

Bodhisattvas in the Pagoda and in the World: Socially Engaged Buddhism in Hue



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Table of Contents:

I Abstract.....	3
II Acknowledgments.....	4
III Glossary of Terms.....	5
IV Introduction.....	6
V Methodology.....	9
VI Historical and Philosophical Background.....	10
-Brief History of Buddhism in Vietnam	
-Thich Nhat Hanh's Life and Teachings of Engaged Buddhism	
-Buddhism in Hue	
VII Literature Review.....	23
VIII Presentation and Discussion of Findings.....	27
-Buddhism and the State	
-Youth Perspectives on the Roles of Buddhism in Hue Society	
-Social Services Performed by Pagodas in Hue	
-Thich Nhat Hanh's Engaged Buddhism at Tu Hieu Pagoda	
IX Conclusions.....	49
X Recommendations.....	51
XI References and Appendix.....	52

Abstract:

How do Buddhist pagodas and other Buddhist institutions, practices, and practitioners engage with the larger realm of society in Vietnam? Does the majority Mahayana Buddhist population enact this tradition's Bodhisatva ideal of helping all beings transcend suffering? What Buddhist teachings might provide a successful model for social engagement today? This paper addresses these questions in the context of the city of Hue, with an in depth case study at Tu Hieu pagoda that is situated within an investigation into the broader culture of Buddhism in this city.

Using participant observation, interviews, and literature reviewed, I explore the vibrant presence of Buddhism in contemporary Hue society. I argue that the youth generation currently entering adulthood shows interest in maintaining Buddhism as a central component of their lives. Social service programs run by pagodas are widespread and receive substantial support from the lay community. There are well-established networks of communal support among the monastic and lay Buddhist communities. A close relationship between the state and religious institutions both regulates and facilitates social engagement. However, there remains a perceived schism between life in the pagoda and life in society that prevents Buddhist teachings from fully entering daily life in Hue. The two major Mahayana strains in Vietnam, Pure Land and Zen, both offer inspiration for the practice of social engagement, although both carry different philosophical limitations for this practice.

The “engaged Buddhism” taught by Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh offers an alternative and innovative practice that integrates the transformation of the self and society. This humanistic tradition is currently practiced at Tu Hieu pagoda, but has only been recently reintroduced to Vietnam following Thich Nhat Hanh's 2005 return from a long exile in the West. This practice offers concrete tools for transforming personal suffering as well as working for positive change in society. If it is successfully re-adapted to Vietnamese culture, this tradition may help to develop a model of Buddhist social engagement that is effective for contemporary Hue society. This model will draw on the strong existing practices of Buddhist social engagement and integrate traditional beliefs with new advancements in mindfulness practice as a tool for confronting the personal and social issues of our time.

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...A Lotus to You, A Buddha to Be...

Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations:

Bodhisatva: Enlightened follower of the Buddha who remains in the world to help other beings.

Dharma: Literally “the way. The path to the cessation of suffering. The Buddha's teachings.

Dharma talk: Lecture during which a dharma teacher formally presents spiritual teachings to the sangha.

Dharma discussion: Organized group sharing about the challenges and joys of Buddhist practice, between monastics and/or lay community members.

Dharma teacher: Monk or nun that has received ordination as a teacher, usually following a period of at least 5-10 years of ordained monastic life.

Gatha: Simple poem or phrase used to foster awareness.

Lay: Non-monastic members of a religious community.

Monastic: Gender-neutral term for ordained monk or nun.

Sangha: Buddhist community.

SYSS: School of Youth for Social Service.

UBC: Unified Buddhist Church, not affiliated with the UBCV. Represents the Plum Village sangha.

UBCV: Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Vietnamese Buddhist organization not recognized by the socialist state.

VBS: Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha. State-sponsored Vietnamese Buddhist organization.

Introduction:

It is late in the afternoon, and the heat has begun to dissipate with the breeze off the Perfume River in Hue. I sit in a small café by the water with two young monks and four young nuns, all clad in the traditional plain brown robes. They tease each other casually and laugh, their eyes visibly shining. We talk about the women sewing at the embroidery exhibit we just visited, how their patience and concentration is a type of “embroidery meditation.” Two small boys row up to us in a boat and one of the monks beckons to them, offering to share some of the *che*, sweet soup, that we have been enjoying. The monk walks to the boat to hand the boys the plastic sacks of *che*, and surprises us all by jumping in the boat and paddling around clumsily as the small boys laugh.

The amalgamation of diverse traditions that constitutes Buddhism in Vietnam plays numerous and complex roles in society. In my study of Buddhist social engagement in Hue over the past month, many of my sources have cited political activism and charitable work as the two dominant ways in which Buddhism takes an active role in society. I have come to appreciate, however, that seemingly mundane encounters like the one just recounted also offer key insight into this topic. This short story demonstrates that the boundaries between monastic and lay life in Vietnam are distinctly permeable; that Buddhist qualities can be identified in seemingly nonspiritual labor; that material generosity and enjoyment of worldly experiences can be important components of Buddhist practice. If we begin to think of Buddhist social engagement as *all* the ways that Buddhist teachings, practices, practitioners, and institutions enter the larger realm of society outside the pagoda, a vibrant culture of engaged Buddhism is revealed. In this framework, this story becomes more than a pleasant afternoon—it is a meaningful encounter between Buddhism and the world. While I will focus on many more concrete examples of social engagement in the following paper, I would like to open with and maintain this broader perspective as well.

I began my month-long research period with this guiding question: do Vietnamese Buddhist

pagodas function as active social institutions, or is their primary role that of an isolated retreat from the social world? The Buddhist culture in Vietnam varies dramatically throughout the country's diverse social and physical geography, so I knew that I could never answer this question conclusively.

However, my case study in Hue immediately presented me with numerous examples of pagodas that perform evident social functions. While I visited several pagodas and other Buddhist sites that are clearly an isolated retreat for the monastic community or a pristine tourist site, I encountered far more pagodas that are intricately intertwined in the life of Hue city. Monks and nuns are a common visible presence at the market, on the street, at public events. As with many other activities considered “private” in the West, religion in Vietnam exists quite comfortably in the public sphere. Incense and prayer beads are sold on the sidewalk, altars are perched in trees on street corners, ceremonial processions stop traffic. It is nearly impossible to travel more than a kilometer within Hue or the surrounding areas without encountering a Buddhist pagoda. In addition to the larger and more famous pagodas built by royalty or venerable Buddhist masters, almost every village and neighborhood has a small pagoda constructed in cooperation by a community of lay practitioners and a monastic order.

In light of this clear presence of Buddhism in society, I began to refine my question. What specific social functions do pagodas in Hue play, and how does this differ by Buddhist tradition and individual pagoda? Do lay Buddhist practitioners, particularly from the enormous youth generation that is now entering adulthood, show interest in maintaining a vibrant and active culture of Buddhism through the country's rapid development and modernization? What teachings and practices of social engagement can be useful for a coping with the social issues modernity entails?

In addition to exploring these questions about the broader Buddhist culture in Hue, I chose to focus my research on Tu Hieu pagoda, a monastery run in the Plum Village tradition of Vietnamese Zen

master Thich Nhat Hanh, a previously-exiled monk who has lived and taught in the West¹ for over 40 years and returned to his home country for the first time in 2005. Thich Nhat Hanh was the first Vietnamese teacher to coin the term “engaged Buddhism” during his controversial peace activism and social work during the Vietnam-American War. His teachings are centered around the practice of mindfulness, bringing full awareness and presence to daily activities. They have been popularly received in the West as concrete, straightforward tools for transforming individual suffering and the suffering of society.

Since returning to Vietnam in 2005, Thich Nhat Hanh has made two other visits, during which he has worked to establish a practice center in the central highlands in Bao Loc (Prajna or Bat Nha Monastery) and reestablished an order of monks and nuns practicing the Plum Village tradition in Hue, at Tu Hieu (the temple where he was ordained) and Tay Lin pagodas. Over 400 young monastics have been ordained in the Plum Village tradition since 2005, and several monastics who were ordained at the sister monasteries in France and the U.S. have returned to Vietnam to help lead the *sangha*, Buddhist community.

Tu Hieu is a fascinating case study because it displays the interaction of traditional Vietnamese Buddhist concepts of social engagement with a controversial and unique practice of engagement that incorporates both Vietnamese and Western values and philosophy. As a practitioner of the Plum Village tradition in the U.S., I was able to bring my previous understanding of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings into this new context. I was eager to understand how accessible and applicable the Plum Village tradition is for the local lay community, and how it fits within the larger Buddhist framework of social ethics and practices in contemporary Hue society.

I am grateful that I was able to be present at this pagoda during such an exciting time of

1 While I acknowledge that the “West” is a social construction rather than geographical fact, I employ this construction in this paper as it was employed by many of my research participants, to indicate wealthy, developed industrial nations with a strong presence or influence of cultures and peoples of European origin.

transition and development—I encountered a newly-formed community actively involved in the process of defining itself, an indigenous Vietnamese tradition that evolved in the West and is now being refitted for a Vietnamese perspective. This paper is an exploration of this process, and hopes to shed light on both Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism as well as the larger Buddhist culture of social engagement in Hue. I am optimistic that existing networks of social capital between pagodas and Buddhist practitioners, along with social service programs and other practices of engagement currently in action, will support the development of a modern Vietnamese Buddhism that can transform the suffering of both individuals and society today.

Methodology:

My three principle methods for gathering information about Buddhist social engagement were observation, semi-formal interviews, and research of scholarly literature and Buddhist texts. Participant observation was employed at Tu Hieu pagoda, by attending talks, discussion, and meditation sessions and participating in other daily activities such as chores and meals with the pagoda community. I was present for public days at the pagoda where I interacted with members of the local lay community. I visited and observed the practices at other pagodas in Hue as well as an orphanage, a home for the elderly, and a health center run by nuns. I spoke and meditated with members of the Hanoi Community of Mindful Living, the only lay sangha currently active in Vietnam that practices in Thich Nhat's Hanh's tradition. I took detailed field notes after each of these visits which were later coded and analyzed.

