



WHEN A MAN'S HOME IS HIS TEMPLE

Can Buddhists Find Nirvana Despite California Zoning Laws?

BY DEBORAH BAXTROM

When Thich Chon Thanh, a soft-spoken Vietnamese Buddhist monk with a shy smile and an eagerness to serve tea whenever guests drop by, first immigrated to the United States he converted his one-story, ranch-style house in Garden Grove, California, into a Buddhist temple to serve Vietnamese immigrants seeking a place of worship. Thich was simply practicing his religion the way he always had, by conducting services and making himself available as a counselor and teacher.

Little did the monk realize that the ancient practice of monks using their homes as places of worship would open the way for a bitter church-state controversy that exemplifies how difficult religious freedom can be for minority faiths in America.

However much a part of his faith, Thich's "open-door policy" at the Lien Hoa Temple caused trouble. He was once placed on probation for allowing a homeless family to live temporarily in his garage. Another time, on Buddha's birthday, the Lien Hoa Temple staged a

large celebration, and neighbors claimed that the parking situation was so severe that they were unable to reach their own driveways. At least 200 people were in attendance in Thich's home, and a PA system disturbed the peace. Two police officers and a city official disrupted the sacred service. The city official demanded that Thich turn off the PA system. He did immediately, but the Lien Hoa Temple was charged with creating a public nuisance and conducting religious services without a permit.

"It was our fault to naively create such problems," said Thich, "so I went to apologize to my neighbors. I expressed my love and respect to them, particularly to the elders, and they responded the same way to me."

Thich's efforts were partially successful. The principal of the high school and two ministers from nearby Christian churches who had signed a complaint against the temple withdrew their names and even allowed the Buddhists to use their parking facilities. Some neighbors admitted that noise from stereos and even lawn mowers in the area was at least as loud as most

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been in the center of the controversy, angering both sides. He has been accused of making controversial remarks about Vietnamese Buddhists in a city council meeting. Yet at the meeting, the council, of which he is a member, approved an application for a conditional use permit requested by another Buddhist home temple.

“We are getting letters every day demanding that the council be recalled,” he said, “because we approved that license! By and large, the members of the Buddhist community have not been good neighbors. We explain that we expect them to follow the laws the same as everyone else. They say they understand; then the next week they are back to doing the same things.”

The real question is Do the inconveniences

“The Vietnamese Buddhist people are very poor,” said Nguyen. “If you ask them to build a large cathedral, it would take years or the backing of another country. For instance, Taiwan backs the Taiwanese Buddhist church in America. But if we were to go to the Vietnamese government and ask for funds, we would become agents of the Communist government in Vietnam. It seems to me that what is actually being said to the Vietnamese Buddhists in Orange County is—you don’t fit here, we don’t want you here.”

Yet that wasn’t the message the Lien Hoa Temple got from the court regarding Buddha’s birthday celebration. The judge did not issue a preliminary injunction against the temple, and the case was dismissed; but the temple was required to apply for a conditional use permit, which was granted. The use of the PA system it had employed at large holiday services was banned, and the temple had to provide a parking lot on the grounds with a specified number of spaces, to refrain from all on-street parking, and to erect a wall between its property and the neighboring properties.

The code enforcement office compromised as well. They permitted up to 25 worshipers to attend services in Thich’s home temple until a new pagoda is built in the backyard, which will hold 64 worshipers. In allowing the construction of the pagoda, the city overlooked the fact that the property owned by the temple is less than an acre. The city of Garden Grove has a zoning requirement mandating that all churches and religious centers in the city be constructed on a minimum of one acre. This rule is particularly troublesome to Vietnamese Buddhists because an acre in Orange County can cost \$1 million. It is one of the zoning laws some consider discriminatory.

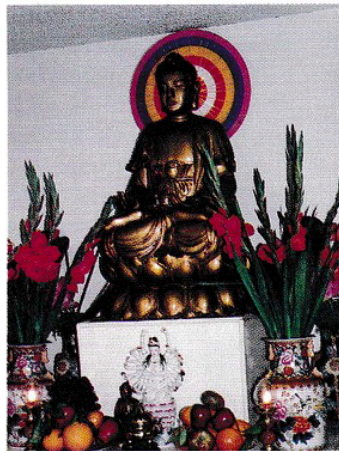
Nevertheless, for now at least, the controversy around the Lien Hoa Temple has subsided. Thich proudly displays the construction permit issued by the city. A new pagoda will be built in the center of Meditation Trail, a white, circular path in the backyard that is traversed by the monks as they meditate. “Last week we completed the requirements for the sprinkler system. Next week I hope we can begin pouring the concrete for the foundation. I am very happy.”

Meanwhile, Thich hasn’t given up on his neighbors. He still offers wishing cards and gifts on Christmas and other holidays and goes to their houses regularly. Thich Chon Thanh’s neighbors might consider returning his visits.

His teas are terrific. ☞



(Left) Swastika: Buddhist peace symbol.



(Right) Buddhist altar at Lien Hoa Temple on Bixby Avenue.

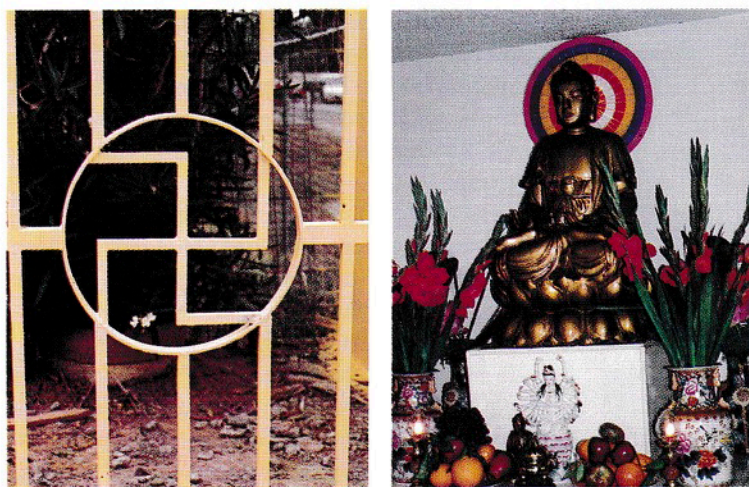
experienced by some home temple neighbors outweigh the spiritual needs of the residents whom the temples serve? In light of the passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the answer would seem to be no. It seems likely that those living near the Buddhist home temples will have to continue working toward acceptable compromises, rather than seeking to shut down the home temples, often with the use of zoning laws often drafted for the protection and general welfare of the public.

Nguyen and other home temple sympathizers say many of these zoning laws are discriminatory and were drafted with large established religious organizations in mind. These religions have the structure, political backing, and financial support necessary to allow them to meet the numerous city zoning guidelines, but for the Vietnamese Buddhists, the funds are simply not available to immediately meet all the requirements.

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