



Thich Quang Do  
**KEEPER OF THE FLAME**

*Laureate of the Rafto Prize 2006*

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# Thich Quang Do

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On the occasion of the  
2006 Professor Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize  
awarded to Venerable Thich Quang Do  
*Bergen, Norway, 4th November 2006*



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## PRESS RELEASE

### **The Rafto Prize 2006 for Vietnamese human rights defender**

The board of the Rafto Foundation has decided to award the 2006 Professor Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize to one of Vietnam's most prominent defenders of democracy, religious freedom and human rights: Venerable Thich Quang Do. He receives the prize for his personal courage and perseverance through three decades of peaceful opposition against the communist regime in Vietnam, and as a symbol for the growing democracy movement in the country.

**Thich Quang Do** is an intellectual leader and a unifying force in his home country. A monk, researcher and author, he has devoted his life to the advancement of justice and the Buddhist tradition of non-violence, tolerance and compassion. Through political petitions Thich Quang Do has challenged the authorities to engage in dialogue on democratic reforms, pluralism, freedom of religion, human rights and national reconciliation. This has provided force and direction to the democracy movement. But he has paid a high price for his activism. Thich Quang Do has spent a total of 25 years in prison and today, at 77, he is still under house arrest. From here he continues the struggle. As deputy leader of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Thich Quang Do is strongly supported by Vietnam's numerous Buddhists. He also receives broad support from other religious communities as well as from veterans of the Communist Party. Thich Quang Do plays a key role in the work of reconciling dissidents from North and South Vietnam.

With this award the Rafto Foundation wishes to express its support for all Vietnamese who are fighting for a peaceful transition to democracy. Since April of this year, more than 2.000 citizens have signed the petitions "Appeal for Freedom of Political Association" and the "Manifesto on Freedom and Democracy for Vietnam". The petitions demand respect for basic rights, political pluralism, freedom of religion and freedom of association. This is the first time in recent years that so many people have signed on to public petitions. The petitions are signed by a wide array of Catholic priests, Buddhist monks, former political prisoners, former Communist

Party officials, veterans, academics, teachers, nurses, engineers, writers, businesspeople and many ordinary citizens. In Vietnam, the mere act of signing such documents may lead to harassment, detention and often imprisonment.

Vietnam is working to increase its international legitimacy and has applied for membership in the World Trade Organisation. (WTO). The economy is liberalized, but the country has retained an authoritarian regime. The one-party state does not tolerate dissenting views or criticism from the media, political parties, religious organisations or labour unions, despite the country's ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Hundreds of political and religious dissidents remain in prison. Prison conditions are in breach of international standards and there is evidence of torture and mistreatment. Prisoners are kept in isolation in cramped, dark, unsanitary cells. There are reports of prisoners being beaten, kicked and hit with electric shock batons. Arrest without a warrant is common and the judicial system is vulnerable to political pressure. Defendants often do not have access to independent legal counsel. Trials are closed to the public and the media, often also to the family of the accused.

The new prime minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Tan Dung, recently promised to increase the pace of reform aimed to build a state that is governed by law and committed to democracy. This promise must now be followed by concrete action. The Rafto Foundation calls on the Vietnamese government to stop their attacks on dissidents and enter into a dialogue with the democratic opposition on reforms opening for participation and respect for human rights, freedom of belief and political liberty in Vietnam.

The Rafto Prize 2006 is awarded at Den Nationale Scene in Bergen Saturday November 4th at 13.00.

*The Rafto Prize was established after the death of professor Thorolf Raftos in 1986, in gratitude to his longstanding work to help people who are repressed and persecuted, and in the realization that this work must be ongoing. Every year the Rafto Foundation awards the Professor Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize (The Rafto Prize). This is a human rights award gaining international status, among other, several Rafto laureates, Aung San Suu Kyi, José Ramos-Horta, Kim Dae-Jung and Shirin Ebadi, have subsequently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Rafto Prize contributes to a focus on human rights violations and on people and communities which need the attention of the world. This year the Rafto Foundation is marking 20 years of work for human rights. On this occasion, all previous Rafto laureates are invited to Bergen.*

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## A Buddhist's Quest for Democracy \*

*Thich Quang Do*

My name is Thich Quang Do, I am a Buddhist monk. I was born in Thai Binh, northern Vietnam, on 27 November 1928 and I entered the orders at the age of 14. But my story really begins at 10 am on 19 August 1945, the day of the August Revolution, when the French colonialist rulers were overthrown by Communist revolutionary forces in northern Vietnam.

I was just 17. On that day, I saw my master, the most Venerable Thich Duc Hai, superior monk of Linh Quang Pagoda, Thanh Sam village in Ha Dong province, executed by the Communist forces. They took him out onto the green outside the village hall in Bat village, just a mile away from his own pagoda. There, they hung a sign inscribed “*traitor*” around his neck, and shot him dead.

One year later, in 1946, my master’s religious elder brother, the most Venerable Thich Dai Hai, superior monk of Phap Van Pagoda in Bac Ninh province, was also arrested. He died in prison soon afterwards, accused of having ties with the Vietnamese Nationalist Party.

My master’s religious father, Venerable Thich Thanh Quyet, superior monk of Tra Lu Trung Pagoda, was to suffer a similar fate. In 1954, communist cadres came to his pagoda and accused him of using religion, the “opium of the people”, to deceive the masses. They threatened to classify him as an “an enemy of the people” and subject him to a denunciation and struggle campaign. Everyone knew such campaigns led to horrendous tortures, suffering and death. Thich Thanh Quyet preferred to take his own life rather than undergo such humiliations. He hanged himself in his pagoda.

So it was, at that precise moment, at 10 o’clock in the morning on 19 August 1945 that I realized with absolute certainty that Communism could not possibly last in Vietnam. My whole being was filled with this profound conviction as I gazed at my master standing outside the village hall. His arms were tied behind his back with barbed wire and two placards hung around his neck, one covering his chest and the other his back, proclaiming him a “quisling” and a “country-selling traitor”. He was squeezed between two groups of men armed with truncheons and sticks, spears and lances, rakes and sickles. Another group of men, the so-called “judges” of the People’s Tribunal stood on a platform to conduct the case. They ordered my master to kneel and hang down his head while listening to the charges. He refused. One of the judges stepped down from the platform and, planting himself in front of my master, declared: “You’re a traitor, you can’t afford to be stubborn.” As he said this, the judge hit my master repeatedly on the chin, bloodying his mouth. Blood kept dripping onto the placard covering his chest, the one proclaiming him to be “a country-selling traitor”. Then and there, they sentenced my master to death. They took him to the green outside the village hall. His blood continued to drip onto his robe and on the place where he was standing. Then they forced him to lie down. One of the men fired three shots point-blank at his temple. Another spurt of blood gushed out and my master died on the spot.

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\* This is an extract from “*Those Who Dare - Voices of Asia’s Democrats*”, published by the Alliance for Reform and Democracy in Asia (ARDA), Singapore, 2006 (authors include Sarwar Bari, *Pakistan*, Chee Soon Juan, *Singapore*, Chua Tian Chang, *Malaysia*, Martin Lee, *Hong Kong*, Loretta Ann P. Rosales, *Philippines*, Shih Ming-teh, *Taiwan*, Venerable Thich Quang Do, *Vietnam*, Wang Dan, *China*). The book is dedicated to the Burmese Nobel Peace Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The spurt of blood and the sight of my master, lying motionless on the grass with both hands tied behind his back, dying in a pool of blood, remain vividly imprinted on my mind. Blood covered his face, his robes, his legs and the ground where he lay. The two placards denouncing him as a traitor were also red with blood. Sixty years later, I still remember this sight as if I had witnessed it only yesterday.

At that moment, I was utterly beside myself with grief. As I sat on the grass looking at my master's body and sobbing bitter tears for him, I knew for certain that Communism could not survive. The reason is simple enough - Communism advocates hatred and the class struggle, and condones the killing of people in the cruelest manner. As history has shown, cruelty has never formed the basis of political longevity. Fundamentally, people abhor cruelty and evil. And what the people abhor is not likely to last. In the years to come, my conviction was proven true as communism was overthrown in its birthplace, the Soviet Union, after lasting a mere 74 years.

