the resistance. I read a book written by Ly Van Sau entitled ‘South East Asia in the World Politics’ and a book about history of Vietnam entitled ‘Our Struggle for Independence’. They were too serious books for a year 8 or 9 student, but I read them anyway.

The war for independence became fiercer and I had a good reason to ask my parents to let me continue my study at a Vietnamese school. They agreed immediately. In year 10 I read Vietnamese literature for the first time and learned more about Buddhism through poets such as Nguyen Du, Chu Minh Trinh and Nguyen Cong Tru. Ironically my father was a devout Catholic and he tried to mention this religion as little as he could! But my history teacher was wonderful. He explained skillfully the relationship between Vietnam and France in the war right under the nose of many secret service agents who were so anxious to show their loyalty to the Great France Government. People whispered that he had had a nervous breakdown and was called the mad teacher. I was not quite sure if he faked his insanity!

At the end of year 10 the war ended through the Geneva agreement. This divided Vietnam into two “countries”: North and South Vietnam. My parents promised that if I passed the School Certificate Examination, I would be allowed to travel to Hanoi. My dream remained just a dream: I will never see Hanoi! Three weeks after the Saigon regime collapsed and the whole country was reunified, I was imprisoned for the third time (I was arrested by the security forces under both President Ngo Dinh Diem and General Thieu). Until now I have not seen the City of Hanoi. It is still of my dream city. After being released, I had to make a drastic choice: preserving my freedom by fleeing Vietnam or living a humiliating life as an outcast in my very own country. I chose to live as an exile a brought about by tragic political events of the last fifty years.
In 1946 the French legionaries re-conquered Hue and transformed the National High School (Truong Quoc Hoc) into an army garrison. When the French army had to withdraw in accordance with the Geneva Accord, the army garrison again became Quoc Hoc high school. I was one of the first senior high school students, part of the first youth generation of the era in which Vietnam was officially divided into two countries. Ngo Dinh Diem was asked to come back to be the Prime Minister. We were allowed to interrupt our schooling to join the mass demonstration to overthrow the last Emperor of the Nguyen Dynasty. Ngo Dinh Diem skillfully maneuvered many conflicting political forces in Vietnam at that time and was elected President of the first republic. I was not really aware of what going on in the political arena, except that some of my relatives who joined the resistance against the French were harassed and interrogated by the Government secret service. I spent most of my time reading more books to catch up the few years I missed while attending the French lycee.

That was when people had high hopes for the first republic. Most literature and philosophy teachers supported President Diem and instead of teaching patriotism or nationalism, they talked about Personalism which is an obscure philosophy of a French theologian called Telhart De Chardin. The Presidents 's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, adored it and made it the main political philosophy of his party. His monotheistic ethics derived from Catholicism were also unashamedly hailed as the national code of ethics. I started to revolt by saying the contradicting viewpoint to that of my teachers and other supporters of the regime. In the matriculation year, a priest taught me Western psychology, which reflected the duality mode of thinking of Christian theosophy: body-soul, reason-desire, consciousness-unconsciousness etc..... Later I found that Buddhism offered a more wholesome integrated theory.

A few teachers who studied at French universities came back and introduced new ideas from the post war Western philosophers and novelists such as Husserl, Jaspers, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Malraux, Merleau Ponty and other psychologists like Freud, Jung, Adler. Partly because of the lack of books, partly because these ideas were completely new to us, I did not fully grasp them at that time. But I vaguely knew that there was a trend to re-evaluate the European tradition because of the tragic results of the Second World War, which impacted on all political, economic, social and spiritual institutions.

After completing the Higher School Certificate, I wanted to study Law and became a lawyer but my father disagreed. He said that lawyer only served the wealthy. He wanted me to take up teaching. I thought lecturing at universities was more appropriate because I probably had more time for reading and research. So I chose philosophy.

The more I read the more I could see the crisis in Western philosophy. One of the books written by G. Gusdorf, Traite De Moral and Traite De Mathephysique discussed thoroughly the intellectual challenges emerging at that time. Philosophers like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Marx, Heidegger questioned the Western tradition and the Existentialists such as Sartre, Malraux and Camus continued to destroy mercilessly any thoughts on their way to the philosophy of absurdity. That was the period of the Twilight of Idols and of the Dawn of Absurdity. Imprisoned in the dual mode of thinking, these philosophers were not able to escape the Myth of Adam and Eve, neither were they able to see a way out of the dichotomy between Being and Non Being. What was left from the Judeo-Christian tradition was atomic bombs, violence, Stalinism and the cold war which could ignite at any time in many places around the globe.

