

## BUDDHIST ETHICAL VALUES IN TODAY'S SOCIAL LIFE IN VIETNAM

### VALORES ÉTICOS BUDISTAS NA VIDA SOCIAL ATUAL NO VIETNÃ

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**Abstract:** For more than 2000 years of presence in Vietnam, Buddhism has become one of the basic foundations of the national spiritual culture. With the teaching of compassion and wisdom, Buddhism was soon practiced and inclined to a good, compassionate, and altruistic lifestyle, contributing to establishing solidarity, consensus, stability, and progress in social life. Therefore, the author clarifies Buddhist ethical values in today's social life in Vietnam, thereby proposing solutions to promote them to contribute to leading ethical, cultural, intellectual, and secure lifestyles for a good society.

**Keywords:** Values. Buddhist ethics. Society. Vietnam.

**Resumo:** Durante mais de 2000 anos de presença no Vietnã, o budismo tornou-se um dos fundamentos básicos da cultura espiritual nacional. Com o ensinamento da compaixão e da sabedoria, o Budismo foi rapidamente praticado e inclinado para um estilo de vida bom, compassivo e altruísta, contribuindo para estabelecer a solidariedade, o consenso, a estabilidade e o progresso na vida social. Por conseguinte, o autor clarifica os valores éticos budistas na vida social atual do Vietnã, propondo soluções para os promover e contribuir para um estilo de vida ético, cultural, intelectual e seguro para uma boa sociedade.

**Palavras-chave:** Valores. Ética budista. Sociedade. Vietnã.

## 1. Introduction

Building a state under the rule of law and strictly abiding by the laws is one of the inevitable issues for the modern and civilized society of Vietnam today. However, the ethical foundation has always been respected to develop the values of truth, goodness, and beauty and maintain a sustainable, happy social life. One of the factors significantly contributing to the ethical foundation of Vietnamese people today is Buddhist ethics, such as kindness, compassion, delight, renunciation, no-self, altruism, etc., to bring love and help people to purify their minds and perform good deeds. Therefore, the article clarifies the positive values of Buddhist ethics in social life and proposes solutions for promoting and spreading good human values embedded in Buddhist ethics to develop an advanced social life imbued with national identity in Vietnam during the current international integration.

## 2. Literature Review

Buddhism and Buddhist ethics have always been a topic of concern for many domestic and foreign researchers. Some typical works and research results can be mentioned, such as *Fundamentals of Buddhism* written by Peter D. Santina, translated into Vietnamese by Thich Tam Quang, 1996; *The Influence of Ideologies and Religions on Vietnamese People Today* by Nguyen Tai Thu, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 1997; Rahula, Walpola. *What The Buddha Taught*. (Thich Nu Tri Hai translated). Hong Duc Publishing House, 1998; *The Historical Buddha* by Schumann, H.W. (Tran Phuong Lan translated), Vietnam Buddhist Research Institute, 2000; Walpola Rahula (Le Kim Kha translated), *What the Buddha Taught*, Ho Chi Minh City General Publishing House, 2013; *Buddhist Ethics – Path and Expression* by Thich Phuoc Toan, Hong Duc Publishing House, Hanoi, 2017; *Buddhist Ethics and Their Influence on Vietnamese People’s Ethics Today* by Thich Hue Dao, Social Science Publishing House, Hanoi in 2020; and so on. In general, the works have systematically studied Buddhism and aspects of Buddhist ethics. In each perspective, the authors have had different research directions to achieve their goals. However, no in-depth research on Buddhist ethical values and solutions to promote them in Vietnamese society today has been conducted.

## 3. Research Methods

The article is based on the worldview and methodology of dialectical materialism and historical materialism. In addition, it combines logical-historical, analytical-synthetic, and inductive reasoning methods and applies interdisciplinary knowledge of Philosophy, Religious Studies, Religious Ethics, Religious History, and Culture.