My master was killed for being an enemy of the people. Yet he his sole "crime" was to help victims of the terrible famine that broke out in 1945 in North Vietnam. This famine was exacerbated by the Japanese occupants, who forced the people to plant hemp instead of rice and burned all the rice stocks. Countless people died. Bloated corpses were strewn along the streets. Troops of starving people marched to Hanoi and Ha Dong cities to beg for food, but many literally dropped dead on arrival, after the gruelling journey. Deeply moved by this tragic situation, my master set up a relief association in March 1945 to provide shelter, food and care for the dying. His association succeeded in saving a great many people and by June 1945, they were able to return home to their villages. My master and his disciples returned to our pagoda. Yet for this, the Viet Minh accused him of being a Japanese agent and executed him. How many innocent people were killed in the name of the revolution in these bloodthirsty "struggle" campaigns?

On that day, I came to another conclusion. In life's natural elimination process, whatever serves mankind is likely to survive. Even if it has been buried, man will dig it up. On the other hand, whatever is detrimental to mankind is bound to destroy itself. This is why Buddhism has survived in Vietnam for the past 2,000 years despite brutal State repression, because it corresponds to the people's needs. Communism, on the contrary, does not serve mankind at all. People living under Communist rule are spiritually oppressed and materially deprived of everything. In Vietnam, Communism drove the country to complete bankruptcy, forcing the Party to revert to capitalism and adopt a free-market economy. Today, "Communist" is only a label in Vietnam, completely devoid of meaning.

So it was, as I stood on the green in Bat village, that I made a decision that was to determine the course of my life. I would never accept violence, cruelty, hatred and discrimination, whatever "noble" cause they purported to defend. Then and there, I vowed to do all that I could to combat fanaticism and intolerance, and devote my life to the pursuit of justice through the Buddhist teachings of non-violence, tolerance and compassion.

I have never regretted this decision. But little did I realise how this simple vow would lead me down a path paved with prison cells, torture, internal exile and detention for so many years to come. Imprisoned under a succession of political regimes, I soon learned that all tyrants fear the truth, and one must be ready to pay the price – sometimes a very high price – simply to defend the convictions and values one believes to be right.

One of my first tastes of prison was in 1963, under the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam. The anti-Buddhist policies of President Diem, a fervent Roman Catholic, provoked deep outrage in Vietnam. In May 1963, tensions flared after government troops fired on Buddhists in Hue who were demonstrating against a government ban on carrying Buddhist flags on the birthday of the Buddha. Several people were killed and many wounded. In June, Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc set fire to himself in Saigon to draw the world's

attention to the persecution Buddhists were facing in Vietnam. A wave of protests swept across the country. President Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu retaliated with a widespread crackdown. On August 21, his troops surrounded the Xa Loi Pagoda in Saigon, shot over thirty Buddhist monks and arrested thousands of Buddhist monks, nuns, lay-followers, students and other demonstrators.

I was among those arrested and subjected to brutal torture. I remember having to crawl on all fours from my prison cell for interrogations, incapable of standing upright. Nevertheless, I managed to make myself useful during my stay in jail. I had spent several years as a Research Fellow at universities in India and Sri Lanka, so I spoke reasonable English. In the morning, as they brought in my food, Buddhists managed to slip me articles from the international press on the Buddhist struggle which I would translate by evening, so they could pick them up as they brought my evening meal. These translations were reprinted in Buddhist newspapers to keep Buddhists informed of international opinion and boost their morale. No one suspected that their translator was working between torture sessions from an "office" in the depths of a government prison cell!

The mounting tension between the Buddhists and Diem-Nhu's repressive policies led to explosive protests, and eventually carried off in their wake the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, which fell on 1 November 1963. The fall of Diem opened a new era for Buddhism in Vietnam. Under his regime and during the whole period of French colonisation, only the Catholics were allowed to function as a "Church", whereas Buddhism was reduced to the mere status of an association under the provisions of Colonial Decree No. 10. In 1964, Decree No. 10 was repealed, and we held the first nationwide Buddhist Congress in Hue. At last, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) regained its full, legitimate status. Later, during the Vietnam War, the UBCV took up an active position for peace. We were often better known in the international media by the name of the UBCV's headquarters at the An Quang Pagoda in Saigon.

My experiences in the jails of President Diem were painful and harsh. But they were a mere prelude to the systematic, quasi-permanent cycle of imprisonment, internal exile, administrative detention, re-arrest, imprisonment and house arrest that I would experience under the Communist regime. Jailed for the first time by Hanoi's Communists in 1977, I was to be held under one form of detention or another for the next thirty years. Today, I am still under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon, although I have never been officially charged. The Communist government claims that I am "totally free". But my freedom is that of a goldfish in a bowl – I can go round in circles in my tiny monk's cell - but beware if I ever try to jump out to taste freedom outside!

When the Communists took power after the fall of Saigon on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1975, it was clear that they were fundamentally hostile to religion. Immediately, they embarked on a policy aimed at eradicating all religions in South Vietnam, just as Ho Chi Minh's government had done in the North after 1945. Vietnam's majority religion, Buddhism, which is adhered to by over three-quarters of the population, became the principal target of repression. Even before North and South Vietnam were re-unified into the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of (South) Vietnam implemented a systematic policy of persecution against the independent UBCV. All over the country, on the orders of local Communist Party officials and Security Police, pagodas were destroyed; Buddha statues smashed; UBCV schools, universities, hospitals and orphanages were seized by the State for use as military barracks, warehouses or living quarters for North Vietnamese "colons" who came to impose Party rule over the unruly South. Thousands of Buddhist monks were arrested and forcibly drafted into the People's Army to fight in Hanoi's war of invasion in Cambodia, which is a gross violation of their non-violent vows. I was Secretary-general of the UBCV's Executive Institute "*Vien Hoa Dao*" (Institute for the Dissemination of the Faith) at that time,

and I remember that in the months following April 1975, we sent over 300 letters to the authorities protesting these repressive acts. Unfortunately, none of these letters remain. They were all burned in July 1982 when the authorities confiscated the UBCV's headquarters at the An Quang Pagoda and installed the State-sponsored Vietnam Buddhist Church in its place. It took five whole days to burn all our documents and files. Needless to say, the government never replied to any of our demands, except by stepping up their campaign to suppress the UBCV.

Repression reached such a pitch that on November 2, 1975, 12 monks and nuns burned themselves alive at the Duoc Su Zen Monastery in Can Tho, southern Vietnam, in a collective protest against religious persecution. This was the first ever public protest in Communist Vietnam, and it took the authorities completely by surprise. Security Police rapidly covered up the affair, evacuating the bodies immediately and mounting a blockade around the Monastery. Two nuns and a Buddhist who came to inquire about the monks three days later were arrested and disappeared without trace. Police then razed the whole Duoc Su Monastery to the ground and removed the bodies. Their whereabouts was never revealed.

Perhaps I should explain the significance of self-immolation, which seems shocking and barbaric to the Western mind. Personally, I share this same feeling of aversion. In the Buddhist tradition, those who pledge to self-immolate must first obtain permission from their masters. I have never given my blessing to anyone who asked permission to self-immolate, whatever their motives. I always urged them to stay alive and devote their energy to the struggle. But self-immolation in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition is not suicide, nor an act of resignation or despair. It is an act of protest, a prayer, a symbolic means of turning one's body into a Torch of Compassion to dissipate ignorance and enlighten those in error. In his remarkable book, *"Sociology of a War"*, French scholar Paul Mus grasped the essence of this, describing the self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc in 1963 as "an advertisement of the intolerable gap between morality and the reality of the Diem regime" aimed to "indicate to both Vietnamese and Americans a morality and a responsibility for others that lay outside the divisions of political systems and culture".

