

Introduction to Buddhist Youth Association

A. Introduction

In the 1940's, some Vietnamese Buddhist youth groups were founded at Hue, the Vietnam's Capital at that time, with the aim of encouraging youths to study and practise Buddhism. The original members of those groups were the siblings of a family and its neighbours. The groups therefore were called Buddhist Families and were named after the Dharma names of the families' fathers. The first Buddhist Family was Tâm-Minh, the Dharma name of Dr Lê-Đình-Thám (1897-1969). Since then the movement has spread to all parts of Vietnam from the South to the North. By 1950, all Buddhist youth groups had combined together into a common association: the Buddhist Youth Association (GDPT -originally from the Vietnamese phrase Gia-Đình Phật-Tử, literally meaning Buddhist Family). Since 1964, the Buddhist Youth Association has been an education department of the Unified Vietnamese Buddhist Church (UVBC). In principle, all activities of the GDPT association are under the guidance and supervision of the UVBC. The GDPT association has its own constitution that was approved by the UVBC. Since 1975, many Vietnamese have left their country and lived in other countries. Wherever there are Vietnamese, there are Vietnamese Buddhist Youth units, even in refugee camps where Vietnamese lived temporarily, waiting to go to third countries. However, all GDPT units in the world have the same original aims, use the same logo, and follow the same mottos and rules. They also sing the same official anthem, and their uniforms have the same smoke-grey colour. GDPT units in different countries may have different constitutions that are derived from the original constitution of the Vietnamese Buddhist Youth Association to suit the organisations of the Vietnamese Buddhist Churches in those countries. In future, we hope that there would be GDPT units with non-Vietnamese background members, and we might call ourselves Buddhist Youth Association or GDPT.

B. Aims, Logo and Mottos

1. Aims

The aims of all Buddhist Youth Associations are to help youths to develop themselves into upright Buddhists, and to contribute to the building of a peaceful, prosperous and harmonious society.

2. Logo and Mottos

All Buddhist Youth Associations use the common logo of White Lotus Flower on a light-green circular background with a white border. The logo was originally designed by Brother Lê Lùng of GDPT Tâm-Minh. GDPT members uphold the motto "Compassion - Wisdom - Courage" as their guide in life. Originally, GDPT Tâm-Minh used the "Harmony - Trust - Joy" motto, which is now still used for younger members (sparrows).

C. Membership and Rules

1. Membership

Everyone can join Buddhist Youth Associations. GDPT members are grouped into three main branches based on their ages:

- a) Sparrow: For children from six to 12 years of age.
- b) Youth: For youths between 13-17 years of age.
- c) Adult: For adults from 18 years of age.

There are different training programs in theoretical and practical Buddhism for the three branches. The Sangha (monks and nuns) and youth leaders guide GDPT members to develop themselves into upright Buddhists.

Adult members who have passed leader training camps (workshops) and have developed competency in different disciplines including the Dharma (Buddhist canon), religious procedures, scout-like activities, literature, history, musical theory and practice, etc. will be promoted to be youth leaders.

2. Rules

GDPT members are encouraged to live consistently with the following sets of rules:

- a) For sparrows: There are three rules.
 - 1) As a young Buddhist, to worship the Buddha and follow His teaching in life.
 - 2) As a young child, to respect parents and live in harmony with siblings under the love of parents.
 - 3) As a young child, to love oneself as well as others, and to protect and improve the environment.
- b) For Youths and Adults: There are five rules.
 - 1) As a Buddhist, to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and to live consistently with the virtuous precepts one has vowed to keep.
 - 2) As a Buddhist, to live wholeheartedly with loving kindness and compassion, and to respect all forms of life.
 - 3) As a Buddhist, to develop wisdom, the insight about the life, and to respect the truth.
 - 4) As a Buddhist, to be pure in any aspect, from the body to the mind, from speech to action.
 - 5) As a Buddhist, to live in sympathetic joy and non-attachment in order to progress boldly on the Way.

