

# **Hoa Hao Buddhism**

## **A Religion Deeply Rooted in the Culture of the Peasantry of Mekong Delta**

(Prepared by BPSOS – 31 October, 2013)

Founded in 1939 by Huynh Phu So (known as “Prophet” or “Teacher” to his followers) Hoa Hao Buddhism was named after the birthplace of the founder, a village in Tan Chau district, Chau Doc Province, in South Vietnam. In 1965, there were more than 2 million followers officially registered as Hoa Hao Buddhists. Currently, there are approximately 3 to 6 million Hoa Hao Buddhists, mainly concentrated in An Giang, Dong Thap, Kien Giang, Vinh Long and Phong Dinh Provinces.

Prophet Huynh Phu So aimed his teachings at the peasants who lived in extreme poverty and hardship in the Mekong Delta. He preached a more simplified version of Buddhism, strongly emphasizes the compliance with the “Four Debts of Gratitude,” which includes: Gratitude to parents and ancestors, Gratitude to country, Gratitude to Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha and, Gratitude to fellow countrymen and humanity.

His teachings mesh well with the cultural norms and economic conditions of the people (mostly farmers) living in the Mekong Delta region and represent the essence of Buddhism.. He understood that the peasants had little time or money to attend and support elaborate religious services. Thus, Prophet Huynh Phu So advocated simple religious practices to be carried out within the home rather than in temples. Hoa Hao Buddhism has no clergy or statues and few temples.

Hoa Hao Buddhists are thus encouraged to lead a normal agricultural life with their families while observing Buddhist teachings. In line with this philosophy, Hoa Hao Buddhists worship twice a day in front of simple in-home altars, and no food, no effigy is used in worshipping Buddha; only fresh water, flowers and incense are permitted to represent purity. Their home is their temple.

According to the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World:

*“Many of Huynh Phu So's oracles, particularly those relating to self-improvement, form the basis of the Hoa Hao Buddhist doctrine. Fulfillment of the Four Graces, or Four Debts of Gratitude (Tu An), is one of its most important tenets of Hoa Hao life and thought:*

- 1. Be grateful to our parents and ancestors.*
- 2. Be grateful to our country.*
- 3. Be grateful to the three gems: Buddha, Buddha's teachings, and the Sangha (the Buddhist community).*
- 4. Be grateful to fellow countrymen and to mankind.*

*...In line with the original teaching of the Buddha, who stated that ‘Our belief must come from our heart,’ Hoa Hao Buddhism allows its followers to practice their religion at home. They do not shave their heads or take refuge in pagodas. They can live a normal life. The first and fifteenth of each lunar month are considered holy days, but worship can be conducted in the morning and evening in the home. In a Hoa Hao home the Buddha's altar does not have to include a Buddha statue, gong, or bells. A piece of brown cloth is used to symbolize human harmony. Outside the home a “heaven's altar” can be set up to help communication with the universe—sky and earth, four cardinal corners, and ten Buddhist directions. As for offerings, pure water is offered as a symbol of cleanliness, as are flowers for purity and incense to freshen the air. The Hoa Hao flag is also very simple, being brown and rectangular and bearing no characters or images”.*

Conforming to the rural lifestyles and advocating for frugality that suits the economic conditions of the peasantry, the Hoa Hao beliefs soon attracted many followers and quickly spread across those provinces in the Mekong Delta known as the rice basket of the South.

Reflecting the communal life of peasants, Hoa Hao Buddhists set up recital minarets (Dao Trang) – gathering places set up by followers or groups of followers for communal use to conduct cultural activities, group study, group meditation, and social activities. Some 800 such minarets were established along main arteries cutting through all the villages of the Mekong Delta. There are also lecture halls (Doc Giang Duong) erected in different villages to provide platforms for lecturers to speak to large outdoor gatherings of Hoa Hao Buddhists.