The self-immolation of the twelve monks and nuns in the Duoc Su Zen Monastery followed a similar vein of protest. In October 1975, the Monastery's Superior monk Thich Hue Hien had received orders from the local Provisional Revolutionary authorities prohibiting the monks and nuns from displaying the Buddhist flag, fasting or making silent retreats ("everyone must eat and speak in order to follow the Revolution"), obliging them to propagate Marxism instead of Buddhism, join Communist Party mass organizations and enrol in political activities. They knew that UBCV Pagodas all over the country had received similar orders, and that mass arrests would follow if they refused to obey. The 12 monks and nuns therefore decided to make a collective protest in the most powerful way they could, as an advertisement of the UBCV's refusal to comply with the dictates of violence of the communist regime. At midnight on November 2, 1975, they burned themselves alive, leaving behind a letter calling for reconciliation and an end to religious repression in Vietnam.

In the climate of fear that shrouded the whole Vietnamese population in the months following the communist take-over, this act of civil disobedience was an inspiration to all those who suffered repression under the regime. From that moment on, emboldened by the UBCV's example, religious movements, political dissidents and human rights defenders from all walks of life began to openly challenge the authorities and express their legitimate claims for democratic freedoms and human rights. The Vietnamese non-violent democracy movement had begun.

Predictably, the Hanoi authorities clamped down on this nascent movement with unbelievable violence, deploying its vast repressive machinery to arrest, torture and murder its critics, and crush all form of dissent. During this period, masses of Vietnamese, not just the military but

also journalists, writers, artists, academics, trade unionists, teachers, peasants and farmers were thrown into the Vietnamese *gulags* or “re-education camps” without any justification or trial. Hundreds of thousands of innocent people died of ill-treatment, exhaustion or starvation in these camps. No statistics were ever released on the number of prisoners detained, but in 1978 Premier Pham Van Dong announced that “over a million people have been released”. He had announced this figure in an interview with French journalist Jean-Claude Labbé published in *Paris Match* Magazine in September 1978. The previous year, Vo Van Sung, Vietnamese Ambassador in Paris, had announced on French television that only 50,000 prisoners were detained in the camps.

Relations between the UBCV and the Communist authorities grew increasingly tense. On March 3, 1977, tension reached a climax when the police attacked and occupied the Quach Thi Trang Orphanage on Tran Quoc Toan Boulevard in Saigon. The orphanage stood behind the National Pagoda, which they had previously occupied and turned into a cinema. In their assault on the orphanage, the Communists tore down the big nameplate identifying the institution as belonging to the UBCV and threw it onto the kerb. At 11 am that day, as Secretary General of the UBCV’s Executive Institute *Vien Hoa Dao*, I signed a communiqué calling on all Buddhist followers to be ready to engage in non-violent struggle to defend the UBCV and protect religious freedom.

On April 6, 1977, a number of Buddhist leaders, including Venerable Thich Huyen Quang and myself, were arrested and taken to the Pham Dang Luu prison in Saigon. I was held for 20 months in a solitary confinement cell just 90 centimetres wide and 1.9 metres long. It had one window the size of my hand, which they opened just to hand in my food. Otherwise, the window was kept closed, making the cell unbearably stuffy. That year, I wrote a poem called “*At the break of day*” which contained the following lines :

*“Vietnam, I call your name  
From the depths of my cramped prison cell  
Outside, the whole country has become one vast prison,  
Is there no peaceful place where my people can find refuge ?  
O Vietnam, my beloved country...”*

On December 10, 1978, Thich Huyen Quang and I stood trial and were released. I learned later that we owed our release to an international campaign in which the Irish Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Mairead Maguire nominated us both for the Nobel Peace Prize. Sadly, many others suffered a more tragic fate. Venerable Thich Thien Minh, one of the UBCV’s most prominent figures, an implacably efficient organizer and head of the youth movement, was tortured to death on October 16, 1978 at Security Police Station X4 on Nguyen Trai Street in Saigon.

This merciless repression, however, failed to silence the independent UBCV. The Communist leaders therefore decided that if they could not suppress Buddhism by force, they should subjugate it to strict State control. On November 4, 1981, they founded a State-sponsored body, the Vietnam Buddhist Church (VBC) which became the only Buddhist organisation to receive official recognition. A widespread campaign was launched to urge, persuade or coerce UBCV Buddhists to join. The authorities called it “Buddhist unification”, but in fact it was exactly the opposite. Before 1975, the UBCV was a united, homogeneous organization made up of many different Buddhist schools from North, Central and South Vietnam. By setting up the State-sponsored VBC, the communists aimed to split up Buddhists, using the age-old policy of “divide to rule”, just like the colonialist and imperialist powers had done before. Once they set up the State-sponsored VBC, they no longer recognized the UBCV. From then on, even though the UBCV was not officially banned, it became an illegal organization.

Needless to say, our leadership adamantly refused to submit the UBCV, with its 2,000-year tradition of independence, to the political control of the Communist Party and its mass organization, the Vietnam Fatherland Front. Inevitably, a new wave of arrests followed, and I was one of the first to be targeted by the Police. On 25 February 1982, I was arrested and deported to the village of Vu Doai, Thai Binh province in Northern Vietnam, where I would remain in internal exile for the next ten years.

Arresting people in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a very simple business. There is very little legal fuss or paperwork involved. In my case, the Communist authorities simply sent me an express letter summoning me for a "working session" with the Police. I could tell that something was wrong when I walked into the room and saw several heavily-armed Security agents. After an hour's wait, they ushered me into the office of Mr. Quang Minh, a high-ranking Security Police officer who had "looked after" me when I was in Phan Dang Luu prison. He curtly informed me that "doing religious work is tantamount to being politically active. We will notify you of the Revolution's attitude towards you." Five minutes later, he stood up and read a decision signed by one Mr Le Quang Chanh, Deputy Chairman of the City People's Committee, banishing me into internal exile. A so-called escort team commander came to receive his orders and four security guards, armed to the teeth, took me to a car. It seemed surreal. I felt as if I was watching a kidnap film where I was playing the star role! It was about 9.30 when our ten-car convoy arrived at Dan Day in Long Khanh province, where we stopped for lunch at a rubber plantation. Only then did I notice Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, who was sitting some ten yards from where I was. He too had been banished into internal exile, and was being "escorted" to Quang Ngai province in Central Vietnam. He would spend more than two decades there, without the slightest judgement or trial. At that moment, neither of us realized how many years we would spend in isolation and much this perfunctory order would affect our whole lives.

Conditions in internal exile were extremely austere. In winter, the climate in Thai Binh is cold and damp. The temperature drops very low, and I had very little means of keeping warm. For some obscure reason, the authorities sent my 84 year-old mother into exile with me. She could not stand the Spartan conditions, and died a horrible death from cold and hunger in 1985. Her death was a terrible blow to me, I had been unable to prevent it, and I grieved bitterly for her. I felt as if I was responsible for her suffering, with my stubborn ideas and dogged refusal to toe the government's line.

At the same time, my stay in Thai Binh enabled me to observe many things. I was deeply struck to see how Buddhism had survived amongst the people, despite decades of destruction under the Ho Chi Minh regime. Of course, repression had taken its toll – the great pagodas were all abandoned and lain ruined, many others had been razed to the ground, and hardly any monks or nuns remained. Yet somehow the ordinary people had kept Buddhist teachings and practices alive. Too poor to repair the brick buildings, they had erected thatched huts and bamboo shrines as places of worship, or pooled their resources to build small houses to serve as Pagodas. The Buddhist texts and sutras, which had been labelled as "decadent" and systematically burned by the authorities, had been replaced by hand-written copies of books obtained from relatives or during trips to South Vietnam, so the villagers were all familiar with Buddhist teachings. At the same time, they seemed impermeable to Marxist-Leninist doctrines, despite the endless meetings and study sessions imposed on them by the local Party cadres. Even the statutory Communist "icons" were glaringly absent from the people's lives. Whilst I was in Vu Doai, I never saw one portrait of Karl Marx, Lenin, Stalin, or any other be-whiskered Soviet leader, even in Communist Party members' homes.

