



The spirit of compassion as a core value of Buddhism in practicing social responsibility in Vietnam

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Abstract

Buddhism has deeply permeated Vietnamese culture, shaping the nation's ethical framework and social conduct. This article examines the spirit of Compassion (Maitrī and Karuṇā) not merely as an emotive state but as the ontological basis for practicing social responsibility in Vietnam. By analyzing the dialectical interplay between Buddhist philosophy and social reality, the study demonstrates that charitable activities in Vietnam are practical manifestations of “Engaged Buddhism”. Findings confirm that compassion serves as the core value transforming individual spiritual cultivation into active social commitment, thereby contributing significantly to sustainable development and social stability in contemporary Vietnam.

Keywords: Compassion, social responsibility, vietnamese buddhism, engaged buddhism, buddhist ethics

Introduction

From its very origins, Buddhism has been not only a philosophical system concerned with personal liberation but also a tradition imbued with a profound spirit of engagement directed toward serving humanity. Within this extensive doctrinal system, alongside core teachings such as non-self (anattā), impermanence (anicca), and dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), the spirit of compassion (Maitrī–Karuṇā) is regarded as a foundational quality. Far from remaining a purely psychological state of sympathy, compassion in Buddhism constitutes a dialectical process that culminates in practical action aimed at alleviating suffering and fostering happiness within the community.

In Vietnam, with a history of more than two thousand years accompanying the nation under the tradition of “Protecting the Nation and Comforting the People”, Buddhism has become deeply interwoven with Vietnamese cultural and spiritual life. Today, in the context of national renewal and the emergence of many non-traditional challenges, the role of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha has become increasingly significant through its social welfare activities. However, to gain a profound understanding of the nature of these activities, they must be examined through the lens of Buddhist philosophy rather than viewed merely as acts of charity.

Based on this practical context, the article focuses on addressing a central research question: How has the spirit of compassion driven the shift of Vietnamese Buddhism from a tendency toward “world-renunciation” (withdrawal from secular life) to the practice of “engaged social responsibility” (active engagement with society) in the contemporary context? Through an analysis of this transformation, the study affirms that compassion is the core value and the intrinsic driving force that ensures the dialectical unity between the spiritual path and worldly life in the practice of Vietnamese Buddhism.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Framework: Buddhist Ethics and Social Responsibility

The scholarly works of Peter Harvey, Damien Keown, and Paul Williams provide the essential ontological and ethical

foundations for understanding the genesis of social responsibility within Buddhist thought.

In *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (2000), Peter Harvey argues that Buddhist ethics is not predicated on divine commandments or external moral authority, but rather arises from a profound insight into the nature of reality. Harvey emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between the doctrines of Dependent Origination (paṭiccasamuppāda), Non-self (anattā), and Compassion (karuṇā). From this perspective, ethical action is interpreted as a natural and necessary response to the fundamental interconnectedness of all existence. Consequently, social responsibility is not viewed as an externally imposed obligation, but as the logical corollary of an awakened awareness regarding the relational nature of self and others.

Damien Keown, in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992) [9], establishes a foundational approach to the subject through the lens of Virtue Ethics. Keown contends that Buddhist moral practice prioritizes neither rigid rule-following (deontology) nor utility maximization (consequentialism). Instead, it focuses on the cultivation of moral character, positing Compassion (karuṇā) and Wisdom (paññā) as central virtues. This framework is particularly valuable for conceptualizing Buddhist social responsibility as an outward extension of inner spiritual cultivation, rather than a bifurcated social obligation.

Paul Williams, in *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (2008) [34], elucidates the philosophical basis of the Bodhisattva path. Williams demonstrates how Mahāyāna Buddhism reoriented the goal of liberation from individual enlightenment (the Arhat ideal) toward universal liberation for all sentient beings. This doctrinal shift establishes a robust soteriological foundation for social engagement, framing the alleviation of suffering not merely as a secular concern but as an indispensable means of realizing enlightenment itself.

Together, these scholars construct a coherent theoretical framework in which compassion functions as both the ontological ground and the ethical impetus for Buddhist social responsibility.

2. Engaged Buddhism and the Turn Toward Social Engagement

The concept of Engaged Buddhism has been articulated and developed through the seminal works of Thích Nhất Hạnh, Christopher S. Queen, and Sallie B. King, serving as a conceptual bridge between classical doctrine and contemporary social praxis.

