Compassionate Equilibrium: Buddhist Ethics and The Vietnamese Response to The COVID - 19 Pandemic

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***Abstract*—This article explores how Korean Buddhist Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic have drawn on the ideals of karuṇā (compassion), mettā (loving-kindness), upekkhā (equanimity), and the Middle Path (majjhimā paṭipadā). Citing sangha projects, doctrinal authorities, and contemporary Buddhist thought, it is a case study in how the Vietnamese Sangha has translated aged spiritual principles into pragmatic, humane, and ethical practice. The conversion of temples into quarantine sites, the delivery of vital essentials, and mental health assistance via the internet are some of the manifestations of what will be referred to as in this paper: *mettā*, "*a moving ethical balance between loving-kindness and equanimity*," that fosters not only individual resilience but collective well-being as well. This article situates the Vietnamese journey within the broader historical and philosophical scope of Buddhist medicine and social engagement Buddhism, arguing that the fusion of (spiritual) wisdom and (social) responsibility encapsulates a unique vantage point of the middle way. Buddhist ethics not only offers a moral lens through which to view crisis, but also is a positive model for integrated health and social solidarity in the shadow of global challenges, the article concludes.**

***Index Terms*—Buddhist ethics; compassion; Vietnam; COVID-19; Middle Path; karuṇā; upekkhā; mettā; engaged Buddhism; public health.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The ethical and social questions raised by the COVID-19 pandemic, which far surpassed questions about medicine, pressed societies to deal with issues of responsibility and the common good. Although biomedical science delivered vaccines and treatments, the pandemic also revealed an analogous gap; ethical coherence and humane solidarity. In this general sense, Vietnamese Buddhism provides a good demonstration of how to engage traditional ethics to address contemporary relief work. The Buddhist Sangha of Vietnam (VBS), including both its monastic and lay community, was the most influential ethical presence in pandemic-response. Its efforts - to distribute food and oxygen, run vaccination centres, and offer digital mental health support - were rooted not simply in social duty but in an ethical triad consisting of compassion (*karuṇā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). These are the manifestations of what this article names a compassionate equilibrium, conceived as the poise of empathetic engagement with the calm-depths that enable sustained other-regard.

Conceptually, this article advances discussions in the fields of global health ethics and religious humanitarianism by illustrating how Buddhist compassion extends beyond a private feeling to a public virtue. The Vietnamese example shows how ethical thinking rooted in canonical texts can build collective resilience that transcends sectarian divides. By rooting its public presence and its public action in *karuṇā* and *upekkhā*, the Sangha furnished a vision of ethical leadership in which spiritual and civic obligations were united.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical basis for this article is derived from the expanding field of Buddhist ethics which has transformed over the last few decades from a philological enquiry into moral philosophy and applied ethics. Authors like Peter Harvey (73) and Damien Keown (128) have stressed the virtue - ethical nature of Buddhist moral reasoning, where

compassion, mindfulness, and wisdom combined, form the foundation of moral excellence. The findings of Keown and Goodman (41), among others, illustrate the convergence of Buddhist ethics with Aristotle's and utilitarian ethics while at the same time revealing that its soteriological aim of liberation distinguishes its ethics from these other ethical theories. Alongside these theoretical shifts, the convergence of Buddhism and public health has become an area of focus in its own right. Nguyễn (34-35) and Hutchins (265-73) demonstrated the historical dimension references of Vietnamese chronicles and scholarly works on Buddhist governance.

However, in spite of such richness, English - language research on Vietnamese Buddhism is still scarce and interpretive conclusions adhere to mainstream understandings within Buddhist ethics scholarship (Harvey *Ethics* 72-95). Yet the case of Vietnam shows how compassion - based -ethics and social activism can crystallize in a distinctive humanitarian praxis. Hence the pandemic response of the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha not only represents the historical Buddhist social service but also could be seen as germane to Buddhist moral reasoning in the present day.