Suddenly, in March 1990, I received an unusual visitor. It was an envoy sent by the Minister of Public Security Mai Chi Tho. I was surprised, to say the least. Mai Chi Tho was one of Hanoi's most powerful and influential figures, brother of Le Duc Tho, who was awarded (but

declined) the Nobel Peace prize along with Henry Kissinger for his role in negotiating the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement. The envoy conveyed Mr. Mai Chi Tho's invitation to come and visit him in Hanoi, and implied that I could subsequently be released, and even invited to take up residence in the VBC's headquarters at the Quan Su Pagoda in Hanoi. I understood immediately what was behind this offer. Despite all the government's efforts over the past 10 years, it had never succeeded in supplanting the UBCV in the hearts of Buddhist followers in Vietnam. The State-sponsored VBC was so obviously a political tool of the Communist Party, its dignitaries were either government stooges without any spiritual background, or weak-minded or naive UBCV monks who had been unable to resist State coercion. No one took the VBC seriously, and no one held its leaders in respect. Hanoi had no control over the Buddhist population, and it needed some upright, "respectable" elders to head the VBC. I had been a Professor of Oriental Philosophy at Van Hanh University in Saigon and taught Buddhist studies at the Pontifical College Pius X in Dalat, so I suppose they must have seen me as a fair candidate for the post. But I had no intention of becoming Hanoi's puppet, even in a such a shining golden cage !

Three months later, quite unexpectedly, the Thai Binh province Security Services issued me with an identity card. Under Vietnam's *doi moi* or renovation policy, people who possessed this precious document were entitled to travel around the country, whereas previously they had to apply for a *laissez passer* (travel pass). I also noticed that the Security squad that had stood guard around my pagoda had been withdrawn. After living over a year in this situation, I decided to test the limits of "renovation".

I resolved to break out of house arrest, and to do it publicly, in a completely transparent and open way. It was not that I could not endure the harsh conditions of exile in the North. As a monk, I can live anywhere, under any conditions, however difficult they might be. But I refuse to live under arbitrary detention, without the slightest process of law. So, in the Spring of 1992, I simply informed the Security Services of my intentions and set off South. I had been arrested and banished to the North in the Spring of 1982, and ever since, I had promised myself to return South one Spring day. Thus, I left Vu Doai with a number of Buddhist followers on March 22, 1992, after just 10 years and 27 days in house arrest.

During my ten-year absence, the government had virtually stifled the UBCV's activities, arresting all its leadership and terrorizing its followers. All over the country, Security Police had torn down UBCV name signs over pagodas and Buddhist institutions and replaced them by nameplates of the State-sponsored VBC. Back in Saigon, I immediately made plans to resist the government's repression and demand the right to existence of the outlawed UBCV.

Several decisive events took place which prompted me to accelerate these plans and gave a completely new dimension to the UBCV's struggle. They began with the death of the third UBCV Patriarch, Most Venerable Thich Don Hau in Hue in April 1992. The late Patriarch was a greatly respected figure, even by the Communists, and Hanoi's leadership decided to make political capital out of his funeral. They set up a State funeral committee, invited top party figures and prepared to award the late Patriarch the Ho Chi Minh medal of merit. But Thich Don Hau was a sage, an immensely wise and clairvoyant man, and he had foreseen the Party's machinations from beyond his tomb! In fact, he posthumously stymied Hanoi's plans by leaving a testament in which he stipulated that his funeral must be a purely Buddhist event, with no political speeches or intervention by the State. In this testament, Thich Don Hau also appointed Venerable Thich Huyen Quang to succeed him as head of the UBCV. This was an incredible gesture of defiance to the Communist authorities. Thich Huyen Quang was under house arrest, and like me, he was known for his public criticisms of the government's abuses of human rights. Hanoi still attempted to organize a State funeral for the late Patriarch. But the determination of the Buddhists in Hue took them by surprise. Fifty monks went on hunger strike at Linh Mu Pagoda, the monk Thich Tri Tuu prepared to self-immolate, and thirty

thousand Buddhists flocked the streets of Hue until the funeral was over and Government representatives were obliged to withdraw.

Just one year later, tension flared up again in the ancient capital of Hue, a stronghold of UBCV dissent. On May 21, 1993, a young Buddhist named Nguyen Ngoc Dung self-immolated at the Linh Mu Pagoda to call for religious freedom. Police immediately evacuated his body and attempted to cover up the incident, claiming that he was a "desperate drug addict suffering from AIDS". Security Police summoned Linh Mu's Superior Monk, Thich Tri Tuu to their Headquarters on May 24, 1993, and tried to force him to accept the Government version of events. Monks began a hunger strike in front of Police Headquarters in protest, and within a few hours the peaceful sit-down developed into a 40,000-strong demonstration, the biggest public protest in Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War. Heavily-armed riot police and troops from the People's Army used tear-gas, water canons and electric truncheons to disperse the crowds; a Government vehicle was overturned and burned during the scuffle which ensued. Several Buddhist monks and followers were arrested in the aftermath and on November 15, 1993, the People's Tribunal in Hue condemned Venerables Thich Tri Tuu, Thich Hai Tang, Thich Hai Thinh and Thich Hai Chanh to three and four years imprisonment on charges of "incitement" and "disturbing public order". Five Buddhist lay-men also received prison sentences ranging from 6 months to four years.

This was a turning point in the UBCV's conflict with the Communist authorities. Whereas we had previously limited our demands to religious freedom and the right to existence of the UBCV, it became obvious that these could never be achieved as long as Vietnam remained a one-party dictatorship depriving Vietnamese of political freedoms and rights. Religious freedom and even sustainable economic development would be impossible without democracy system and the respect of basic human rights. In November 1993, Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang issued an 8-point "Declaration" calling for free elections, a multi-party system, a new Constitution and an end to the Communist political monopoly. This declaration defined our vision of a just and open society in Vietnam, and underscored our determination to struggle not only for religious freedom and Church independence, but for the fundamental rights and freedoms of Vietnamese people as a whole.

Our movement assumed another new dimension after 1993, one which we owe in part to the Hanoi regime. In 1986, Vietnam launched the policy of *doi moi*, opening to a "free-market economy with Socialist orientations". As it competed for foreign investment, Hanoi was obliged to provide wider access to communication supports such as the fax machine, telephone, electronic media etc... We were quick to seize upon these new opportunities to draw international attention to the Buddhist cause. In 1992, the UBCV had invited Vo Van Ai, a well-known Buddhist writer and human rights activist to be the UBCV's international spokesman and set up the International Buddhist Information Bureau in Paris. With his help, and through the UBCV network, we established an underground information channel, which succeeded in breaching Hanoi's walls of censorship and bringing information to the international media and forums such as the United Nations, the US Congress, the European Parliament etc... The Communists were furious, and tried their utmost to dismantle our network, but they were powerless to stifle our voice. We Buddhists were everywhere, and we were not afraid. When one person was intercepted, another took his place. When one information channel was blocked, another was set up. From then on, the UBCV's movement for democracy gained international recognition. Hanoi was exposed to international scrutiny. It no longer had free rein to detain, torture and murder its citizens with total impunity.

Our growing demands for democracy and their echo in the "outside world" deeply disturbed the Communist authorities. In June 1993, top-ranking Party Security officials gathered in Haiphong for a Conference on "The Peaceful Evolution" to evaluate the implications of the demonstration in Hue. "This is a warning bell that should awaken us all to

the real and effective capacities of our enemies in implementing the strategy of "peaceful evolution". Overseas forces are setting in motion a gradual, surreptitious process to "rot" the regime from within. They are enticing reactionary forces to rise up inside the country, without needing to invade us from outside with weapons or military troops." Strange, I have always believed that "peaceful evolution" was something positive, a process to which we should all aspire. Yet the communists fear it like the plague!

In August 1994, in defiance of the government's ban, I put up a sign over my Monastery inscribed "Exiled Secretariat of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam", and appealed to Buddhists all over the country to restore UBCV nameplates torn down by the authorities after the creation of the State-sponsored VBC. At the same time, I sent an Open Letter to Do Muoi, Secretary-general of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), along with a document I had written on the persecution suffered under communism since 1945. A copy of this document, entitled *Observations on the grave offences committed by the Vietnamese Communist Party against the Vietnamese people and against Buddhism*, was smuggled out to our spokesman in Paris, with the request that he make it public if I did not receive a reply from the VCP within six months.

