Mackenzie Miller

**History of Buddhist Persecution in Vietnam**

The Buddhist religion is not theistic, however, it does regard one individual, Siddhartha Gautama, or the Buddha. He was born a man but attained enlightening or “Buddhahood” through the path to the cessation of suffering. His teachings inspired Buddhism, with the intention of helping others reach the same awakening. Buddhists are under his teaching that one must understand the Four Noble Truths. Gautama’s Four Noble Truths state that life brings suffering, this suffering comes from attachment to things of this world, it is possible to attain the cessation of this suffering, and that following the eightfold path cease the suffering. Buddhists must also strive to follow the Eightfold Path in order to reach enlightenment or nirvana. The eightfold path requires one to strive for wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental development. Wisdom requires the right view and intention. Ethical conduct demands the right speech, action, and livelihood. Mental development is characterized by right effort, mindfulness, and concentration.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Buddhism was born in India in the 6th century BC. By the 2nd century BC, however, it began to separate into factions. Buddhism was divided into 18 or more interpretations, but all factions were under the two major branches: Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana is interpreted as “the great vehicle” which means that through this religion, all people can achieve enlightenment like Siddhartha Gautama. This inclusivity differs from Theravada Buddhism, where you must live the life of a monk to achieve this goal. Mahayana Buddhism is the main form of Buddhism in East Asia. East Asian Mahayana Buddhism highly regards the Discourse of the Lotus of the True Dharma, commonly referred to as the Lotus Sutra. This influential text encourages an active engagement with others and with the whole of human society.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Mahayana Buddhism gradually spread throughout Southeast Asia from India in the 9th century. During this century, many traders came to Vietnam through the ports along the Red River Delta. In addition to goods these traders also brought their Buddhist beliefs which increasingly permeated Vietnamese culture.[[3]](#footnote-3) Buddhism was reinforced in Vietnamese society while it was under the Ly Dynasty rule from 1009-1225. Many of the Ly kings were Buddhists and had spent part of their lives in monasteries. However, during the 20-year occupation of the Ming Dynasty in Vietnam from 1407 to 1427, the emperors persecuted the Buddhists. During their harsh control over Vietnam, these emperors demanded that all Vietnamese take up the ideas of Neo-Confucianism instead. The emperors of the Ly Dynasty continued to force Neo-Confucianism, especially Le Thanh Tong during his rule from 1460-1497. In addition, the Nguyen Dynasty imposed Neo-Confucianism from 1802-1945.[[4]](#footnote-4) Subsequently, the French persecuted the Buddhists because they felt that Buddhism was a potential threat to power during their imperial rule over Vietnam until 1954.[[5]](#footnote-5) By 1954 however, 80 percent of the Vietnamese population remained Buddhists.[[6]](#footnote-6) Therefore, Buddhism in Vietnam remained a symbol of nationality that has continued to endure despite foreign attempts to eliminate it from Vietnamese society.

During the Vietnam War from 1955-1957 and especially during the rule of Ngo Dihn Diem from 1955-1963, the persecution of Buddhists continued. Although most of the population was Buddhist, Diem and his administration asserted Catholic supremacy.[[7]](#footnote-7) The discrimination reached a peak on May 8, 1963, when many Buddhists assembled in the streets of Hue to celebrate the birth of Buddha. To their dismay, Diem’s troops fired into the crowds ordering them to take down the flags they were waving.[[8]](#footnote-8) This caused the people to stampede and resulted in nine deaths when people were either shot or trampled.[[9]](#footnote-9)