III. CLARIFICATION OF METHODS AND SOURCES

The approach of this study is based on the multi - levels of analysis of the interpretation of text tradition followed by historical contextualization and then sociocultural analysis. Relying mostly on Pāli literature (such as the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta*, the *Dhammapada* and the *Visuddhimagga)*, the doctrinal-level is limited to a brief sketch. The historical aspect draws on Vietnamese chronicles and research on Buddhist rule by scholars. The sociocultural aspect draws on more recent texts, including the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha Annual Report on COVID-19 Relief Activities 2020–2021, to interpret the practical implementation of doctrine in practice. Although the Pāli sources cited are in English translation, interpretive claims reflect mainstream interpretations in the field of Buddhist ethics. Triangulating evidence from doctrinal and empirical sources helps guard against the hagiographic and places monastic activism within a more general moral terrain. The method here is therefore textually informed yet sociologically meaningful, preserving the integrity of Buddhist philosophy yet engaging with contemporary ethical situations.

IV. FOUNDATIONS OF COMPASSION AND EQUANIMITY IN DOCTRINE

The Four Noble Truths serve as the ethical pillars of Buddhism and parallelly address suffering (*dukkha*), its causes, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. It is a framework that can be applied to both the analysis and treatment of individual and group pain. Compassion and lovingkindness are prominent in this framework as the emotional or moral responses to seeing suffering, In the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta* (Bodhi *The Suttanipāta* Sn 1.8, 143-152), the Buddha instructs the followers to develop an infinite heart of loving-kindness: “Just as a mother shields her only child with her life, even so, with a boundless heart should one in like manner cultivate it toward all beings.” This poem, canonical in the *Sutta Nipāta* (Bodhi *Budhha's Discourses* 149) and repeated in the *Khuddakapāṭha* (Ñāṇamoli *Minor* 9), expresses the non-bearing of selfishness and being invested in the other.

Compassion in Buddhist practice is not warm sympathy but the ethical wisdom that emerges from understanding cause and effect (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). It is by nature relational and inextricably linked to the needs of the other. As Harvey (75) comments, compassion is “the active expression of wisdom”. The *Visuddhimagga* also equates compassion to “when the heart is moved to trembling by suffering”, then that suffering is “to be tempered by equanimity so that it does not disturb the mind “.

Upekkhā (equanimity) the fourth brahmavihāra or “divine abode” serves as an antidote for compassion as a way to stabilize and moderate it. Although compassion is a reaction to suffering, equanimity keeps this reaction from becoming too involved or caught up in suffering. The Visuddhimagga defines upekkhā as “balanced seeing” and not grasping either pleasure or pain (Buddhaghosa 301-02). Supporting this ancient insight are neuroscience findings by Davidson and Lutz (173-76) that meditation practices associated with the cultivation of equanimity enhance emotion regulation and resilience.

Karuṇā, mettā, and *upekkhā* together make an ethical triad that governs emotional, intentional, and behavioral elements. When aligned within a foundation of mindfulness *(sati*) and wisdom (*paññā*), they engender the even-minded ethical character that is the focus of the path in Buddhism. This accord is expressed in the way of the Middle, which is neither the way of sense-pleasure indulgence nor the way of self-torture. The Middle Way is not compromise but dancing with discernment, meaningful engagement informed by contextual responsiveness, that resists absolutizing and sentimentalizing.

This compromise is included in the Middle Way, which is far from him who dared to be arbitrary sia proxenet bodybuilding. The Middle Way is not compromise, but discerning dynamism one steadfastly responds to the situation at hand with appropriateness without becoming compulsive or going to extremes.

In the Vietnamese context, these doctrines were revitalized in the pandemic. Monks and lay devotees rifles invoked the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta* in their sermons, webcasts teaching compassion service to fans service of an active meditation. The practice of equanimity enabled these practitioners to remain calm in an era of tremendous uncertainty — and loving-kindness inspired them to keep giving. Compassion was its active feeling, equanimity its steadying force, and wisdom its guiding principle.