At the same time, I began to organise the activities of the UBCV. An essential part of Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy is the commitment to emancipate one's fellows from suffering. It was therefore quite natural that in October 1994, after terrible floods broke out in the Mekong Delta, killing 400 people and leaving 500,000 homeless, we launched a humanitarian Rescue Mission to distribute relief aid to the victims. This was the very first public UBCV-sponsored mission since our Church was banned in 1981. But as our relief convoy prepared to leave Saigon on the night of November 5, it was intercepted by Security Police. They arrested the organizers and confiscated all relief aid. The Communist Party's Fatherland Front later announced that the operation had been "smashed" and warned that all further relief aid must be distributed by the Government. I sent a strong letter of protest to Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, denouncing this action as a "grave violation of basic civil rights and democratic freedoms". As a result, on 4 January 1995, I too was arrested on charges of "provoking trouble in violation of Vietnamese law". The government announced that I would stand trial "as a Vietnamese delinquent, not as a Buddhist monk".

I was sentenced to 5 years imprisonment and 5 years house arrest along with other members of the UBCV rescue mission at a one-day trial at the Supreme People's Court in Saigon on August 15, 1995. We had no defence lawyers or means to defend ourselves. We were charged with "undermining religious solidarity" and "taking advantage of democratic freedoms to violate the interests of the State and social organisations". Specifically, I was accused of organizing the Rescue Mission and sending an Open Letter and manuscript of my book of "*Observations*" to VCP Secretary-general Do Muoi. The court gave us the right to appeal, but I refused, having no confidence in the communists' "kangaroo courts". Some of the others chose to invoke this right, but predictably, their sentences were upheld. So there I was, back in prison once again, after such a short taste of freedom!

I was incarcerated in Ba Sao Re-education Camp in Nam Ha Province, northern Vietnam. In Vietnamese "Ba Sao" means "three stars", and the inmates often joked that this was the worst "three star" hotel in Vietnam. Later, I was transferred to the notorious B14 Prison near Hanoi. B14 is one of Vietnam's harshest jails, made up of several rows of solitary confinement cells without windows or ventilation. The poor detention conditions and lack of medicine took a toll on my health. I suffered from headaches due to high blood-pressure, as well as pains in my chest and stomach. But I was not beaten or tortured, and I felt somehow I was treated with a certain deference and respect, as if someone was protecting me from the outside.

One day in 1998, completely out of the blue, the prison authorities announced that I was going to be released. I was astounded, since I still had over a year of my sentence to serve. In fact, Hanoi was under increasing international pressure to improve its human rights record, and it had decided to amnesty a number of prominent political prisoners on September 2, Vietnam's National Day. Although I did not know it at the time, many Western governments and human rights organisations campaigned actively for my release. US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had raised my case specifically along with several others during her first visit to Vietnam in 1998. A group of Nobel Prize laureates, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Jose Ramos-Horta, Mairead Corrigan Maguire and François Jacob had also formed a support Committee for the release of Thich Huyen Quang, myself and other UBCV detainees.

Some of the political prisoners released in the 1998 amnesty were set free on condition they accepted to emigrate after their release. In my case, Hanoi set no such conditions. They knew I would never accept. My place was in Vietnam, alongside the people. This was my home, my roots, culture, language, spirit were in this land. Outside, I would be like a fish out of water, of no use to anyone. Here, I could continue to speak out against injustice, and contribute concretely to the movement for democracy and human rights.

So I was put on a plane in Hanoi, and arrived in Saigon on September 2, 1998. As I stepped into Tan Son Nhat Airport, I was engulfed by a crowd of bustling, over-joyed Buddhists who had slipped through Police cordons to greet me. How did they know I was on that plane? Hanoi had not even announced my release, even less issued details of my travel schedule. So the Buddhist "bamboo radio" was still working well! After my years in isolation, I was deeply moved by this warm, spontaneous reception. The crowd greeted me with such joy and affection. There was not a bunch of flowers left on the stalls in Tan Son Nhat airport that day.

I returned to the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon, where I had lived before my arrest. The resident monk, my friend Thich Thanh Minh, is a kindly man. He kept two big sheep dogs, ostensibly to guard the Monastery, but in fact to frighten the security agents who kept watch on us day and night. The dogs growled at them and bared their teeth viciously – but their bark was much worse than their bite, they were true Buddhists guardians in the best non-violent traditions.

I soon learned that my newfound freedom was subjected to tight restrictions, despite the government's declarations that I was "totally free". Plain-clothed security agents surrounded my monastery, the telephone was tapped and all visits strictly monitored. As I told the international media, I had "left a small prison only to come into a larger one!" Just a month after my release, in October 1998, the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, Mr. Abdelfattah Amor came to visit me during an inquiry mission into religious freedom violations in Vietnam. He had notified the government of his visit, but when he arrived, the security police physically prevented him from entering my Monastery. I could see him from my window, but it was impossible for us to meet. We just waved at each other, and eventually Amor went away. He subsequently made a scathingly critical report to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, citing this incident and describing how badly Vietnam had treated his delegation during the trip. No other country, he said, not even China, had subjected an UN expert in the course of his functions to such repressive and humiliating treatment.

I discovered also that I was forbidden to travel, although no formal ban had ever been pronounced. During the *Tet* (Lunar New Year festival) we Vietnamese have a tradition of visiting our family and elders. For my first *Tet* in freedom, I was determined to visit the UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang, my dear friend and former prison companion, who was still under house arrest in a remote village in the central province of Quang Ngai. Thich Huyen Quang had been detained without charge since 1982, and we had not seen each other for 18 years, since our paths crossed on the road to internal exile. I set off for Quang Ngai by

train without informing anyone. Thich Huyen Quang and I spent the most wonderful day together, pouring out our ideas on Vietnam and the future of the UBCV. We had not exchanged one letter or phone-call in almost two decades, yet we were on exactly the same wavelength, sharing the same vision and concerns. It was as if we had never been separated at all. Nevertheless, our euphoria did not last long. The next morning, Security Police suddenly descended on us, completely ransacked the Hoi Phuoc Pagoda and arrested us both. We were interrogated roughly and accused of “plotting to set up an illegal organization”. Security Police physically dragged Thich Huyen Quang back to his Pagoda, and forcibly escorted me back to Saigon.

This incident confirmed my suspicions about the regime’s total insecurity and paranoia regarding Buddhism in Vietnam. Security Police did not arrest Thich Huyen Quang and I because they resented two old men meeting to celebrate *Tet*, but they panicked at the idea that we were conspiring to re-establish the outlawed UBCV and reinvigorate its actions for democracy and human rights. In fact, due to our long years in detention and our “obstinate” combat against government repression, Thich Huyen Quang and I had unwittingly become symbols of the struggle for democracy and human rights, not only for Buddhists but for Vietnamese from all walks of life. Hanoi feared the power of this symbol. They knew that together, “we two formed a multitude”, and they stopped at nothing to keep us apart. Hanoi’s leaders feared us because they saw the Buddhist movement as a challenge to the authority of their unpopular regime. This convinced me more than ever that our struggle was legitimate. I had witnessed the inhumane detention conditions endured by the UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in Quang Ngai province over the past 18 years. I vowed to campaign for his release, and to bring him home to Saigon to continue our movement together for democracy and human rights in Vietnam.

One lesson I learned during this period was the vital importance of international support in the movement for democracy in Vietnam. As Hanoi sought to integrate the global community, it became increasingly sensitive to international pressure. But it also sought to reject this pressure as an “interference” into its internal affairs. In 1993, Vietnam was one of the countries known as the “dirty dozen” who signed the Bangkok Declaration prior to the UN World Conference on Human Rights. They supported the “Asian values” argument and claimed that Vietnam’s cultural specificities made it an exception to the universal rule. Despite my house arrest, I began writing to governments and international organizations to denounce this fallacy and urge them to press more actively for human rights progress in Vietnam. In a letter to Ambassadors of the European Union in Hanoi, urging support for the release of a list of 31 prisoners of conscience, I wrote:

Universal human rights should be the foundation-stones of all international relations and the basis of interchange between communities, peoples and nations. Human civilisation should never allow any government, whatever its ideology or political creed, to derogate from universal human rights and isolate its people behind an iron curtain on the pretext of "non-interference" into the nation's internal affairs.