#### **4. Results And Discussion**

##### **4.1. The concept of Buddhist ethics and Buddhist ethical values**

###### ***The concept of Buddhist ethics***

*Ethics* plays a significant role in social life and is frequently discussed and resolved to ensure the existence and development of individuals and communities. According to the *Common Vietnamese Dictionary*, ethics is “The rules expressed in the relationships among people, between individuals and collectives; Good human qualities” (Nguyen Nhu Y 1998, p.249). *Ethics* can be understood as a system of rules and social norms by which people adjust their behavior to suit the interests of the community and society. In terms of religion, “Religious ethics is all concepts and ethical rules expressed in religious teachings (especially through precepts) to adjust human behavior according to the worldview and religious life” (Dang Thi Lan, 2006, p.14). Thus, religious ethics related to good and evil become ethical norms expressed in each discipline and doctrine of each religion.

Buddhism originated in India (during the 6th or 5th century BCE) when the society was divided by an unequal caste system. The founder of Buddhism is Prince Siddhartha, born in 624 BCE and known as Buddha Shakyamuni or Buddha. The main goal of Buddhist ethical thought is liberation from suffering, which is supreme and at the core of Buddhist teachings. According to Doan Trung Dang: “Duties are Right Dharma; virtues are fulfilling duties, not falsifying Right Dharma” (Doan Trung Con, 1995, p. 524). This means if the Right Dharma is about liberation, all Buddhist ethical thoughts are associated with the process of liberation. The Buddha declared, “Monks, in the past and even now, I teach only suffering and its cessation” (Thich Minh Chau, 1995, p.185). The above declaration of the Buddha highlights the idea of relieving the suffering of all living beings, eliminating suffering and sorrows, and bringing benefits and happiness to humans and is clearly expressed through the massive scripture system, in which the *Four Noble Truths* are basic: (1) *The Noble Truth of Suffering*: all the sufferings in life that each of us must experience. These are the eight sufferings: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; union with what is displeasing is

suffering; the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering; (2) *The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering*: the cause of discontent, frustration, and suffering that no one can avoid is craving; (3) *The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering*: the source of true, sustainable happiness without suffering is concentration and mindfulness; (3) *The Noble Truth of the Path that Leads to the Cessation of Suffering*: the path to achieve the source of true happiness. *The Four Noble Truths* show Buddhist ethical values based on means to extinguish greed, anger, and delusion.

In the *Noble Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering*, the main foundation of *the Four Noble Truths*, is the *Eightfold Path*: “The noble path is the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths are the noblest. Non-attachment is the noblest state...” (Doan Chinh, 1997, p.173). *Right View and Right Intention* in the *Eightfold Path* bring a deep and thorough awareness of the nature of life and a correct and positive conception of life as the core of thinking and acting. *Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood* develop good life skills based on the right understanding and experience in practicing good dharma through thoughts, words, and actions. *Right Effort* forms a sense of relentless effort; Finally, *Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration* expand self-control, including emotions, feelings, psychology, thinking, language, and actions; hence, the mind is peaceful, blissful, and immobile.

Besides, the *Six Harmonies* are to not only lead a harmonious and pure religious life and help the Sangha develop but also bring significant benefits to any collective capable of applying it. The Six Harmonies consist of (1) *Harmony in living together* is to live together in harmony and mutual respect on the basis of equality, mutual affection, non-discrimination, non-belief, and no envy; (2) *Harmony in speaking without conflict* is to give kind and harmonious words that do not fight over, offend, and hurt others; (3) *Harmony in having the same viewpoints* is to know how to exchange and consult ideas and have thoughts that do not cause opposition, disputes, prejudice, or hatred; (4) *Harmony in experiencing Dharma bliss* is to uphold the precepts, maintain ethical norms, practice the right dharma, support each other in training qualities and virtue and self-improvement; (5) *Harmony in having the same viewpoints* is to incline to right views and have harmonious and independent thoughts and perceptions; (5) *Harmony in sharing benefits* is to share the same benefits in material and spiritual aspects with each other in a sociable, equal, loving, and respectful way.