Thích Nhất Hạnh, who first coined the term in Vietnam: *Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (1967) and later elaborated upon it in *Being Peace* (1987), emphasizes the inseparability of spiritual practice and social action through the philosophy of Interbeing. He argues that meditative practice cannot be divorced from an awareness of worldly suffering; thus, social responsibility becomes the concrete expression of mindful compassion. This perspective dissolves the traditional binary between “world-renunciation” and “world-engagement” redefining Buddhist practice as inherently relational and responsive to the human condition. In *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996), Christopher S. Queen systematizes this movement as what he terms a “Fourth Yāna” of Buddhism. Queen analyzes how modern Buddhist movements reinterpret the Four Noble Truths by shifting attention from individual psychological suffering to structural and collective forms of suffering, such as poverty, injustice, and violence. Through this hermeneutic shift, social activism for peace, justice, and human rights is legitimized as an authentic and necessary form of Buddhist practice.

Sallie B. King, in *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (2009) [10], focuses on the ethical motivations underlying this movement. She argues that Buddhist engagement with social issues does not represent a process of secularization, but rather a return to Buddhism’s core values of Compassion and Nonviolence (ahimsa) in response to global challenges. King’s framework is particularly instrumental for analyzing charitable and welfare activities in Vietnam as a balanced integration of active social engagement and the preservation of spiritual identity.

3. Buddhism, Sustainable Development, and Social Welfare

The nexus between Buddhist ethics and sustainable social development is further clarified through the economic and social theories of P.A. Payutto and E.F. Schumacher.

P.A. Payutto, a leading Thai Buddhist scholar, critiques consumer-driven economic models in *Buddhist Economics: A Middle Way for the Market Place* (1994). Drawing on the Noble Eightfold Path - particularly the concept of Right Livelihood (sammā-ājīva) - Payutto proposes an economic model that prioritizes moderation, ethical production, and inner well-being. He posits that genuine social welfare must encompass spiritual well-being alongside material prosperity, thereby redefining development beyond conventional economic indicators.

Although not a Buddhist scholar in the strict sense, E.F. Schumacher was deeply influenced by Buddhist thought. In his seminal work *Small Is Beautiful* (1973) [24], Schumacher advances a human-centered model of development that challenges the dominance of profit maximization. He emphasizes that economic and social activities should serve human flourishing and environmental sustainability rather than mere material accumulation. Together, Payutto and Schumacher provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how Buddhist principles can contribute to a paradigm of sustainable development.

4. Synthesis

Collectively, these bodies of literature demonstrate that compassion (Maitrī-Karuṇā) operates simultaneously as an ontological foundation, an ethical motivation, and a practical guide for social engagement. This integrated perspective offers a solid theoretical basis for examining how Vietnamese Buddhism translates spiritual cultivation into active social responsibility, thereby contributing to social stability and sustainable development in the contemporary context.

The Philosophical Foundation: The Compassionate Spirit of Buddhism

1. Etymological and Doctrinal Definitions

To understand the Buddhist approach to social responsibility, one must first clarify the ontological meaning of Compassion. In Buddhist doctrine, Compassion is not merely an emotional response but a cultivated spiritual quality rooted in non-duality and the realization of interconnectedness. It is centrally encapsulated in the Four Immeasurables (Brahmavihāra): Loving-kindness (mettā), Compassion (karuṇā), Sympathetic Joy (muditā), and Equanimity (upekkhā).

Etymologically, the Pāli term *Mettā* derives from the root *mid* (to soften or to love), signifying a sincere wish for the welfare and happiness of all beings without discrimination. It transcends possessive attachment, aiming for the realization of non-separation between self and others. By contrast, *Karuṇā* derives from the root *kar* (to act) combined with *uṇā*, indicating a mental movement stirred by the suffering of others and oriented toward alleviating that pain. The *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification) provides a rigorous distinction between these qualities. It explains that while *Mettā* functions to promote well-being and counteract ill-will (greed being its near enemy), *Karuṇā* functions specifically to remove suffering and counteract cruelty (grief being its near enemy). Thus, while loving-kindness is the foundation for harmonizing beings, compassion is the active force that seeks to eradicate their distress (Buddhaghosa, Trans. 1991).

