

# Chùa Thuyền Tôn

*By Benjamin Bruce*

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## 1.0 The Institution

The pagoda (chùa) Thuyền Tôn was founded by Master Dai Duc Thich Vien Dieu and is named after his original monastery, located in Central Vietnam. The pagoda moved to its current location in 1990 after having been in located in smaller building on St. Laurent where it had been for around 10 years. A little under 10 years following the master's arrival to Canada from Vietnam (which itself was in the late 1970s-early 1980s), the congregation had grown considerably: there was not enough room for everyone to pray together and it was necessary to find a larger space, so they looked around until they found the building where the temple is now located. Chùa Thuyền Tôn's current building on Alma used to be that of a paper manufacturing company, and the renovations and changes made to the building to convert it into a temple have been considerable. All the renovations were designed and prepared by the master, while the work was carried out mostly by volunteers from the congregation- some people donated money, others time. These renovations have also been done over a continued period of time- many of the very noticeable outside designs were done only last summer.

The master also co-founded with a nun named Su Co Thanh Quang the Pagoda Bồ Đề, a temple located in Beauport, a town north of Québec city. Interestingly, judging by the temple's website it is not as ethnically Vietnamese. There are many more Quebecers who participate and attend services at the temple Bồ Đề, something which is very rare at Chùa Thuyền Tôn. Lately however, the master has been having health problems and as a result of this has decided to stop giving services at the temple Bồ Đề. Instead, he has decided to focus his time on Chùa Thuyền Tôn, leaving the nun who founded the temple with him in charge.<sup>1</sup>

As demonstrated by the way in which the construction of the temple was carried out, the hierarchy of the temple is top-down, with the master being at the top. As well, within this hierarchy women (nuns) are placed below men (monks). An example of this is that of performing the weekly service-though the nuns have the training and are capable of carrying out the ceremony, as long as there is a monk present it is up to that monk to perform the service. Nonetheless, some people I spoke with maintained that there was no hierarchy, and that everyone had an equal position within the monastery. This I have found hard to believe, as there seems also to be a hierarchy within the group of lay people who participate in the ceremonies. Lay people are involved in a number of the ritual activities, however certain activities seem reserved for specific people, for example the playing of certain instruments or the giving out of slips of paper commemorating deceased relatives. Much of this seems more based on seniority rather than on gender, as there is participation in most activities by both sexes.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this temple: <http://www.pagodebode.org/>, as well as an article in *Le Soleil*: [http://lesoleil.cyberpresse.ca/journal/2003/12/27/special\\_le\\_soleil/00283\\_la\\_religion\\_sans\\_dieu.php](http://lesoleil.cyberpresse.ca/journal/2003/12/27/special_le_soleil/00283_la_religion_sans_dieu.php)

## 2.0 The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam

On the national level Chùa Thuyền Tôn is part of the Unified Buddhist Congregation of Vietnam in Canada, which in turn is part of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (Vien Hoa Dao). The headquarters for the Canadian congregation is in Edmonton and its leader is Thich Thien Tam, who is president of the organisation's executive committee as well as leader of the Truc Lam Monastery.<sup>2</sup>

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) is today an international organisation that represents the overseas Vietnamese Buddhist communities in Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand and has over 500 temples and Buddhist cultural centres around the world.<sup>3</sup> It was the result of a conference that took place from December 1963 to January 1964 at the pagoda of Xa Loi in Saigon, as an attempt to unify all the different traditions of Buddhism in Vietnam (most significantly the Mahayana and Theravada schools). The UBCV was quick to further expand their influence, founding a Buddhist university in 1964 (Van Hanh, on the initiative of Thich Nhat Hahn), and building a number of new pagodas and Buddhist centres across the country. With the end of the Diem regime in 1963, Buddhists also began to realise the role that they could play politically. As a result, Buddhists began to take part in as well as organise more protests, demanded more involvement in the government and in general came to be regarded as a political force. This new active involvement in politics was largely thanks to two of the UBCV's most important leaders, Tri Quang and Tam Ghau. The continuing Buddhist protests eventually led to significant repression by the government of Nguyen Cao Ky, and a split between Tri Quang and Tam Ghau also contributed to a decline in the influence of Buddhist movements. Following the communist victory and unification of the country in 1975, Thich Quang Do, the 'Secretary General of the Institute for the Propagation of the Dharma' (the executive role of the UBCV, which he assumed in 1974), began to protest the government's increasing involvement in controlling religious activities. For these protests Thich Quang Do and five other leaders of the UBCV were arrested; however a trial in 1978 could not convict them with anything more than 'disturbing the peace and spreading misinformation.' In 1981, the communist government created a state church (the Buddhist Church of Vietnam) in order to supplant the UBCV, which was subsequently banned. The government then used this as an excuse to arrest the two top leaders of the UBCV, Thich Quang Do and Thich Huyen Quang (the highest-ranking leader of the UBCV), and exile them to separate locations. Since 1981 the government has kept the two leaders under house arrest, although in the last few years there have been some signs of improving relations, such as the meeting in April of last year between Thich Huyen Quang and Phan Van Khai, prime minister of Vietnam.

