

## State-Sangha relation in East Asia: Is symbiosis possible in a transnationalised world?



22 June 2010, 15.00-18.00

MPI for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity,  
Göttingen

Roundtable discussion



### Kontakt

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## Program

### 15.00-15.45

JOHN CHAPMAN (Independent scholar, UK):  
Return to Vietnam of Exiled Zen Master  
Thich Nhat Hanh

### 15.45-16.25: Roundtable discussion

YINONG ZHANG (Shanghai University, MPI):  
State religious policy and Tibetan Buddhist  
revival in post-1980s China

SOPHORNTAVY VORNG (MPI):  
Modern Buddhist reformist movements and  
educated middle class in Bangkok

JOVAN MAUD (MPI):  
Transnational connections and state-sangha  
relations

JUSTINE QUIJADA (MPI):  
The impact of communist anti-religious poli-  
cies under state socialism on Buddhist prac-  
tice in the former Soviet Union

### 16.25-17.00: Open discussion

In the last two decades, many Asian societies, especially those which are under communist rule, have witnessed a revival of Buddhism. This revival has encountered considerable difficulty, mainly due to conflicting relations with the state. In China, as Ji Zhe (2001) reports, since the 1980s, Buddhism has entered a period of revival and prosperity after three decades of persecution. In order to survive and to conform to the ethical system imposed by the government, the monks were forced to engage in "productive labour". However, from the 1990s onwards, local authorities have sought to co-operate with Buddhism, hoping to profit from it by attracting investors and promoting tourism. Nonetheless, this did not entail a loss of state control.

Over the last two decades in Vietnam Buddhist movements have positioned Buddhism as a national tradition, albeit one which at the same time is open to global linkages and resources. It is noteworthy that the Communist Party has sought to boost its legitimacy by endorsing Zen, a vision of Buddhism promoted by a transnational movement, as an authentic national tradition. Advocacy by overseas critics focuses on the perceived decline in morals and keeps pressure on the government to uphold a rationalized notion of religion. Distinctions between foreign and the national are effaced as transnational connections and exchange between monks within and beyond Vietnam intensified.

This seminar proposes to re-examine this thorny relation through the twists and turns of Thich Nhat Hanh's return to Vietnam since 2004, following his acceptance of the invitation of the Vietnamese government, which had first indirectly, then directly exiled him for 39 years. John Chapman, independent scholar and a lay member of Thich Nhat Hanh's Plum Village, will offer his first hand observations of the Zen Master's attempt to bring his own version of Zen Buddhism, the famous "Engaged Buddhism" back to its root, Vietnam. By observing closely the subsequent visits Thich Nhat Hanh to Vietnam, Chapman demonstrates how the Zen Master's ambitious project encountered various obstacles in the national context, although it had enormous success among young educated urbanites. The climax of the conflict led to the announcement by the state that Thich Nhat Hanh was once again no longer welcome in Vietnam, but also led to a violent clash at Bat Nha, one of the fastest growing Buddhist monasteries founded by him after 2004, following which 400 resident monks and nuns were forced to flee to Thailand.

Reflecting on John Chapman's first hand materials several Buddhist experts at the Max Planck shall offer a comparative roundtable discussion of state-religion relations in contemporary Southeast and East Asia.