In addition, *the Four Dharmas of Attraction* are the art of winning people’s hearts and the method of winning and converting the masses. This is the skill of integrating collectives, organizations, and communities for social benefits. Generosity, as the Buddha taught, is to give materials such as money, wealth, food, clothing, or means of earning a living; knowledge,

skills, life and professional experience, good words, and ethical values; peace and tranquility with words of comfort, advice, understanding, and protection to express sympathy, trust, and admiration. *Kind words* are to use loving, gentle, graceful, polite, sincere, and clever words to win people's hearts and help them incline them to the good. *Beneficial acts* are to use dedication to help people have benefits and encourage them to strive for mutual success in life. *Sympathy* is to use closeness, co-habitation, co-work, and commitment to suffering to form good feelings and relationships.

Through the teaching of *Karma*, the Buddha taught a sense of personal responsibility. People must be aware that they are the master of their life, fully responsible for what they do, what they create with their body (actions), speech (words), mind (thoughts). No one can make themselves happy or miserable but themselves. Through the teaching of *dependent origination*, the Buddha taught that interdependent relationships, from people to the world, are in the operation of causes, conditions, and effects. There are no independent entities, no random events, and no power that can govern all things apart from the process of causes and effects. In the teaching of *four immeasurables*, the four immeasurable minds (*Kindness, Compassion, Delight, and Renunciation*) teach people to live a noble life with a broad and altruistic mind that is useful for life. Thus, "Buddhist ethics is all the values, standards, virtues, peace, happiness, etc., which people get from the practice of dharma, the teaching of the Buddha, to perform the functions of inclining to a peaceful life and noble liberation" (Thich Phuoc Toan, 2017, p.35). That is to say, Buddhist ethics teach people to incline the good and be knowledgeable to build a good and happy life in the present, prevent the evil, and develop the good to bring peace and happiness to all living beings.

### ***Buddhist ethical values***

*Value* was discussed and used very early in the history of ideology. In the ethical aspect, value is "*affirming the positive and right side, that is, including the viewpoint of value associated with the truth, goodness, and beauty; referring to what is capable of motivating people to act and strive*" (Phan Huy Le, 1996, p.17). According to Professor Huynh Khai Vinh, in the *Discussion of tolerance in culture*: "Ethical values express the standards regulating the relationship among humans and between humans and natural and social world (family, community, etc.) based on love or animosity, respect or disrespect, and the development or suppression of talent, freedom and happiness" (Huy Khai Vinh & Nguyen Thanh Tuan, 1997, p.60). Therefore, there is no general and abstract ethical value. Ethical value is within or permanently associated with specific

qualities and norms. Ethical values are not separate from specific concepts, norms, principles, and behaviors, but they are also not identical to ethical concepts, norms, and principles.” For humans, the world appears in patterns, even though it (a world full of rich and complex phenomena) has no meaning (luxurious – cowardly, good – bad, etc.) for itself’ (Ho Si Quy, 2006, p.41).

In terms of religion, each religion has its own principles and ethical norms for the behavior and lifestyle of its followers. All religions incline to the good, eliminate evil, and direct people to high and beautiful values. Although differences also exist in the concept of ethical norms, the greatest ethical value is to contribute to maintaining social ethics and refining personalities. Therefore, Buddhist ethical values are understood as a combination of ethical and religious values, ethical norms, models, and religious ethical norms (sacredness, purity) to regulate and standardize human behaviors on the principles of voluntariness, self-discipline, consideration of what to do and what not to do. Buddhist ethical values can be generalized in the following aspects:

*First, promote human values*

Buddhism focuses on people as subjects to build, protect, and perfect them. The fields of social activities always aim at the goals for people, which liberate them from suffering, injustice, and material and spiritual oppression; building a peaceful, civilized, and happy society. However, liberation is not due to an external force that each individual must do on his/her own: *“Be a lamp for yourself, rely on yourself only. Use the Dharma as a lamp, use the Dharma as a refuge, do not rely on anything else”* (Vietnamese Buddhist Canon, 1991, p.584). Thus, people do not fall into evil ideas or ideologies either in any form. Buddhist ethics teach people to live honestly and encourage people to perform good deeds, stay away from evil, and not perform evil deeds to create a good life.