**Figure 1: A lecture hall**

Hoa Hao Buddhist teachings promote mutual assistance among followers, engagement in charity work, and avoidance of the luxurious lifestyle. Specifically, Prophet Huynh Phu So taught his followers to abandon all harmful habits and superstitions, stay away from money-seeking sorcerers and healers, abstain from burning golden votive paper, and not offer alms. In sum Hoa Hao Buddhism seeks to prevent wasteful practices and save money to assist the poor.

Hoa Hao Buddhism does not focus exclusively on Buddhist sutras, but mainly on the teachings of the founder whose words have been mostly transmitted in the form of easily understood poems, in the tradition of “Ca Dao” or folk poetry.

Throughout its development, Hoa Hao Buddhism remains closely in tune with the needs and concerns of the local peasantry. Traditionally, Vietnamese society was based upon extended families and agricultural communities. Far from being a mere topographical unit, a Vietnamese community was a viable social cell, a sort of micro-society with distinct economic, administrative, cultural and religious life sui generis. Therefore, Vietnamese society has been described as a federation of rural communities. For the Vietnamese people, any community represented a microcosm, a nexus around which all social and religious life evolved.

In summary, Hoa Hao Buddhism embraces the norms and traditions in the Mekong Delta, and from its teachings emerge a new culture with the following characteristics:

- (1) Each person is responsible for his or her own adherence to the teachings of the Prophet: They study the bible and pray at home, or collectively at the local recital minaret. Of their own volition, they occasionally gather at the lecture platform to listen to a learned Hoa Hao Buddhist.
- (2) Each home is a temple: Prayers, ceremonies, teachings and other activities are conducted at home, oftentimes with the participation of neighbors or lay leaders in the village or from nearby villages.
- (3) Each community is a system of social support: Putting beliefs into practice, Hoa Hao Buddhists are engaged in charity work and volunteer services, providing support to those less fortunate and mutual assistance among fellow Hoa Hao Buddhists in the village and beyond.
- (4) A network of tightly connected, self-governing autonomous communities with practically no hierarchy: There is no central authority that dictates its will or imposes its controls on the people. There is a saying in Vietnamese to the effect that “the emperor’s rule stops at the village’s gate.” This is truly the case among Hoa Hao Buddhist communities.

## Violations of Cultural Rights

Right after the takeover of Saigon on April 30, 1975, the communist government ordered the dissolution of the entire Hoa Hao Buddhist Church (HHBC) hierarchy. They confiscated all HBC properties including offices, Hoa Hao central library, temples and shrines, the Hoa Hao University in An Giang province, and all recital minarets. In all, before 1975, the HHBC had: 28 provincial or city offices, 82 district offices, 476 village offices, 3,100 hamlet offices, and over 800 recital minarets. With few exceptions all of these facilities were confiscated by the communist government – a sample of such facilities is included in Attachment 1. This policy that continues to this day has severely disrupted the traditional way of life of Hoa Hao Buddhists at both the individual and the community levels and hindered them from practicing their beliefs.



**Figure2: A lecture hall turning into ruins**

The social and cultural infrastructure of Hoa Hao Buddhist communities in the Mekong Delta was thus dismantled. Followers are left with no gathering place to conduct group activities according to the precepts of their religion, which emphasize the communal lifestyles of the

peasantry. The few minarets still in the possession of Hoa Hao Buddhists are barred from being renovated. Most of them are becoming unusable.

Without a public gathering place, Hoa Hao Buddhists used their homes as staging areas for most activities. The police routinely break up the gathering of Hoa Hao Buddhists in their own homes, banning group activities and group prayers. Despite police interference, which sometimes turned violent, Hoa Hao Buddhists continued to find ways to practice their faith.

The government realized that it could not wipe out Hoa Hao Buddhism and switched tactics. It sought to control Hoa Hao Buddhist adherents by establishing, in 1999, the Hoa Hao Buddhist Administrative Council, which was comprised of many Communist Party members, to replace the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church.