Though the UBCV still exists in Vietnam the lack of religious freedom as a result of government control also means that it does not exercise a direct central authority over the overseas communities. The official information service of the UBCV is the International Buddhist Information Bureau (IBIB), located in Paris. One of the main tasks of the IBIB and the overseas UBCV congregations has been to put pressure on the Vietnamese government to allow Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do freedom of movement, and to end its persecution of the UBCV's top leaders. Unfortunately I have not been able to find out whether there is a hierarchy amongst the 4 leaders of the overseas communities (in Europe, Canada, the U.S., Australia and New Zealand), or what precise influence they exercise over specific temples, such as Chùa Thuyền Tôn. Insofar as funding for Chùa Thuyền Tôn is concerned, I was only able to find out what I observed, which was that following the Sunday service people would give envelopes with cash inside to the older nun at the main desk, who would then take down their names and accept the envelopes.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Overseas UBCV Congregations of Europe, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand represent Buddhist followers in the 3 million-strong Vietnamese diaspora. They have over 500 UBCV Pagodas and Buddhist cultural centres all over the world." <http://servizi.radicalparty.org/documents/index.php?func=detail&par=1563>

In Canada, one event that the Unified Buddhist Congregation does organise is a conference that is held on a yearly basis (last year was it was in Edmonton, this year will be in Calgary), where the masters of various temples across the country gather and stay for around two weeks. The various national Vietnamese congregations of the UBCV also seem to be well-connected with one another, especially based on my observations of one particular Sunday service. On that day the ceremony was performed by three visiting (Vietnamese) monks coming from somewhere in Scandinavia who were travelling around the country, raising funds in order to build a temple back where their community was in Europe. Money was given to them as it normally is at the front desk-in cash (mostly 20\$ bills), sealed in an envelope. I asked a few people there if this was normal, and I received a number of replies that visiting monks such as these would come by infrequently, raising funds for Buddhist temples in other parts of the world. Furthermore, a number of weeks ago the master left for vacation and to visit different monasteries in the United States. If nothing else, these events indicate the presence of a well-connected and well-coordinated organisation.

### 3.0 The Community

Another important point to mention is that the UBCV seems to be as much an ethnic organisation as a religious one. Though non-Vietnamese are in no way discriminated against or discouraged from attending, there is no active proselytising or any attempt to gain more followers. The congregation at Chùa Thuyền Tôn was fully Vietnamese for the period of time when I went, though I was told that there were sometimes ethnically Chinese Vietnamese who came, and that there had been two Quebecers who had come in the past (one was married to a Vietnamese man, the other spoke Vietnamese and was a Buddhist). The importance of ethnicity affects also the practitioners. When asked which other temples they would sometimes attend, the people I spoke with mentioned a number of different places- but only Vietnamese ones. Though the temples do not always have the exact same practices, everyone I spoke with seemed to go exclusively to Vietnamese temples.