*Second, build good relationships in society*

The Buddha taught: *“If a country has the following seven things, the number of old and young people will increase, and it will be peaceful for a long time; no one can invade. “Usually organizing meetings to discuss about political affairs; Respecting the elder and tolerating the younger (promoting solidarity); often respecting the law, understanding the national prohibitions and having politeness (respecting traditions); being filial to parents, respecting masters; respecting temples, respecting deities; genuine and clean gynaeceum, and laughing and talking without evil visions (women and girls must keep their virginhood); respecting and serving*

*the Buddhist priests, the maintainer of the precepts, and being attentive and never lazy to look after and support them (such as the dharma of respecting Arhats” (Thich Minh Chau, 2005, p.84-87). It means that for a good society, all people must treat each other ethically; it is necessary to establish social order through relationships from family to society, such as parental duties, filial duties, spousal duties, teacher-student duties, friendship duties, duties to those who are employed, etc.*

*Thirdly, appreciate the practicality and application*

Each religion upholds its own practicality and application in its own way, in accordance with its teachings. For Buddhism, the spirit of compassion for suffering is the foundation. In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha taught, “Do not perform any evil/ Cultivate good/ Purify your mind/ The teachings of the Buddhas” (Thich Minh Chau, 1995, p149). Therefore, cultivating yourself and performing good deeds are the foundation of Buddhist ethics, the strong desire to liberate people from suffering, the thought of altruism, relief from suffering, and the pursuit of happiness and peace for people as well as society. However, cultivating yourself and performing good deeds are not to annihilate all struggles and to be negative and passive to all injustice, oppression, etc., but to resist greed, envy, selfishness, coercion, violence, etc., encourage the manifestation of harmony, humility and people’s focus on performing good deeds.

#### **4.2. Buddhist ethical values and solutions to promote Buddhist ethical values in today’s social life in Vietnam**

##### ***Buddhist ethical values in today’s social life in Vietnam***

After more than 2,000 years of introduction and development, Buddhism is localized and deeply rooted in the social life of Vietnamese people. At each stage of development, Vietnamese Buddhism has constantly made positive contributions and had a great influence on Vietnamese social life in various fields such as national culture, art, lifestyle, and thinking, especially in terms of social ethics. Today, Buddhism is increasingly promoting its positive values in several areas of Vietnamese social life in the current context of market economy and globalization in the following aspects:

*First, Buddhist ethical values contribute to strengthening the traditional ethical values of Vietnam*



According to the report of the *White Book* of Vietnam published in March 2023, “Buddhism accounts for the largest number of followers with over 14 million followers and 18,544 places of worship” (Luong Hoang, 2023). In the development process in Vietnam, Buddhism not only conveys people’s beliefs but also plays a role in maintaining social ethics. Buddhist ethics, through laws, teachings, values, and norms, have come into the Vietnamese people’s lives. The influence of Buddhist ethics on the Vietnamese people’s lives is not only a teaching through scriptures and books but also a custom and way of life. In the book *Traditional spiritual values of the Vietnamese people* by Professor Tran Van Giau, he affirmed that, “The traditional ethics of the Vietnamese people is the traditional value system of patriotism, industriousness, compassion, gratitude, heroism, creativity, and optimism, in which patriotism is the spiritual ethical value at the top of the Vietnamese traditional values. The tradition was formed in thousands of years of building and defending the country. In the historical context and traditional values, if Buddhism wants to survive and develop in Vietnam, it is required to have a harmonious adaptation” (Tran Van Giau, 1980, p.145).

On a good foundation, the Vietnamese people have received Buddhist ethical thought and built Vietnamese Buddhism. The Buddhist thought of kindness, compassion, delight, renunciation, relief from suffering, and rescuing people from danger are still being absorbed and promoted by the Vietnamese people in their social life. Some rules of Buddhist ethics, such as the Five Precepts, the Ten Good Deeds, and the Eightfold Path, have similarities with the standards of social ethics that people believe in and promote. They are the rules that every society needs to maintain ethics and a healthy and happy lifestyle for people.