V. HISTORICAL CONTINUITY AND VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST HUMANITARIANISM

Vietnamese Buddhism has a long tradition of combining spiritual practice with social engagement. Buddhism acted as both the state ideology and instrument of morality from the Lý dynasty (1010-1225) onwards. Lý Thánh Tông and Trần Nhân Tông are examples of kings who institutionalized compassion as a principle of rule, with the establishment of hospitals, orphanages and communal granaries as means of accumulating merit (*puñña*) (Nguyễn 44-47).

Trần Nhân Tông who a dao himself and later founded the Trúc Lâm Zen (Thiền) as a distinctly Vietnamese integration of royal responsibility and spiritual renunciation. In his Trúc Lâm Yên Tử writings he accentuates the integration of individual wisdom and state service, which is predicated on the idea that benevolent rule follows from altruistic conduct. This line of Buddhist kingship provided a template for subsequent, monastic models of humanitarianism. Not only had places of worship become venues for worship but had also become places of instruction, medical treatment, and public welfare. The monks mobilized in war times and famine to give relief, living out the ideal that moral training includes involvement in other people's pain. "the Buddhist doctor did not simply treat disease but took advantage of the opportunity to rekindle compassion through healing," Hutchins observes (270).

The moral souvenier was not clear to us, but we understood there were traces of it. When the COVID - 19 virus hit in early 2020, the Sangha sprang into action through its temple networks. As per the Annual Report on COVID - 19 Relief Activities (2021), the Sangha had provided over 1.2 million food packages, ran quarantine centers as well as provided mental health assistance for all provinces (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha 9-12; 18-22). Those initiatives were inspired not by proselytizing, but the Buddhist ethic of universal compassion. They recounted their work as a practice of *dāna pāramitā*, the perfection of generosity. The ethical rationale for these activities was found in the Dhammapada (Bodhi 5): *Hate is not conquered by hate; hate is conquered by love*. Compassionate service was thus understood to be a material expression of the Dharma, a device for bringing Buddhist insight into the sphere of human suffering.

In this way, the pandemic did not engender previously unseen forms of Buddhist engagement but rather reactivated established traditions of social responsibility. As Kenneth Zysk and C. Pierce Salguero demonstrate, already early Buddhist medicine was at once physical and spiritual care (Zysk 53). Vietnamese Sangha's pandemic response is therefore an exemplar of continuity, not novelty – a reenactment of a historical ethic in present day.

VI. APPLIED COMPASSION AND THE MIDDLE PATH IN PUBLIC HEALTH

Informed by this historical antecedent of humanitarianism, the Vietnamese Sangha's response to COVID-19 illustrates how such moral precepts were implemented in tangible public-health endeavours. As the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic came to be known in Vietnam, both the Buddhist

Sangha and lay communities actively began to embody the principles of *karuṇā* and *upekkhā* in their public health activities. Temples and monasteries acted as points of distribution for food and other supplies, vaccination sites, and even quarantine centres. The Sangha's selective engagement with local officials in its nascent period was a practical application of the Middle Path ideal - no isolationist and geopolitically nonpartisan cooperation that was nevertheless committed and compassionate. There were some revealing expressions about the ethics of these activities and associated with said passages in the scriptural texts. Monks are also known to have recited *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, which states that taking care of others is itself taking care of oneself (Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 1648-49; SN 47.19).

The expatriate poet was receiving his greatest acclaim, and reviewers were most often recalling his famous Ethiopian quotation as they delved into "So It Goes" and the story of the plane crash: that protecting other people from becoming infected or infecting you, was a form of self-preservation, a way of expressing *mettā*, an important Buddhist philosophy in action. Tâm said in his public speeches: "*To mask oneself and keep one's distance are not the fulfilment of one's obligation but acts of kindness, protection of others in the consciousness of one's own*" (Thích Trí Quảng 21-27). The Sangha, which coordinates volunteer groups and donation campaigns, also represents compassion in action via the Buddhist principle of *upāya* (skilful means). Temples held online fundraising campaigns and digital counselling when strict lockdowns forbid them from providing any help in person. Family members can now adapt rituals to online platforms, so that they can perform memorial services while upholding safety measures. This flexibility shows how the ethical principle of non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) was integrated into modern technologies to care for the community.