On the one hand, the government presented the Administrative Council to the world as a sign of religious freedom; on the other hand they further suppressed the “non-conformist” Hoa Hao Buddhists, targeting lay leaders and their active followers. For example, on 15 June, 2000, when Nguyen Van Dien, a lay leader of the Pure Hoa Hao Buddhist Sect, visited the home of Hoa Hao couple Vo Van Buu and Mai Thi Dung, the police busted in and forcefully took away the key of Dien’s moped, practically confiscating it. When Buu and Dung protested this violation of privacy, they were arrested. In August 2000 they were tried on charges of “opposing government officials on public duty.” Dung was given a 18-months suspended sentence followed by 24 months of administrative detention while her husband Buu was sentenced to 2 years in prison.



**Figure 3: The police breaking up a mass prayer**



**Figure 4: The police blocking Hoa Hao Buddhists from coming together to commemorate the anniversary of their religion's founder**



**Figure 5: A lecture hall closed out by the government**

To promote the legitimacy of the new leadership of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church, the government suppresses the voices of Hoa Hao Buddhists who do not recognize the government-sanctioned Administrative Council. The Venerable Vo Van Thanh Liem was apprehended by the public security police in front of his temple soon after his submission of written testimony to a congressional hearing chaired by Congressman Christopher Smith on June 9, 2005. Also arrested and imprisoned was his nephew Vo Van Thanh Long, an assistant monk at the temple. The government cut off power to the Venerable Vo Van Thanh Liem's temple and to the home of Vo

Van Thanh Long, his nephew. Many prominent Hoa Hao Buddhists that advocated for religious freedom were placed under house arrest and continue to be under strict surveillance by the police: Truong Van Thuc, Le Minh Triet, Nguyen Van Lia, Vo Van Diem (Vo Van Thanh Liem's brother).

Likewise, local authorities cut off power to Diem's home after they found out that Diem had met with Congressman Christopher Smith during the latter's visit to Vietnam in late 2005.



Figure 6: Monk Vo Van Thanh Liem after being assaulted by the police

In early 2007, the government intensified its crackdown on non-conformist Hoa Hao Buddhists. According to the US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2007:

*After 1975, all administrative offices, places of worship, and social and cultural institutions connected to the Hoa Hao faith were closed. Believers continued to practice their religion at home, but the lack of access to public gathering places contributed to the Hoa Hao community's isolation and fragmentation. In 1999, a new official Hoa Hao body, the Hoa Hao Administrative Council, was formed. In the spring of 2005, the Hoa Hao Administrative Council was expanded and renamed the Executive Committee of Hoa Hao Buddhism. Several leaders of the Hoa Hao community, including several pre-1975 leaders, openly criticized the Committee. They claimed that the committee was subservient to the Government and demanded official recognition, instead, of their own Hoa Hao body, the Hoa Hao Central Buddhist Church (HHCBC). Although still unregistered, on May 4, 2005, the HHCBC held an organizational meeting that was attended by 126 delegates from across the southern part of the country. However, its members faced significant official repression.*

*...The Government requires all religious publishing to be done by the Religious Publishing House, which is a part of the Office of Religious Affairs, or by other government-approved publishing houses after the Government first approves the proposed items... The Religious Publishing House has printed 250,000 copies of parts of the Hoa Hao sacred scriptures, along with 100,000 volumes featuring the founder's teachings and prophecies; however, Hoa Hao believers reported that the Government continued to restrict the distribution of the full scriptures, specifically the poetry of the founder. The official Hoa Hao Representative Committee*

*cited a lack of funds, not Government restrictions, as the reason why the Hoa Hao scriptures had not been published in full.”*

On March 5, 2007 the People's Court of Dong Thap Province sentenced four Hoa Hao Buddhist leaders to four to six years imprisonment for having participated in a peaceful hunger strike to protest physical assaults by the police against Hoa Hao Buddhists: Nguyen Van Tho (6 years), Le Van Soc (6 years), Nguyen Van Thuy (5 years), and Duong Thi Tron (4 years). Their trials, with no defense accorded and being closed to the public and family members, have resulted in the typical prearranged sentences. Other prominent Hoa Hao Buddhist leaders in prison included: Nguyen Van Dien, Vo Van Buu, Mai Thi Dung, Nguyen Thanh Phong, Nguyen Thi Ha, To Van Manh, Vo Van Thanh Liem, Vo Van Thanh Long, Le Van Tinh and Bui Tan Nha.