I conducted semi-formal interviews with six students from Hue University to get a sense of the youth perception of the Buddhist culture in Hue, as well as talked to older members of the community and several monastic teachers. I interviewed a member of the International Cooperation Office of the Government Committee on Religious Affairs to gain insight into the government perspective. Participants were informed of the intentions of the study, and confidentiality was protected by

removing names from the paper if requested and carefully guarding all field notes. Some of the research was conducted by myself in English, French, or basic Vietnamese, and some translation of interviews, religious talks and discussions from Vietnamese to English was employed. Literature reviewed included scholarship on Vietnamese Buddhist history and culture in order to situate my findings within a larger context. Selections of Thich Nhat Hanh's writings were also reviewed in order to explore some of the philosophical foundations for engaged Buddhism.

This methodology is effective as an in depth case study of Tu Hieu situated within a broader view of the Buddhist culture of Hue. My first-hand experiences and personal relationships with monastic and lay community members allowed me to draw a detailed representation of several specific examples of engaged Buddhism. My methodology is of course limited by its scope, and cannot claim to present a comprehensive representation of the role of Buddhism in Hue society. Many of the interview subjects were from a selective age group and socio-economic demographic (university students), and most were female because of my limited contacts. Further inquiry needs to be taken into the perspective of other social groups. The study was also limited by the language barrier—more conversations were conducted with English speaking participants, potentially excluding some of the perspectives of monastics and lay practitioners with no English skills. Translations may have confused certain concepts or statistics.

Background:

Buddhism has an ancient and layered history of more than 2000 years in Vietnam, and I certainly cannot do justice to that full history here. In brief summary, however, there are four periods generally identified by scholars: from the introduction of the religion until the 10th century CE, the “golden age” of the 11th-14th centuries, a period of decline in the 15th century followed by a gradual revival, and modern practices (Minh Chau 1). Both East Asian and Indian Buddhist influences from

trade routes began to filter into Vietnam during the first century CE. Zen was first introduced to Vietnam by the Indian monk Vinītaruci in 580 CE by way of China, but this tradition remained relatively unpopular in comparison to Pure Land and other more devotional Mahayana (“large vehicle”) strains that were easily incorporated into indigenous animistic practices. Chinese Mahayana Buddhism dominated the Northern kingdoms; Theravada (“small vehicle”) traditions were incorporated with the annexation of the Khmer and Champa kingdoms to the South.

While Mahayana Buddhism traces its roots back to the teachings of the historical Gautama Buddha, it is largely based on sutras and other religious writings from India and China at the beginning of the Common Era. The Mahayana tradition de-emphasizes the belief in karma and the individual's escape from the cycle of birth and rebirth through the attainment of Nirvana. The focus of Mahayana practice is instead the liberation of *all* living beings from suffering with the aid of Bodhisattvas, enlightened followers of the Buddha who remain in the worldly realm to help others. Teachings of compassion, loving-kindness, and the universal transcendent Buddha-nature of all beings permeate this tradition and lend themselves to a Buddhism that is grounded in relieving the suffering of worldly experience.

Following the country's independence from China at the beginning of the 11th century, Vietnamese Buddhism moved to the forefront of society. In the 11th through 14th centuries, monks were influential in government affairs and the court financially and ideologically supported the development of pagodas and other Buddhist institutions. King Tran Nhan Tong, who ruled during this period, was the official founder of the *Truc Lam* (Bamboo Forest) school of Zen, and remains a national icon of the synthesis of worldly and spiritual leadership (Government Committee for Religious Affairs 2006 11).

A period of decline in Buddhist practice is attributed to the Le Dynasty's replacement of Buddhism with Confucianism as the national system of belief during the 15th century. “The village communal house replaced the pagoda as the center of village life” (Government Committee for

Religious Affairs 2006 8). However, some scholars argue that Buddhist practice remained active during this period on a local, less conspicuous scale, and in fact “continued to receive imperial or other elite support until at least 1900” (DeVido 255). This indicates that although notions of periods of Buddhism's development and decline may be useful for a general historical framework, it is important to remember that these categories fall short in describing the complexity of religious identity and practice. They are also highly subjective, with the concept of “decline” often rooted in a critique of “superstitious,” “popular,” or “impure” beliefs influenced by other religions.

It is quite difficult to speak of Buddhism as a distinct entity, as the two other branches of Vietnam's “triple religion,” Confucianism and Taoism, have been highly influential on Buddhist life throughout history. In recent years, the increasing popularity of Catholicism and Protestantism and the creation of the indigenous religious movements of Hao Hao Buddhism and Cao Dai have further complicated the country's religious identity. The inconsistency between statistical studies on religion in Vietnam demonstrates the unclear parameters of what constitutes Buddhist practice and identity today—studies deem anywhere between 15 and 95 percent of the population practicing “Buddhists.” What is clear, however, is that the majority of the population is in some way influenced by a Buddhist world-view and religious traditions.

The legacy of the factionalism and political unrest of the 1950s-1970s continues to effect Vietnamese Buddhism today. Many monastics, including Thich Nhat Hanh, were prominently involved in protesting the Vietnam-American war. Because these monastics advocated for reconciliation over victory, both sides of the conflict disapproved of and often violently suppressed their actions. Many members of the conservative Buddhist hierarchy also disapproved. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, a preeminent Buddhist organization in the South during the 1960s, has denounced the control of the socialist state since the end of the war in 1975 and repeatedly calls for the establishment of a democratic political system. When the socialist government established the Vietnamese Buddhist

Sangha in 1981 in order to consolidate all Buddhist organizations, the UBCV denied affiliation. This has resulted in several respected monks in the UBCV's leadership to be placed under house arrest and their activities heavily restricted. The socialist state claims that it is non-state-sponsored religious organizations that they prohibit, not the religious practices or beliefs themselves. Supporters of the UBCV instead see the conflict as ideological (Chapman 306-312).

Within the contemporary organized Buddhist traditions, Theravada Buddhist practices (prevalent in most Southeast Asian countries) remain largely exclusive to ethnic minority groups. In the majority Mahayana Buddhist community, two major strains are active today: Pure Land mixed with other devotional practices, and Zen traditions, which have been revived in the past half a century.

Pure Land practices are based on the accumulation of merit in order to obtain a higher level of incarnation in the next lifetime. The most common practice of merit accumulation is the chanted recitation of the Amitabha and Lotus Sutras. Combined with indigenous, animistic beliefs in the influence of gods and spirits, Pure Land practice in East Asian countries usually includes prayer. This devotional practice directed toward the Buddha and various Bodhisattvas is not instructed in any Buddhist scriptures, but is an integral part of the practices conducted in Buddhist pagodas in Vietnam. Confucian ancestor worship also comes into play in the prayers performed at Buddhist sites. Many pagodas include altars to the temple ancestry as well as the deceased relatives of local lay practitioners. Another aspect of many Pure Land practices is making monetary and symbolic offerings to the Buddha.

Many proponents of the Buddhist revival (*Chan Hung Phat Giao*) that began in the 1920s, a national movement to both return to the scriptural roots of Buddhism and create a modern Buddhist institutional system, were highly critical of these “superstitious” and “irrational” Pure Land practices. A deemphasis on reincarnation and a pragmatic belief that “one could do a lot more to influence one's lot materially by practicing frugality and by educating oneself in scientific advances than by making offerings to the spirits” (Taylor 29) arose during this period, catalyzed by criticisms of superstition by

the French colonists and other Western powers. In writing about the “problem of religious expenditures,” Philip Taylor concludes that while this critique may be valid in some cases, material contributions to religious rites can and do play important social and spiritual roles. “Sacrifice is at the heart of the construction of social identities. In place of those critics who regard such practices as symptomatic of destruction and disorder, the contributors find paradoxically that in them lie the key to constitution and re-ordering of community” (Taylor 34).

From this point of view, Pure Land practices include a clear call to social engagement—contributing to the construction of collective identity, these practices are intricately involved in the worldly, social realm. In another sense, Pure Land devotional beliefs remove the responsibility of the individual practitioner for relieving suffering on earth and instead situate this responsibility in divine figures. Pure Land has a great potential for inspiring social engagement because it includes community rituals that generate social capital and focus on worldly realities such as health and happiness in the family, but it also has the potential for encouraging individual irresponsibility and social complacency.

The largest sect of Zen (*Thien*) in Vietnam is the Lam Te school, the most prominent branch of which is the Lieu Quan school. Lieu Quan was founded in the 18th century as a domesticated version of a tradition that was introduced from China in the previous century. The Truc Lam sect, founded in 13th century, is the only Zen tradition that is indigenous to Vietnam.

The lineage of the Lieu Quan school has remained unbroken, and for centuries Zen meditation has been practiced in synthesis with Pure Land traditions by its monastics. In the 1970s monk Thich Thanh Tu instigated a revival of a “pure” Vietnamese Zen tradition under the banner of the Truc Lam sect, which had disappeared for centuries. This tradition has been growing rapidly in popularity, especially in the North, centered around Truc Lam Yen Tu pagoda outside of Hanoi. In the last twenty years, other Zen pagodas have also seen a significant rise in the number of lay participants at meditation retreats lead by “teachers who espouse a form of Buddhism stripped of many former

devotional practices” (Taylor 27).

However, accompanying this increased interest in meditation practice has been an ideological repositioning of Zen as the original, legitimate form of Vietnamese Buddhism, something that scholar Alexander Soucy calls “largely a case of cultural invention” (Soucy 349). Traditionally, only monastics at large pagodas with Zen masters and the intellectual and economic lay elite practiced meditation. In most small village Pagodas, neither monastics nor lay practitioners had any contact with Zen. Again, Western notions of “legitimacy” and critiques of “folk beliefs” may be now coming into play in this newest period of Buddhist revival. Because Zen is the primary form of Buddhism popular in the West, “the Communist party seeks to boost its legitimacy by endorsing Zen, a version of Buddhism supported by a transnational movement, as an authentic national tradition” (Taylor 28). The introduction to Thich Thanh Tu's *Keys to Buddhism* indicates this tendency to critique Buddhism within Western frameworks of “rationality:”

I very much want to weed out the superstition that has been incorporated into some parts of Buddhism here [in Vietnam]; like wiping off dirt to show the true face of the Buddha underneath. By doing so, my intention is not to reopen ugly scars, but rather to promote a Buddhist practice that is more in line with our current society and can serve us in the future. We are now living in the age of science, an age in which the search for truth has become of utmost importance. Buddhism is also a search for truth (Thich Thanh Tu 12).