The Vietnamese instance is broadly comparable with those of Buddhist-majority countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, but it is unique in its centralised coordination. The hierarchical nature of the VBS also allowed for doctrinal consistency to be maintained despite the rapid mobilization of members. Compassion was never characterized simply as charity but as a moral imperative and one integral to the path of the Buddhist. This framing gave social restrictions and vaccination campaigns legitimacy, and trust in both religious and secular authorities.

VII. ENGAGED BUDDHISM AND ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

The pandemic also revived a Vietnamese form of engaged Buddhism, which had been shaped in the mid-20th century by reformers such as Thích Nhất Hạnh. Engaged Buddhism stresses the unwinding of the dualism of spiritual practice and social action. Under COVID-19, this ideal found institutional embodiment in the Sangha's joint relief work and ethical guidance. "Inter-being" Teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh, the recognition that all things exist in relation to other things, was a key lens through which to understand collective vulnerability. In this interpretation, the virus represented the interconnectedness of human existence: damage to others affects us all in the social net. "The suffering of one is the suffering of all; the happiness of one is the happiness of all" (Thích Nhất Hạnh 98)

This vicarious faith of Vietnamese monks was used to combat social hatred and prejudice towards those who were infected. Compassion was reinterpreted as encompassing solidarity, not just selective help. Online sermons and teaching stressed *upekkhā* as the essential attitude to cultivate for enduring compassion and for preventing burnout or despair in the long run. Part of the meaning of equanimity was to be understood as a technology of ethics that is to say, an internal process designed to educate affect and sustain engagement through time. Also, the leaders of the sangha demonstrated what might be called moral transparency: their personal conduct was in harmony with their public expression of ethical norms. The monastics followed orders, displayed patience in the face of limited supplies, and did not politicize their humanitarian work. Such censoring is part of the Buddhist virtue of *sammā-vācā* (right speech) and *sammā-kammanta* (right action), which are considered the two legs of the eightfold path. They showed that moral leadership is as much about self-regulation as it is about serving others.

VIII. PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS: COMPASSION AS MORAL COGNITION

The setting of the Compassionate Equilibrium how Buddhist ethics combines feeling, thinking, and willing to form a cohesive moral psychology. Compassion derives from a cognitive realization of interdependence rather than pure emotion. Thus compassion, when informed by *upekkhā*, is neither partial (to involve) nor depleting (to exhaust). These dynamic converts moral feeling into moral thought - a cultivated perception of the world's suffering along with an understanding of your ability to make a difference. Conceptually, this model undermines Western binaries between the mind and the body. In Aristotelian virtue ethics phronesis rules the emotion through moderation informed by practical reason whereas in Buddhism wisdom and compassion are co - dependent, each are precondition to the other. As Keown (134) points out, to be a morally upright Buddhist is to be "a person whose understanding of reality necessarily entails compassionate conduct." These insights transform knowledge into commitment. The pandemic made this all the more apparent. Volunteers were fatigued, frightened and grieving. But impermanence (*anicca*) and non-self (*anattā*) gave cognitive means to emotional survival. Through contemplating the impermanence of all phenomena, they would maintain compassion without attachment to outcomes. This balance of cognitive detachment and emotional engagement is the hallmark of the Buddhist response to crisis.

CASE STUDIES OF APPLIED COMPASSION

Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC)

Already the largest city and the center of the pandemic in Vietnam, HCMC also became a hub for Buddhist humanitarian coordination. They handed out food and medicine, turned meditation halls into emergency clinics and helped manage quarantine centers. Members of sangha and laypeople alike volunteered together under the call "Đạo pháp Gắn Liền Với Dân Tộc" ("*The Dharma Bound with the Nation*"). Accounts have been recorded of monks helping with cremations and burials during periods when city systems were overloaded (Vietnam Buddhist Sangha 18-22). Such were these responses: compassionate but not emotional pity, meditative but relational.