These texts served as a catalyst for me to go back to the oriental philosophy, particularly Buddhism. I found my refuge when I read texts such as the Central Philosophy by C.V. Murti, Letters to a Young Poet by Rilke, The Buddhist Logics by Scherbatsky, Edicts of Asoka, The Diamond Sutra and others similar persuasion.

In 1960 there were two political events that caught my attention. The abortive coup d'etait organized by Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi and the birth of The National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. President Diem had been in power for only six years and the First Republic was only four years old. How did it happen?
I worried for President Diem with whom I sympathized. I considered him a good nationalist who expelled the last bastion of French colonialists. He was the founder of the first democratic regime and skillfully crushed all the armed revolts in South Vietnam either by negotiation or by military means. Lastly my family lived in the same village as his.

What I was hoping for was that he would not fall into leaders’ pitfalls in newly independent states by becoming bureaucratic, mandarin-like and autocratic. I was also expecting that he would cooperate with North Vietnam economically to prepare a smooth path for re-unification as had happened in Germany and Korea. Finally we hoped that he would recognize the valuable contribution of those non-communist elements who had participated in the resistance. In my mind his mission would have been to destroy all the relics of the royalist and colonialist regimes. And then we would wait for the hatred, ideological differences and international pressure to die down until the two sides would be ready to discuss the reunification of the country. Ideologically, in order to eliminate the 17th parallel, which divided the country, there had to be something more appealing than the Personalist, and Communist ideology that the two sides would accept. I naively thought this could be Buddhism. However Diem’s regime became more and more oppressive and it relied totally on a tiny faction of the population: the refugees from the North in 1954 and the Catholic believers.

One of the Vietnamese mandarin poets, Nguyen Cong Tru, sketched his action path in a poem, Ke Si (A Confucian) which may have left an imprint in my mind. He emphasized good reputation rather than material rewards, how every one could serve one’s country, vision, determination and persuasion rather than Machiavellian techniques or crude violence. Although I did not like the French colonialists, I believed the Vietnamese could learn many lessons from the 1789 French revolution. Mobilizing the support of the masses seemed to be more democratic and effective than unnecessary total war.

Buddhist principles have provided me with spiritual guidelines to engage in political and social actions. The massacre of Buddhist believers on the Vesak Day in 1963 opened the floodgate from which my friends and I plunged into the political current, which caused tremendous damage for Vietnamese on both sides. We started with a simple manifesto that I call the trilogy, On the ideological plane, engaging in political actions, like the struggle for de-colonization, is a way to mitigate our Karma. Starting the process of demystification of the imposed Western thoughts is one of many efforts to re-establish the national identity (in which Buddhism plays a vital part). In social and political terms, our objectives were to secure a true national independence and a reconciliation process amongst many conflicting factions, and to achieve a social revolution without relying on another imposed Western mode of thinking like that of Marxism.

On Vesak Day in 1963, my people and I actually started the long tragic journey.

THE TRILOGY

More than ten years ago, when I heard that my Teacher, The Very Venerable Thich Thien Minh was poisoned in jail, I wrote a poem to send him my last respect.

You are the first to depart
Please wait for me
My Karma is still holding me up in this Samsara world.

I may not have paid my debt and who knows, I may have created more Karmic actions! But as long as I see it, every action must aim at lessening one’s Karma. My Master always reminded us that Buddhism could not be practiced outside this Samsara world, that Buddhism came to Vietnam as a fresh stream of water, not as a leech sucking blood from our people, that Buddhists’ right actions could contribute to the mitigation of the community Karma of the Vietnamese people. Buddhists have been forced to choose between the two evils, which are equally devilish: being colonized by foreign powers or being the sacrificial lambs in the slaughterhouse of the so-called international revolution.
From 1963 onwards many young students threw away their schooling and their career to join the Struggle Movement. They actually swam against the political currents which created the civil war for more than 20 years. In this war there was almost nobody who would not have had blood relatives or friends fighting for the rival party. As I have said earlier, in the cultural and political front, the objectives of the movement were to dismantle the relics of the colonial system and to demystify the dominant western philosophies, particularly Catholicism. Its social model was based upon the principles of self-determination, compassion and social justice. The participation of the *awakening* young generation in political actions in 1963 created a new group of political activists who have no immediate desire for power just for the sake of it. They were a new breed of intelligentsia who consistently tried to achieve the above goals via non-violent means. I have many reasons to believe that the student movement in Paris in 1968 that rebelled against the Gaullist Government and as well as rejected the obsolete Communist ideology, and the students’ anti war movement in America, could have been influenced by the engaged Buddhist movement in Vietnam.