On a weekly basis the congregation is between around 60 to 80 people, however as there is no official membership and because it is quite common for people to switch between temples, it is difficult to come up with a figure for the congregation at large. For holiday events such as New Year's or the Buddha's birthday, festivities are held and sometimes there are performances by children. For these events the number is significantly larger, ranging from 200 to 300. The ratio of men to women is not noticeably in favour of one or the other, at any age. There is a wide diversity in age at the temple, from babies to 80-year-olds, however everyone there (other than those in their teens and younger) came originally from Vietnam. There is not such a large youth presence, rather the majority of people who come to weekly Sunday service are between 30-50 years old. Vietnamese is spoken by everyone at the temple, for the service and amongst themselves, however since most of them have been in Canada for around 20 years or more now (the majority left after the fall of Saigon and the communist take-over) most can speak some English or French as well. The children (second-generation) would speak with their parents in Vietnamese, while they would talk with each other in English or French. The congregation consists mainly of Vietnamese from central and southern Vietnam, as would be expected (one man told me "otherwise, why would we have left?!").

The ordained clergy at Chùa Thuyền Tôn (who live at the temple) is comprised of the master, an older nun, a younger nun, and two young girls training to be nuns (Colleen and Danielle). The master, Dai Duc Thich Vien Dieu, from central Vietnam, has already been mentioned above. The older nun actually only became a nun two years ago, and because of her age does not do much of the general chores around the temple, nor does she take care much of the children. The younger nun, whose name is Nhu Duc, came to Canada 4 years ago from Vietnam, where she had been in a monastery outside of Ho Chi Minh City. She is the niece of the master, and was able to leave Vietnam because she was coming to Canada for religious purposes (whereas in the case of her siblings, for example, they cannot visit her as they are not allowed to leave). She takes care of most of the daily chores around the temple, and also seems to act as guardian for the children.



The young girls in the picture are both 7 years old and have been at the monastery in Montréal for 7 months. The girl on the left is Colleen, and is originally from Edmonton, and the girl on the right is Danielle, who is from Vancouver. Their families are still in Edmonton and Vancouver (parents and siblings), however their parents seem to have wanted them become nuns, and thus asked Nhu Duc to take the children in. At first Nhu Duc refused, believing the children to be too young, however the parents managed to persuade her otherwise, and since then they have been living at the temple in Montréal. They both go to school here in Montréal, and at the temple they learn written Vietnamese (they are bilingual English-Vietnamese otherwise) and Buddhist practices. When asking about them I was told that others had asked too, if they were not unhappy, living so far away from their homes (when I spoke with them alone as well, they both mentioned how much they missed their families). However, the response I and others asking such questions received was that they say that they are happy at the temple, and wish to become nuns. They both seemed very excited to tell me that the master was bringing them back yellow robes when he returned from his vacation.

The lay people who engage in various aspects of the ceremony, such as playing instruments, distributing slips of paper for ancestor worship, etc. are members of the congregation who do not live at the temple. They wear grey robes to distinguish themselves from the rest of the congregation during the service and though mostly older, there are some middle-aged practitioners as well. The duties of the lay people during the service are not affected by gender, but some practices seem to be only for certain people (such as playing certain instruments).



## 4.0 Ritual Space



*Downstairs dining room*



*Buddhist literature, coats & shoes*



*Upstairs main desk, lobby in the background*

The building itself is quite large and consists of two floors. The entrance to the building is through an unmarked door by the garage that leads to the lower floor, where there is a big open space in which meals are held after the Sunday service, as well as a kitchen in the back, some storage space and a room for coats and shoes on the way to the stairs. This last room also is where the temple's large collection of free Buddhist literature (in English, French, Vietnamese and Chinese) is kept, and there is a bunk bed in the back ("for anyone who might need it," I was told). There are two sets of stairs leading to the top floor: one which is the main staircase and leads to the lobby outside of the main worshipping area, and another which is not usually used by the congregation and which leads up to the main worshipping area, behind the statues and altars. In the lobby area there is a main desk and a small area with chairs, and a hallway that extends further back to where the clergy lives. The worshipping area itself is made up of three different rooms. The first is the largest, where the first part of the service and sermons are held. This is where the large altars for various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and the temple guardians are to be found. Behind this is a smaller room where there is a shrine set up for former masters, now deceased. Extending alongside the main area and this back room is another room where ancestor worship is practiced. The names and pictures of deceased relatives of the congregation are put up on the wall, and it is in here that the second part of the Sunday service, that of ancestor worship, is held. The counter in front of the wall of pictures also has several altars, offerings, and two statues.