D. White Lotus Flower Logo



All GDPTs use a common logo: The White Lotus Flower logo. Lotus flowers are very popular in Buddhism. Lotus is a plant that grows in warm climate areas. A lotus flower is born in mud, grows and stands above it unsoiled. Lotus flowers have beautiful colours and pleasant fragrance.

1. Description

The White Lotus Flower in the logo has eight petals. The three lower petals symbolise the Three Jewels: the Buddha (the middle petal), the Dharma (the left petal -front view) and the Sangha. The five upper petals stand for the five virtuous

characters of an upright Buddhist: diligence, happiness (sympathetic joy and non-attachment), purity, wisdom and compassion.

2. Three Jewels

The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha are called together the Three Jewels because they show us the way to relieve our sufferings, greed, hatred and delusion. Following the Three Jewels, we will have peaceful, joyous and happy lives. Under the light of the Three Jewels, all beings, including humans, animals, insects, etc. will live in harmony, will share and protect the environment including the atmosphere, forests, mountains, rivers, trees, rock, soil, etc.

- a) **Buddha**: A Buddha is one who attains full enlightenment, i.e., the one who is self-enlightened, has helped others to become enlightened, and has perfected the enlightenment virtue. There are numerous Buddhas: Sakyamuni, Amita, Maitreya, Mahavairocana, etc. We often use the term "The Buddha" to mean the historical Buddha (Sakya-Muni).
- b) **Dharma**: Dharma or Buddhist canon is classified into three categories: sutra, vinaya and sastra. Sutra is composed of the teachings of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, eg, Dharmacakkappavattava (Turning the wheel of Dharma), Dharmapada, Abhidharma, Lankavatara (Lăng Già), Prajnaparamita-hrdaya (Heart Sutra), Agama (A-Hàm), Avatamsaka (Hoa-Nghiêm - Hua-Yen), etc. Vinaya is the moral code (rule) used to control our thoughts, speeches and actions. We often use the pair sila-vinaya (precepts and rules). Sila-vinaya is not only to bring harmony to Buddhist communities and to develop our virtuous behaviour, but is also a means for concentration (samadhi), which in turn is an approach to acquiring wisdom (prajna). The three processes, sila, samadhi and prajna, are called the Three Disciplines. Actually, the three disciplines should be presented in a cycle, i.e., with sila-vinaya we have samadhi, with samadhi we have prajna, and with prajna we have sila-vinaya but at a subtler level. There are five precepts for lay Buddhists (upasaka –male lay Buddhist, and upasika –female lay Buddhist), ten precepts for novices, 250 precepts for bhikkhus (monks), 350 precepts for bhikkhunis (nuns), etc. Sastra includes commentary or development works derived from sutra by Bodhisattvas, eg, Abhidharmakosa (by Vasubandhu), Adhyamika (by Nagarjuna), Yogacara (by Asanga and Vasubandhu), etc.
- c) **Sangha**: A Sangha is a community of the Dharma practisers who left their homes and have vowed to live in awareness. Normally, a sangha has at least four persons who live in harmony following the Six Principles of Harmonious Living. There are two main sangha streams: bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.

3. Five Virtuous Characters

The five virtuous characters are the objectives that a GDPT member should aim for.

- a) **Diligence (effort, energy)**: The diligent character is the name for the middle, upper petal in the white lotus flower of the logo. The Sakya-Muni Buddha is a representation of this character based on His marvellous effort in finding the Way and in spreading the Dharma.

To attain this objective, we should try our best to realise the other four virtuous characters, i.e., happiness, purity, wisdom, and compassion, in our daily lives.

- b) **Happiness (mudita and upekkha)**: The happiness (sympathetic joy and non-attachment) character is the name for the petal immediately to the left of the diligence petal (front view). The future Maitreya Buddha is a representation of the happiness character. His statue is often sculpted with a happy face, and a giant abdomen that symbolises generosity and equanimity because the Maitreya Buddha accepts everything, good or bad, without greed, hatred or delusion, and let them go without a single trace of discrimination in His mind. Some statues of the Maitreya Buddha have six children (standing for six consciousnesses) interfering with Him but the Buddha is still joyous.