#### *Second, Buddhist ethical values in Vietnamese culture*

Vietnamese culture is an open culture. It preserves the national identity to suit itself while it adapts to foreign cultural elements. Thus, religious tolerance is also cultural tolerance, considering religion as the entity of culture, as a cultural subject. Buddhism becomes a bridge to bring Vietnamese culture to the world in international integration. Not only providing ideology for Vietnam’s feudal dynasties, but Buddhism also contributes to training talents for the country, defining the path of enlightenment for each individual through the four noble truths and the eightfold path, contributing to regulating human behaviors according to the standards of truth, goodness, and beauty.



Today, Buddhist ethical thought has affirmed its position in national cultural life in many fields of social life, such as politics, literature, architecture, music, art, culture, customs, beliefs, and religions. The teaching of life, “The Dharma is not separate from worldly phenomena,” has promoted Buddhist cultural values in Vietnamese society over time. The value of Buddhist ethical thought has deepened and enriched the traditional values of Vietnamese culture, such as the concepts of compassion, wisdom, selfless altruism, six harmonies, or upholding the law of cause and effect. Buddhism has specified that all human suffering and social inequalities are mainly greed, anger, and delusion, giving rise to wrong views, fighting, and doing evil. Buddhism also upholds the law of cause and effect, teaches and advises people to implement the *Four Immeasurable Minds*, the *Eightfold Path*, etc., upholding responsibility before themselves, the community, and society, and helping people adjust their behavior.

### *Third, Buddhism in Vietnam’s economic development*

Buddhist ethical thought not only contributes to the orientation of human behavior and attitudes in the face of nature and society but is also an essential factor in the sustainable development of Vietnam’s economy. Buddhism contributes to the development of the tourism economy with tangible and intangible values of religious institutions and works in Vietnam, such as pagodas, temples, and religious cultural works associated with relics such as Thien Mu Pagoda (Hue), Dau Pagoda (Bac Ninh), Bai Dinh Pagoda (Ninh Binh), Linh Ung Pagoda (Da Nang), Ba Den Pagoda (Tay Ninh), etc. It is the attraction of a large number of domestic and international tourists every year, especially during the festival season, that contributes to increasing local tourism income. Specifically, according to statistics of the domestic tourism industry on revenue from spiritual tourism in Ninh Binh Province in the first half of 2023, there were 4.53 million tourists, 2.5 times higher than the same period in 2022. In particular, there were 4.3 million domestic visitors and 220,000 international visitors. The revenue reached approximately VND 3,750 billion (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (2023)). Spiritual tourism contributes to introducing Vietnamese culture and history to international visitors while arousing the love of the homeland and learning about the national culture and history, as well as contributing to the economic development of Vietnam.

In addition, for the construction and improvement of the current socialist-oriented market economy institution and international integration, Buddhist thought contributes to

the State against negative and unethical phenomena in production and business and fading national identity in social life. It contributes to preserving good values in human relations and building and developing Vietnamese human personalities in the new period that is both civilized and imbued with national identity.

*Fourth, Buddhist ethical values in the implementation of social security*

Buddhism contributes to the implementation of social security, such as opening free vocational classes, which helps to reduce unemployment in society and create jobs for workers, etc. According to the Central Committee for Social Charity of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, during the third term of the Sangha, there were 25 Tue Tinh Duong establishments (traditional medicine establishments) and 655 traditional medicine clinics with good performance, which have examined and distributed drugs worth over VND 9 billion (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 2020). In addition, Buddhism has helped reduce the burden on society by joining hands to help disadvantaged people soon overcome difficulties and stabilize their lives. During the term of 2017 - 2022, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha has carried out charity activities with more than VND 12 trillion. These meaningful activities greatly influence the people's spirit and lead to other activities that attract many participants (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 2020).