2. Mahāyāna Perspectives and the Concept of Non-duality

As Buddhism assimilated into East Asian cultures, these concepts were further enriched through Chinese characters, which deeply influence Vietnamese Buddhist thought. The character for Loving-kindness (慈 - Cí) combines the element denoting “thusness” (茲) with the character for “heart” (心). Philosophically, this suggests a heart that naturally resonates with the state of others - rejoicing in their happiness as one’s own. The character for Compassion (悲 - Bēi) is composed of the character “not” or “negation” (非) placed above “heart” (心). This implies a heart free from binary discrimination and self-centeredness (anattā). Only when the discriminating mind is transcended can genuine, unconditional compassion arise.

This universal scope is vividly illustrated in Mahāyāna scriptures, particularly within the framework of the Six Perfections (Pāramitās). Buddhist texts describe compassion as surpassing even a mother’s love for her only child, emphasizing impartial care for both near and distant beings. This spirit is epitomized in the Bodhisattva vow: “I would rather sacrifice my own life than abandon my great

aspiration; forgetting myself for the peace of all beings". Such expressions underscore that compassion is not a private sentiment but an expansive ethical commitment to "Oneness" - where the suffering of others is perceived as one's own.

3. Synthesis: From Spiritual Cultivation to Social Responsibility

In summary, whether understood through the lens of Theravāda ethics or Mahāyāna ontology, Compassion forms the bedrock of Buddhist consciousness. In this sense, loving-kindness and compassion represent a process of transforming consciousness, enabling deep empathy and authentic ethical engagement aligned with one's true nature. Rooted in this transformative process, compassion carries core values directly related to social responsibility. Within the Buddhist worldview, compassion consistently orients individuals and communities toward the aspiration for a harmonious, equitable, and sustainable society.

The Ethical Framework of Buddhist Social Responsibility

1. Conceptualizing Social Responsibility: A Cross-Philosophical Perspective

Social responsibility is conventionally defined as an ethical framework mandating that individuals and organizations act for the benefit of society at large. It functions simultaneously as a moral duty at the individual level and a normative foundation for social cohesion and stability at the collective level. Expressions such as civic duty, altruism, and care for the vulnerable are universally recognized as its practical manifestations.

In Western philosophy, this concept has been rigorously examined, most notably by Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas offers a profound relational interpretation, arguing that responsibility arises not from a social contract but from the encounter with the "Face of the Other." For Levinas, this encounter demands an ethical response prior to any rational calculation or conscious choice. Responsibility, in this phenomenological view, is not an external imposition but the very core of subjectivity—an inescapable obligation grounded in human relationality.

2. The Buddhist Approach: From Internal Cultivation to Social Order

While classical Buddhist scriptures do not explicitly employ the modern term "social responsibility", its essence is deeply embedded in Buddhist soteriology. This Western notion of "inescapable obligation" resonates strongly with the Buddhist doctrine of Interbeing (Pratītyasamutpāda).

Buddhist ethics articulates this responsibility concretely through the doctrine of the Fourfold Gratitude (Four Debts of Gratitude). This teaching mandates gratitude toward: (1) parents, (2) the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha), (3) the nation/society, and (4) all sentient beings. By positioning "gratitude to society" and "sentient beings" as religious duties, Buddhism elevates social responsibility from a civic suggestion to a spiritual imperative. Here, individual moral cultivation is rendered inseparable from the maintenance of the broader social order.

3. Practical Embodiment through Ethical Discipline

At the praxis level, Buddhist social responsibility is operationalized through the Threefold Training: Ethical

Discipline (śīla), Mental Cultivation (samādhi), and Wisdom (prajñā). The observance of the Five Precepts acts not merely as a personal restraint but as a mechanism for social protection (abhaya-dāna—giving the gift of fearlessness to others). Buddhist ethics posits three fundamental criteria for action

Avoid actions that benefit self but harm others;

Avoid actions that harm both self and others;

Actively cultivate actions that benefit both self and others.

These criteria underscore that Buddhist morality is inherently relational.