In Vietnam modern history, with the exception the August Revolution led by Communists, there has not been any movement which created the enormous impact as the Buddhist Youth Movement did in 1963. It was non-violent yet it was able to maintain its impetus for a very long time. Wherever there were high schools or universities, there were boycotts of classes, fasts, public meetings and demonstrations whenever they were needed to show strength and support. The small traders with a shoestring budget were ready to throw their support in by stopping all commercial activities for a day or two. Even the public servants who were normally very obedient to the Government staged stop-work meetings to show their solidarity with the students and the masses. The number of pagoda goers rose. In 1966 all the teachers at high schools and lecturers at tertiary institutions in Hue resigned en mass. Spectacularly, all the military armed forces in the Tactical Zone I (Hue and Danang) rebelled against the central government and threw their support in with the Buddhists. In my opinion, the Buddhist Movement at this time made history.

THE CONFLICT

The Buddhist Movement revolted against the government not because it was hungry for power, or seeking privileges, but because it wanted to find a way out of the political, social and cultural conflicts created by the political myths such as *the last outpost of the free world* or *the vanguards of the international revolution*. These myths were reinforced and maintained by the huge propaganda campaigns by both the South Vietnamese Government and the communists.

In the eyes of the young generation at that time, Vietnam was no longer the same after the Buddhist Movement erupted in 1963. All the political myths which were used to justify the civil war were critically examined and questioned: North and South, Nationalists and Communists, the Mandate of Heaven of the overtly cult leaders (Ho Chi Minh and Ngo Dinh Diem); the democratic rights of the public; the vanguard posts in the Cold War, peace and the price of victory of proxy wars, the fight for national freedom, the freedom of worship versus the crude attempt to monopolize the beliefs; the people’s religion and the religion imposed by foreign invaders.

These dichotomies were no longer taken for granted and motto such as ‘Independence’, ‘Peace’, ‘Revolution’, ‘Freedom’ were severely questioned. The Buddhist Movement resulted in a whole generation, which began questioning all these myths. In Buddhist terms it was an awakening process.

Previously there were a few movements in Vietnam history which were able to mobilize people, such as the remembrance ceremony of Tran Van On, a student who was killed by the French colonialists, the funeral procession of the patriotic Phan Chu Trinh, the revolt of writers in North Vietnam in 1956, the ‘Movement For Peace and Neutrality of Vietnam’, the intellectuals and politicians the in the *Caravelle* Group which asked the President Diem to start the democratization process in South Vietnam, the Coup d’etat of a group of young Turks, led by Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi in 1961 and the bombing of the Independence Palace by
pilots Nguyen Van Cu and Pham Phu Quoc. However those events which were inspired by a small group or individuals failed to attract the support of the masses. No one who organized or participated in these events questioned the roots of the civil war.

A SHAVED HEAD AND A TORN ROBE

Many people were surprised to witness Vietnamese Buddhism, after many years of hibernation, awoke and grew with a lightning speed like the legendary Phu Dong Thien Vuong. Had they known the reform activities initiated by many leaders in the Sangha, they would not have been quite so surprised. Inspired by the reform movement led by a Chinese monk patriarch, Thai Hu Dai Su, and the revival of Buddhism in Asia and Southeast Asia, the Vietnamese Buddhist Church had been trying to reform its regulations, its structures and its members. In 1963 Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation shocked the whole world. President Kennedy asked his close staff: "Who are the Buddhists? Why didn't we know anything about them?" Had Kennedy lived a few years longer, he would have been even more surprised. In 1967, JUSPAO conducted an investigation into the zone controlled by both the government and the National Liberation Front. The majority of people expressed their views clearly and comprehensively. First, they did not want the war to be prolonged; second, the two personalities they knew and respected most were Ho Chi Minh and the Venerable Thich Tri Quang. Unfortunately, in order to protect the vested interests of the military and industrial complex, President Johnson and his successors ignored these findings.

