

OVERVIEW OF HOA HAO BUDDHISM

1. PURE LAND

In 1939, Prophet Huynh Phu So, a native of Hoa Hao village in Tan Chau district, Chau Doc province, founded Hoa Hao Buddhism. Since then, Hoa Hao Buddhism has grown rapidly into a major religion in Vietnam. Hoa Hao Buddhism has spread throughout the Mekong River Delta, the Western part of South Vietnam. The following provinces have the highest concentration of Hoa Hao Buddhist: Chau Doc, An Giang, Sa Dec, Kien Phong, Vinh Long, Phong Dinh, Chuong Thien, Kien Giang, Ba Xuyen, Bac Lieu, An Xuyen, Dinh Tuong, Long An, Kien Hoa, Kien Tuong, and the capital, Saigon- Gia Dinh.

The highly fertile area of the Mekong Delta, also known as the Rice Basket of Vietnam, plays a very important part in the agricultural economy of Vietnam. The Rice Basket region covers an area of 18,850 square kilometers of farmland, which yields three million tons of rice per year. The Mekong Delta region exports close to 30% of Vietnam's rice crop. In addition to agriculture, the Mekong Delta region specializes in fishery, animal husbandry, and various other crops.

South Vietnam, all regions south of the 17th Parallel, has a total area of 173,260 square kilometers. 30,000 square kilometers are used for agriculture. The Western Area, where Hoa Hao Buddhism was founded, occupies 60 percent of the total cultivable land of the region.

2. ORIGIN

The mountains of the Western area have been the home of many unexplainable mysteries. The most famous of these are the Sacred Mountains of That Son on the border of Chau Doc and Cambodia.

In 1849, a living Buddha reverently known as The Healing Buddha of Tay An made his first appearance on the Sacred Mountain of That Son and began his salvation mission by creating BUU SON KY HUONG Buddhism. About 90 years later, exactly in 1939, also near That Son, another living Buddha, Prophet Huynh Phu So, continued the tradition of Buu Son Ky Huong and founded Hoa Hao Buddhism. Although Hoa Hao Buddhism was founded in 1939, it is a continuation of the Buu Son Ky Huong (literally, "Strange Perfume from Precious Mountains ") established in 1849. Thus, its existence is over a century old.

Both The Healing Buddha of Tay-An and Prophet Huynh Phu So have been revered throughout South Vietnam as two Buddha coming into the world to save mankind from sufferings.

3. HOA HAO FOLLOWERS

The estimated total number of Hoa Hao followers is over two million people representing more than one third the population of the Western Area, or 10 percent of the population of South Vietnam (prior to 1975). In provinces like Chau Doc, An Giang, Kien Phong, and Sa-Dec, Hoa Hao Buddhists account for 90 percent of the population. In other provinces, this proportion varies from 10 to 60 percent.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF HOA HAO BUDDHISM

First Characteristic

From Buu Son Ky Huong to Hoa Hao Buddhism, these Buddhism are characterized as PURE LAND - a Buddhism for the peasants, one meant for Vietnamese farmers.

During his lifetime, The Healing Buddha of Tay An preached Buddhism. At the same time, he encouraged agriculture under the slogan PRACTICING BUDDHISM WHILE FARMING YOUR LAND. In continuing the tradition of Buu Son Ky Huong, Prophet Huynh Phu So also encouraged PRACTICING BUDDHISM WHILE FARMING YOUR LAND. This is the reason why Prophet Huynh Phu So chose the most fertile part of Vietnam to begin his evangelical mission. Therefore, the majority of Hoa Hao faithful are farmers.

Second Characteristic

Hoa Hao Buddhism and Buu Son Ky Huong advocate the practice of Buddhism at home. The Healing Buddha of Tay An and Prophet Huynh Phu So shared the view that Buddhism should not only be preached in pagodas and temples, but also be a living practice observed in every family. For this reason, Hoa Hao followers are not required to shave their heads and take refuge in pagodas. Instead, they are allowed to live with their families, to lead normal lives tilling their land while trying to improve themselves by observing Shakyamuni's Teachings (Siddhartha Gautama, historical Buddha, born in 563 B.C.E).

"STUDY BUDDHISM TO IMPROVE OURSELVES" is the guideline of Hoa Hao Doctrine. In order to attain Nirvana and free us from the cycle of reincarnation, we must follow the genuine teachings of Buddha, keep a clear mind and improve ourselves to fulfill our duty in our present life.

A Hoa Hao Buddhist practicing Buddhism for self-improvement must first of all do his best to comply with the Four Great Debts Of Gratitude:

1. Gratitude to our Ancestors and Parents.
2. Gratitude to our Country.
3. Gratitude to the Three Treasures: Buddha, the Dharma (Buddhist teachings), and the Shangha (Community of monks).