*The Main Hall*



*Altar for former masters*

The altars themselves are quite similar. Small pyramids of fruit are always present—mostly oranges, but sometimes Chinese Ya pears or grapefruits as well. In front of the statues there is a bowl in which incense is placed, and there are glass ornaments and lights designed in the shape of lotuses. Candles, bamboo and flowers are also placed on these altars, and on the front of the main Bodhisattva altars a picture of the dharma wheel is painted. On either side of the front altar as well as next to one of the altars for the temple guardians (in the main hall) there are also donation boxes, however I never saw anyone use them.

*Ho-Phap**Tieu-Dien-Dai-Si*

The temple guardians (Dharmapala-protectors of the dharma) who have their altars on the sides of the main hall are Ho-Phap, on the southern side by the main entrance, and Tieu-Dien-Dai-Si (Mahakala in Sanskrit), on the northern side by the entrance to the ancestor hall. Ho-Phap is representative of a Viharapala, a protector of Buddhist monastic communities, and is also viewed as a healer, while Tieu-Dien-Dai-Si is considered a "wrathful manifestation" of Quan-The-Am (Avalokitesvara). The former is depicted as a general, or a prince, and is wearing full armour and carrying a sword. The latter has a demonic appearance: his mouth is wide open with his tongue sticking out, his face is red and he has another face at his waist. As well, he is holding a flag with his name written on it. The two are both very militaristic figures, and alongside protecting the teachings of the Buddha they are also responsible for pacifying and destroying its enemies.<sup>4</sup>

*Drum Set**Main Bell*

Musical instruments are located on either side of the main hall, near the temple guardians, as well as up front by the main altar. At the main altar in front of Sakyamuni, on both sides of the statue of Maitreya there are instruments. On the left is the wooden fish, or tempo block, and on the right is a large brass bowl which is the temple gong.<sup>5</sup> Near the statue of Ho-Phap there is a large bell, and on the other side are a number of different drums. Small bells and other (percussion) instruments are also carried by monks and lay members and are played during the ceremony.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/mindessence/vgtour.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/mindessence/vgtour.html>



*Sakyamuni's main altar: the wooden fish and the temple gong flanking Maitreya and Ksitigarbha in the back left*

In the main worshipping area the statues of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are opposite (east) to the windows that open on to the street (west), while shrines to the temple guardians are flanking on the sides (north and south). In the back centre of the room is the largest statue, that of Sakyamuni Buddha, and behind him is the Bodhi tree, which is itself made out of plastic and is attached to the wall. At the top hanging over the Buddha are also fake leaves coming from the branches of the tree. On either side of the main Buddha are the two Bodhisattvas Ksitigarbha and Avalokitesvara, whose names in Vietnamese are respectively Dia Tang Vuong Bo Tat (left of the Buddha when facing the main statue) and Quan The Am Bo Tat (right of the Buddha). In front of Sakyamuni there is a small statue of Maitreya, in front of which the presiding monk stands when he (she) conducts the ceremony. In front of this area where the monk stands there is another altar, this one with the statues of Amitabha and a multi-armed statue of Avalokitesvara. On the wall behind Sakyamuni, Ksitigarbha and Avalokitesvara there is a mural painted on the wall, depicting mountains, water, the Bodhi tree in the middle and a small white crane up in the top right corner. As well, behind the statues of Ksitigarbha and Avalokitesvara there are neon halos, while behind Sakyamuni there is a light that flashes around in a circle. Finally, in the corners there are spinning "stupas," pillars in which there are many miniature Buddhas and in which people can put wishes, requests and hopes. In the side room where the ancestor worship is conducted the statues at the altar are those of Ksitigarbha (below) and Amitabha (above) with an incense holder in front, and flowers and lotus imagery on either side. Ksitigarbha is depicting as sitting in the lotus position, holding his staff, and Amitabha is standing and making a hand gesture.