The American Government had no faith in the potential bargaining power of the Vietnamese Buddhist Church until a large number of candidates supported by the Church were elected to the Lower House and in the Senate. Without the vote rigging organized by the military Junta, candidate Truong Dinh Dzu, who had secured the support of the Buddhist Church could have been elected President. One of the Communist moles who covered his identity by living as a monk within the Buddhist Church commented: "The An Quang Unified Buddhist Church is a religious organization which has the support of the masses. It has gained the respect of the international community and had many talented leaders" His confessions confirmed the effectiveness of the Church in dealing with the junta government and the National Liberation Front as well. "While the (Communist) Party was unable to manipulate the Unified Buddhist Church, the Church attracted most support from the majority of the grass root Vietnamese. The Buddhist Church is a pressure political group which proved to be a force which has to be reckoned with". This was not an assessment of a local communist cell, but a judgement of a member of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee, cited by a mole who had been an undercover communist agent in the Church for many years.

While some anticommunist extremists accused the Venerable Thich Tri Quang of being a communist agent, the Communists denounced him as a strategic CIA agent. They cited an "incident" in 1964 when the whole central part of Vietnam was flooded. The Communist insurgents wanted to destroy all the isolated outposts in the countryside where the South Vietnamese soldiers were stranded. Thich Tri Quang then orchestrated a campaign called The Unified Buddhist Church Campaign To Help the Victims of the Flood. Thich Tri Quang hoisted the Buddhist flag everywhere and used all possible means such as boats, out-boards and even helicopters to rescue soldiers. Also, in 1964, when the South Vietnamese people were revolting against the Junta Government, the National Liberation Front used the motto 'Denouncing the Junta Government' in order to expand their activities in the big cities, Thich Tri Quang formed People Committee To Save Our Fatherland to attract all the opposition masses. In 1965, the American marines landed at Chu Lai, Danang. The Front used the motto 'Fighting Against the American Invasion' to muster the support of the South Vietnamese. Thich Tri Quang then organized a campaign Pray for Peace to limit our political push. This accusation was from Tran Bach Dang, a mastermind in the National Liberation Front. The Politic Bureau in Hanoi may not have agreed with the Front's assessment but they knew too well that, even those Buddhists who joined the Front, would have sided with Thich Tri Quang if they were given a chance to work with him. Little wonder why, after conquering the South in 1975, Hanoi established the government sponsored Vietnam Buddhist Church to transform it into a government tool. It could be said that because of the Buddhist Movement in 1963, both sides were rushing to find a solution for the Vietnam conflict. The hawk factions seemed to be winning when the war escalated in 1964.

The American was defeated not because they lacked of weapons or manpower, but they did not have spiritual tenacity like that of the Vietnamese. While GIs fought to defend the vague idea of the Free World
in a remote country, the Vietnamese (communists as well as anti-communists) believed that they fought to
defend their own country, not merely defend an ideology that they neither understood nor accepted. The
Communists quickly forgot many lessons of history. In the thirteenth century, after defeating the
Mongolians, the Tran Kings burned all the letters written by some defeatist mandarins who wanted to
surrender to the enemy, and exercised an amnesty for all. On the contrary, the Communists set up gulags
to imprison all the high ranking administrators and officers who served the former government. Instead of
glorifying the heroes who defended the country, they glorified Marx and Lenin, who have no role in the
minds and hearts of the Vietnamese people.

TEMPORAL POWER

Buddhists know very well that clinging and craving means sufferings while detachment means liberation.
The ultimate goal will always be seeing true reality, which is impermanent, no Self and inter-dependent.
Temporal power is only a raft to cross the other side. Temporal power is as any dharma is temporary, as
fleeting clouds. It may be useful in creating a structural change, which provides a better environment for
every sentient being to follow the Path but that is all. To cross to the other shore, meaning liberation, one
has to start one’s own spiritual journey.

Asoka, an Indian King, used his power as a Bodhisattva at work. The welfare system established by him
was probably the first known in human history. The Tran Kings spent their years in power as if they were
only part of the path towards liberation. Most of them abdicated when young and retreated into the jungle
to live Spartan lives as Zen masters.

Engaging into political activities is perceived by Buddhists as a way to mitigate negative karmic effects, not
to increase them. Their objectives are to create happy social environments for their compatriots to live a
meritorious life. In our nomenclature, our objectives are to serve the Vietnamese people and to propagate
the Dharma. Before becoming a Buddhist, we are all Vietnamese. We do not restrict ourselves to any
ideologies. Clinging to any ideology is against our ultimate objective: detachment of worldly-things. In the
history of humankind we have witnessed many political and religious lunatics who have engaged in mass
murder. Therefore we did not fight for any particular party, religion (in the sense that we excluded the non-
Buddhists) or military group at that time. But whenever we recognized any leaders who acted against the
people’s interest we did not hesitate to protest.