Government suppression of Hoa Hao Buddhists continues to this day. The government uses threats, intimidations, arrests and violence to force Hoa Hao Buddhists to recognize and submit themselves to the government-sanctioned Executive Committee. Non-conformist Hoa Hao Buddhists would be painted in the government-controlled media as sowing discord in the religious community by not recognizing the Executive Committee.

The government vigorously blocks all activities that are not under the control of this Executive Committee. As an example, the government has increased its harassment of Bui Van Trung's family since 2006, when he built a recital minaret in Phuoc Hung, An Phu District, An Giang, to allow local Hoa Hao Buddhist adherents to congregate and study the Church's teachings, pray, and engage in celebrations and other religious rituals. Thousands of members of the Traditional Hoa Hao Buddhist Church have since used the minaret for prayers, meditation, other religious practices, and communal activities. The government ordered Trung to close the minaret on the pretext that he had no official permit. Each time the believers gathered there, public security agents and their hired thugs surrounded the site, blocked its entrance, beat up believers, used fire trucks to hose water on them, and/or threw rocks and rotten food into the minaret. Once Trung had to threaten self-immolation when the police raided the minaret and harassed participants during a group prayer. In July 2012, the police arrested Bui Van Tham, Trung's son, without warrant. In September he was tried and sentenced to two years and six months in prison for "opposing the state." On October 30, 2012 Trung himself was arrested. In January 2013, he was sentenced to four years in prison on charges of "opposing officials performing their duty." In late October 2013, when Bui Thi Diem Thuy, Trung's daughter, hanged the banner: NAM MÔ A DI ĐÀ PHẬT (I put my faith in Amida Buddha) at the minaret's entrance, the police ordered it taken down. As she refused, the minaret was desecrated the following night, and the banner was torn.





**Figure 7: Recital minaret set up by the family of Bui Van Trung, desecrated in late October 2013**

The recent sentencing of Nguyen Van Lia is another example. To provide an alternative to the sanctioned book of teaching, which the government had censored about half of its content, Lia, a 71-year old lay leader, distributed books, CDs and DVDs of the teachings of founder Huynh Phu So to fellow Hoa Hao Buddhists. He was arrested on April 24, 2011 with his wife, Tran Thi Bac Lon, on what appeared to be a trumped-up traffic violation as they drove to attend a remembrance ceremony for another deceased Hoa Hao follower. The authorities then raided their house and confiscated all books, CDs and DVDs. Authorities released his wife that night, but continued to detain him, and prevented his family from seeing him for five months after his arrest. In December of that year, he was sentenced to 5 years in prison on charges of distributing “anti-government” materials. Also sentenced was Tran Hoai An, a Hoa Hao Buddhist, for the same charge.



Figure 8: Nguyen Van Lia at trial, 13 December, 2011

According to the US State Department's International Religious Freedom Report for 2012:

*“The Hoa Hao Administrative Council is the officially recognized Hoa Hao body; however, several leaders of the Hoa Hao community openly criticized the council as overly subservient to the government. The government permitted publication of only five of the 10 Hoa Hao sacred books for sanctioned Hoa Hao groups. No new books were authorized for publication during the year.*

*“Dissenting Hoa Hao groups, the Traditional Hoa Hao Church and the Pure Hoa Hao Church, faced restrictions on their religious and political activities. The government prohibited their commemorations of the disappearance of the Hoa Hao founder and public readings of his writings. Police regularly discouraged worshipers from visiting temples and facilities affiliated with the unrecognized Pure Hoa Hao Church and Traditional Hoa Hao Buddhist Church in An Giang, Vinh Long, Dong Thap, and Can Tho, especially on church holidays related to the lunar calendar and the anniversary of the death of the founder of Hoa Hao Buddhism.”*

Following the Buddhist tradition of self-immolation, many Hoa Hao Buddhists have burned themselves to death in protest of government policies targeting their communities.