*Amitabha with Ksitigarbha below, ancestor hall*

## 5.0 Ritual Process

The Sunday service that is offered at the temple is the main weekly event and attracts between 60 and 80 people. Some people show up early (though compared with how many eventually show up, not many) and before the service starts there is a recorded gong that is played. Around 10-15 minutes before the service starts (11am) one of the lay participants begins to ring the large bell that is located by the main entrance, calling everyone to the service. By 11am most people have shown up, though it is not uncommon for people to arrive late. Everyone who attends wears 'normal' Western, North American clothing, ranging from well-dressed (shirt, dress pants) to very casual (jeans and sweater/shirt). Those who wear the white bandanas (signifying that they are in mourning) are not noticeably better dressed, or more dressed in specific colours than those who do not wear the bandanas. The lay people of the community who engage in the service wear grey robes, while the ordained clergy wear grey robes underneath yellow robes, which are worn over one shoulder.



*Where the congregation assembles in the main hall, with the main altar on the left and the drum set in the back right*

Wooden holders with prayers books are set out in lines across the carpeted floor, in front of which people seat themselves for the service. At 11am the monks and nuns (including the children) all enter the hall, at which time the congregation stands to receive them. A slight bow is exchanged, and then the head monk assumes his spot in front of the statues of Maitreya and Sakyamuni. Incense is lit and is placed in the holders in front of Ksitigarbha and Avalokitesvara, with a larger number of incense sticks being placed in the holder in front of Sakyamuni. A microphone is set up there already, and the monk begins to recite prayers for A-Di-Đà Phât (Amitabha). On either side of him the gong and the wooden fish are played by monks or nuns, or by senior lay people when someone might be away. Some prayers chanted by the head monk are also to be recited by the entire congregation, and those who do not know the prayers by heart read from the prayer books placed in the wooden holders. At the end of certain prayers and following the Namô (A-Di-Đà Phât), signalled frequently by the ringing of the temple gong, people in the congregation do prostrations. Unless specifically stated by one of the monks or nuns however, the number of times as well as when the prostrations are done often depends more on the individual person. This can be seen by the fact that some people hardly bow at all, while others are much more avid at doing them. The music- in other words the various bells, drums, the temple gong and the wooden fish-are all played throughout the entire service by the ordained clergy or the lay members in grey robes. At certain periods they all become louder, remain so for a number of beats, and then decrescendo for a

more extended period of time before getting louder once more. Those who play the temple gong always do so with their right hand, while the left is held in front in a prayer position.

Following this prayers are said for deceased ancestors. This is most often for recently deceased relations, however this is not necessarily always the case as the anniversary of a loved one's death is also observed. Nonetheless, officially mourning is practiced for 49 days (the period of time until reincarnation takes place). Those who attend the temple for the reason of mourning a lost relative wear white bandanas around their heads, and when this part of the ceremony begins yellow/orange slips of paper are distributed by senior lay people (those wearing grey robes) amongst these people. The slips are then fastened to the person's head, either under a bandana or with the use of a clip. After a number of prayers have been said, and noticeably more prostrations are made on the part of those mourning, the slips are gathered up once more by the senior lay people. The head monk then continues the service with prayers for the living-for good health, good luck, etc. Throughout the ceremony these prayers are 'sung' by the head monk in a cantoring/chanting fashion, and the language used is very much rooted in religious terms and expressions. On one occasion I attended the temple with a friend of mine who spoke Vietnamese, but who was not accustomed to the religious language. My friend would understand the directions that are given in between prayers (most often by the younger nun), such as: "we will now bow three times," or "we will now go into the ancestor hall," however the prayers themselves were much more difficult as the language used and the manner in which they are recited are very much specific to a religious context. Often the same prayers are recited each week, or a selection of the same prayers. I was told that they are from sutras, although I am not sure as to exactly which ones.

After this service is given sometimes the presiding monk will give a sermon. Whether or not a sermon is given depends on the monk. The master seems to normally give a sermon (he did when I attended), however the monk who has replaced him the past few weeks does not seem inclined to do so, whereas the visiting monks from Europe whom I mentioned did give one. At any rate, when a sermon is given, the change in the atmosphere is considerable. For the entire service the head monk is hidden behind the front altar of Avalokitesvara and Amitabha, with his back turned towards the congregation. For the sermon he faces the congregation holding a microphone, and speaks in a much more informal, personable fashion. The greater informality is also noticeable amongst the congregation, who spread themselves out more and seat themselves in much more relaxed positions than during the ceremony and recitations. During the first ceremony many people kneel or sit cross-legged, while some stand in the back. The sermons proceed much along the same lines as most religious sermons do: application of religious philosophy in every day, confrontation of current issues, and generally giving advice to the congregation. The sermons as well as all the other ceremonies are conducted entirely in Vietnamese, with only those English and French words that are necessary (such as place names, etc.).