4. Conclusion on Ethics

Consequently, Buddhist social responsibility should be understood as a form of moral agency grounded in spiritual practice rather than legal compulsion. By identifying greed, hatred, and delusion as the roots of both personal suffering and social conflict, Buddhism calls for an "Ethical Vigilance". This extends the scope of responsibility from the internal transformation of consciousness to concrete engagement with social realities, affirming that true liberation involves responsible and compassionate participation in the life of the community.

5. Core Values of the Buddhist Spirit of Compassion in the Practice of Social Responsibility in Contemporary Vietnam

The Buddha famously stated: "Just as the ocean has only one taste, the taste of salt, so too my Dharma and Vinaya have only one taste, the taste of liberation". This statement encapsulates the fundamental orientation of Buddhism: liberation is not an abstract metaphysical retreat but a concrete ethical commitment to alleviating suffering. In the context of contemporary Vietnam, this soteriological goal has been reinterpreted as a mandate for social engagement. It is from this orientation that the core values guiding Vietnamese Buddhist social responsibility can be identified—not merely as abstract ideals, but as values concretely embodied in sustained social practice.

1. From Ontological Insight to Active Engagement

The first core value lies in the transformation of Compassion (karuṇā) from an internal meditative state into a principle of active social engagement. Unlike secular philanthropy, which may originate from external moral obligations or reputational considerations, Vietnamese Buddhist social responsibility is grounded in the ontological insight of Interbeing (thể tính trong tức). Because practitioners perceive the suffering of others as inseparable from their own existence, social engagement is regarded not as an auxiliary activity but as an essential continuation of spiritual cultivation.

This value is clearly expressed in the tradition of "Phật giáo nhập thế" (Engaged Buddhism), where monks, nuns, and lay practitioners participate directly in social welfare to realize the unity of Wisdom (prajñā) and Compassion in lived reality. Empirically, this orientation is reflected in the significant scale of Buddhist social engagement. During the seventh term of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), charitable and social welfare activities nationwide amounted to nearly 1 trillion VND (approximately 40 million USD) annually, with hundreds of local temples and Buddhist organizations actively involved [Cite VBS Report]. Such sustained participation indicates that social responsibility is structurally integrated into the religious life of Vietnamese Buddhism.

2. Non-discrimination and Ethical Inclusivity

A distinguishing value of Buddhist social responsibility in Vietnam is Ethical Inclusivity, rooted in the doctrines of Non-self (*anattā*) and the fundamental equality of all beings. Compassion, in this framework, transcends distinctions of social status, moral judgment, or social stigma. This value is particularly evident in Buddhist engagement with marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Concrete manifestations of this inclusivity can be seen in the care provided for the elderly without family support (*người già neo đơn*), people living with HIV/AIDS, and individuals suffering from social exclusion. Between 2007 and 2019, Buddhist institutions across Vietnam established and maintained over a dozen nursing homes, collectively caring for over 1,500 elderly individuals, ensuring both their physical well-being and dignified end-of-life care (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, 2017) ^[33]. Similarly, Buddhist temples in major urban centers like Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City have served as counseling and care centers for people affected by HIV/AIDS, reaching thousands of families through non-discriminatory support networks.

From a philosophical perspective, these practices exemplify compassion as a moral refusal of exclusion. They demonstrate that Buddhist responsibility is not a form of vertical charity - bestowing aid from a position of superiority - but a model of horizontal solidarity grounded in shared vulnerability and intrinsic human dignity.

3. Sustainability and Holistic Care

Moving beyond temporary relief, the third core value is an orientation toward Sustainable and Holistic Care, consistent with the Buddhist virtues of Patience (*ksānti*) and Diligence (*vīrya*). Rather than limiting compassion to episodic acts of generosity, Vietnamese Buddhism has increasingly institutionalized social responsibility through long-term structures.

A prominent example is the nationwide system of *Tuệ Tĩnh Đường* (Charitable Traditional Herbal Clinics). From just 25 clinics in the early periods, the network expanded to over 165 clinics by 2012, along with hundreds of associated traditional medicine centers providing free examinations and treatment. According to Thich, T. D. (2021), These institutions collectively delivered medical services worth tens of billions of VND, serving tens of thousands of patients annually, particularly in remote and economically disadvantaged areas. Furthermore, the systematic training of monks and nuns in medical knowledge ensures the professional sustainability of these services.