Central Vietnam (Huế and Hội an)

In areas with a history of royal support for Buddhism, the temple system combined ritual and health instruction. Outdoor chanting was punctuated with public service messages on hygiene and vaccination. This artistic innovation in line with the spirit of *upāya* allowed the community to continue ritual identity while observing pandemic safety (Waddell and George 1129). The fusion of spiritual reassurance and medical precaution is a testament to the ability of Buddhism to recast ancient traditions to address contemporary needs.

Mekong Delta

In the Mekong Delta, temple flotillas of small boats would bring food and oxygen tanks to remote villages. The Sangha termed this act "*Hạnh Bố Thí Tập Thể*", collective generosity and conjoined the logistical aspect of doing things together with the moral aspect of accruing shared merit. Here the ordinary work of life turned into acts of moral cultivation; compassion was woven into the daily work-force, rather than being sequestered in ritualized alms-giving.

Mindfulness, Moral Intention, and Burnout Prevention

Among the most original of the Vietnamese Buddhist responses was its analysis of compassion fatigue as a challenge of both ethics and psychology. The monastic leaders stressed that mindfulness (*sati*) and right intention (*sammā-saṅkappa*) are necessary to maintain long-term altruism. Volunteer training sessions began with brief meditation sessions, melding awareness of breath with recitations of *mettā* phrases such as "May all beings be safe."

Work with mindfulness by Shapiro and his colleagues (Shapiro, Schwartz, and Bonner 164–76) has been shown to reduce stress and enhance empathy among those who practice it. quanimity training has also been shown to promote neural resilience (Davidson and Lutz 173), in the same way. These results are consistent with the Visuddhimagga's assertion that equanimity (*upekkhā)* fortifies compassion by mitigating emotional disturbance (Ñāṇamoli, 302). Vietnamese Buddhist ritual thus served as spiritual discipline, identity work, and psychosocial therapy. The monastic teachings depicted rest and self - care as a duty and not a sin, and rest and self - care were recast as ways of practicing *upakkhā.* The Sangha redefined balance as a kind of moral watchfulness, instructing

volunteers that fatigue dulls mindfulness and therefore compassion. This notion fits in with the Middle Path's avoidance of extremes so that service can be sustainable.

IX. TENSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CRITIQUES

Nonetheless, there are several tensions within this successful model of Vietnamese Buddhist practice. The first one is the rise of secularization and commodification. As Purser (45-70) warns, mindfulness stripped of its ethical context becomes timeliness of productivity rather than a vehicle for liberation. Although the risk was countered in the Vietnamese Sangha by rooting mindfulness in explicit moral intention, it is possible that such ethical mooring will be lost as mindfulness is widely applied in secular contexts. Second, the empirical assertions regarding meditation effects remain methodologically contested. However, while we do not make claims about causative efficacy, we recognize the limitations of correlational data. It therefore reads meditative practice not as a form of medical treatment but as a kind of moral education.

Sustainability and inclusivity also remain issues of concern. Buddhist humanitarianism is notoriously reliant on volunteer labor and donations, which brings with it questions of fatigue and uneven resources. Longterm partnerships with government and secular organizations must be established to facilitate distribution of aid especially in non-Buddhist or ethnically complex communities. Yet these constraints do not diminish the Sangha's response as a moral event. Rather, they highlight the urgency of continuing to ask how compassion can be turned into an institutional practice without losing the mark of compassion."

Implications for Public Health Policy and Vietnam experience: Lessons for policy that extend beyond the Buddhism:

The Influence of Moral Framing on Collective Compliance. Compliance is higher when public health orders are presented as expressions of compassion and humanity's interconnectedness rather than as coercive commands. Religious Networks as Partners in Health. Temples also can serve as logistical hubs and trustworthy intermediaries for health messaging (Waddell and George 1123-38). Training Volunteers in Mindfulness. Short interventions based on equanimity and compassion may serve to shield individuals from burnout and enhance ongoing civic participation. Interfaith Collaboration (Buddhaghosa 301-02; Shapiro et al 167-72). The logic of *upāya* could be used to guide interfaith collaboration in the collective pursuit of shared humanitarian objectives, which could help to make such enterprises more efficacious and provide a further basis for social solidarity. Incorporating Mindfulness into Volunteer Training. Brief equanimity and compassion interventions may protect against burnout and promote enduring civic engagement. Interfaith Collaboration. The logic of *upāya* can inform interfaith cooperation in a collective pursuit of common humanitarian aims, making such operations more effective and providing an additional source of social solidarity (Dorji 89-106).