The Zen tradition also carries mixed messages about social engagement. Primarily concerned with the internal transformation of the mind, many Zen teachers discourage their followers from becoming distracted by earthly illusions of suffering. Sister Chan Khong, Thich Nhat Hanh's closest assistant and a highly respected dharma teacher, describes her interactions with Thich Thanh Tu as a dedicated young social worker:

Usually when I talked to [Thich Thanh Tu] about social work, he expressed the folk belief that it was just 'merit work' that could never lead to enlightenment. He said work like that was only a means to get reborn into a wealthy household. No notion could have been more alien to me. I didn't care at all about rebirth, especially into a wealthy family. There was so much to do right in the present moment (Chan Khong 15).

However, Zen meditation practices do provide more concrete tools for the transformation of

internal suffering than the Pure Land tradition. The individual is responsible for this transformation rather than divine forces. While some Zen traditions use mantras as the object of meditation, others focus on the practice of mindfulness—bringing full awareness to the body's experience in the present moment in order to calm and ground the mind. This type of meditation engages with earthly reality as a tool for transforming individual suffering. However, the potential for social engagement can only be realized if Zen practices include the Mahayana Bodhisattva ideal of working to relieve the suffering of all other beings. Zen social engagement may also be complicated by the common belief that earthly suffering is a product of the mind rather than a reality that needs to be addressed through social action. Chan Khong expresses her frustration with this definition: “The monks and nuns told us to release our anger, for example, 'because life is an illusion,' but they never told us how to do it. For me, life was not an illusion—the injustices and suffering of life in the slums were very real, and I wanted to learn how to cope with these realities, not deny them” (Ngoc Phuong 16).

Thich Nhat Hanh's Life and Teachings of Engaged Buddhism

Thich Nhat Hanh's life work and teachings provide a unique example of a Vietnamese Zen tradition that responds to this frustration by integrating individual and societal transformation. Thich Nhat Hanh was born in 1926 in a small village in Quang Tri province in central Vietnam. He entered Tu Hieu monastery as a 16-year-old novice monk in 1942. His teacher was Zen master Thich Chan That of the 43rd generation of the Lam Te school and the 9th generation of the Lieu Quan school. His monastic training included both Pure Land and Zen traditions. After three years as a novice, Thich Nhat Hanh attended the Bao Quoc Buddhist Institute in Hue where he received full ordination in 1949 (Chapman 299).

In the 1950s, Thich Nhat Hanh began to develop a reputation as a writer and teacher. He also began to encounter critics of his idea of integrating philosophy, literature, and foreign languages into

Buddhist education, as well as his call for a unified, humanistic Vietnamese Buddhism that would transcend boundaries of tradition and hierarchy. In 1954 he published a series of ten articles in which he proposed the idea of an “engaged Buddhism” or *dao phat di vao cuoc doi* (Buddhism which enters society). Faced with increasing controversy over his lectures and publications, he founded a monastic “community of resistance” near Dalat where he lived and wrote for several years. He continued to teach at various temples in Southern Vietnam, but was met with disapproval from the more conservative Buddhist leadership as well as restrictions from the Diem regime (Chapman 300).

In 1961 Nhat Hanh accepted a fellowship to study comparative religion at Princeton University. This began his two-year period of studying and teaching in the U.S., during which the Buddhist resistance movement grew in southern and central Vietnam, catalyzed by the self-immolation of monastics such as Thich Quang Duc. The Diem regime fell in November of 1963. Following a request from Buddhist leaders in Hue, Thich Nhat Hanh returned to Vietnam in December 1963 (Chapman 301).

In 1964 the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam was established in Saigon as a central Buddhist anti-war organization for the South. Thich Nhat Hanh immediately wrote a proposal to the UBCV for three points of action—a public call for the immediate cessation of violent conflict in Vietnam, the foundation of a new Buddhist institute to train Buddhist leaders, and the foundation of a training center for social workers who would “help bring about non-violent social change based on the Buddha's teachings” (Ngoc Phuong 49). Of the three suggestions, only the Buddhist institute was approved by the UBCV. Therefore Thich Nhat Hanh, along with a group of dedicated students and social workers, independently inaugurated a School of Youth for Social Service in 1965. The SYSS “trained thousands of young people, including monks and nuns, to go to the countryside and help the peasants rebuild their villages. We helped them in four aspects: education, health, economics, and organization” (Nhat Hanh 2008—2, 8). During this period, Thich Nhat Hanh also helped to found La

Boi press which facilitated the publication of many new advancements in Buddhist thought (Chapman 302).

The foundation of the Order of Interbeing (*Tiep Hien*) in 1965 “brought institutional expression to [Thich Nhat Hanh's] conception of engaged Buddhism.” This organization would act as a bridge between lay and monastic Buddhists, “an inclusive community dedicated to a common life of service” (Chapman 302). Those ordained in the order were not required to enter a monastic life, but committed to practicing fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, ancient precepts written by the Buddha and rewritten by Thich Nhat Hanh. These trainings provide in depth guidance for thinking, action, and lifestyle choices that minimize harm done to other beings on earth (Nhat Hanh 2002).

One of the projects carried out by the SYSS in the 1960s was the construction of experimental “self-help villages” in the South, “where citizens share collective responsibility to develop the local economy and provide for education and healthcare. We wanted to uproot old attitudes of passivity—waiting for someone else to make a difference” (Nhat Hanh 1998 136). These villages were founded on the belief that both North and South Vietnam had become too dependent on foreign superpowers, and that the only way for Vietnam to live at peace was to become self-sufficient (Nhat Hanh 1998 143).

Thich Nhat Hanh's thoughts about Buddhism and social work in this time period are beautifully encapsulated in his journals, later published in an anthology, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*. “Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam teaches that good works do not need to be reserved for the pagoda, but can be extended to towns and villages...‘People are suffering so much that even the Buddha no longer sits in the temple all the time’...Of course the only reason he ever did was because people placed him there. But the Buddha does not want to be isolated amidst offerings of rice, bananas, and flowers” (Nhat Hanh 1998 196).

While he was deeply dedicated to the work of SYSS, Thich Nhat Hanh also realized that his ability to communicate effectively with Western audiences could be of much use to the peace

movement in Vietnam. By 1966 he had concluded that “only the American government could stop the war, and that they would not do this as long as the American people were so blinded by ideology that they could not see the reality of what was going on” (Chapman 303). He left for the U.S. in May, after receiving the Dharma transmission from his teacher which placed him the next in the lineage of Zen masters at Tu Hieu.

While traveling and teaching in the U.S. and Europe in the late 60s and 70s, Thich Nhat Hanh had the opportunity to speak with many influential political, religious, and grassroots leaders. In 1967 he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who had been convinced to publicly oppose the Vietnam War after the two met personally. He led the unofficial Buddhist peace delegation to the Paris peace talks, but was denounced by both the North and South Vietnamese political leadership. When the war ended in 1975, it was clear that Thich Nhat Hanh would not be allowed to safely return to his country (Chapman 304).

In 1982 Thich Nhat Hanh founded the Plum Village monastic community in the south of France, where he has lived and taught since. He has traveled to North America to teach and establish practice centers since 1983. More than 300 lay sanghas practicing the Plum Village tradition have been established worldwide. Thich Nhat Hanh has published over 85 books. In 1998 the Unified Buddhist Church (not affiliated with the UBCV) was founded as a non-profit organization to represent the international community practicing in the Plum Village tradition. He was permitted to return to Vietnam for the first time after over 40 years of exile with an international delegation in 2005, a highly publicized and controversial visit that many accused of being a political move on the part of the socialist government to counter charges of religious freedom violations (Chapman). At age 82, Thich Nhat Hanh's life continues to model the message that spiritual enlightenment and working for social justice are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are inherently interdependent.

Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes that what he teaches is not radical but gets to the heart of the

Buddha's teachings: “Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time. Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on—not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you” (Malkin). In his talk on the “History of Engaged Buddhism,” Thich Nhat Hanh outlines some of the foundations for engaged Buddhism in the Buddha's teachings. The Four Noble Truths teach that the cessation of suffering lies in a path of right livelihood based in concrete, active daily practices. In order to find this path, we must look deeply into the nature of suffering, not avoid it. He also sites non-attachment to views as the “basic spirit of Buddhism”; since war and conflict are based on fanatical attachment to ideology, working for peace is an inherent Buddhist practice (Nhat Hanh 2008—1 3-7).

While Thich Nhat Hanh finds the heart of all of his teachings in those of the Buddha, he also stresses the importance of allowing Buddhism to develop in accordance with the new needs and challenges of our time. “Everything, even the Buddha, is always changing and evolving. Thanks to our practice of looking deeply, we can realize that the sufferings of our time are different from those of the time of Siddhartha, and so the methods of practice should also be different” (Nhat Hanh 2008—1 7). This is connected to non-attachment to views, even Buddhist ones. The dharma is just a means to get to an end, not the end itself; an old Zen saying reminds us, “don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon.”

The defining Buddhist foundation for social engagement is the Insight of Interbeing, revealed in the Diamond and Prajnaparamita sutras and many other of the Buddha's teachings. In the Diamond Sutra the Buddha says: “We have to do our best to help every living being cross the ocean of suffering. But after all beings have arrived at the shore of liberation, no being at all has been carried to the other shore. If you are still caught in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span, you are not an authentic Bodhisattva” (Nhat Hanh 2008—1 70). Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes the intuitive and scientific truth behind this cryptic statement—non-self, or rather non-separate self, is an easily

observable fact. The Buddhist concept of emptiness seems pessimistic to many Westerners, but in fact it is entirely optimistic—emptiness simply means emptiness of a separate existence, therefore fullness of everything else. Human beings contain water, plants, sunshine, animals, thoughts, ancestors—an infinite list of elements that make up one “being.” Each individual being is fleeting and impermanent, but the greater cycle they belong to is infinite. “If you look more deeply you will see that I just five or six days, the rose will become part of the garbage...and if you look into the garbage can, you see that in a few months its contents can be transformed into lovely vegetables, and even a rose” (Nhat Hanh 1988 31).

The ethical implications of this simple insight are enormous. In recounting a story about a young prostitute who feels ashamed of herself, Thich Nhat Hanh writes: “We are not separate. We are inextricably interrelated. The rose is in the garbage, and the non-prostitute is in the prostitute. The rich man is in the very poor woman, and the Buddhist is the non-Buddhist...The emancipation of the young prostitute will come when she sees into the nature of interbeing. She will know that she is bearing the fruit of the whole world. And if we look into ourselves and see her, we bear her pain, and the pain of the whole world” (Nhat Hanh 1988 38). Once we learn to look deeply into the nature of this pain, we see that “no one among us has clean hands. No one can claim it is not our responsibility” (Nhat Hanh 1988 33).

