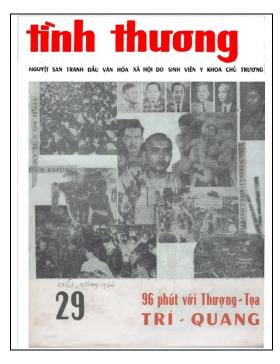
NINETY SIX MINUTES WITH REVEREND THÍCH TRÍ QUANG [05.05.1966]

NGÔ THẾ VINH



Fourty four years had passed since the end of the Vietnam War. Questions still remain to be answered. The mere mention of the name Thích Trí Quang is enough to conjure up a lot of controversy. (1) Many labels have been associated with his name: in the eye of the anti communist Vietnamese Thích Trí Quang was definitely a Communist masquerading as a monk working under the orders from Hanoi. On the other hand, the communist leaders considered him to be a strategic CIA agent; declassified CIA documents on their part determined Trí Quang was

not a communist, but a religious activist fighting for peace and an early end to the war. In addition, archived records of the conversations between Trí Quang and American officials showed that Trí Quang was a committed anti-communist who was able to understand the reasons for the use of American troops in the fight against the North Vietnamese and Chinese.

In his answers to the interview conducted by the journal Sinh viên Tình Thương in 1966, when "mentioning the dangers posed by the Communists, Rev Trí Quang compared them to nailed down gold leaves, that need a revolutionary whirlwind blowing in the right direction, not to carry away the belief but sweep clean the gold leaves that represent the communists."

So, where is the truth? Who is the real Thích Trí Quang? Just like in the masterpiece Japanese movie Rashomon, the author will not offer a real portrait of Thích Trí Quang, but would rather bring to mind the political and social circumstances of the 1960s, when Trí Quang was closely associated with the events of the time.

After 1975, Rev Trí Quang quietly led the remaining years of his life at the Già Lam pagoda in Gò Vấp Saigon. He later moved to the Từ Đàm pagoda in Huế. Just recently, it was reported that Thích Trí Quang had passed away on November 8, 2019 at that pagoda at the age of 96 (he was born in 1923). Very differing public opinions once again emerged within and outside of the country in spite of a dire lack of real information pertaining to his person.

Looking back to the 1960s, while news pertaining to the Buddhist struggle in Central Vietnam erupted in the media headlines, in Saigon, on 04.22.1966, Rev Trí Quang granted a rare interview to two TIME reporters McCulloch and James Wilde. In its aftermath, Rev Trí Quang moved to Huế and did not have any subsequent contacts with the Western news media. Nevertheless, TÌNH THƯƠNG, a publication of the students at the School of Medecine, that was very much interested in current events appointed its two reporters Phạm Đình Vy (5) and Ngô Thế Vinh to fly to Huế, and carry out the interview Ninety six minutes with Reverend Thích Trí Quang in the afternoon of 5-5-1966 at the Từ Đàm Pagoda, Huế. The interview was published in Tình Thương issue No. 29, 1966. It was translated into English by a US News & World Report reporter but for unknown reasons not published afterwards.

Today, in his Thư quán Bản Thảo, author Trần Hoài Thư ⁽⁴⁾ was able to obtain from Cornell University the complete collection of Tình Thương including the issue # 29. In it the interview that was conducted over half a century ago was published in its entirety in pages 2-3-4-5. I would like to reintroduce that almost forgotten article – without any comments – with the sole purpose of familiarizing the young readers as well as future historians with this rare historic material about Rev Trí Quang. **Ngô Thế Vinh**

NINETY SIX MINUTES WITH REVEREND THÍCH TRÍ QUANG [05.05.1966]

NGÔ THẾ VINH & PHẠM ĐÌNH VY

THE DRIVING MOTIVE

With the political upheavals of last week, a phenomenon named TRÍ QUANG has surfaced all over the foreign press. The weekly Time called him a new Machiaveli, the l'Express considered him a personality that rocks the American nation, not mentioning articles about him that appeared in US News and World Report and Newsweek... that phenomenon was then replicated in Vietnamese newspapers. They eagerly translated then published those aritcles; many people look at it as the discovery of a religious talented, powerful but at the same time enigmatic and difficult to decipher.

For a long time, we hold a bias against foreign newsmen who make judgments about Vietnamese affairs. We truly believe no foreigners can understand Vietnam better than the Vietnamese themselves. This tendency to trust foreign correspondents in the analysis of Vietnamese events on the part of the country's news media either originated from an attitude of overreliance or an idiosyncrasy / oddness.

Let's go back to Thích Trí Quang's case. Apparently, it only takes a minor misconception to call him either a communist or an ultra nationalist. The belief that religion will continue to play a major role in the future politics of the South and the indispensable need to understand a committed religious who is holding firm political leverage led to this interview of ninety six minutes with Reverend Thích Trí Quang in the afternoon of 5-5-1966 at the Từ Đàm Pagoda in Huế.