To have the happiness character, we should live with optimism and a smile ready on our faces. We should keep our minds calm in most situations. We should be ready to repent (accept and promise to avoid) our mistakes. We should easily forgive others' mistakes, even ours after repentance.

- c) **Purity**: The petal immediately to the right of the diligence petal is named after the purity character, which is the one that GDPT members should keep in daily activities, from the body to the mind, from speech to action. The Amita Buddha is a representation of the purity character based on His 48 vows. With these vows, He established a Pure Land for any living being who would like to transcend to that realm.

To have the purity character, we should keep our bodies, hairs, clothes, houses, cars, etc. clean and tidy. We should be honest, polite, and always respect the truth. Our speeches should bring peace, joy and harmony to everyone. Moreover, we should keep our minds free from greed, hatred, selfishness, jealousy, envy, etc.

- d) **Wisdom**: In Buddhism, we often use the pair wisdom-prajna. In simple terms, a person with wisdom is the one with right understanding. The left-most petal is named after the wisdom character. The Manjusri Bodhisattva is a representation

of the wisdom character. People sculpt His statue with a sword in His right hand. The sword symbolises the wisdom used to cut through all delusion and ignorance. The green lotus flower in His hand symbolises the purity of His wisdom.

To have the wisdom character, we should have righteous views (insight) on all phenomena. For example, we should know that rain is not the action of any saint or god. Rain is a physical phenomenon occurring when cloud gets cooler and cooler, and eventually condenses to become water, which is heavier than air, and falls down. In Buddhism, we recognise the Four Noble Truths (Sufferings -the existence of sufferings, Origination -the cause of sufferings, Extinction -the cessation of sufferings, and Path -the way to extinction, e.g., the Noble Eightfold Path), the interdependence among phenomena (e.g., the Twelve Link Causation theory), etc.

- e) **Compassion (metta and karuna):** In Buddhism, the term compassion is often used for both loving kindness (metta: to bring joy, happiness to beings) and compassion (karuna: to lighten beings' sufferings). The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Quan-Yin or Quán-Thê-Âm) is a representation of the compassion character because He usually listens to the suffering cries of beings in the world. People often sculpt His statue in the form of a mother with a willow branch and a bottle of pure water. The Bodhisattva sprays pure water on the minds of beings to cool their greed, hatred and cleanse delusion, and as a consequence, all living beings may transcend their sufferings.

Loving kindness and compassion should be the motivation for our daily activities. We should bring peace, happiness and harmony to everyone, humans, animals, insects, trees and plants. Our lives should aim at the lightening of our sufferings and others'. We can say that compassion is the manifestation of our wisdom because with the understanding of the interdependence among phenomena, we recognise that others' sufferings are also ours.

To recognise which action actually originated from compassion, from righteous love, we should improve our wisdom, our understanding. Practising meditation will help us to have the insight of our minds, and therefore to know the motivations of our thoughts, our speeches and our actions. Learning Buddhism, sciences, etc. will enable us to have righteous views about the world, the universe, about all phenomena and their interdependence. Being aware of our mind activities and the environment, we can control our speeches and body activities.

Knowing how to control our activities, we should be courageous to concentrate our effort to stop bad, ugly thoughts, speeches and actions. We should try our

best to be involved in good, wholesome activities, and to improve the purity of our minds.

4. Colours and Symbolisation

The white colour of the lotus flower logo symbolises purity. Lotus flowers grow in mud, a material people often consider dirty and having bad smell. However lotus flowers have pleasant fragrance and beautiful colours. This is a metaphor for the bodhisattvas' vow: lightening beings' suffering. Bodhisattvas are born and raised in the world full of greed, hatred and delusion. However they keep themselves unspoiled, i.e., free from greed, hatred and delusion. Lotus flowers cannot grow in clean, dry soil. Similarly, bodhisattvas will not achieve their vow without coming into the world full of sufferings. Self-sacrifices, e.g., the Six Paramitas (six perfections) characterise bodhisattvas' practices.

The light-green colour is the colour of young leaves, which symbolise youths and their hopes.