While this responsibility may seem overwhelming, Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings provide guidance for a daily practice of mindfulness that helps to transform the individual's suffering as they work to transform the sufferings of society. He has written gathas for mindfully following the breath, eating, walking, hugging, and working which are simple and accessible to children and adults alike but produce profound results. “We don't need to go out and find something to meditate about. The object of our meditation is not something outside of our daily life. The way proposed by the Buddha is to help yourself and to help the people around you” (Nhat Hanh 2008—1 57). Just as he realized from his own

experience that he didn't have to choose between practicing in the monastery and leaving the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering (Chapman 306), engaged Buddhism teaches that transforming society can be deeply spiritual for the self while transforming the self can have profound effects on society. The Insight of Interbeing shows us that these apparently separate paths are one and the same.

Buddhism in Hue

The city of Hue has a long Buddhist history beginning with the ancient Theravada practices of the Champa Empire, highly influenced by Hinduism. In 1308, Hue was officially annexed as part of Vietnam as a wedding gift for Princess Huyen Tran upon marrying a Cham king (Giac Qua 18/4/09). In the following centuries, the Northern Mahayana tradition rose to dominance in Hue, although subtle Theravada influences remain as this tradition was absorbed into the larger Vietnamese Buddhist culture. In 1802, Hue became the imperial capital of the Nguyen dynasty. At this time, three major religious trends existed: a tradition of strict Zen Buddhism with an emphasis on the Chinese strain of *Linji (Lam Te)* practiced by a small elite, a popular synthesis tradition of Pure Land, Zen, and traditional devotional practices, and the official Confucian ideology of the royal court, which in reality remained highly favorable of Buddhism (Thich Le Cong Thuan 20/4/09). Following the heavy influence of French colonial control, Buddhism in Hue experienced a period of decline, and was renewed during the national revival. In modern times, Hue has been widely acknowledged as the heart of the country's Buddhist practice.

Monk Thich Giac Qua cites the Vietnam-American War as a defining moment in the development of Hue as the country's Buddhist center. When the country was divided in 1954, many monastics in the North were required to leave their pagodas to join the military or otherwise contribute to the country's fight for independence. When the war ended, many were married and did not return to

the monastic lifestyle. Thich Giac Qua says that today the practice of Buddhism remains diluted in the North. In Hue, however, the traditional monastic lifestyle was maintained through the war and continues to thrive today (Giac Qua 18/4/09). The influential Buddhist resistance movement against the Diem regime in the late 1950s and early 60s began in the politically active monastic community in Hue.

Today, Thua Thien-Hue province has over 1,500 ordained monastics out of a population of one million people. There are hundreds of pagodas, with nearly 100 built by monastic orders, 300-400 built by royal dynasties, and a significant number built independently by lay communities with the consultation of monastics. In 2008, Hue hosted a successful international Vesak celebration for the anniversary of the Buddha's birth (Giac Qua 18/4/09). The current construction of new centers for Buddhism, such as the Lieu Quan Buddhist Cultural Center and the Quan The Am Buddhist Tourist Center, indicate a clear commitment on the part of the local government to maintain this long-standing heritage.

Literature Review:

In recent years, the increasing popularity of Eastern thought in the West has led many Western intellectuals to study the ethical philosophy behind Buddhism, particularly to consider the compatibility of a Buddhist social-ethic with Western institutions such as Christianity. In his article, "The World as Arena of Transformation," Taigen Dan Leighton outlines what he calls the concept of "radical intersubjectivity" in Mahayana Buddhism, and discusses the framework of ethics this interconnectedness implies. In "Searching for a Mahayana social ethic," David Chappell gives a highly theoretical treatment of Mahayana texts within the context of ethics. There has been a proliferation of studies on Buddhism's relationship to feminism, environmentalism, consumerism, and social movement theory. Critics such as Tara McKinney and Ken Knabb (2002) write about the pitfall of allowing Buddhist pacifism and non-attachment to incite apathy and complacency among Western activists.

While these studies of Buddhism from a Western philosophical perspective are certainly valuable, less academic attention has been paid to Buddhist social-ethics in their contemporary local contexts in Asia. The studies that are available are most commonly focused on Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese, or Southeast Asian Buddhist communities. The literature available about Buddhist social engagement in Vietnam is largely historical, focusing on the political activism of monastics during the American War. In this literature activists such as Thich Nhat Hanh are generally treated as a radical anomaly, rather than a product of a widespread, socially-active Buddhist culture. Sallie B. King and Christopher S. Queen, two American scholars who have published several well-received books on engaged Buddhism, only reference Vietnam in the context of the historical actions of Thich Nhat Hanh, Thich Quang Duc, the UBCV and other politically radical figures of the 1960s.

Elise DeVido contests the accuracy of this limited representation:

If engaged Buddhism is defined only in political terms, as confrontation with the state, as struggle against war and oppression, then the era of the 1960s marked the high point for this type of engagement in modern Vietnamese institutional Buddhism. But what if we broadened the definition of the public sphere beyond political activism, texts and intellectual debates to include Buddhist practices, public sermons and lectures, translation projects, pagoda (re)construction, education and publishing initiatives, welfare, associations, trans-local and transnational journeys and the building of social networks? (DeVido, 254).

Encouraged by DeVido's perspective, I am compelled to use my own research to question whether the dearth of widespread academic attention to the role of social engagement in contemporary Vietnamese Buddhism indicates a lack of engagement, or simply a lack of recognition by scholars with a limited definition of the public sphere.

DeVido's article "Buddhism for the World: The Buddhist Revival 1920-1951" stresses that Buddhism's active role in Vietnamese society has a long history, and that a search for the exact origins of the Buddhist revival that gave birth to the political activism of the 1960s is largely futile. In examining the period of 1920-1951, DeVido explores the diverse developments in Buddhist culture that were united under the banner of a nationalistic movement to articulate a modern Vietnamese Buddhism.

As previously discussed, the movement was partially fueled by the pressure to deflect colonial and other Western criticisms of Vietnamese spirituality as “irrational” and “superstitions” and gain legitimacy by reforming religious institutions. But it also stemmed from a rich and longstanding indigenous debate about the proper roles of Buddhism in society and a rise in the popularity of lay Buddhist organizations. The Vietnamese revival was closely linked to other similar movements in the region, particularly influenced by the ideas of the Chinese monk Taixu (1890-1947). Taixu's notion of “Buddhism for this world” promoted an active social role for the religion, which “reforms society, helps humankind to progress, and improves the whole world” (DeVido 257).

This article is included in a collection of writings about contemporary Vietnamese religion edited by Philip Taylor, *Modernity and Re-enchantment*. In the first chapter, Taylor questions the widespread perception that the Buddhist revival ultimately failed because it didn't articulate a clear political agenda and was disrupted by factionalism. “Scholars and activists who have focused in the limited impact of the Buddhist revival or on the co-option of Buddhism by the state are unable to explain the contemporary vitality of Buddhist educational and social work activities...These activities belie the thesis that Vietnamese Buddhism is unsuited to modern realities or somehow incompatible with the communist variant of modernity” (Taylor 24).

Robert Topmiller's article “Vietnamese Buddhism in the 1990s” documents the author's surprise at the resilience of the Vietnamese Buddhist culture under the socialist government that he witnessed during his research period at the end of the twentieth century. This included a large number of youth living or studying at pagodas. He also observed an active debate “about the suitable character of Buddhism in a society permeated with violence and injustice. The disagreement has raged between those who see work for social justice and peace in the political arena as proper for Buddhist clergy and those who have emphasized religious values and removal from the world” (Topmiller 234). He attests to the highly political nature of Vietnamese Buddhist social engagement and the resulting suppression

of non-state-sponsored Buddhist groups. In Topmiller's opinion, however, the youth population will keep Buddhism alive with “the social commitment they bring...their concern for people will eventually awaken their political consciousness and remind them of the centuries-old relationship between the people and Buddhism” (Topmiller 238).

Other scholars are also optimistic about the positive and active role of Buddhism in contemporary Vietnamese society. Andrew Wells-Dang encourages his readers to look outside narrow Western definitions of civil society that stress “independence from the state and opposition to state ideology” in order to appreciate the development of civic activity in Vietnam. While religious organizations are highly regulated by the government, they constitute a vital component of civil society. “In developing countries in particular, religious organizations have constituted prototypical forms of civil society in conditions where other forms of social organization were weak” (Wells-Dang 3). Wells-Dang describes Vietnamese engaged Buddhism as “outward-looking, optimistic, collaborative and community-oriented” (Wells-Dang 6). He cites pagoda-run orphanages and other charitable activities as concrete examples. Wells-Dang also emphasizes the transnational nature of the engaged Buddhist tradition, a promising characteristic that allows increased access to foreign social and material capital for Vietnamese communities (Wells-Dang 7).

These authors envision a contemporary culture of socially engaged Buddhism in Vietnam that is not limited to politically radical activism. My research explores the contemporary practice of Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism in Hue within this larger context. It examines the tensions and collaborative developments between multiple definitions of social engagement: both Thich Nhat Hanh's clearly articulated vision for social change and the longstanding networks of communal support among Buddhist institutions and communities that are characteristic of the greater Vietnamese religious landscape.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Buddhism and the State

Irregardless of Karl Marx's famed declaration that “religion is the opiate of the masses,” religious practices have continued to be an integral element of Vietnamese society under the socialist state. For better or worse, the American democratic ideal of a “separation of church and state” is also largely inapplicable to Vietnam. The influence of the Vietnamese government in religious affairs has caused an outcry of human rights violations from many Western countries, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom repeatedly placing Vietnam on their list of countries of particular concern (Roscoe). Ongoing conflicts between the UBCV and the state-sponsored VBS continue to exacerbate this concern. However, while there are clearly many improvements that need to be made to ensure religious freedom in Vietnam, I argue that the close relationship between the state and religious institutions can also provide positive support for the development of an active Buddhist presence in society.