THE MISTAKES OF TIME MAGAZINE

There seems to exist a clear disconnect between the actual situation in Central Vietnam and the inflated news as reported in the printed media. After over four weeks of protest, Huế has returned to normalcy except for banderoles still left hanging here and there, painted exhortations on walls to "Close the schools – Close the Markets / Bãi Khoá – Bãi Thị", the "Kamikaze" coeds returning to school with their shoulder long hair and white áo dài, weapons surrendered to the military, radio broadcasts calling the students to attend the convention to discuss the normalization of the University's activities.

At the Toà Khâm harbor, right across from the University, American landing crafts are unloading loads after loads of food and amunitions, young kids clowning around with the American Marines. In front of the Information office, besides slogans calling for the election of the National Assembly, protestations against the Central Government, one can also observe condemnations of the Vietcong shelling of the Thành Nội killing the civilian population...

Those are the only vestiges left by the days of bloody unrest.

On the slope leading to Nam Giao, the Từ Đàm Pagoda still serenely stands. Besides a few disciples going to pray, there are nothing at the place to remind you of the restless days of protest. In the nhà Trai, in a white loose outfit, a relaxed Reverend Trí Quang is playing chess with an elderly man. Sitting next to him is the young monk Thích Mãn Giác.

As we arrive, the game just came to a close and the victor naturally is nobody else but the Reverend. Though we never met before, we can immediately recognize him by his pair of extremely piercing eyes. Absent any overbearing manner or stern almost hypnotizing glance, the Reverend greets us with a contagious sympathetic smile and his easy-going way.

Going straight to the point, we remind the Reverend of his pronouncements to the foreign press, the TIME article in particular ⁽²⁾. The Reverend explains:

-- They did come to inquire about my opinion, I answered several of the questions, nevertheless the published article showed ideas that were not mine, it is not in my nature to disclaim anything, as a result there are inaccuracies in that article.

For example the article in the weekly TIME magazine painted me as a radical xenophobist constantly dreaming of a return to the Golden Age under the Lý dynasty – that's complete fabrication.

I never advocate such policy; moreover, the model of the Lý dynasty with monks actively taking over the reins of power proves totally out of touch with today's realities. To aspire for these things is utter nonsense. Also, when they asked me about the National Assembly, I only emphasized several points: the number of people voting, the infiltration by the Vietcong and the selection of the head of the Executive Branch through an interim / provisional National Assembly.

About his biography, the Reverend asserted it is only an inexact work put out by the Public Security.

Sensing that the Reverend was not happy with the TIME article, we did not want to delve deeper into the subject.

WAR OR PEACE

On account of his anti-Americanism, many people fear that the first National Assembly with Buddhist influence will vote to ask the Americans to withdraw their force from Vietnam and clear the way for negotiations to end the war, the Reverend thinks that: -- It is too early now to talk about whether we should negotiate or continue to fight. The thing is the current government doesn't represent anybody and the result is an extremely tragic political and military situation. To think of war – this is not a real war. To think of negotiations – it's even more humiliating. Only the Americans and Hanoi are involved. Nobody pays attention to the Saigon government. Because of that, we need to have a National Assembly, an elected government, establishing a national identity in the true sense of a Nation. War or Peace will be up to the National Assembly. If we choose to fight it means we are truly fighting a war and if we choose to negotiate then we have an advantage.

You have to be sitting in the driver's seat before talking about moving forward or backward. It means we must have a National Assembly. And I would not be as stupid as denying that I do not want to negotiate lest I'll be accused of warmongering.

At the mention that some people think the Buddhists are aiming for the third solution, Neutralism, Reverend Trí Quang said:

-- If negotiations were held to establish neutralism as a solution then what should it look like. Even the most reckless couldn't accept the situation we have now in Laos. The Pathet Lao started as insurgents, the Armistice of 62 in Laos amounts to an official recognition of that war. The Pathet Lao became a de facto party in the war, they fight on, in reality there is no neutrality in Laos.

With the present situation in Vietnam, if such an agreement is signed, the Vietcong will be a recognized party and in six months the South will fall into their hands. Therefore, I always think we need to have a car first, a National Assembly elected by the majority of the people before we can think of anything else. Any conjecture will be obviously premature.

A NATIONAL ASSEMBLY UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

When talking about the difficulties facing the future National Assembly: the Communists, the present Authorities and Americans; the Reverend believes:

-- More than anybody else, the people living in the countryside have ample experience with the Communists and they know who is a Communist who is not. Therefore, we should not worry about the Vietcong infiltration into the National Assembly.