I also sought to explain the vital role of religious movements, especially Buddhism, in the democratic process in Vietnam. For several decades, all opposition parties and political movements had been totally suppressed by the Vietnamese Communist regime. In this political vacuum, the Buddhists had assumed a key role in voicing people’s grievances and pressing for fundamental freedoms and rights. In my letters to the international community, I stressed the UBCV’s role in our country's development:

We firmly believe that the UBCV, with its tradition of over 20 centuries, its following of 80% of the population, and its philosophy based on compassion, tolerance and understanding, could contribute greatly towards healing the ills of Vietnamese society today. If the UBCV were entitled to re-establish the vast network of hospitals, schools,

universities, orphanages, social and cultural centres confiscated by the authorities after 1975, it could seriously attack the scourges of poverty, illiteracy, drug addiction, prostitution, child abuse and the many other serious problems facing our society today.

Moreover, Vietnamese Buddhism is deeply impregnated with the spirit of freedom and social justice, and this spirit is the very essence of our commitment to democracy and human rights today. From the very outset, Vietnamese Buddhism developed a unique tradition of social engagement, and throughout our history, Buddhists have always played an active role in the nation's social, political and cultural life. But at all times, Buddhism has remained independent of political powers, supporting the State in times of need, checking its powers when it became too authoritarian, offering a freedom outside Confucianist conventions. As the scholar of Asian religions, Paul Mus aptly observed <sup>1</sup> :

In Vietnam, Buddhism lived within the system and beyond it. Not just a civilization, not just a means of living in the world, it was a Way for all men to transcend the limitations of society and the self to reach a higher truth. As Buddhists, all men were brothers in a realm above race and culture. They were not fathers and sons, kings and subjects, but equals in moral responsibility, equals in their capacity for achieving salvation. (Vietnamese Buddhism) showed a Way out beyond the binding “net ropes” of the Confucian world. In peacetime, it offered the Vietnamese an internal life... outside the conventions of society. In times of tyranny and “splitting apart”, it indicated a morality that lay beyond loyalty to the existing authorities. The Buddhist “brotherhood” was an alternate form of community that provided a basis for opposition to an oppressive regime. It did not itself incorporate an alternate design for a state or society-in-the-world, but it provided a means of reconciliation.

Alongside my international appeals, I continued to press the Vietnamese authorities for progress in human rights. Citing Article 69 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of the press, I applied to set up an independent newspaper in Vietnam as a “*forum for dialogue and exchange*”. Prominent Communist veteran and dissident General Tran Do filed a similar demand in Hanoi. Needless to say, our applications fell on deaf ears. Even today, 20 years after Vietnam ratified the UN Convention on Civil and Political Rights, which enshrines freedom of expression and the press, there is not one independent newspaper in Vietnam.

I also initiated concrete actions, such as another UBCV Rescue Mission for flood victims in the Mekong Delta in October 2000. Hearing that the disastrous floods had rendered almost half a million people homeless, mostly children, I launched an appeal for funds. Money poured in from Buddhists around the world. I decided to head the delegation myself to test the government's good-will - after all, they insisted that I was totally free! In a letter to Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and Communist Party Secretary-general Nong Duc Manh, I wrote: “Despite my age and ill-health, I cannot stand by whilst people drown. I have decided to accompany the UBCV rescue team and share the hardships, cold and hunger alongside the victims”. From Paris, our international spokesman Vo Van Ai announced that I would leave Saigon on October 6, 2000 at 8.00 with a UBCV relief convoy. As I set off that morning, a crowd of security police stood outside my door, but they did not intervene. However, once my convoy had reached a remote spot in An Giang province near the Cambodian border, far from the public eye, we were all arrested. The security police moored our boat to a floating customs post and detained us for questioning for a whole day. Then, late into the night, after prohibiting us from distributing relief aid to the people, they “released” us, simply cutting off our boat from its mooring and leaving us to drift down the river, at the mercy of robbers and cut-throats. It was pitch black, our boat was laden with money and food. We were a sitting

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<sup>11</sup> *Sociology of a War*, Paul Mus, and *Fire in the Lake*, Frances Fitzgerald.

target, and I must admit that we were all afraid. Yet by some miracle – was it Buddha or the people who protected us – no one attacked our convoy and we emerged unscathed. I was forced to return to Saigon, but I later sent a UBCV team back to the area to distribute our aid.

In 2001, the Vietnamese Communist Party held its Ninth Congress, and Hanoi launched consultations on the need for democracy and reform. In stark contrast to this debate, the year began with a wave of unprecedented political repression. In January, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai told the nation's police force that "hostile forces" were using human rights and religion to destabilise the country, and called them to step up action in "hot spots of religious and ethnic unrest". In February, Hanoi deployed tanks and armed forces to brutally crush peaceful demonstrations by ethnic Montagnards in the Central highlands protesting religious persecution and State confiscation of lands.

Against this backdrop of totalitarian oppression, the Party's "consultations on democracy" were both a contradiction and an insult to us all. I felt urgently that the time had come for Vietnamese dissidents, democrats and human rights defenders from all religious denominations and political affiliations to work together for true democracy in Vietnam. We all aspired to democratise Vietnam, but no one had advanced a concrete transition plan for democracy in our country. I decided to write an *Appeal for Democracy*, which I sent to the Communist leadership as my contribution to the VPC's debate. My *Appeal* set forth an 8-point proposal and called on all Vietnamese to rally together in support of this peaceful democratic plan. It proposed the dismantling of antidemocratic control mechanisms such as the *ho khau* (compulsory residence permit) and the network of *cong an khu vuc* (local security police) which keep the whole population under surveillance; the closing of all "re-education camps" (Vietnamese *laogai*); the abrogation of Article 4 of the Constitution (enshrining the mastery of the Vietnamese Communist Party); the establishment of free trade unions, independent NGOs, a privately-run press. My *Appeal* received overwhelming support, with the endorsement of over 300,000 Vietnamese at home and abroad, and hundreds of international personalities, including Nobel Prize laureates. Thirty-six members of the US Congress sent a letter to the UN Human Rights Commission applauding the *Appeal* as "an enormous leap forward in the democracy movement" and calling for UN support. Several days later, I received a visit from officials from the Communist Party's Fatherland Front who warned me I had "gone too far".

Throughout this time, I never forgot my pledge to bring the UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang back to Saigon. In March 2001, following reports that he was seriously ill, I wrote to the government calling for his immediate release. I told Hanoi's leaders that if they did not release the Patriarch before June, I would travel to Quang Ngai to fetch him home myself. Indeed, I was deeply outraged by the government's hypocritical treatment of Thich Huyen Quang and myself. Officially, the 81-year-old UBCV Patriarch had been "released" from house arrest in 1997. Yet Police maintained him under permanent surveillance and control. I was also free—on paper—yet I suffered the same restrictions. In reality, the authorities dared not arrest us for fear of public outcry, but neither did they dare set us free. So they keep us in a legal limbo, half prisoner-half free, half guilty-half innocent. We were like dogs on an elastic leash, free to run circles around our tails, but sharply pulled in if ever we went too far.

In May, I received a summons for a "working session" (the Communist term for interrogations) with the local Police. Security agents and Party officials strictly prohibited me from travelling to Quang Ngai and threatened to arrest me for "violating national security". I refused to be intimidated, and declared that I would leave for Quang Ngai on June 6, with a delegation of UBCV Buddhists.