From a philosophical standpoint, this development reflects a paradigm shift from “reactive compassion” (responding primarily to emergencies) toward “proactive compassion” (building long-term social resilience). Such an approach seeks not only to alleviate immediate suffering but also to restore autonomy, dignity, and psychological well-being, thereby contributing to social stability and sustainable development.

4. Synthesis: A Normative Framework for Social Harmony

A Normative Framework for Social Harmony Taken together, these values—active engagement grounded in ontological insight, ethical inclusivity without discrimination, and sustainability through holistic care—constitute a robust normative framework for Buddhist social

responsibility in contemporary Vietnam. Rather than resisting modernization, Buddhist compassion offers ethical criteria for navigating social change in a humane and balanced manner.

By fostering trust, solidarity, and moral accountability, the Buddhist practice of compassion functions as a stabilizing force within Vietnamese society. This analysis confirms that compassion operates as the pivotal axis through which individual spiritual cultivation is transformed into collective social commitment, contributing meaningfully to social harmony and national development in contemporary Vietnam.

Conclusion

This study has systematically examined the spirit of Buddhist Compassion (*Maitrī-Karuṇā*) as the ontological and ethical foundation of social responsibility in contemporary Vietnam. By integrating classical doctrinal analysis with empirical observations of Buddhist social engagement, the study arrives at three principal conclusions. First, the analysis demonstrates that within the Vietnamese Buddhist context, social responsibility does not emerge as an external obligation imposed by secular ethical frameworks, but as an intrinsic expression of the doctrine of Interbeing. Compassion functions as the mediating principle through which the soteriological aim of individual liberation is translated into a collective commitment to alleviating social suffering. This finding challenges reductive interpretations of Buddhism as inherently world-renouncing and affirms Engaged Buddhism as both a coherent theoretical paradigm and a lived religious practice.

Second, the core values identified in this study - active engagement, ethical inclusivity, and sustainable care - constitute a distinctive normative model of social welfare. Empirical evidence, including the institutionalization of *Tuệ Tĩnh Đường* clinics and the systematic care for marginalized populations, indicates a significant transition from sporadic acts of charity toward professionalized, long - term social support structures. In this regard, Buddhist social responsibility contributes meaningfully to addressing structural gaps within the national social welfare system.

Finally, the study suggests that Buddhist ethics represents an important moral resource for sustainable development in Vietnam. By foregrounding human dignity, non-discrimination, and holistic well-being, the Buddhist approach not only aligns with contemporary notions of social responsibility but also enriches them with a deeper ethical and spiritual orientation. In the context of rapid modernization, these values function as a stabilizing moral anchor, fostering social cohesion, trust, and resilience.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

1. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations.

Methodological Scope

The research relies primarily on doctrinal analysis and aggregated institutional data provided by the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha. It does not include a quantitative evaluation of the effectiveness or social return on investment (SROI) of specific Buddhist welfare initiatives in comparison with secular NGOs or state-run programs.

Generalizability

The analysis focuses predominantly on Mahāyāna Buddhism, which constitutes the majority tradition in Vietnam. Consequently, it does not fully capture the distinctive approaches to social responsibility found in Theravāda (Khmer Buddhism) or Mendicant (Khất Sĩ) traditions, which may articulate alternative models of engagement.

Temporal Constraints

While the study draws upon data available up to 2019, the socio-economic transformations following the COVID-19 pandemic may have generated new patterns of Buddhist social adaptation that are not yet reflected in the present analysis.

2. Directions for Future Research

Building on these findings, future research could advance the field in several directions.

Quantitative Impact Assessment:

Future studies should employ quantitative methodologies to assess the measurable social impact of Buddhist welfare activities in areas such as healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation. Such assessments would strengthen the empirical basis for interdisciplinary dialogue and policy engagement.

Comparative Approaches

Comparative analyses between Buddhist social responsibility and that of other religious traditions in Vietnam (e.g., Catholicism or Cao Đài), as well as with secular models such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), would offer a more comprehensive understanding of Vietnam's pluralistic welfare landscape.

Emerging Fields of Engagement

Finally, future scholarship should explore how Vietnamese Buddhism applies the ethic of compassion to emerging global challenges, particularly environmental sustainability (often framed as "Green Buddhism") and digital ethics. Investigating how classical Buddhist values respond to ecological degradation and technological transformation represents a promising and necessary frontier of research.

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