As for the authorities, the Buddhists have kept their word and let the authorities have the opportunity to carry out their pledge to the people about the National Assembly. If the authorities have good will, let them show it by working toward a National Assembly. If they betray their pledge, not only history will be their judge but the people themselves will react immediately. Keeping the present authority until the National Assembly election is also a way to deprive the renegade, dissension abetting generals of an occasion to cowardly abscond from answering for their deeds before history.

Whether the Americans truly want the South to have a National Assembly or want to prevent it is yet to be determined. But the important thing is we have to believe in ourselves and should not act in a way that makes the Americans feel threatened.

THE GENERALS IN THE POST NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TIME

When mentioning the role of the generals in the present and after the National Assembly, Reverend Trí Quang observes:

-- While citing the war, Communist threat, the generals call the people, religions, political parties to form a common front when it is they who fight the most among themselves. They vie for power, eliminate each other for gain and gradually brush aside the ones who are deserving. Facing opposition from the people, a threat to them, they form strong alliances to safeguard their interests and abuse the people. For that reason, the main concern of many people is to find a way to send them back to their purely

military role, rebuild the strength, reputation, and discipline of the armed forces and restore the honor of the deserving generals.

At the present time, people are witnessing a central group of generals who are only interested in getting rid of each other leading to self elimination. At the present time, people still reserve much sympathy to generals who are "clean" and have contributed to the November Revolution. Like Lieutenant General Đính who is accepted by the people in Central Vietnam for that very same reason.

WITH THE AMERICANS

The recent struggle to form the National Assembly was tinged with *Anti-Americanism* causing many to feel apprehensive and fearful that the Communists may take advantage of the situation. In regards to the role of the Americans in Vietnam, the Reverend felt:

-- In the aftermath of the revolution of 63, the Americans gained many benefits in Vietnam: increase significantly the number of their troops, occupy good bases like Da Nang, Cam Ranh; also the country of Thailand. It is not sure whether the Americans really want to fight Communism in Vietnam, they want to maintain Communism and this war to profit from it. For, if they truly wish, they can improve the present situation to a great extent by helping Vietnam fight Communism and at the same time build the foundations for democracy instead of supporting lackey governments. A good example is the recent events in Da Nang.

THE CASE OF DA NANG

In the Reverend's eye, it is thanks to Good Providence that bloodshed was averted in Da Nang. Mr Kỳ must answer to history for his mistakes but the Americans must also assume a big share of responsibility too. The fact that the Americans used C130s to transport battalions of Vietnamese Marines and tanks to suppress the struggle of the people in Central [Vietnam] is an unpardonable blunder the Reverend states.

-- It only takes a small misstep to start a huge bloodshed and the Americans would be blamed for it. The American History of the Twentieth Century will be stained by three events: the dropping of nuclear bombs in Japan, the suppression in the San Domingo Republic and the third one is the events in Da Nang.

A BUDDHIST GOVERNMENT

When reminded of the remark by the weekly magazine Newsweek that the demand made by the Reverend Trí Quang to rush the election of the National Assembly comes from his conviction that the Buddhist organization will gain the upper hand and the future government will be Buddhist directly controlled by the Pagodas, Thích Trí Quang vehemently refutes that idea and explains:

-- Such view will not work for the benefits of Buddhists but on the contrary can be detrimental to their Honor. I totally reject such idea. Experience has shown interim governments even though supported by one religion or another will fall at the first sight of a demonstration with only a few hundred participants. A Buddhist supported government, right from the start, will experience difficulties with the other religions. It will not be able to accomplish anything but will bring disrepute to Buddhism instead. Consequently, Buddhists do not want to repeat the mistakes of Mr. Diệm's time.

To advocate for the National Assembly, Buddhists only wish to do something good for the country and the people that consist of not only Buddhists but also followers of other faiths and all levels of society.

The National Assembly, the Government will not be the exclusive representatives of certain privileged groups but the deserving representatives of the people.

RELIGIOUS WAR

The upheavals of August, 1964 and the massacres in the cities still remain bleak obsessions in the minds of many. The frictions between the two faiths in recent days revive those obsessions. The prospect of a religious war has been mentioned uneasily in a number of newspapers. What is the Reverend's view on that threat. Thích Trí Quang explains:

-- Those fears are excessive and cannot be real. Regrettably, the events in August are the works of Nguyễn Khánh, totally contrary to the wish of the religious leaders. In my contacts with leaders of the other faiths, I stated – a religious war if needed should only be fought for the interests of the parties involved. But such conflict of interests do not exist at all. Therefore, there should not be any justification for regrettable things to happen while the main cause is a general in Khaki uniform that stands in the middle.