As the day of my departure approached, excitement mounted within the Vietnamese Diaspora and the Buddhist community in Vietnam. Everyone looked forward to Thich Huyen

Quang's return from exile and the moment we would both be re-united in Saigon. Not only Buddhists, but also Catholics, Protestants, followers of the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai religious sects, human rights defenders and democracy activists from all walks of life were behind me, enthusiastically supporting my act of non-violent resistance. This was too much for Hanoi. Rather than risk a public showdown, they clamped down swiftly and silently, taking public opinion by surprise. On May 31, 2001, just a few days before my departure, 30 security guards broke into the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery and placed me under arrest. I was pronounced guilty of "breaching national security" and sentenced to two years administrative detention without any legal process or trial. Hanoi's Foreign Ministry justified this unlawful action by claiming that it was a "reactivation" of the sentence of which I had been amnestied in 1998.

I was locked in my room like a criminal. When my food was brought in, the Police searched my tray. What humiliation, what hypocrisy! Afraid to arrest me outright, Hanoi had turned my pagoda into a prison. My arrest caused international outrage. Olivier Dupuis, a member of the European Parliament and Secretary-general of the Transnational Radical Party came to Saigon with his assistant Martin Schulthes to express his solidarity with me. On June 6, he succeeded in entering my monastery, but the security police prevented him from seeing me. The police had not yet confiscated my mobile phone, and I remember Vo Van Ai calling me from Paris and saying: "*Open your door, there is a Member of the European Parliament standing outside*". I whispered in English: "*It's impossible*". Those were the last words I spoke to Vo Van Ai or anyone outside the Monastery for the next two years.

I never met Olivier Dupuis, but I heard that he staged a one-man demonstration outside the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery brandishing placards in Vietnamese inscribed "Religious Freedom in Vietnam" and "Release Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do". He and Martin Schulthes were swiftly arrested, interrogated by the security police, and expelled from Vietnam. This was the first human rights demonstration ever staged by a Westerner in communist Vietnam.

Detained *incommunicado* for the next two years, I was released in June 2003. But once again, my freedom was short-lived. In October 2003, Thich Huyen Quang and I called a Special UBCV Assembly at the Nguyen Thieu Monastery in the province of Binh Dinh, where Thich Huyen Quang was under house arrest. As we returned to Saigon together in a mini-van along with other UBCV dignitaries, Police launched a clampdown and arrested us all. 11 UBCV monks were sentenced to house arrest, Thich Huyen Quang and I were accused of "possessing State secrets" and placed under investigation. We were never formally charged, yet we have been effectively under house arrest since that day.

And so my story continues. Paved with prison cells, racked with repression, it is a common tale, the tale of all those who care for freedom and democracy in Vietnam.

In 2005, on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War and the advent of communism in Vietnam, I addressed a message to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. This message resumes my vision – the Buddhist vision – of the road to democracy in Vietnam. It is a simple statement, but Hanoi's reaction to it proves that democracy is still heresy in Vietnam. On 30 March 2005, a young UBCV monk Thich Vien Phuong came to my Monastery to film this message. But as he stepped outside, Security Police immediately arrested him. They confiscated his camera and film, and subjected him to intensive, aggressive interrogations for several days. Thich Vien Phuong was condemned to pay a colossal fine of 15 million dong – the equivalent of more than 43 months basic wage in Vietnam – on charges of "activities of producing films or video-tapes with contents that slander and infringe upon the prestige of organizations, the honour or dignity of individuals, but which are not serious enough to be punished under criminal law." Fortunately, our UBCV

network managed to smuggle an audio version of the message overseas. It was made public at the UN Human Rights Commission. This is the essence of my message to the UN.

“Human rights” means the right of every human being to live as free and respected members of society. But in Vietnam today we are not free. We are prisoners in our own country, in our pagodas, in our homes. Prisoners of a regime which decides who has the right to speak and who must keep silent. Who has the right to freedom, and who must be detained. We are prisoners of a regime, which, 30 years after the end of the Vietnam War, continues to fight a battle against its own people and deprive them of their basic human rights.

For the past 30 years, the communist authorities have sought to stifle all independent voices in Vietnam. Today, we have no opposition parties, no free press, no free trade unions, no civil society. All independent religions are banned. All citizens who call for political reform, democracy or human rights risk immediate arrest.

Because we refuse to accept this, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam has been systematically repressed. Our Church is outlawed, our leaders arrested, our followers harassed. For more than twenty-five years, the Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang and I have been imprisoned or exiled, simply for demanding the people’s basic human rights. As I speak to you today, I am under house arrest at the Thanh Minh Zen Monastery in Saigon. Secret Police keep watch on me day and night. My telephone is cut, my communications are monitored, and I am forbidden to travel. This message was recorded in secret, and Buddhists followers took great risks to send it to the International Buddhist Information Bureau and the Vietnam Human Rights Committee in Paris, who helped bring it to your gathering today.

The communist government claims that we do not need freedom, that by opening Vietnam’s markets they can fulfil the people’s needs. But their policy of “doi moi” – economic opening under authoritarian control, has failed disastrously, and led to serious human rights abuses in Vietnam. State corruption, power abuse, social injustice, exploitation and forced labour are widespread. The poverty gap is rocketing, and social problems such as juvenile crime, drug addiction, AIDS, child prostitution and trafficking in women are rife. In a society with no rule of law, no independent judiciary, the people have no recourse against these evils, and live in permanent insecurity, hardship and fear.

What can we do to bring stability, well-being and development to the people of Vietnam ? During my long years in detention, I have thought deeply, and I have come to the conclusion that there is only one way – we must have true freedom and democracy in Vietnam. This is the only possible solution. We must have pluralism, the right to hold free elections, to chose our own political system, to enjoy democratic freedoms – in brief, the right to shape our own future and the destiny of our nation.

Without democracy and pluralism, we cannot combat poverty and injustice, nor bring true development and progress to our people. Without democracy and pluralism, we cannot guarantee human rights, for human rights cannot be protected without the safeguards of democratic institutions and the rule of law.

Democracy and pluralism are also vital for the survival of religious movements and for the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, for we shall never be free from religious repression until a democratic process is under way. The UBCV has vast human resources, and we can do so much for our people’s development if only we are free.

The Communist leaders are afraid of democracy because they fear it will make them lose power. But what is more important – keeping power or building a free and prosperous Vietnam? The communist regime justifies its presence in the name of nationalism, independence or economic progress. But in reality, maintaining power is their true concern. Maintaining the power and privileges of a ruling minority of 2 million Party members over

the majority of 80 million people. That is the tragedy of Vietnam – in the aim of keeping power at all costs, Hanoi's regime is destroying our nation and our cultural identity.

This is why we Buddhists, and Vietnamese people from all walks of life are calling out urgently for freedom, democracy and human rights. The authorities try to stifle our voice by repression, imprisonment and violence. But they cannot stifle the people's will. We shall continue our peaceful struggle. We will not stop until we realize our aspirations for democracy in Vietnam.

Each day, Vietnamese democrats face dangers to keep the spirit of freedom alive. We are not afraid, but we know that we cannot win this battle alone. We need the support of the international community, of democrats around the globe.

Our demands are simple. We call for the right to existence of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and all other non-recognized religions so that we can contribute to the welfare of our people. We ask for the right to run an independent newspaper in Vietnam, as a forum for democratic debate. We call for the release of all those who are detained because of their political opinions or religious beliefs.

Hanoi should heed the peaceful demands that are being voiced with increasing urgency by the people of Vietnam. As I wrote in my *New Year's Appeal for Democracy and Pluralism* in February 2005, "the government should not think that because it has prisons, a massive army and a strong police force, it can do whatever it wants. ... Today, those who truly care about the country's future are driven into a corner, waiting for the people's anger to explode, like a river ready to burst its banks".

In Asia, we say that people and their rulers are like water and a boat. So why not take the peaceful path, and let the water keep the boat afloat? Otherwise, the boat will surely be overturned!