4. Gratitude to our fellow countrymen and to mankind. To show our thankfulness to our Country, we must be ready to sacrifice ourselves for our country when required.

Third Characteristic

Hoa Hao Buddhism has modernized the methods of self-improvement by discarding all unnecessary rites and superstitious rituals. The purpose is to promote the essence of Buddhism in accordance with Buddha's genuine teachings. Some of the modifications advocated by Hoa Hao Buddhism are:

1. We should not built new pagodas or statues. Instead, we should reserve our money to aid the poor and the needy.
2. We should not solicit the services of sorcerers, magicians, astrologers, and fortunetellers.
3. We should not offer food as offerings to Buddha because Buddha would never accept such bribery.
4. We should not use flags, banners, and streamers or burn votive paper because this is a futile waste...
5. We should not conduct expensive funerals. Instead let us pray quietly for the deliverance of the deceased person's soul.
6. We should not compel our children to marry the one they do not like.
7. We should not demand large financial gifts from the bridegroom or organize big wedding parties, because this will only impoverish us.

In short, the reforms advocated by Hoa Hao Buddhism are aimed at bringing us back to the original teachings of Buddha, which said: "OUR BELIEF MUST COME FROM OUR HEART. Faith is a matter of heart rather than a matter of rites and rituals".

5. WORSHIP

To be in line with these reforms, Hoa Hao Buddhist worship at homes is very simple. Buddha statues, bells or gongs should not be displayed on the altar. The Hoa Hao Buddhist Altar should consist of a piece of brown cloth symbolizing human harmony. Under the Buddha's Altar is the Ancestral altar reserved for honoring our Ancestors. In front of the house, an altar to Heaven is set up to enable communication with the Universe (heaven and earth), the four heavenly Directions and the ten Buddhist Directions (North, South, East, West, North-East, South-East, North-West, South-West, Above and Below). No food of any kind, including fruits, may be used to worship Buddha. Only fresh water, flowers and incense sticks are needed. Fresh water represents cleanliness and flowers purity. Incense sticks are used to freshen the air.

Hoa Hao followers must worship Buddha at least twice a day, morning and evening. In addition, Hoa Hao Buddhist should observe the 1st and 15th day of each lunar month as

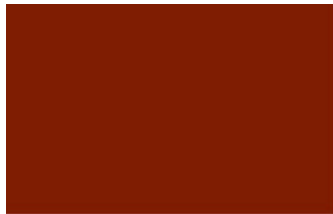
Holy Days. On Buddha's Holy days, Hoa Hao Buddhist should go to pagodas, Hoa Hao Meeting Halls or Preaching Halls to pray and listen to sermons.

Prayers are recited in a low voice. Bells or gongs should not be used. When the time of worship comes, if we are away from home, let us turn Westwards to pray to Buddha - we face Westwards because the original land of Buddhism is in India, West of South Vietnam. We should encourage others to pray silently in their hearts wherever they may be.

On 18th day of the 5th lunar month of each year, the Hoa Hao Buddhist community celebrates Founders Day. The celebration marks the day Hoa Hao Buddhism was established. On this day, an important ceremony is held at the Hoa Hao Holy Land and throughout the Mekong Delta area. The main features of Hoa Hao Buddhism are observed on this occasion.

6. HOA HAO BUDDHIST FLAG AND INSIGNIAS.

The Hoa Hao Buddhist flag is rectangular in shape. The flag color is a maroon brown. There are no characters or pictures on the flag.



Hoa Hao Buddhist Flag

The Hoa Hao insignias are round and brown, and bearing the picture of a white Lotus and four initials P.G.H.H - an acronym for Phat Giao Hoa Hao which means Hoa Hao Buddhism.



Hoa Hao Buddhist Insignia

7. HOA HAO HOLY LAND

The Hoa Hao Holy Land has been established at Hoa Hao village, Tan Chau District, Chau Doc Province, the home village of Prophet Huynh Phu So and also the birth place of Hoa Hao Buddhism.

8. SYSTEM OF ORGANIZATION

The Hoa Hao Buddhist Community is administered by a system of Administrative Committees set up at each hamlet, village, district and province. At the top of the hierarchy is the Central Council of Administrators. The Hamlet Administrative Committee is composed of several subcommittees. From this centralize-decentralize system, Hoa Hao Buddhist leaders are able to keep close contact with the masses. All activities and instructions are effectively managed. The communication channel from the central council to the grass-roots subcommittee level is free flowing. The guiding principle of Hoa Hao organization and management can be described as Focused Democracy.