The Buddhist leaders since 1963 have not made any personal gains, except a few laypersons whom were
nominated to take part in the elections. Our political objectives were to achieve peace, independence and
social justice for the Vietnamese people. It sounds very much like an idealistic group with a utopian
scheme. However we know our objectives would have been possible.

SPIRITUAL SOURCE

The spiritual source of the Vietnamese people is usually found in the three religions: Buddhism, Taoism
and Confucianism. Values particularly those of Buddhism, are closely identified with patriotism and the
people’s survival. Buddhism may have been powerless for a certain period of time in history, but the
Buddhist Sangha and laymen have contributed enormously to the efforts to defend the country and to
prevent the national culture from being pushed aside by foreign influences. It could be said that the
Vietnamese people and Buddhism are mutually dependent. The people and the country need to survive so
that Buddhism can be developed and vice versa. The spiritual strength derived from Buddhism contributes
to defending the national culture.

There have not been any dynasties, any organizations, and any regimes, including the Communist Party
that have had that kind of relationship like the one between Buddhism and the Vietnamese people. The
Communist Party has only had 70 years of history while Buddhism is rooted in the Vietnam soil and so
became the driving force of the Vietnamese people.

The Vietnamese Buddhist Church has no ambition either in temporal power or in political power. As a
social institution the Church has acted as social criticism. It denounced the autocratic rule of President
Diem as it denounced the Junta Government, which minimized the chance to win the Vietnam War by acting as puppets for the American government. After 1975 Buddhism again refused to side with a fanatical, ruthless and oppressive regime. As a result many leaders were either murdered or imprisoned. When Marx and Engel denounced that religions was "the opium of the people", they virtually knew nothing about Eastern religions, particularly Buddhism. The Vietnamese communists acted as drug enforcement agencies and forgot, or pretended not to see the interdependence between the Vietnamese people and Buddhism.

Four generations have sacrificed their lives for independence, freedom, democracy and prosperity. So far the Communist Government has only widened the gap between the nouveau rich and the poverty-stricken masses. Even though the cold war was over and the whole socialist system collapsed, Stalinist measures are still used to deal with dissidents inside Vietnam. Not only did the Buddhist Church play the role of a referee, but many former revolutionaries also raised their concerns. A large number of former cadres have used all available means to give warning signs to the present Government and no-one knows how long the conscientious objectors will be muzzled. A communist stalwart has admitted: We are very good at waging warfare but do not know how to run the government. Our country has been re-united and independent for quite some time, but we have to ask ourselves why the country has been lagging behind the rest of the world, including some of the poorest third world countries?

The Vietnamese Buddhist Church either has to surrender to the current repressive Government or to fulfill its role as social criticism acting as a referee who tries to instill fair play. As individuals Buddhists may join either party but as an institution, the Buddhist Church has to use its own judgement either to support or to denounce principles or policies in accordance with the six harmonious principles within the boundary of the constitutional democracy.