*The ancestor hall, with pictures and names on the wall and the main altar in the middle*

Following the sermon (or if no sermon is given, following the ceremony in the main hall) the greater part of the congregation goes into the ancestor hall, where the ceremony for the ancestors is then conducted. The majority of people here wear white bandanas, as might be expected, but not everyone. The head monk positions himself in front of the altar of Ksitigarbha and Amitabha and begins to recite prayers. Incense sticks are passed out amongst the people in the room, who prostrate themselves four times with the stick of incense before they are collected again and are all placed in the holder in front of the main altar. The distributing and collecting of the incense is done by different people depending on the day, and is not always done by the lay people in grey robes.

On both ends of the room the ordained clergy and the grey-robed lay members play music throughout the ceremony. There is another wooden fish (tempo block) at the far end of the room in the above picture, otherwise most instruments are again bells that are held and played. The music is played in a similar fashion to the ceremony in the main hall, with a short crescendo followed by a more prolonged decrescendo, which then repeats itself. Along with the other prayers, during this ceremony the "Namo A-Di-Đà Phât" is chanted more than in the main hall ceremony. I was told by one person that this was to call Amitabha to protect the deceased ancestors, while the master told me that it was also a sign of showing respect to Amitabha. The prayers during the ceremony here are also more specific, with names being read out for those who have recently died. The number of people here sitting cross-legged is significantly lower, as most people kneel or stand. When the name of their relative is called out in a prayer (the monk has a stack of orange sheets, each one with the name of a different person on it) the members of that family prostrate themselves a number of times, so that during the service there are small groups of people prostrating in succession. As well, there are moments when a prayer ends, which the music indicates as well by everyone playing at the same time, and then everyone in the room bows.

During the ancestor service food, tea, and a number of empty bowls and cups are placed along the counter next to the wall of pictures. At various times during the ceremony the monk calls up those who have lost someone to fill up the cups with tea, or fill the bowls with food. This symbolises a communion with those who have passed away, as the food is the same as that which is eaten in the meal following this service. This can also be a place a strong emotions for some, and every now and then there are people who cry during the service. The monk also uses hand gestures during this ceremony to indicate to the congregation when to stand, when to prostrate, etc. as he cannot interrupt the recitation of prayers to do so. This ceremony lasts about the same length of time as the first ceremony in the main hall, approximately half an hour. Those who participate only in the first ceremony and who do not attend the ancestor worship go downstairs to wait for the meal, pray before the various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas or temple guardians personally, or stand around in the main hall talking amongst themselves. The atmosphere in the main hall at this time becomes much more sociable, and downstairs the tables and dishes are all prepared (in fact, arranging the downstairs for the meal is done even before the 11am service begins). Paying respects to the former masters at the altar in the back was done only once while I was there, and that was when the master was present and conducted the ceremony. It is done following the ceremony in the main hall, and before the ancestor worship; presumably this is something that is done more frequently when he is present.

Following the ancestor worship everyone goes downstairs for the meal. Families occupy different tables in the hall, and the head monk with the rest of the ordained clergy (the two nuns and the two children) sits at the head of the second last table closest to the kitchen. Prayers are not said before eating at any other table other than his, and even this is done very informally. The time I sat in the same row of tables in fact, the children were given the task of saying a prayer before the meal, which everyone watched with smiles on their faces.

The food is all Vietnamese and is prepared by a number of women in the kitchen in the back. Everything is provided by the temple other than the desserts, which are brought by individual families. This is why though there is always enough rice and main courses for everyone (much more than enough, actually!), the selection and number of desserts varies every week. As there is always a surplus of food, families also use this as an opportunity to bring food home for the coming week.

Following the meal people begin to leave, while many stay behind and help clean up. The dishes are taken to the kitchen, the tables are wiped off and put away with the chairs and the floor is swept, until everything is put away and it looks just as empty as in the picture on page 12. This marks the end of the service, after which everyone leaves.