Philosophical Dialogue: Virtue, Care, and Non - Self

Building on the cognitive model described in the last section, the next part deepens into comparative moral philosophy and ethics of care. Buddhist compassionate equilibrium is in both analogy and extension to Western moral theories. Like Aristotelian virtue ethics, it stresses habituated character and moral judgment, but unlike Aristotle, it grounds virtue in the epistemology and ontology of *anatta*. With care ethics, it shares relational responsiveness, yet it transcends partiality through universal benevolence. The *Mettā* Sutta's injunction to love all creatures "seen and unseen" is a regulative ideal of non - positional compassion. Buddhist ethics reinterprets altruism not as self - sacrifice but as the realization of interdependence, by decentering the self. It converts compassion to a cognitive realization rather than an affective overflow. The Vietnamese practice of this insight shows how non - self - leads to the ability to persist morally: volunteers serve without being vested in outcomes, which allows them to persevere in service. When compassion is grounded in equanimity it is a public virtue, rational, sustainable, and applicable across times and cultures.

X. CONCLUSION

Every aspect of the Vietnamese Buddhist response to COVID-19 clearly manifests Buddhist ethics' capacity for reinvention in the context of contemporary global problems. But it was more than logistics: it was the

moral grammar of those acts. By connecting doctrinal compassion with concrete suffering, Vietnamese Buddhism showed that an ethical calculus based in dukkha – awareness of suffering – can lead to both spiritual and civic transformation.

The investigated notion of compassionate equilibrium defines a moral condition in which its constituents - the affective and the cognitive mind states - coexist. It is compassion informed by mindfulness and rooted in wisdom. The metaphor of equilibrium highlights that just as we should not over empathize to the point of burnout, nor engage in detached neutrality that could lead us to apathy, moral behavior consists in a regulated emotional state informed by wisdom.

Outside Vietnam, this framework very well also has transnational public ethical implications. In the face of a global health system facing more complex challenges – climate change, forced migration, mental health epidemics – Buddhist ethics provide a lens to view interdependence. Its appreciation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* offers a rationale for thinking in terms of ecological and social systems: all actions impact the whole of life.

In comparison to the Ambedkarite and Hindu models of co-option, the Vietnamese Buddhist approach resonates with *Bhutan's Gross National Happiness* framework and the humanitarian initiatives of Taiwan's Tzu Chi Foundation. But it is distinctive in its revival of classical doctrine within national coordination through the Sangha. Compassion was not separate from governance; it became the moral architecture of collective governance.

On a philosophical level, the pandemic has renewed interest in the importance of moral sentiment to public reason. Reason and feeling are often contrasted in Western traditions, but Buddhism provides a view of their interdependence. Compassion is a way of knowing as well as a way of caring. In this way, Buddhist ethics is relevant to a wider philosophical debate regarding how affective intelligence and moral reasoning together influence the development of public virtue.

On a practical level, the findings in this study imply that the ethical education of public health should develop far beyond the procedural rules to the cultivation of character — virtues such as compassion, patience, and equanimity in those who undertake the work of healthcare and volunteering. The Vietnamese case demonstrates how such qualities are also systematically instilled, through processes of meditative training and communal ritual, providing viable moral recourses in times of crisis. Ultimately compassionate equilibrium is what the Buddha termed "*the Middle Way*": a moment-by-moment awareness that grants space for acting decisively without arrogance, having empathy without despair, and serving others without becoming weary.

In a post-pandemic age when societies are re-evaluating the values upon which resilience is built, the Vietnamese Buddhist lived-experience offers a lasting teaching: compassion, when grounded in equanimity and enlightened by wisdom, is not simply a personal virtue but a public ethic. This shows that spiritual traditions, rather than being fossils of the past, continue to be crucial sources of moral clarity for steering through the fog of what's to come.

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