Monk Thich Le Chong Thien believes—and argues that most of the population agrees with him—that most of the members of the Vietnamese People's Party are in fact Buddhist, even though they are prohibited from espousing any one religion. During the Vietnam-American war, pagodas often sheltered communist leaders from harm. Although the Buddha declared that monks should not link with political officials, Thich Le Chong Thien says that this teaching is generally ignored in Vietnam. When a German journalist interviewed a Buddhist monk protesting the Diem regime about this teaching, the monk answered, “Before I became a Buddhist monk, I am Vietnamese” (Chong Thien 20/4/09). Religious and national identity are complexly intertwined in Vietnam. While a heated debate continues about whether or not it is appropriate for Buddhism to enter the realm of politics, it is undeniable that it is has already done so for centuries.

Since 1990, the socialist state has issued multiple decrees and ordinances aimed at protecting

religious freedom. However, they continue to retain strict regulations over the construction and organization of religious institutions, religious festivals, conferences and ceremonies, election and ordination of dignitaries, fundraising, and participation in international associations (Government Committee on Religious Affairs 2007). While the compatibility of these restrictions with international standards of human rights can certainly be critiqued, they do allow for integral state engagement with religious life. In a conversation with Nguyen Thi Bach Tuyet of the governmental Committee for Religious Affairs, she both acknowledged the importance of working for better implementation of the ideals of religious freedom and proudly enumerated some of the ways in which the government encourages the development of religion.

Initial plots of land are often provided for planned religious institutions once they approved by the committee. The country's three Buddhist Institutes has received government funds for expansion and renovation projects. The Committee for Religious Affairs runs a publishing house for religious books and magazines, and has coordinated the translation and publication of religious texts into indigenous languages for ethnic minority groups. State-recognized religious groups have representatives in the National Assembly. The state also funds religious leaders studying abroad, such as sending Buddhist monks to India. They encourage the exchange of ideas among religious leaders in the region, frequently sending monks and priests to ASEAN conferences (Bach Tuyet 2/4/09). Thich Le Chong Thien downplays this material support, saying that his pagoda is self-sufficient, but stresses that he feels he receives "great spiritual support" from the socialist state (Chong Thien 20/4/09).

There is much work to be done to ensure a just relationship between the Vietnamese state and religious institutions. Political tensions remain with organizations like the UBCV that disapprove of the regulations of the state. However, this just relationship will not necessarily be a completely separate one as envisioned in the the United States. Close governmental involvement and support can create a unique environment for an active role of Buddhism in society.

Youth Perspective on the Roles of Buddhism in Contemporary Hue Society

My interviews with students from Hue University displayed a large range of interest in Buddhism, as well as differing opinions on the active roles that Buddhist teachings, pagodas, and monastics play in contemporary society. However, all of the interviews indicated that although youth in Hue may come to different conclusions about Buddhism, this is a topic of high relevance to them as they enter adulthood. I interviewed one young woman who did not identify as Buddhist, but she said that she was unique among her friends who are all active at their pagodas. Others indicated that they practiced Buddhism simply because it was a family tradition, and seemed not to have significant personal investment in the practice. But the majority of the students interview participants expressed genuine excitement and interest for their Buddhist practice, and indicated that they were actively pursuing this practice of their own volition. Even among this group, however, there was a range of opinions about the applicability of Buddhist teachings to daily life outside of the pagoda.

All of the students interviewed cited prayer as their most common religious practice. None had experience with meditation, but several expressed interest in learning more about this practice. The Pure Land belief in merit accumulation was held by many students who talked about praying in order to obtain good jobs, health for their family, or happy marriages. Most frequently, the students mentioned going to the pagoda to pray before taking an exam. Many talked about a belief in spirits or traditions of ancestor worship. These students all practiced devotional forms of Pure Land Buddhism, integrated with animistic beliefs in spirits, Taoist cosmology, and Confucian practices of ancestor worship.

In addition to special religious days when they attend a local pagoda with their families, such as the Tet holiday or the first or fifteenth days of the lunar month, many students said that they went the pagoda in their free time to pray for good luck or simply to enjoy the calm environment. Many valued

the pagoda as a refuge from the busyness of their daily lives. One young woman said, “Wherever you are in the society, when you come to the pagoda you become another person—you will find that you will be very kind and calm” (Phuong 10/4/09). Another said, “I go to the pagoda when I feel stressed, then I don't feel stressed any more” (Anh10/4/09).

When asked whether Buddhism affects the way they chose to live their lives, many students displayed at least a minimal awareness that Buddhism includes teachings about how to “be a good person.” When this was further probed, however, it seemed that several students believed that this simply entailed the accumulation of merit through prayer and other devotional practices, rather than more active life choices. “In primary school my mother took me to the pagoda and said, 'you have to pray for your studies, for your health. Buddhism will make you a good person!' This is something we can't explain, but we should believe” (Thu Thuy 11/4/09). One young man said that Buddhism definitely didn't influence his life choices such as lifestyle or career, that “I want to chose my job by myself” (Nhat 10/4/09). Others made the clear distinction that prayer isn't enough to make a good person, and that Buddhism must be a part of daily life: “I don't like people who say that they believe in the Buddha, but then when they are in society they don't do good things” (Phuong 10/4/09).

What practices of ethical behavior do these students learn from Buddhist teachings? Every student interviewed expressed interest in doing charitable acts. They also indicated that pagodas play an important role in inspiring and facilitating charity. One student said that most pagodas have a donation box for old clothes or books which are given to people in need. Several students talked about orphanages run by pagodas, and said that they often volunteer to play with the children or sing them lullabies. They said that most Buddhists in Hue volunteer and give money to charity, and that Vietnamese abroad often send remittances back to their home pagoda to buy food for poor or elderly people (Phuong 10/4/09).

While some students didn't attend a specific pagoda regularly, others showed an investment in

the community of their village pagoda. One young woman said that she teaches the younger children at her pagoda about the Buddha's life every Sunday afternoon (Phuong 10/4/09). Others mentioned enjoyable activities for youth at their pagoda, such as singing Buddhist songs, playing games, or going on camping trips with monks and nuns. Several seemed to have a sense of being part of pagoda family, which entailed responsibility to participate in and care for this family.

When asked about whether they have personal relationships with monks or nuns, several students said that they regularly talk to monastics at local pagodas. They often ask advice for challenges they are facing in their lives, such as conflicts with friends or decisions about their schooling and career. One young woman in particular mentioned a meaningful relationship with a nun, who “can see personalities like a fortuneteller” (Thu 11/4/09) and gives advice on how to become the best person you can be. The nun has also given her medicinal advice for traditional herbal healing techniques. She instructed her on a daily practice of sitting in front of the Buddha to pray or reading a Buddhist book for ten minutes every morning when she wakes up to start the day with a clear mind, telling her that she worries too much (Thu 11/4/09). Many students similarly said that Buddhism helps them gain self-confidence, faith, and hope. It is a source of comfort in times of difficulty, and the focus on generating good karma for the future helps people live “optimistically” (Anh 10/4/09).

Most of the students were at least peripherally aware of the five precepts, the central ethical teachings of the Buddha. One young woman said that she followed the first two, of not killing and not stealing. She eats a vegetarian diet. But she said that she is frustrated by how absolute most of the teachings are: “Sometimes you have to lie” (Anh 10/4/09). I agreed with her, and showed her the version of the precepts that Thich Nhat Hanh has written that I follow. I told her how I believe that these are more useful for daily life because they are clearer and not so abrupt and absolute. She seemed very interested, and others also expressed a desire for ethical teachings that are more applicable to their daily lives than the traditional version of the precepts.

I encountered many other critiques about Buddhist traditions as well. While some students were enthusiastic about the value of a monastic lifestyle, others said that it seemed boring and too restrictive. One young woman said that when her cousin was ordained, the family was very embarrassed. He was a “normal man,” and his relatives all wanted him to become an engineer and get married. They were upset that he went against the family's wishes (Thanh Thuy 11/4/09). I noticed this conflict on several occasions between the Buddhist monastic lifestyle and traditional Confucian family values that stress obedience to parents. In other cases, it has been clear that pagodas have integrated these family values; students talked about learning to respect their elders as a large part of the ethical guidance they received at pagodas.

The other major complaint about the monastic lifestyle was that monks and nuns are so removed from society that they cannot offer good advice that is applicable to daily life. One student said that monastics cannot help her solve problems because they have “poor brains about life,” and that their overly “equal thinking” causes them to simply accept everything as it is (Anh 10/4/09). Another student mentioned that she doesn't like to talk monks and nuns because they only want to talk about the Buddha, not about “normal life” (Thanh Thuy 11/4/09). When I asked her whether she thought Buddhism could help resolve social issues such as domestic violence, one student said that she didn't think so. The pagoda helps people feel less stressful, but not to resolve conflict. After a conflict, a pagoda could be a good place for people to come feel more peaceful and comfortable (Thu Thuy 11/4/09).

These interviews demonstrated that the youth in Hue sense a tension between the role of Buddhism as a passive force—a retreat from the social world, a tradition that denies the significance of worldly acts—and the role of Buddhism as a call to ethical social action. Devotional practices tread an interesting line between these two poles—focused on obtaining worldly benefits, they are grounded in the social realm, but this faith in divine forces can also override a sense of personal responsibility for

making good life choices. Charity is clearly a well-established practice of social engagement carried out by pagodas in Hue, and the youth generation also frequently engages with the monastic community for spiritual and, to a limited extent, worldly advice. From my interviews and other observation, however, it seems that there is a significant desire among youth for Buddhist teachings that are more applicable to their daily lives.

Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas undoubtedly “take an important role in society, especially in Hue” (Phuong 10/4/09). What is currently contested, however, is the matter of what this role should look like, something that varies dramatically by individual pagoda and lay community. However, the strong existing networks of social capital between pagodas and lay Buddhists and the sustained youth interest in Buddhism in Hue provide a promising landscape for the future development of socially engaged Buddhist practices.

Social Service Programs Run by Pagodas in Hue

As my youth interviews indicated, there are numerous social service programs run by pagodas in Hue. I will briefly outline three of the ones I visited here. These three programs focus on alleviating the suffering of orphans, elderly, and sick people respectively. Three out of the four Buddhist forms of physical suffering, or *dukkhas*, are represented by these examples (bereavement, old age, and illness).

Duc Son pagoda, home to over 200 children, is one of the largest and most famous Buddhist orphanages in the region. The orphanage was founded by nun Thich Nu Minh Tu over twenty years ago, and she continues to be in the spiritual and logistical leader of a staff of almost twenty nuns and twelve lay people. Most of the lay staff are women, while local men often come to help out with repairs or other labor needs for a minimal fee. Homeless families may also be given rooms if they contribute to the running of the center.