## 6.0 Doctrine and Beliefs

Formally the doctrine practiced at Chùa Thuyền Tôn is that of mainstream Vietnamese Buddhism, which is a mixture principally between Zen and Pure Land traditions. The pagoda Bô Đê does a good job of summing up many of these beliefs on their website, which includes much of the traditional Buddhist canon: the 4 noble truths of the Buddha (the existence of suffering, the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the 8-fold noble path that leads to the end of suffering); the emphasis on the "3 jewels of Buddhism" (the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha); and the practice of Buddhism to escape the cycle of rebirth and attain Nirvana. This is all reflected in the free literature that Chùa Thuyền Tôn has in its basement as well. The presence of Ksitigarbha in the ancestor hall also demonstrates a belief in the vows which that Bodhisattva took—namely not to attain enlightenment until he had saved every living being—as well as a belief in the Buddhist notions of hell, as he specialises in relieving the pain of those reborn in such worlds.



*Thich Nhat Hahn's (bottom centre) visit to the old Chùa Thuyền Tôn temple; the master Dai Duc Thich Vien Dieu is in the back, second from the right, and Canadian Patriarch, Thich Thien Tam, is directly to his left*

The Pure Land aspects can be seen in the recitation of the Namo A-Di-Đà Phật and the importance given to Amitabha in their ritual, while the Zen aspects can be seen in their Friday service, which has a focus on meditation during which there is no chanting or recitation of texts (the practice of Zazen). Zen Buddhism in Vietnam has a long history, especially with the upper classes of Vietnamese society, while, as in other Buddhist countries, Pure Land was seen more as a religion for the masses (along with other folk beliefs and Daoist influences). In Pure Land Buddhism it is believed that through the recitation of the "Namo" one can be reborn in the Western paradise of Amitabha, which would itself also deliver one from the cycle of rebirth. In Zen Buddhism the focus is on gaining enlightenment through meditation (*zazen*), which is seen as either something that is cultivated gradually or something which comes in a flash of inspiration (Japanese: *satori*). Today there is no distinct division between these beliefs in mainstream Vietnamese Buddhism, and in fact amongst the congregation distinctions between different styles of Buddhism seem to lose importance as well. A few people with whom I spoke told me that Tibetan priests have visited Chùa Thuyền Tôn in the past, and when I asked whether there were not problems because of the differences in practices, I was told on more than one occasion that no matter the differences it was still the same Buddhism. The ease with which members of the congregation attend different temples also attests to this belief in an all-encompassing Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh, who is today seen as one of the most important leaders of Zen Buddhism in the world, visited the temple in 1987 as well. This divergence in Buddhist traditions that are nonetheless accepted by those who attend the temple shows that sectarian



divisions are not a large factor in the belief system of Chùa Thuyền Tôn. Texts can be seen in the iconography on the outside of the temple, where flanking the central windows are two lines of Chinese characters that come from the Heart sutra. Important texts for them formally include much of the Buddhist canon, although for the congregation there does not seem to be much emphasis or focus on any particular one.



*The outside of Chùa Thuyền Tôn, with Avalokitesvara on the right and a portion of the heart sutra on the left*

When talking with members of the congregation themselves I was often told of the most important elements of Buddhism: tolerance, kindness and respect towards others. A number of people told me that coming every week was not important, and that if one did not want to come then one should not. The most important thing, however, would be to live your life as the Buddha did, and love every living being. When I asked someone once to give me a summary of what was said in the master's sermon the answer I received was of this nature. Whenever I asked more specific questions, I was told to go speak with a Buddhist scholar, and was even given the name of someone who lives in Hochelaga.