On 19 March, 2001 a Hoa Hao Buddhist, Mrs. Nguyen Thi Thu, self-immolated and died in Vinh Long Province. She committed self-immolation to protest the brutal police crackdown against a demonstration held by Hoa Hao Buddhists two days before.

On 6 March, 2005, Vo Van Buu attempted self-immolation but was rescued. He and his wife, Mai Thi Dung, participated in a demonstration to protest government's blocking Hoa Hao Buddhists from conducting mass prayers.

On the same day, Tran Van Ut, a Hoa Hao Buddhist priest, committed self-immolation and died.

## **Typical Facilities of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church Confiscated by the Government in 1975**

1. HHBC Headquarters Office at Hoa Hao village, now transformed into the Administrative Office of Phu Tan district, Angiang Province. Hoa Hao Holy Land is now called: Phu My Village, Phu Tan district, An Giang Province.
2. Office of Management Board of Hoa Hao Holy Land, transformed into the Information and Cultural Office of Phu Tan district.
3. HHBC Library of Hoa Hao Holy Land, transformed into Phu My People Committee, Phu Tan district.
4. Boarding house for Hoa Hao Buddhist pilgrims at Hoa Hao Holy Land was leveled. The land was used to build the District Treasury.
5. HHBC Relief Station now is the District Education Office.
6. HHBC Lecture Hall at My Huong market now is a government sport club office.
7. Mess Hall No. 1 for Hoa Hao Buddhist pilgrims near My Huong market was leveled. It is now a restaurant.
8. Mess Hall No. 2 near HBC's headquarter was also leveled to build a food depot.
9. Hoa Hao Representatives Office, 114 Bui Thi Xuan Street, Saigon.
10. Office of Hoa Hao Saigon Management Board, facing the Hoa Hao Representatives Office.
11. Office of Hoa Hao An Giang Management Board, 80/1 Nguyen Truong To St. Long Xuyen City.
12. Office of Hoa Hao Phong Dinh Management Board, 42 Ly Thai To St. Cantho City.
13. Office of Hoa Hao Interprovincial Phong Dinh-Chuong Thien Management Board 42 Ly Thai To St, Can Tho City.
14. Seat of Hoa Hao Interprovincial Phong Dinh-Chuong Thien, 16-18 Tran Quoc Tuan St, Cantho City.
15. Office of Hoa Hao Chau Doc Management Board transformed into Nguyen Ai Quoc Party School, Chau Doc City.
16. Office of Hoa Hao Vinh Long Management Board, located at Vinh Long-Can Tho square, transformed into Vinh Long Printing office.

17. Office of Hoa Hao Sa Dec Management Board, 2km from the former Sa Dec Provincial Administrative Headquarters.

18. Office of Hoa Hao Tan Chau Management Board transformed into Tan Chau Light Industry office.

19. Lecture Hall of Long Phu village, Tan Chau district is now being used as maternity hospital.

20. Office of Hoa Hao An Phu Management Board, transformed into An Phu Tax Branch.

## Persecution Against Hoa Hao Buddhists

Respectfully submitted to:

- International human rights organizations
- Advocates for religious freedom
- Officials of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church's overseas branches

*(Hopefully we can be a source of information on the repression of the Hoa Hao Buddhist Church (HHBC) that organizations advocating for human rights and religious freedom can use in their discussions with the government of Vietnam).*

Several HHBC adherents are serving long prison sentences for demanding religious freedom. To help others remember these courageous individuals, this document summarizes the circumstances leading to their unjust punishment by the government of Vietnam, particularly in view of the regime's harsh treatment of those being detained for their advocacy.

**1. Mai thi Dung**, of Cho Moi District, An Giang Province, arrested on 8/5/2005, tried on 9/15/2005 for "disturbing the peace", and sentenced to 11 years in prison. She is serving her 9<sup>th</sup> year in Thanh Oai Prison, Thanh Xuan District, Hanoi.

Cause of arrest: she demanded that the government stopped its unjust denial of HHBC adherents' right to participate in a religious ceremony held in a private home. Mai thi Dung said: "Everyone knows that places of worship are very safe and peaceful. It was the government's side that disturbed the peace when they came in force to stop our prayer session. They charged me with an infraction that they had caused".