At the beginning of our conversation, without any prompting, Minh Tu clearly identified that

“part of a becoming a nun is to do charity.” When we further explored this topic, she assured me that charity is a very natural part of the life of all Vietnamese Buddhist pagodas. Any lay people who attend a pagoda that doesn't run charitable programs are always instructed by the monastics where to go to take part in programs run by another pagoda.

Minh Tu emphasized the importance of education for the children, and insists that they remain in school through the global economic crisis despite critics who encourage her to send them out to work. The children are also given vocational training such as cooking vegetarian food and wood-carving. Minh Tu pragmatically acknowledges that not all of them will be able to pursue higher education, and they may need to rely on these marketable skills.

While the initial land for the pagoda was provided by the government, for expansion projects and the daily running of the orphanage Duc Son relies on charitable donors. This includes many members of the local lay community, such as a group of four middle-aged women I met during my visit. They said that they were good friends that came together once a month to donate food, clothes, or money, as well as giving more donations on their own whenever they were able. They are all regular pagoda attendees. They indicated that charitable practices are an integral part of both their spiritual and social lives.

The pagoda also has strong transnational ties to foreign donors. While I was there, I met an Australian “cultural tour” student group that was volunteering for the day, as well as an American business man who owns a wireless internet company that donates 20% of their profits to Duc Son. We ate in a vegetarian restaurant for visiting tour groups run by the pagoda as an additional source of income, and were shown some of the children's wood-carvings that are sold visitors.

A nearby pagoda, Tinh Duc, is run as a home for elderly adults without families. It was founded about ten years ago by a nun who felt compassion for the elderly she saw on the street, thinking that she could be like that someday. She invoked the traditional belief in the multi-generational family as

the central Vietnamese social unit, saying that it was very important for these people to have someone to share their opinions and wisdom with, that everyone needs family. The land for the pagoda was sold by a local lay practitioner for a minimal fee, and the home for the elderly is supported by local and foreign donors. A local doctor comes to treat the residents each week for free.

The nuns teach the elderly residents Pure Land chanting, which helps to comfort and relax them. When I visited, some residents were chanting with the nuns in the pagoda, while the more infirm were in their rooms chanting alone and fingering prayer beads. Many had beautiful smiles that lit up their faces, and it seemed like this practice truly did bring them some relief from their ailments.

The third pagoda social service program that I visited, Dieu Hanh, was founded in 1989 and has treated seriously ill patients with an alternative healing technique for several years. This technique, developed in Japan and practiced by only a few centers in Vietnam, is based on a period of fasting and a special diet. After up to two weeks without food, patients are weaned back into eating a soup made from black sesame and brown rice. The fast helps to clear the system of “bad energies.” The head nun we spoke with said that she had learned about this technique from a medical textbook and tried it herself, with incredible results for easing several of her ailments. She has had several patients cured of the early stages of cancer through this technique. A local doctor who is retired from working at a hospital and is now researching this technique also comes to treat the patients.

The nun emphasized that people from all religions are welcome to come to the pagoda to be instructed in this healing technique. She found that Buddhist chanting was helpful to her during her period of fasting, and many others rely on this practice for comfort. She cited belief as an important component of the healing process, although when asked whether Buddhism could have any physically healing effects she denied the direct correlation.

Each of these pagodas relies on the involvement of both local lay Buddhists as well as international donation sources, indicating strong networks of spiritual and financial support. They all

demonstrate a synthesis between spiritual practice and worldly service. Participants in each of these programs indicated that Buddhism can be both an inspiration for social service work and a means of comforting and sustaining the service workers and participants. They are clear examples of an active role of Buddhism in Hue society.

Thich Nhat Hanh's Engaged Buddhism at Tu Hieu Pagoda

Tu Hieu pagoda houses 60 monks, while Tay Lin temple inside the imperial citadel houses the 40 nuns that complete the monastic community practicing the Plum Village tradition in Hue. For practical purposes, both the monks and nuns will be referred to here as part of the Tu Hieu community. All public programs are held at Tu Hieu, and the nuns frequently travel to Tu Hieu for sangha activities. The first small hut for the pagoda constructed in 1843 and the main structures built in 1848. It is located about 6 km southwest of the city center.

On an average day, the monks at Tu Hieu rise at 3:30 in the morning for their first sitting meditation session. Breakfast is at 6:30, followed by an 8 AM dharma talk. This is either lead by a monastic teacher or the monks will watch a recorded dharma talk by Thich Nhat Hanh on DVD. Walking meditation is at 10 AM, during which the community enjoys walking mindfully together outside. Lunch is at 11 AM, followed by a long midday break for resting, reading, or writing. In the afternoon there are either meetings, dharma discussion groups for sharing about the practice, or working meditation. After dinner, the monks participate in another period of sitting meditation, chanting, or other practices.

On Sundays the pagoda hosts a public Day of Mindfulness, during which members of the local lay community come to practice with the monastics. This inclusion of the lay community is an important component of social engagement. On many other days, such as when special meals are prepared or ceremonies are conducted, the lay community is welcome to attend. I participated in one

ceremonial meal that was attended by many lay community members; even the workers from the construction site for the new pagoda building were invited. When I asked about this, I was told that it is “an old Vietnamese tradition” for pagodas to generously welcome anyone who wishes to come to a meal.

To return to my initial observation at the start of this paper about the natural presence of Buddhism in seemingly mundane daily life, my experience interacting with the monastic community in Hue has confirmed this belief that being an ordained Buddhist in Vietnam does not entail separation from worldly reality. I have been particularly impressed by the extent to which the lifestyle of the monastics in the Plum Village tradition is, for lack of a better word, *normal*. While their daily activities vary significantly from the lay population, they inhabit this lifestyle in a way that seems relaxed, comfortable, and enjoyable—nothing like the life of esoteric rituals and droning lectures, strict asceticism and harsh isolation envisioned by some of the students interviewed.

Walking up to Tu Hieu, visitors are enveloped by a sense of calm immediately upon passing the vendors peddling incense at the magnificent front gate. A half-moon pond stands in front of a winding path that makes its way up to the main hall of the pagoda. At certain times of the day the pagoda grounds may be silent, offering a still moment to hear the birds rustling in the branches of the pine trees or the hum of the cicadas. But at other times there is the resounding sound of the novices chanting, or the purr of motorbikes carrying monastics to or from town, or the laughter of local children come for a soccer match with the monks. The environment is undoubtedly special, a place of retreat and refuge from frantic traffic and crowds. And yet I would challenge anyone who would deem this less real than the hubbub of downtown Hue a few kilometers up the road.

The monastics at Tu Hieu live close to their source of their livelihood, growing many of their own organic vegetables in the pagoda gardens and their own rice in a field in town. They take turns cooking in the kitchen and doing other chores such as splitting wood for fuel or cleaning the buildings.

While they aim to keep their lifestyle as simple as possible, they are also ruthlessly pragmatic, using email to keep in touch with members of the lay community. They have limited personal belongings and sleep on wooden beds in shared rooms, but a few have guitars or iPods for spiritual music and entertainment. There is always joking and laughter among the primarily youthful monastic community, and they love to play sports in the afternoons. In fact, during one of my first weeks in Hue a Vietnamese news website published a photojournalist's essay featuring artful black and white shots of the young monks at Tu Hieu playing volleyball.

I mention all of these details because I think that this groundedness in earthly reality is at the heart of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings. Mindfulness practice is about waking up, realizing the Buddha nature within all beings and seeing that we have already reached the shore of enlightenment here on earth. Paradoxically enough, it is only through coming to this transcendent awareness of what *is* that we can begin to envision what *might be*. Herein lies the promise of Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism for transforming the self and society.

In addition to the fourteen Mindfulness Trainings taken by monastic and lay members of the Order of Interbeing, Thich Nhat Hanh has written five Mindfulness Trainings that lay practitioners can choose to receive as guidelines for an engaged Buddhist life. These trainings carry similar messages to the traditional five Buddhist precepts, but many people find them clearer and more applicable to their daily lives. In a conversation with Brother Phap Niem, one of the more advanced monastics and a dharma teacher at Tu Hieu, he said that he feels the traditional version of the precepts is “too classic, too much like commandments” (Phap Niem 6/4/09). This complaint was mirrored in my interviews with students. The Mindfulness Trainings are instead about awareness, about a heartfelt commitment to look deeply into the consequences of your actions.² There is a recitation ceremony once a month at Tu Hieu when the lay community can receive the five Mindfulness Trainings for the first time or reflect on

² See appendix for the full text of the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

their adherence to the trainings over the course of the previous month. The Mindfulness Trainings are the bridge between this tradition's internal practices of developing awareness and insight and its external practices of ethical social engagement.

Tu Hieu runs numerous programs in the lay community; the pagoda is a source of both material and spiritual support. There is a large focus on the youth community and nurturing young people as the future of the country. During one public dharma talk I attended, sister Hoa Nghiem talked about the need to bring Buddhism into early education, with simple songs and gathas for daily life such as mindful eating or hand-washing meditation. “Young people are the seeds of the country, we must water them carefully...This is the responsibility of teachers, parents, monks and nuns—everybody. Not just one person.”

The pagoda sponsors over 200 disadvantaged children who come from rural areas to Tu Hieu once a month. They practice walking meditation and hear a dharma talk in the morning, then eat lunch and have a lesson from local teachers who are hired for the day. They receive 100,000 VD when they go home. I spoke to a lay practitioner from Hue who runs a similar program for the elderly and disabled. He receives money from Plum Village and then distributes 100,000 VD a month to different households, which he visits to check up on regularly. The pagoda also provides relief for emergencies in the lay community such as flooding, which is a common problem in Hue and the surrounding provinces. Tay Lin temple is home to several disabled or otherwise disadvantaged girls, and a larger group of girls come to the temple daily to learn sewing and other vocational skills.

Tu Hieu hosts a youth retreat each summer, and last summer there were 500 attendees. The monastics keep in touch with the youth by email to answer questions and offer emotional support. There is a large concern for depression and suicide among young people in Vietnam, and the monastics try to provide support networks for at-risk youth. Near the end of the month while I was in Hue, 45 monastics from Tu Hieu and Prajna, joined by several dharma teachers from Deer Park Monastery in

California, traveled to Thailand to lead a family and a youth retreat for lay people from all over Asia.

The monastics at Tu Hieu regularly travel to other parts of the country to lead retreats.