BELIEVERS OR CITIZENS

The early birth of the Constitutional National Assembly is the work of the Buddhists, many people think so. That's not what the Reverend Trí Quang want them to believe. He says:

-- A religious struggle will encounter many difficulties. In itself, it engenders complexes of victors and losers with the other friendly religions. For that reason, I would like to see struggle movements for democracy originate from the people devoid of religious colors. If they work to the benefits of the nation, Buddhists will stand behind and support them. In the recent upheaval, at the meeting with the Representatives of the Capital City Council / Đại diện Hội đồng Đô Thành, I said: you are the representatives of the people of all walks of life, if you all come out to fight for the National Assembly, we Buddhists will stand behind you. Deep in my heart I wish it to be so.

After expressing his lack of confidence in the effective strength of the nationalist parties, the Reverend thinks that it is the youth and students who

must assume the role to fight for freedom and democracy. Not Buddhism or any other religion. The Reverend states:

-- I understand when the students participated in the struggle against Mr. Diệm in 1963, their view of the Buddhists monks at that time was different from what it is today. I like to keep that original view unchanged, consequently I would like Buddhism and the other religions to go back to their position. That Buddhists were forced to lead the struggles in my view is very inappropriate..

CHÍN MƯƠI SÁU PHÚT VỚI THƯƠNG TOA



THÍCH TRÍ QUANG

hài của NGÔ-THẾ-VINH

CHIẾN TRANH HAY HÒA BÌNH
Từ những nhận địah gán cho ông
Mỹ, nhiều người c sợ rằng Quốc hội
được thiết lập với ảnh hướng cha Phật gi quyệt yếu cấu Mỹ rất lưi khối Việt Nh

TÍN ĐỜ HAY CÔNG DÂN

The magazine Tinh Thương issue # 29: 4 pages 2-3-4-5 the complete interview with Thích Trí Quang on 05.05.1966 at the Từ Đàm Pagoda, Huế [source: private collection of Trần Hoài Thư, Thư Quán Bản Thảo]

CONVICTION IN COMPLETE VICTORY

In contrast to the conventional teaching of a detached and pessimistic Buddhism, Reverend Thích Trí Quang projects the image of a new type of religious: a Committed Monk, engaged in all social changes, using all available prestige and power to navigate to a port amenable to the development of religion.

He possesses a sharp eye for timely analysis of current events, a highly developed pride in his "Way of the East" personality along with an inherent ultra-nationalism, his own unusual philosophy of action and unshakable conviction in the final victory of all his undertakings. His name is associated with conspiracies, scheming but he wants his adversaries to respect his "Way of the East" personality. He always revealed in advance his actions. The Reverend says:

-- Many people claim I have an intimate relationship with Mr. Lodge. This is not the case. With Messrs. Lodge or Taylor ⁽³⁾, every time I take action I meet them and inform them of the Buddhists' position. The rest is up to them. I always give notice of my actions 24 hours in advance. In the recent development, I only saw Mr. Lodge once, explained clearly the Buddhist viewpoint concerning the National Assembly. He told me to give it a second thought. I only smiled and replied I already thought about it. That's all. Concerning the rumor I have met Mr. Kỳ prior to the bringing down of Lieutenant General Thi, it is totally unfounded. I have never met Mr. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Not even once.

THE GOLD LEAVES AND THE WHIRLWIND

Gold leaves go in pair with whirlwinds. That is the analogy Reverend Trí Quang used to describe the current situation involving the Americans and Communists:

-- The gold leaves are the Communists while the whirlwinds the Americans. In the fight against the Communists you need the Americans – That simple. As far as I am concerned, external influences should only be used as means but to accept them – no.

Referring to the dangers posed by the Communists, he observes they are not only gold leaves that dirty the house but nailed down gold leaves

On account of the anti-American aspects of the Buddhist struggle, a number of foreign news media believe that Reverend Trí Quang wants to expel the Americans. The Reverend states:

-- The Americans are very naïve. They do not make the distinction between anti-Americanism and opposition against them. Anti-Americanism is a natural hatred of the Americans regardless of how good they are – sometimes the better they are, the stronger the hatred. On the other hand, opposition against the Americans is an attitude of constructive protest. Suppose two people are riding in a car. If one sees the other person is

driving unsafely, one has to take over the wheel to prevent the car from rolling into a ditch. The movement in the past is not anti-American but opposition against Americans in nature. Opposition to Americans for blocking the National Assembly, opposition to American support of corrupt lackey governments, opposition to American help in the suppression in Da Nang.

So then, the Reverend's real intention is to caution the Americans. The whirlwind must blow in the right direction, not to carry away the belief but sweep clean the Communist nailed down gold leaves.

NGÔ THẾ VINH PHAM ĐÌNH VY

Huế 05.05.1966 [Excerpt from Nguyệt san Tình Thương, No. 29, 1966]

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4/ Hành Trình Tình Thương. Trần Hoài Thư, Thư Quán Bản Thảo, số 74, Tháng 4, 2017

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