Another way of interpreting this openness towards other traditions of Buddhism is that it is a result of no distinctive focus on Buddhism in particular within the temple itself. The temple's lax attitudes towards attendance and repetition on a weekly basis of many of the same prayers and rituals seem to demonstrate that it is fulfilling a role more associated with ancestor worship than 'purely' Buddhism, or perhaps better put, ancestor worship through the philosophies and practices of Buddhism. One man I met my first day there told me that he went very infrequently to the temple, and was only going now because a relative of his had recently died. As well, the faces I began to recognise over the period of time that I went to the services were those who were either lay participants or those who wore the white bandanas and were in mourning. In addition to this, the fact that the majority of the people who attended service in the main hall also take part in the service for the ancestors demonstrates again that ancestor worship might actually be the main factor in bringing people to the temple. If one were to count solely the people who come to pray to Amitabha and for the first service in the main hall, week after week, they would represent a small number compared with those who come to pay respects to deceased relatives. As one of the clergy put it to me when I asked about the high attendance rates, "people are always dying."

## 7.0 Differences with Vietnam, Similarities Internationally



*The Master as a young monk with the tonsure in Vietnam*



*Colleen and Danielle outside Chùa Thuyen Tôn*

Because Chùa Thuyền Tôn is officially a part of the UBCV through its national headquarters in Edmonton and as a result of fact that almost the entire congregation originally comes from Vietnam, it can be assumed that many traditions and rituals have simply been transported to a new location. The practice of tonsuring young monks and nuns by shaving their heads, except for one part at the very front, is one practice that continues with the two girls at the temple today. However, when compared with pagodas in Vietnam, there are a number of adaptations that have been made to the new environment. One example of this is the participation of lay members in ritual. This is due to the low number of monks and nuns in Canada at temples, and in fact in Vietnam this is not practised at all—at every monastery there are sufficient numbers of the ordained clergy to take care of all the aspects of the ceremonies. As well, there is a more pronounced division between the sexes in Vietnam. The master's original monastery in Vietnam of the same name is actually an exclusively all-male temple and nuns are not allowed to be trained there. This seems an almost ironic fact given that all the monastics at the Canadian Chùa Thuyền Tôn are women, except for the master.

No matter these differences, it is interesting to note the uniformity and similarity that Chùa Thuyền Tôn bears with respect to other Vietnamese temples of the diaspora. The temple Huyen Khong on Rosemont has much of the same organisation, rituals and iconography, as does the temple Tam Bao. Furthermore, the temple Van Giac in Oklahoma City has a floor plan almost identical to that of Chùa Thuyền Tôn, and their rituals and practices also seem very much in keeping with what is practised at Chùa Thuyền Tôn.<sup>6</sup> The degree to which this uniformity is observed in other Vietnamese communities, and whether it is due to influence of the UBCV or its national branches, is a question that would require further research.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/mindessence/vgtour.html>

## 8.0 Conclusion

Finally, encompassing the questions of religious practice and belief is the general role of Chùa Thuyền Tôn in the Vietnamese community. As seen in its focus on ancestor worship, the temple responds to the needs of the local Vietnamese community who were forced to flee from their homes over 20 years ago. It provides a location where ritual, religion and culture can all be preserved, although, as seen through the differences with Vietnam itself, it has also adapted to a new environment. The 'chùa' thus acts as an institution around which the community can gather, and where local tradition and holidays can be celebrated. In this sense it takes on the role of a North American 'community centre,' or the traditional *dinh* (communal house) in Vietnamese villages, as well that of 'religious centre': "*Dinh* ceremonies reinforce village solidarity by the feeling that participation in the rituals is being connected with the past, a domain of the ancestors."<sup>7</sup> This quote about a traditional Vietnamese village could just as well be describing the role of the Chùa Thuyền Tôn and other temples for the Montréal Vietnamese communities. However, the most interesting development is yet to come. As already seen, Chùa Thuyền Tôn is ethnically Vietnamese and only rarely are there people of other background who attend the temple. The example of Chùa Bồ Đề, where there seems to be a more diverse congregation might be what Chùa Thuyền Tôn will resemble in another few decades. As well, as the second-generation children of the Vietnamese diaspora now become adults, the impact that this will have on Chùa Thuyền Tôn and other predominately Vietnamese temples will be interesting to observe. Will the temple still be able to preserve the Vietnamese language and aspects of Vietnamese culture? Will the temple become, seemingly paradoxically, *more* Buddhist as a result of converts who are attracted primarily to the religious ideas? The adaptations that Vietnamese Buddhism has made in Canada, at Chùa Thuyền Tôn and elsewhere, is by no means over.

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