**Thich Quang Do**

*Thanh Minh Zen Monastery, Saigon,*

*December 2005*

**Interview with Venerable Thich Quang Do  
on receiving the 2006 Rafto Memorial Prize**  
*26th September 2006*

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*Venerable Thich Quang Do gave an interview to Y Lan Penelope Faulkner, Vice-President of Quê Me: Action for Democracy in Vietnam on his reactions on receiving the 2006 Rafto human rights award. The interview was broadcast on Radio Free Asia and relayed by Vietnamese-language radio stations around the world.*

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**Faulkner:** *The Rafto Foundation has just announced its decision to award you the 2006 Rafto Prize for Human Rights Defenders “for your personal courage and perseverance through three decades of peaceful opposition against the communist regime in Vietnam”. What is your reaction to this news ?*

**Ven. Thich Quang Do:** I learned just yesterday (23rd September) that I had been chosen for the Norwegian Rafto human rights award. My first reaction was complete surprise. I never expected such a thing, and yet it happens to me!

My next reaction was one of mixed feelings, both of happiness and sorrow. I felt very happy, because I was sure that the Rafto Foundation’s board awarded the prize not just to me as an individual, but as a symbol, as a representative of 80 million people in Vietnam today who are deprived of their basic human rights. To live without human rights is to live in humiliation. The Rafto Foundation awarded this prize to encourage me and all Vietnamese to keep on struggling until we succeed in winning back the democratic freedoms and rights which are enjoyed by people all over the civilized world and protected by their political regimes. The Rafto Foundation felt compassion for the oppressed people of Vietnam. So they awarded the Rafto Prize to encourage us to stand firm and continue the democratic struggle, until we force the Vietnamese authorities to respect our human rights.

It makes me happy and deeply moved, because it shows that 80 million Vietnamese who live under oppression today are not forgotten. We are not alone. Norway is thousands of miles away from Vietnam, yet its people care about us. They want to inspire and encourage us to fight for our freedom. They are showing us that they stand beside us, and that there are millions of people all over the world who truly care about Vietnam, who share a common concern for the lack of democracy in our country, and who are ready to help us in every way, both morally and materially, to win democracy and human rights in Vietnam. This really warms my heart.

In April 2006, the World Movement for Democracy (WMD) awarded its “Democracy Courage Tribute” to Hoang Minh Chinh and myself at its Assembly in Istanbul. They chose us as symbols of North and South Vietnam, of all the people who live in misery and humiliation, deprived of all human dignity. This World Movement for Democracy awarded this tribute with the same objective, to show us that we are not alone, that the international community supports our struggle. It was a way of telling us to persevere, to keep on fighting. We must keep trying this year, next year, or the year after that, however long it takes. We must keep up the fight, because human rights are essential to humankind.

However, my happiness was tempered by sadness and shame. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to travel and see the world. I have never been to Norway. I just know that Norway is very far away, and much smaller than Vietnam. Before the times of Mr. Nobel, Norway and Sweden were one kingdom. Later, they separated into two. The population of

Norway is only five or six million people, I believe. Yet the Norwegians have developed a political system that is truly caring, just and humane. The most precious things in life – I mean from a temporal, political point of view, not counting spiritual attainments - are human rights and peace. Norway possesses both these things. The Norwegians live in peace and security. They respect each other and take care of all their citizens, even the most helpless and poor. Not only have they built a society founded on human rights and peace, but they seek to promote these values globally by helping to build a more just and peaceful world. Norway awarded the Rafto Human Rights Prize to Vietnam because it wants the Vietnamese to enjoy human rights like they do. They created the Nobel Peace Prize because they want the whole world to live in peace and security. Compared to Vietnam, Norway is like a paradise on earth. Just look at the Norwegian people's standard of living – it's one of the highest in the world, higher than the United States, Great Britain or France. Whereas the living standard of the Vietnamese people is one of the world's lowest!

That's what makes me feel so ashamed. Vietnam is much larger than Norway. We have a coastline of 3,000 kilometers, 300,000 square kilometers of land. Our population is 83 million, of which three million are members of the Communist Party. 80 million people oppressed by a ruling minority of three million Party members. The Vietnamese Communist Party and Politburo claim to be the "summit of human intelligence". If this is true, how is it that virtually the whole Vietnamese population have become beggars, living without democracy and human rights. The authorities use violence and torture to control the people. Recently, Buddhist monks in Bac Giang described the brutal torture they endured in prison. Their accounts of Vietnamese prisons sound exactly like the middle ages! Our leaders shamelessly declare that they are entitled to torture prisoners. This makes me so ashamed. We have a large country and a dynamic population, even if we still lack education and skills. But compared Norway, Vietnam lags so far behind.

I wonder what the Vietnamese leadership will think when they learn that the 2006 Rafto Human Rights Prize is awarded to Vietnam? I don't think it will make them happy. Indeed, it will probably make them ashamed. Those who have a little bit of integrity should think twice, and ask themselves why Vietnam is so poor that it must export its women and workers abroad? Today, Vietnam is Asia's biggest exporter of manual labour. If we have such a resourceful population and a great leadership that prides itself on having defeated so many imperialist aggressors, why is our country so impoverished, and our people so miserable and repressed? Today, Vietnamese women are put on sale in the market places, auctioned like slaves ... Have our leaders no conscience or integrity? Have they no sense of dignity? It makes me very sad to think about that.

So these are the mixed feelings of joy and sadness that I felt on hearing about the Rafto Prize. I would like to take the opportunity of this interview to launch an appeal to the 80-million Vietnamese people. The Rafto Prize proves that the international community supports the democracy movement in Vietnam. The world has not forgotten us. They stand beside us, and they are ready to encourage and help us. It is time for action. We cannot remain spineless and immobile like worms. For even worms twist and writhe when you step on them! The time has come for the whole Vietnamese population, all 80 million of us, to unite into one bloc. Together, we can form a strong, united movement and force the Vietnamese communist leaders to guarantee our democratic liberties and rights. They must give us back our dignity and self-respect, so we can live a decent life, compete for our place in the community of nations and endure humiliation no more. A country like Norway, with a population of 5-6 million people has achieved all this. So why can't we?

**Faulkner:** *When do you intend to go to Norway to receive the prize? The Rafto Foundation's Board announced that the award ceremony will take place on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2006 at the Opera House in Bergen.*

**Ven. Thich Quang Do:** This is a problem. I would love to go to Norway to receive the prize. It would give me an opportunity to see the world and broaden my outlook on life. But under the circumstances, it's very difficult. I am currently under house arrest. I can't even step outside my Monastery without being arrested by the Security Police. Each time I try to visit the UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in Binh Dinh province I am arrested and forcibly escorted back home. Even when I go to the hospital for my monthly medical check-up, just two kilometers from here, Security Police follow me everywhere. So how could I possibly travel to Norway?

I'm sure the government would never let me go. But supposing they did, I wouldn't dare take the risk. First of all, because I am no longer a young man. Secondly, and more important, Vietnam is my homeland, the birthplace of my ancestors. This is where my people live. It would be fascinating to visit Norway and make a trip around the world. But what if the government were to let me go, then never let me come home? I could never accept that. I would never abandon my country or my people. In 1975, when the War ended and the Communist regime took power, I had many Japanese friends who tried to persuade me to leave Vietnam. They said many Buddhist clergy and followers had already fled the country, and they could help me to leave too. I replied that the majority of Buddhists, indeed the majority of Vietnamese had chosen not to leave their homeland, and I had no intention of doing so either. I must live in Vietnam alongside the people, sharing their suffering when times are hard, sharing their joy when life improves. After trying repeatedly to convince me, my friends finally gave up. It was clear that I was determined never to leave.

I would really like to go to Norway to personally thank the Rafto Foundation and the Norwegian government for all their kindness and support for democracy in Vietnam. But if I cannot go home afterwards, I prefer not leave Vietnam. So I have decided not to travel to Norway to receive the Rafto Prize.

Furthermore, my situation is really difficult. I am the Deputy leader of a banned organization, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV). Under Vietnamese law, this makes me an illegal citizen, liable to be arrested at any time. When Vietnam re-establishes the UBCV's legal status, I will be free to travel as I wish. Until then, I will stay here and play my part in the movement for freedom and democracy in Vietnam.

For Venerable Thich Quang Do's "**Appeal for Democracy in Vietnam**" (2001), the "**New Year's Proposal for Pluralism and Democracy**" (2005) and other documents on the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, please consult our Website: <http://www.queme.net>