There is only one Vietnamese people and their interests are identical. A Buddhist can not deny that, first and foremost, he is a Vietnamese. Neither can a communist. There is no justification for ignoring the people’s interests. This is why the Buddhist Church and its members always oppose those who act against people’s interest.
# A Synopsis of Vietnamese History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name of Dynasty</th>
<th>Name of Kingdom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BC 2879-111</td>
<td>Pre-historic Period</td>
<td>Van Lang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2879-258</td>
<td>Hong Bang</td>
<td>Au Lac</td>
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<tr>
<td>258-207</td>
<td>Thuc</td>
<td>Nam Viet</td>
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<td>207-111</td>
<td>Trieu</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC 111-938 AD</td>
<td>Chinese Domination</td>
<td>Giao Chi</td>
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<tr>
<td>BC 111-39 AD</td>
<td>First Period</td>
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<td>39-43</td>
<td>The Trung Sister</td>
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<td>44-543</td>
<td>Second Period</td>
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<tr>
<td>544-602</td>
<td>Anterior</td>
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<tr>
<td>603-938</td>
<td>Third Period</td>
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<tr>
<td>938-1858</td>
<td>Independence Era</td>
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<tr>
<td>938-944</td>
<td>Ngo</td>
<td>Dai Co Viet</td>
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<tr>
<td>944-968</td>
<td>Twelve Feudal Lords</td>
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<tr>
<td>968-980</td>
<td>Dinh</td>
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<tr>
<td>980-1000</td>
<td>Anterior Le</td>
<td>Dai Co Viet</td>
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<td>1010-1214</td>
<td>Posterior Ly</td>
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<td>1225-1400</td>
<td>Tran</td>
<td>An Nam</td>
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<td>1400-1407</td>
<td>Ho</td>
<td>Dai Ngu</td>
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<tr>
<td>1407-1427</td>
<td>Chinese Invasion</td>
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<td>1428-1786</td>
<td>Posterior Le</td>
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<td>1527 Mac Lords</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1592 Trinh Lords</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rivalry between Trinh &amp; Nguyen</td>
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<td>1627</td>
<td>Nguyen Lords</td>
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<tr>
<td>1786-1802</td>
<td>French Missionary</td>
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<tr>
<td>1786-1803</td>
<td>Alexandre De Rhodes came to Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>French Colonialism</td>
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<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>French troops attacked Danang</td>
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<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>Danang's fall</td>
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<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Saigon's fall</td>
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<tr>
<td>1862</td>
<td>The Vietnamese Court in Hue</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1- Ceded Saigon and adjacent areas to France</td>
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<td>2- Agreed to pay a war indemnity</td>
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<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>The three western part of South Vietnam taken by the French</td>
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<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>North Vietnam captured by the French</td>
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<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>Patenotre Treaty signed. The French Colonialism began</td>
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<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>King Ham Nghï’s uprising (Can Vuong Movement- Royalist Movement)</td>
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<td>1886</td>
<td>Federation of Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia) founded</td>
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<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>Confucians’ uprising (Van Than)</td>
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<td>1906</td>
<td>Nationalist Movement led by Prince Cuong De</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>King Duy Tan’s revolt</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td>Nguyen Thai Hoc’s revolt (The Nationalist leader) in Yen Bai</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Revolt at Gia Dinh, Hoc Mon, South Vietnam</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Soviet Nghe Tinh</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
1945
French troops disarmed by the Japanese Army.
Declaration of Independence and the establishment of a coalition government known as Viet Minh.
The Last King Bao Dai abdicated.
Ho Chi Minh was made Chairman of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
The Japanese surrendered. French attempted to re-conquer Vietnam.
1945-1954 Resistance Movement against the French.

1954
French defeated at Dien Bien Phu Battle. The Geneva was convened to accept the partition of North and South Vietnam.

1955
Diem was appointed Premier by Bao Dai, the Head of State of South Vietnam.
U.S. Military Advisory Group-Vietnam was formed.

1956
A referendum made Ngo Dinh Diem the President of the First Republic.

1957
The last French troops left Vietnam.

1960
The National Liberation Front founded.
The Opposition Caravelle Group petitioned Diem.

1963
May The Buddhist Revolt.
November: Diem toppled by the Revolutionary Military Council.
General Minh was made The Head of State on November 11.
November: Kennedy was assassinated.
Lyndon Johnson became President.

1964
January: General Nguyen Khanh replaced General Minh.
Westmoreland replaced Paul Harkins as Field Commander.
General Maxwell Taylor replaced Cabot Lodge as Ambassador.
Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.
Ground work for the escalation of the Vietnam War.

1965
February: Phan Hung Quat became Premier.
March: Rolling Thunder Bombings the North.
First American Marines landed at Chu Lai.
University of Michigan 's first teach-in.
May: Johnson delivered John Hopkins speech.
June: Nguyen Cao Ky became Premier.
July: Lodge re-appointed Ambassador.

1966
January: Honolulu Conference.
March: The Buddhist uprising in Danang and Hue.

1967
Ellsworth Bunker replaced Ambassador Lodge.
September: Nguyen Van Thieu was elected President and Nguyen Cao Ky as Vice President.

1968
February: McNamara resigned.
March: Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election as President.
April: Martin Luther King was assassinated.
October: Johnson announced a total cessation of bombing.
November: Nixon was elected President.

1969
June: Nixon announced Vietnamisation.
September: Ho Chi Minh died.

1973
Paris Conference.

1975
Communist Government took over South Vietnam.

1975-1988
Approximately two million refugees fled overseas.