While meditation and chanting are taught at Tu Hieu, most of the practices instructed are integrated into the activities of daily life. Walking meditation is practiced communally around the beautiful ponds at Tu Hieu, but lay practitioners are encouraged to practice mindful walking on the street, in their homes and workplaces. On Sundays, the lay and monastic community enjoys a delicious vegetarian lunch together in silence in the main dharma hall. Before the meal, the Five Contemplations are read:

This food is the gift of the whole universe: the earth, the sky and much hard work.
May we live in such a way that makes us worthy to receive it.
May we transform our own unskilled states of mind and learn to eat with moderation.
May we only take foods that nourish us and prevent illness.
We accept this food so that we may realize the path of understanding and love.

The hall is still except for the sounds of chewing and the gentle rustle of people slowly raising the next bite to their mouths. A sense of awe always overtakes me as I look down at the colorful spread filling my bowl and suddenly my eyes open to how much work went into growing and preparing this meal, as I feel the flavor spread across my tongue and taste the nourishment that fuels my every breath.

I talked to an older lay man one afternoon who said he had been a practicing Buddhist for 40 years, but was just now learning how to eat, how to walk with full awareness. I asked him whether he learned these practices from Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings, and he confirmed this but emphasized, "I eat for me, Thich Nhat Hanh doesn't eat for me." I was moved by his understanding that the reason this practice is so effective is because it doesn't rely on the authority of a master teacher for spiritual advancement. "A true teacher will always encourage us to be in touch with the teacher within us" (Nhat Hanh 2007 113).

Of course, many people find this tradition difficult or unappealing because of this sense of personal responsibility for the practice. Fortunately, practitioners of the Plum Village tradition are not

truly on their own as this perception implies. An integral component of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings is a strong spiritual community that supports each member in remaining committed to the practice.

This awareness of the importance of sangha is clearly present at Tu Hieu. I witnessed a dharma discussion group of lay practitioners during which the question was posed of how the public Days of Mindfulness could be made more effective. One man suggested that they pass around a talking stick of sorts during discussion so that everyone would listen more fully and not speak on top of each other. Another suggested that they needed more support from the monastic community in order to bond as a group. Several people talked about needing some form of commitment or regulations for lay practitioners so that there wouldn't be such inconsistent attendance. In the end, a monk suggested that they adopt a "second-body" system like the monastic community, where each practitioner would be paired with another whom they would give special attention and support for staying committed to the practice. Numerous times while I was at Tu Hieu, I was gently reminded by the monastics that I could practice mindful breathing while working, biking or doing other daily activities. One person alone is not strong enough to remain awake when our habits encourage us to fall back into clouded awareness. As one lay practitioner observed, "when we eat, we need to have soup; when we practice we need to have friends."

The type of supportive spiritual community that Tu Hieu models is another form of social engagement. I witnessed one administrative planning meeting with the nuns at Tay Lin temple during which all of the participants remained calm and attentive with the help of a mindfulness bell that was rung several times throughout the meeting to bring everyone back to their breathing in the present moment. If this type of decision-making process were employed in the larger arenas of society, a more just world would undoubtedly be born. This type of peaceful community is a microcosm of a peaceful society, and the key to this community lies in the peaceful individuals that are yet another microcosm within. The livelihood of the monastic communities of Tu Hieu is compelling living evidence that the

transformation of society and self are inextricably interdependent. Critics of Thich Nhat Hanh's peace activism that focus on his political entanglements rarely understand that this deeper practice of “being peace” is the true heart of his activism.

An understanding of the non-duality between internal peace and social peace is demonstrated at Tu Hieu. A central concept of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings are the “good and bad seeds” that everyone has within them, the potential for both healthy and unhealthy behavior. We must acknowledge and accept our bad seeds, not struggle against them. When unhealthy thoughts appear during meditation, by refusing to combat them we can let them peacefully slip away. Our mindfulness practice helps us to water the good seeds such as compassion, awareness, and insight, and over time the bad seeds will diminish in size and no longer have so much influence in our lives. Just as we cultivate these good seeds in ourselves, we cultivate them in our families and communities.

Many people I spoke to at Tu Hieu attested to how important the practice is for their interpersonal relationships. During a dharma discussion group, one lay woman spoke about returning to her mindful breathing whenever she felt agitated by someone in her family. Several people I talked to emphasized Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching of “understanding *and* love” as central to their practice. An older man used the metaphor of seeing all of Hue from the top of Ngu Binh mountain for the way we must look at our loved ones, seeing the big picture of everything that constitutes them, the good and the bad seeds. I met a Swiss couple who runs a center for mentally disabled youth near Tu Hieu, and the woman spoke about how her mindfulness practice helps her care for the youth. In order to truly love them, she needs to look deeply and understand their disabilities, or else it would be easy to get angry and think that they were naughty and malevolent when they misbehaved.

Meeting this Swiss couple also reminded me of how the Tu Hieu sangha is not limited to the pagoda or even to Vietnam—practitioners of the Plum Village tradition are linked into a strong transnational community. This transnational community provides the sanghas in Vietnam with unique

access to spiritual support and material resources abroad. I talked to one nun who told me that although there is a very small number of experienced monastics in the Plum Village tradition in Vietnam, the dharma teachers at Tu Hieu can always go to the elders at the monasteries abroad for advice and support when they “feel tired.” Earlier in the month, I met with the Hanoi Community for Mindful Living, the only lay sangha practicing the Plum Village tradition in Vietnam that is not affiliated with a pagoda. This sangha is composed of both expatriate Europeans and Americans and native Vietnamese practitioners. They are able to organize events and retreats that draw on the knowledge, experience, financial resources, and social contacts of both these groups.

Strong ties to the international sangha as well as the guidance of a teacher schooled in both Eastern and Western thought allows for a positive exchange of ideas to be facilitated by the centers of the Plum Village tradition. The flow of Eastern Buddhist perspectives on psychology and social ethics into the West has been well documented as an increasingly influential and popular trend. The reverse flow of Buddhist thought returning to Asia has been less explored by academics. In Hue, Tu Hieu is in a unique position to introduce an awareness of certain concepts that are developing in Vietnam but have a longer history in the West as codified social values, in addition to nurturing values that are well-established in Vietnamese society. Two examples of these types of fledgling concepts are environmental sustainability and gender equality.

One of the primary concerns among the members of Plum Village tradition today is the causes and effects of environmental degradation and global warming. The monasteries in France and the U.S. are rapidly working to transform their centers into models of a completely green lifestyle with organic gardens, solar panels, and low carbon-emission means of transportation. In Vietnam, this process is also underway, but a lack of financial resources and popular awareness about this issue makes it more difficult. A green monastery and retreat center in the mountains near Hue is being designed to preserve natural resources; it will include a guesthouse on the premises so lay retreatants can stay overnight and

get a firsthand experience of this model.

In a conversation with Phap Niem about environmental sustainability, he said that he feels it is the monastics responsibility to help educate the lay community about this issue. Awareness is beginning to take root, but poverty and the need for economic development continues to take the forefront in the minds of most the population. A Buddhist perspective helps us to see that in order to help humanity, we must also help all other beings on earth; “to destroy non-human elements is to destroy ourselves as well” (Phap Niem 6/4/09).

This message is actively conveyed to the lay community in multiple ways. The pagoda recently organized a screening of Al Gore's film about global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*, for both the lay and monastic communities. They are working to implement a regular “No Car/Motorbike Day,” and encouraging the lay community to do the same. During one of the dharma talks I attended at a public “Day of Mindfulness” at the pagoda on Sunday, Phap Niem wove the environmental message throughout his talk. In the first half an hour directed at the small children, he asked everyone to raise their hands if they could truly hear the birds, see the leaves on the trees. He talked about seeing and cherishing the beautiful world around us with “shining eyes,” not hiding from this reality in the virtual worlds of TV and computer games. Children and adults are both given the opportunity to practice this deep enjoyment of nature each Sunday during walking meditation, when the whole community walks slowly together around the beautiful ponds at the pagoda. While other pagodas in Hue practice walking meditation, Tu Hieu is unique in that it takes the practice outside into nature. Later in his talk, Phap Niem talked to the adults about becoming liberated from attachments to cravings for sexual relationships, money, power, and material things and learning to love what we have around us. He talked about our cravings for food, and the need to look deeply into our food and see if it is truly nourishing. Chemicals used to make animals and plants grow faster and larger may deceive us, but when we practice mindful consumption we can see that they pollute our bodies and environment.

Tu Hieu also models a new paradigm for gender equality. While the monks and nuns currently live separately and only practice together two days of the week, they are in the final stages of constructing a nunnery on the premises of Tu Hieu. This will allow the male and female monastic community to come together more regularly for meals, meditation, dharma talks, and discussion. Male and female lay practitioners participate in dharma discussion together at the pagoda, a rare opportunity to share deeply with non-family members of the other gender.

The conservative culture in Hue makes this process of gender integration a fairly radical advancement. I found that the monks and nuns automatically segregated themselves by gender even in casual situations like sitting and chatting. During a dharma talk, a monk crossed to the women's side of the hall to sit next to me and translate, provoking several agitated glances. One day during working meditation, I came to help the monks who were splitting wood. I was quickly hurried away and asked if I wouldn't rather work in the kitchen. I assured the young monk that I had split wood before and quite enjoyed it, at which he smiled nervously and let me continue. After fifteen minutes or so the tension broke and we all enjoyed chatting and working together.

The monastic population in Hue has 1.5 times as many nuns as monks, due to the traditional preference for male children and the reluctance to let them leave family life (Giac Qua 18/4/09). However, nuns throughout Vietnamese history have been mostly illiterate, prevented from pursuing higher education in Buddhist institutes, and unable to rise to higher levels of religious leadership. Nonetheless, nuns have made countless contributions to Vietnamese society, especially by running many of the Buddhist social service programs like those described earlier. My interviews with students confirmed that lay Buddhist women are usually the main supporter of their family's Buddhist practice. During Thich Nhat Hanh's visit in 2007, he insisted that nuns walk alongside the monks on an alms round in Bao Loc, even though they would traditionally follow behind the youngest novice monks (Ripper 50).