The circular background symbolises the perfection and unobstructiveness property of Buddhism. Anyone, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, can practise Buddhism wherever they are and in any situation to lighten the sufferings of themselves or others; in Buddhism, one can find an appropriate method to end any suffering. The white colour of the logo border stands for the light, the wisdom. Whenever we practise the Buddha's teachings, we live in the light of wisdom, love and understanding.

E. Uniform and Salutation

1. Formal Uniforms

There are four uniform sets, two for sparrows, and two for youths. The uniforms of adults and leaders are the same as those of youths. The formal uniforms are official ones and may be used on any occasion; they should be used in important ceremonies, eg, Vesak (the Buddha's birth day), festivals, funerals, etc. The uniforms described in this section are used by GDPT in Vietnam. In other countries, they may be slightly different.

- a) **Sparrow Uniform:** The formal uniform is composed of a smoke-grey shirt with short sleeves, and a navy-blue skirt (for girls) or short (for boys) with two braces. The smoke-grey colour is the colour of smoke from burning incenses on the altar to the Buddha or the ancestor of most Buddhist families. It is also the colour of smoke hovering over thatch roofs during the preparation of evening

meals in the country side. Seeing this smoke, a traveller would feel nostalgic and want to return home in the happiness of the family warmth.

- b) **Youth Uniform:** The formal uniform for girls is a smoke-grey long tunic and a white pant. The formal uniform for boys is composed of a smoke-grey shirt with short sleeves, a navy-blue short with belt, a hat with four-cornered top and a pair of shoes with long socks. The four-cornered top stands for the benefits we received from the four sources: our parents, our teachers and friends, our society and nation, and the Three Jewels. The hat therefore is called the Four-Gratitude hat.
- c) **White Lotus Flower Logo:** The logo should be worn on the left pocket of the shirt or on the right chest just below the shoulder of the long tunic. In GDPT, only official members (members who participated in ceremonies in which they vowed to live consistently with GDPT rules and mottos) are allowed to wear the White Lotus Flower logo.

2. Informal Uniforms

An informal uniform may be used on any occasion where a formal uniform is not compulsory or not convenient, e.g., during camping, picnics, etc. The informal uniform is common for all sparrows and youths, and is similar to the formal uniform for boys with the short pants being replaced by a pair of navy-blue trousers. Both boys and girls should wear Four-Gratitude hats.

3. Salutation

There are two forms of salutation, each being used in different situations.

- a) **Health Finger Gesture:** GDPT members use the health finger gesture with their right hands when they wear uniforms (formal or informal) to salute members with uniforms of any association, e.g., GDPT, soldier, Scout, etc. or to salute the flags of countries or associations. In Buddhism, a specific finger gesture (mudra) is a sign or a seal representing a specific type of Buddha wisdom. Using the health finger gesture to salute one another is similar to the phrase "How are you!" in English. A mudra also helps us to live in mindfulness and to return to our Buddha nature.
- b) **Joined-Palms:** GDPT members join their palms, lower their heads, and often pray: "*Namo Amita Buddha*" for salutation on other occasions. The praying is to remind us that we all have the Buddha nature, and we would like to keep our minds pure and free from all taints such as greed, hatred, delusion, etc. as is the property of the Pure Land of the Amita Buddha.

There is no rule specifying who should salute first: The ones who find themselves in a situation where a salutation is necessary will salute first. However to be polite, younger members should prepare to salute the older first.

F. Conclusion

With the White Lotus Flower logo on our chests, GĐPT members should be proud of the purity of our minds, our speeches and our actions. Wearing the smoke-grey uniform, we should direct our mind toward beloved villages where people are living in poverty; we should remember and think of our ancestors, the heroes, the soldiers who have sacrificed their lives for our freedom and happiness. While dedicating ourselves to benefit others, we should keep ourselves unspoiled like lotus flowers amidst mud. Under the guidance of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, we should develop the five virtuous characters: diligence, happiness, purity, wisdom and compassion. We should learn the Buddha's teachings and practise them in our daily activities so that our lives will be brilliant with the wisdom light, the light of the white border on the lotus flower logo.