**2. Duong thi Tron**, of Lai Vung District, Dong Thap Province, arrested on 10/2/2006 for "disturbing the peace", and sentenced to 9 years in prison. She is serving her 8<sup>th</sup> year.

Cause of arrest: she demanded the freedom to practice her faith on occasions such as anniversary of the death of a loved one, prayer sessions, discussion of religious topics, religious celebrations, etc. She strongly resisted public security agents when they tried to prevent her from exercising her rights.

**3. Nguyen Van Lia**, arrested on 4/24/2011, tried on 12/13/2011 under Article 258 Item 2 of the penal code, "Abusing democracy to harm national interests", sentenced to 5 years, with reduction to 4.5 years by the appellate court in An Giang on 3/2/2012. He is serving his third year in Prison Z30A in Xuan Loc District, Dong Nai Province.

Cause of arrest: On 4/24/2011, he was on his way to a friend's house to attend a celebration of the death anniversary of his friend's relative when public security agents from Cho Moi District stopped him. Mr. Lia argued that the government does not allow its employees to stop people from exercising their right to follow customs and engage in traditional celebrations. The agents let him go, but alerted their superiors who sent reinforcements. The latter stopped him on the road between Rach Chanh and Cai Nai Bridge. A public security agent in charge of traffic control asked for his moped's papers, which he promptly displayed. One of the agents bent the mirror on Mr. Lia's moped to make it not conform with regulations. When the victim protested, using freedom and democracy in his argument against the arbitrary arrest, the Cho Moi public security officials cited him under Article 258 and detained him.

**4. Tran Hoai An (aka Tieu)**, a resident of Tan Hong District, Dong Thap Province, he was detained on 2/7/2011, tried in Cho Moi on 12/13/2011 under Article 258 Item 2 of the penal code, “Abusing democracy to harm national interests...”, and sentenced to 3 years. He is serving his 3<sup>rd</sup> year in the prison in An Giang.

Cause of arrest: he and Nguyen Van Lia met with the delegation sent by the Commission on International Religious Freedom and the State Department official in charge of religious freedom when those U.S. officials were in Vietnam. An Giang Province's public security agents and Dong Thap public security agents searched An's house and confiscated several documents that they considered to be evidence of his "crime".

**5. Bui Van Tham**, of An Phu District, An Giang, was detained on 7/26/2012, tried on 9/21/2012 for “hampering officials who tried to carry out their duties and for disturbing the peace”, and sentenced to 2.5 years. He is serving his second year in Xuan Phuoc Prison, Tuy Hoa, Phu Yen.

Cause of arrest: Mr. Tham's father, Bui Van Trung, promoted the discussion of HHBC teachings during the celebration of death anniversaries in his home. Mr. Trung built a pavilion where friends and others could carry on discussions of HHBC teachings. Bui Van Tham supported his father's religious activities. After the death anniversary celebration on 3/23/2012, Mr. Trung retired to the pavilion to study and think about his religion's teachings. Public security believed that he did

not adhere to the charter of the government's own Hoa Hao Buddhist administrative unit. Lacking a defensible case to take action against Mr. Trung (who simply prayed and meditated quietly in his pavilion), they arrested Tham on a deserted road section when he was taking home-grown bean sprouts to sell. Tham vehemently denied the unfounded charges against him when he appeared in court.

**6. Bui Van Trung** was detained on 10/30/2012 on his way to visit friends in Cho Moi District, tried by the An Giang Court on 1/23/2013 for “hampering officials who tried to carry out their duties and for disturbing the peace”, and sentenced to 4 years. He is serving his second year in Prison Z30A in Xuan Loc, Dong Nai.

Cause of arrest: He was a participant in Vietnam's traditional celebration of the death anniversaries of relatives. Discussing his Church's teachings is also a traditional HHBC activity. The pavilion serves a religious need and does not harm national interests or diminish the government's stature.

08/11/2013

**Kiều Lê**