While the introduction of these Westernized concepts can certainly have a positive effect on the community in Hue, my experience at Tu Hieu attested to the fact that the Plum Village tradition must be effectively re-fitted for a Vietnamese perspective in order to be truly successful in Vietnam. Many people I spoke to described their difficulties with trying to share this innovative practice. One young nun talked about how she worries that she sometimes makes people uncomfortable with her practice of loving speech. The older generation is still not accustomed to the practice of openly stating love and admiration. She knows that this is an important part of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings, but she doesn't want to cause misunderstandings. One lay practitioner spoke about how his children wouldn't listen to him when he asked them to turn off the TV or video games while they ate, because these forms of technological entertainment are accepted as such a normal part of the contemporary youth culture. However, this same man emphasized that “part of the practice is to plant good seeds in many people, not only yourself.” How does the Tu Hieu sangha negotiate the difficulties in sharing the practice they encounter, and work to make the practice more accessible to a larger audience?

Firstly, the spread of engaged Buddhism must be natural rather than forced. In describing the difference between the lay practitioners who are interested in mindfulness practice and those who just come to the pagoda in order to chant or pray, Phap Niem spoke fondly of the older, more conservative generation and their need for the pagoda as a source of support and comfort. While he was excited about the new youth movement in Buddhism, he showed no resentment towards those practicing the older traditions. When we discussed ongoing internal conflicts at various pagodas that are introducing the Plum Village tradition and encountering resistance by followers of more traditional practices, Phap Niem emphasized that he tries to avoid becoming entangled in these conflicts—he simply sees what he needs to do to help in the moment, and then does it. As far as the larger political struggle between the VBS and UBCV, Thich Nhat Hanh took a clear stance during his visits to Vietnam that he “stands free of both, embraces both” (Phap Niem 6/4/09).

The most effective way of spreading the Plum Village tradition is to allow it to evolve in ways best suited for the local community. Several students I talked to indicated their aversion to Tu Hieu's practice because it is "for the West." John Chapman, a lay member of the Order of Interbeing, writes:

It is probably essential to the successful (re)implanting of [Thich Nhat Hanh's] message that the new practice centers being developed by Plum Village in Vietnam be led by Vietnamese monastics and adapted to Vietnamese culture. That is not to say that his message will inevitably be pressed into the exclusive service of Vietnamese nationalism and be purged of its universalistic content. Rather, one might suspect that, as his internationally recognized philosophy and practice is adapted to Vietnamese social and cultural realities, Vietnam will rise in prominence as one of the new centres of his transnational following (Chapman 334).

I encountered many indications that this adaptation is being successfully carried out at Tu Hieu. In comparison with dharma talks that I have attended in the U.S., I encountered a much larger focus at Tu Hieu on the family as the central social unit and the importance of honoring our ancestors. This traditional Vietnamese value was woven into dharma talks on topics such as the environment, speaking about polluting the earth as betraying the heritage of our ancestry. Sister Hoa Nghiem spoke about how when we smile or when we practice mindful breathing, our ancestors smile and breathe with us. She said that her father didn't have the opportunity to come to the temple and chant, so she chants for him. I began to deeply appreciate that the concept of Interbeing developed in South and East Asian societies because they see this truth realized so clearly in their own families. I attended a ceremony at the pagoda for the anniversary of the death date of a former abbot in the temple ancestry, considered an important "family gathering day" for the monastic sangha. The monks and nuns carefully prepared many special traditional dishes for the large feast that followed, telling me that this food was an essential way for me to learn about Vietnamese culture. In article following his first visit Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: "lighting incense on an ancestral altar in your home is part Vietnamese culture; it is not superstition, but a tradition of insight to acknowledge that you have roots in your ancestors" (Chapman 328).

While emphasizing the importance of personal responsibility for the practice over

devotional beliefs, the Plum Village tradition doesn't outrightly reject Vietnamese beliefs often deemed “superstitious” by Westerners. In one dharma talk, Phap Niem told the story of a young woman who was very ill because she was inhabited by evil spirits. None of the healers in her village knew what to do, but a young traveling student was able to heal her simply by sitting very still and calm with her through the night. Phap Niem said that these spirits are very real, but they are usually in our minds. The way to confront them is with stillness and peace generated by mindfulness practice.

Another distinct cultural difference that I observed in the practice at Tu Hieu as compared to the monasteries in the U.S. was the emphasis on faith and self-confidence. In an American culture that is founded on individualism, often to the point of egotism, this teaching does not need to be as strong. At Tu Hieu, however, many of the lay practitioners spoke about their need to believe more fully in themselves in order to stay strong in the practice in the face of difficulties. The lay community responded positively to a dharma talk in which Phap Niem shared a letter he had received from a Buddhist woman in Sri Lanka who was very ill but retained her strength and courage by cultivating self-confidence.

Many more popular Buddhist practices and beliefs are also incorporated at Tu Hieu. During an afternoon at a public Day of Mindfulness, the sangha practiced a sitting meditation for half an hour and then recited traditional Vietnamese chants followed by prostrations before the altar for over an hour. The novice monks are all trained in the traditional chants, and Phap Niem stressed that this is a very important part of their training.

One Sunday morning at the pagoda, I was particularly aware of the challenge faced by the Plum Village tradition in Vietnam of “attempting to bridge the gap between East and West, between the practice of devotional Buddhism...which believes in a future Pure Land that exists outside one's self, and Buddhism...which says that the Buddha, the Pure Land is within each of us” (Chapman 317). The lay practitioners and most of the monastic community stood outside before walking meditation, singing

simple songs about the present moment in both English and Vietnamese. This singing melded with the chanting of the novice monks drifting out from the pagoda, and as we began to walk together through the trees the chanting followed us. If such a peaceful coexistence and integration of traditional Vietnamese Buddhist practices with the humanistic and applicable practice of Thich Nhat's Hanh's engaged Buddhism can continue to develop, Tu Hieu may truly become a living example of the positive face of globalization—a deep transference and synthesis of ideas that is a vital step in the collective process of slowly healing the wounds of our world.

Conclusions:

If a new socially engaged Buddhism is going to successfully develop in Hue that is capable of confronting the challenges faced by individuals, families, and society today, it will not be immediately or officially estated by any one tradition. It must be gently cultivated and allowed to organically develop over time, uniting existing values and practices of social engagement with innovative new ideas in Buddhist thought.

A young woman I interviewed told me a traditional Buddhist tale that teaches the importance of patience when waiting for truth to be revealed. In this story, a Buddhist monk came to live with a lay family who loved him dearly. Everyone appreciated his calming presence in the family, but one day a misunderstanding ensued. The mother of the family realized that her wedding ring was missing, and accused the monk of stealing it. The monk knew that the family's goose had eaten the ring, but kept this secret to himself as he knew the goose would be killed if the family found out. He accepted the family's anger and abuse, knowing that someday they would understand. Eventually the goose was killed for food and the ring was discovered.

A young woman I spoke to in Hanoi said that she sometimes feels very alone in her mindfulness practice because her friends don't understand, but when she remembers the Insight of

Interbeing—that teaches that all beings are truly walking this path along with her—she feels strong again. Proponents of new practices such as the Plum Village tradition must maintain this deep insight in order to remain patient with the gradual evolution and development of Buddhism in Hue.

Throughout history and continuing into modern times, Buddhist pagodas and monastics have had a close relationship with lay communities. Buddhism also has a close relationship to the socialist state, receiving both restrictions and support. Buddhist institutions play many significant social functions in modern Hue society such as providing social services, spiritual support, and strengthening communities and social capital. The youth generation in Hue shows enthusiasm for participating in an active Buddhist culture; however, many of these youth feel that there is a significant schism between life in the pagoda and life in the “normal” world. They show a strong desire for Buddhist practices that are more applicable to their daily lives. Mindfulness practice as taught at Tu Hieu can provide this applicability.

The Mahayana tradition is founded on the Bodhisattva ideal of helping all beings transcend suffering, and the two major branches that are practiced in Vietnam today, Pure Land and Zen, both include different elements of social engagement. However, the contemporary interpretations of both these traditions has the potential to lead to social complacency. Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism provides a vision of a humanistic Buddhist tradition that has the potential to integrate traditional Vietnamese values and cultural identity with a path of both personal enlightenment and positive social change. If it re-adapts to a Vietnamese perspective after a long period in the West, it can help to propel the much needed movement of Bodhisattvas out from the pagoda and into the world. Or perhaps more precisely, the realization that the spiritual is the social, that the pagoda *is* the world.

Recommendations:

For a student pursuing this topic in the future, I would offer several points of consideration. The first is that there is severely limited in-country availability of Buddhist texts in English, so anyone with plans to do an extensive scriptural review (as I initially did) should either speak fluent Vietnamese or rethink their plans (or plan ahead and pack a suitcase full of books). That said, I found that this focus on scriptural foundations was significantly less relevant to my study of engaged Buddhism than I had anticipated. Coming from an academic perspective on religion that belabors logical inconsistencies in scripture, I was prepared to wrestle with the issue of Buddhist teachings of non-attachment and equanimity negating the case for social engagement. What I found was that in the daily lives of many of the monastic and lay practitioners I encountered, this is truly a non-issue. I was foolishly stuck in a Western binary framework that sees these two perspectives as irreconcilably paradoxical, whereas they appear to co-exist quite happily at Tu Hieu. This is not to say that this debate does not exist in many Buddhist circles, just not in the time and place I was situated in. I find the most rewarding and difficult part of fieldwork is learning to limit the scope of your research to this specific time and place in the attempt to draw it as it is, not as your preconceptions tell you it will be.

Secondly, I would warn that this topic would be fairly difficult for someone without at least a rudimentary understanding of Buddhist teachings coming into the project. In choosing any ISP topic, you should have the lowest possible expectations for library resources available. While I suppose you might get lucky and stumble across the English version of the latest text from the internationally-renowned expert on your topic, the minute possibility of this happening should not prevent you from choosing a highly manageable topic that can be satisfactorily explored using only your previous knowledge and your skills of observation and interviewing over the course of one month. That said, don't let my nay-saying dissuade you from pursuing something you are truly passionate about. I wouldn't have been able to write this paper without my previous experience with Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings; however, that doesn't in any way mean that someone without this experience couldn't have written an equally if not more compelling paper. It just would have been a different paper.

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Appendix—The Five Mindfulness Trainings

The First Training: 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 kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life.

The Second Training: Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression, I vow to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants and minerals. I vow to practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on earth.

The Third Training: Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

The Fourth Training: Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord; or words that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

The Fifth Training: Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body and my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self transformation and the transformation of society.

[Source: http://www.plumvillage.org/practice/5_mindfulness_trainings.htm]