- a. **ELECTIONS:** From the hamlet level, Hoa Hao faithful elect their representatives to the Administrative Committees. The Administrative Committees elect the Central Council of Administrators from the hamlets, villages, districts and provinces.
- b. **LEADERSHIP:** The Administrators are elected according to their virtues and qualifications. A democratic style election ensures fairness and selection of the most able candidate for the job. Each Board of Administrators consists of 10 to 15 members. The Central Council of Administrators has 23 members. Aside from the Central Council of Administrators, the Supervisory Council is setup to act as a check and balance entity. The Supreme Head of the Church is Prophet Huynh Phu So, the Founder of Hoa Hao Buddhism.

9. HOA HAO HISTORY

Hoa Hao Buddhism was established in 1939 when Vietnam was still a French colony. The French authorities did everything they could to oppress and prevent Prophet Huynh Phu So from preaching His doctrine.

After the Japanese troops' invasion of Indochina, Japanese officials expressed their desire to help the Vietnamese nationalist and religious groups to reclaim their Independence from the French. In 1942, they helped liberate Prophet Huynh from Bac Lieu where He was being placed under administrative surveillance by the French, and took Him to Saigon. Prophet Huynh was grateful for His liberation, but this did not prevent Him from incessantly asking the Japanese government to grant full independence to Vietnam.

In 1945, the Hoa Hao Buddhist community organized a guerrilla resistance war against the French. Later on, the same Hoa Hao Front initiated a campaign against the Communist

Viet-Minh when the Viet-Minh began to implement a totalitarian communist regime in Vietnam.

Following the signing of the Geneva Agreement in 1954, the Hoa Hao community underwent another period of repression under the dictatorial regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem. After the overthrow of President Diem on November 1, 1963, the Hoa Hao Buddhists had a chance to reorganize themselves and elect a new Board of Administrators.

The North Vietnamese conquest of South Vietnam in 1975 ushered in another dark period of persecution. Together with other religions, Hoa Hao followers faced systematic tactics aimed at religious annihilation. Aside from the religious persecution campaigns, all properties belonging to Hoa Hao Buddhist and its followers were confiscated. Thousands of religious books, hundreds of lecture halls and dozens of temples were destroyed or converted to private use by the Communist Vietnam regime. Prominent Hoa Hao Buddhist leaders, clergy men and lay people were arrested and sent to concentration camps or executed.

At present day 1999, the Hoa Hao Administrative Council does not exist in Vietnam. The Hoa Hao Buddhists are forbidden to practice their religion. Religious persecution and oppression is very strong. Even under extreme persecution, the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church is diligent in achieving two main objectives:

1. Propagate Hoa Hao doctrine in and outside of Vietnam
2. Carry out social work and come to the help of the poor.

The propagation of Hoa Hao faith is considered a sacred mission. This evangelical mission helps to foster and promote virtues in society in order to reform mankind. The carrying out of social work serves the purpose of raising the standards of living for the people in line with the 20th century progress. As we approach the 21st century, the task of Hoa Hao evangelist and social work programs is becoming increasingly important and critical for humanity.

10. IN THE WORLD BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

Today, Hoa Hao Buddhism is one of the six most important religions in Vietnam. With a mass of over four millions followers closely united in their faith, Hoa Hao Buddhism can be a very influential force in the country. This force is very well organized. Even through the hardships and trials of the Communist Vietnam, Hoa Hao Buddhism still exists. Hoa Hao Buddhism is flourishing and growing stronger each day.

The Hoa Hao Buddhist Church is a founding Member of the Vietnamese Interfaith Council, a body set up with a view of promoting harmony between major religions in Vietnam such as: Catholics, Buddhists, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Cao-Dais, Protestant...etc.

Where do the successes of Hoa Hao Buddhism come from? The answer is simple: Hoa Hao Buddhism is not an entirely new religion in Vietnam. In fact, Hoa Hao is Buddhism based on the fundamental teachings of Sakyamuni combined with two great and ancient Asian philosophies, Confucianism and Taoism - whose teachings and practice are rooted deeply in the hearts of the Vietnamese people.

11. BEFORE 1975

1. ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEES

- 82 District Committees
- 476 Village Committees
- 3,100 Hamlet Committees

2. FACILITIES - OFFICES

- 213 pagodas & training centers
- 468 preaching halls
- 452 meeting centers
- 2,876 offices

3. STAFF

- 36,500 Administrative Committee members (all levels).
- 2,679 pagoda and training center staff
- 6,086 preaching hall staff
- 10,000 preachers and preacher trainees

12. HOA HAO BUDDHISM IN AMERICA:

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