*Fifth, Buddhist ethical values for the environment*

Buddhist ethics always directs people to a cohesive, harmonious, and friendly lifestyle with nature; to respect and appreciate nature because people and nature have a close, equal, and mutual relationship. Recognizing that environmental protection is to protect the survival of all species, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha has participated in propagating and educating the people's awareness of environmental protection. In monasteries, monks, nuns, and Buddhists are encouraged to participate in the activity of "planting the tree of merit" or "planting the tree of virtue" instead of the custom of "picking the lucks." Simultaneously, monks, nuns, and abbots of monasteries actively worked based on the pagodas' available land to provide for their own religious life. The restoration and construction of a spacious pagoda are to stabilize facilities, serve as a place to orient Buddhists and organize periodic retreats for adolescents, teenagers, and children of Buddhist families in order to educate young people to respect and maintain traditional ethics, practice a healthy lifestyle, and have

a sense of environmental protection so that people can love and share responsibilities with the social community.

***Solutions for promoting Buddhist ethical values in Vietnamese social life today***

*First, raising people's awareness of the role of Buddhist ethics in the current society*

The recognition and the role of religion have been affirmed by the Party and the State of Vietnam: "Promoting the good cultural and ethical values and resources of religions for the cause of national development" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p.171). Currently, in the market economy, the positive aspects of Buddhist ethics and the law fight against negative manifestations, cheating, etc. Thus, when evaluating and recognizing the role of Buddhist ethical values, it is advisable to avoid subjective thoughts such as disregard, one-sided, and inaccurate understanding; Buddhism should not be considered pessimistic, ineffective, or only harmful in this society.

*Second, strengthening State management of Buddhism in Vietnam*

In the management of Buddhist activities and organizations, the Party and the State are required to take flexible measures to create conditions for religious followers to fulfill their obligations as citizens. Developing and promulgating laws and policies on Buddhism is to promote a progressive and positive side in building healthy and progressive social ethics. It plays an essential role in orienting the mutual relationship between Buddhist moral values and Vietnamese social life. Those who work in and study Buddhism should be equipped with solid Buddhist knowledge and theory to understand Buddhism correctly, avoiding one-sidedness. At the same time, it is necessary to continue to renovate, concretize, and institutionalize religious policies in general and Buddhism in particular to meet the needs and tasks of religious management in the new situation.

*Third, overcoming the adverse effects of Buddhist activities*

In current practice, religious activities with superstitions such as practicing physiognomy, worshiping stars to relieve bad luck, burning votive paper, etc., at Buddhist places of worship are quite popular, causing economic costs and adversely affecting people's beliefs. Pagoda is a place of tranquility, helping people relax and be calm. Unfortunately,

chaos in festivals or pagodas at the beginning of the new year or on the full moon shows the low awareness of some Buddhists and people for Buddhism, which should be eliminated.

*Fourth, improving the material and spiritual life of Buddhists*

Improving the level of all aspects of people's lives is a prerequisite for Vietnamese Buddhism to develop in the right direction, take the Dharma to serve the nation, guide Buddhist activities to take place healthily, and promote the good values of Buddhist ethics in community life. The implementation of poverty reduction policies and the improvement of the material and spiritual life of Buddhist followers should be strengthened. On the other hand, it is necessary to create conditions for monks, nuns, and Buddhists to participate in production, politics, society, and culture. Thus, they can participate in the practice of social life, accustom themselves to real life, arouse their spirit of national ownership, and contribute their strength to the renovation.

## **5. Conclusion**

With the outstanding value of humanity, Buddhist ethics leads people to live altruistically and nobly and arouse the spirit of solidarity, equality, and love between people. Today, although the historical context has changed and Buddhism also has many differences from ancient Buddhism, many positive factors of Buddhism, especially in ethics, are still valuable in educating people to aim for the good, encouraging people to strive for good values, contributing to preserving and developing pure, compassionate, and altruistic human values and ethical lifestyles. Therefore, Vietnamese history has consistently recognized the outstanding contributions of Buddhist ethics in social life. Buddhist ethical values have contributed practically to the country's achievements in the cause of construction, socio-cultural development, and national development in the context of globalization and international integration.

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