After this violent persecution towards the Buddhists, the monks responded through peaceful documents such as the “Manifesto of the Vietnamese Buddhist Faithful” and the “Heart Letter”. These documents written by the Buddhist monks inspired Buddhists in South Vietnam to non-violently protest against the Diem government.[[10]](#footnote-10);[[11]](#footnote-11) For example, Buddhists in Saigon organized a series of memorial ceremonies, peaceful demonstrations, hunger strikes.[[12]](#footnote-12) Diem’s government, however, continued to lash out against the Buddhists which caused them to respond through self-immolations.[[13]](#footnote-13) Although counterintuitive, self-immolations are also a form of non-violent protest. The act of publically burning oneself is often initially perceived as violent. However, self-immolation actually captures the essence of non-violence in Buddhism, where the Buddhists chose to sacrifice themselves rather than harm another while protesting.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The peaceful protesting by the Buddhists created a global impact which positively affected their domestic situation. Diem had lost American support because the media had again captured his attacks in addition to the self-immolations. Therefore, American CIA officials gave South Vietnamese generals permission to stage a coup. On November 2, 1963, Diem’s rule came to an end as he and his brother were shot and killed.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Buddhist monks inspired international opposition against the Diem government, which led to the fall of Diem.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In this Buddhist crisis, Buddhist monks adhered to the central dogmas of their religion. The "Four Noble Truths" are at the core of Buddhist dogma. Therefore, Buddhists are dogmatically pacifists. Their core belief of pacifism was displayed through their documents, demonstrations, hunger strikes, and even self-immolations. In addition to nonviolence, unity is also stressed in Mahayana Buddhism since it reflects the idea of “the great vehicle” in the Lotus Sutra.[[17]](#footnote-17) In the midst of harsh persecution, Buddhists were unified in their relentless pacifist protests, making it tactfully logical for the United States to help them. Therefore, their adherence to their core beliefs allowed them to impact the war in their favor, which resulted in the fall of Diem.

The fall of Diem, however, resulted in further Buddhist persecution and opposition. On June 19, 1965, Nguyen Cao Ky began his rule over South Vietnam. Ky grew increasingly weary of the Buddhists; he was convinced that the Buddhists were traitors and wanted to overthrow his government. Thus, he removed a revered Buddhist General Thi from command on March 10, 1966. General Thi had both political and military authority in Corps I. The Buddhists were distressed by his removal and perceived Ky’s termination of Thi as a form of religious persecution.[[18]](#footnote-18) This precipitated a new wave of protests. However, this new wave of protests was different from the First Buddhist Crisis because it reflected the Buddhist monks’ growing frustration with the government.

In this crisis, some Buddhists monks deviated from pacifism and opposed the government through violence. A militant group of Buddhist monks emerged after the removal of Thi. This group was led by the Buddhist monk, Thich Tri Quang. Tri Quang’s militancy was reflected through the actions of his Buddhist group after the removal of Thi when they sought to takeover Corps I. Throughout March of 1966, the militant Buddhists created instability through violent riots in Corps I. The militant Buddhists destroyed the homes and churches of many Catholic, threw rocks at people, clubbed police men, and even threw grenades toward the government forces.[[19]](#footnote-19) In addition to violence, Tri Quang and his militant group also engaged in political action. In late March Tri Quang created an alliance with the mayor of Da Nang, Dr. Nguyen Van. In this alliance, the mayor relinquished his support of the GVN and instead backed the Buddhist movement. This alliance allowed the Buddhist movement to claim authority over military forces, including military bases. The remaining ARVN troops who continued their support of Ky were subsequently driven out of Corps I by the movement. By March 26, 1966, the Buddhist movement led by Tri Quang, controlled Corps I.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The takeover of Corps I pressured Ky to restore order immediately. On May 14, 1966, Ky dispatched a thousand South Vietnamese marines to Da Nang in order to suppress the movement.[[21]](#footnote-21) After three days, Tri Quang surrendered.[[22]](#footnote-22) The movement in Corps I was easily crushed by the brute opposition which “permanently freed the government from harmful Buddhist pressures.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The Buddhist movement did not emerge again during the American involvement in the South. In fact, the Buddhists suffered worse persecution under Communist rule in 1975, when leaders such as Tri Quang were put under house arrest.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In the Second Buddhist Crisis, the militant Buddhists monks abandoned their central dogmas of nonviolence and neutrality. The Lotus Dharma also states that Buddhists must remain neutral in their engagement.[[25]](#footnote-25) Tri Quang ignored the dogmas regarding neutrality and instead involved himself in politics. He also abandoned Buddhist pacifism as a result of frustration. His involvement in politics and violence resulted in factions among Buddhist monks and, therefore, disabled the unification of the Buddhists. The Buddhists were incoherent and never meant to involve themselves in violence or politics. Therefore, they were easily crushed by the Ky regime and this prevented them from reviving.

The differences between the First and Second Crises depict how Buddhism has remained part Vietnamese culture despite constant persecution. Throughout Vietnamese history, when Buddhists adhered to their dogmas and remained united, it enabled them to withstand persecution. However, when factions of Buddhists abandon their dogmas, it weakened them and made them susceptible to being crushed by oppressors. Buddhism has remained part of the Vietnamese culture by those who were steadfast in its dogma.

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