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AN ABBOTT OF COMPASSION

Thích Trung Hiếu And The Making Of “Engaged Buddhism” In Rural Vietnam

This article examines the development of “engaged Buddhism” at Phổ Lại Pagoda in central Vietnam through the humanitarian, cultural, and spiritual activities associated with Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu. Broadly understood, engaged Buddhism refers to forms of Buddhist practice that apply compassion and ethical teachings to concrete social and humanitarian concerns. Located in the rural midland region near Huế, Phổ Lại Pagoda has evolved from a modest recitation hall into a community-centered Buddhist institution. Through flood relief, educational support, cultural preservation, and digital outreach, the pagoda demonstrates how Buddhist practice in contemporary Vietnam extends beyond ritual devotion into everyday forms of social care and community resilience.

In late 2025 and early 2026, central Vietnam experienced one of its most devastating flood seasons in recent decades. Prolonged heavy rainfall and flooding affected provinces stretching from Quảng Trị to Khánh Hòa, inundating urban and rural communities alike. According to

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official reports, the disaster caused widespread destruction across the region, leaving dozens dead or missing,¹ damaging homes, roads, agricultural land, and public infrastructure, and causing economic losses amounting to trillions of Vietnamese dong.² In Huế alone, flood damage was estimated at more than 3.27 trillion VND (approximately US\$129.7 million).³ During the most severe period of flooding in late October 2025, several monitoring stations recorded historic flood peaks, while the Bồ River exceeded previous flood records multiple times within a single week.⁴

In several upland communities surrounding Huế, Buddhist temples became more than places of worship: they functioned as temporary shelters, relief distribution centers, and spaces of emotional support for residents affected by disaster. Among these, Phổ Lại Pagoda

¹ Mai Trang, “Huế: Khẩn trương tìm kiếm 6 người mất tích do mưa lũ” [Huế Launches Urgent Search for Six People Missing in Floods], *Báo Tin tức*, (in Vietnamese), October 30, 2025, <https://baotintuc.vn/xa-hoi/hue-khan-truong-tim-kiem-6-nguoi-mat-tich-do-mua-lu-20251030104903306.htm>

² Nguyễn Ngọc, “Mưa lũ ở Quảng Ngãi khiến 11 người thương vong, thiệt hại trên 1.900 tỷ đồng” [Floods in Quảng Ngãi Leave 11 Casualties and Cause Over 1.9 Trillion VND in Damage], *Báo Tiền Phong* (in Vietnamese), November 5, 2025, <https://tienphong.vn/mua-lu-o-quang-ngai-khien-11-nguoi-thuong-vong-thiet-hai-tren-1900-ty-dong-post1793547.tpo>

³ Ngọc Văn, “Huế thiệt hại hơn 3.270 tỷ đồng do mưa lũ lịch sử” [Historic Floods Cause More Than 3.27 Trillion VND in Damage in Huế], *Báo Tiền Phong* (in Vietnamese), November 8, 2025, <https://tienphong.vn/hue-thiet-hai-hon-3270-ty-dong-do-mua-lu-lich-su-post1794560.tpo>

⁴ Chí Tuệ, “Lũ trên sông Bồ ở Huế lần thứ 3 vượt mốc lịch sử trong 1 tuần” [Bồ River Floods in Huế Exceed Historic Levels for the Third Time Within a Week], *Tuổi Trẻ Online* (in Vietnamese), November 3, 2025, <https://tuoitre.vn/lu-tren-song-bo-o-hue-lan-thu-3-vuot-moc-lich-su-trong-1-tuan-20251103120126276.htm>

in Phong Thái Ward⁵ emerged as a notable example of community-based engaged Buddhism, where spiritual practice was closely intertwined with practical social care.

At Phổ Lại Pagoda, Buddhism is expressed not only through rituals and ceremonies, but also through everyday acts of compassion and service. During flood seasons, monks and volunteers organize relief efforts and open the temple grounds to vulnerable residents seeking refuge. Throughout the year, the pagoda also hosts mindfulness retreats, youth Dharma classes, vegetarian community meals, cultural exhibitions, and charitable programs for disadvantaged families. Buddhist chants, poetry, calligraphy, and music are integrated into community life as forms of cultural continuity and emotional resilience.

Much of this orientation has been shaped by the thirty-year-old Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu, the Abbot associated with the development of Phổ Lại Pagoda since 2016. Under his guidance, the pagoda has gradually evolved from a modest rural recitation hall into an active center of “engaged Buddhism” in central Vietnam. Broadly understood, engaged Buddhism refers to forms of Buddhist practice that extend beyond ritual devotion and individual spiritual cultivation into active responses to social suffering, humanitarian concerns, education, environmental awareness, and community welfare. The concept became internationally associated with Vietnamese Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh during the twentieth century through efforts to apply Buddhist ethics

⁵ Previously part of Phong Sơn Commune, it was reorganized into a new administrative ward on July 1, 2025, according to Resolution 1675/NQ-UBTVQH15, <https://xaydungchinh sach.chinhphu.vn/toan-van-nghi-quyet-so-1675-nq-ubtvqh15-sap-xep-cac-dvhc-cap-xa-cua-thanh-pho-hue-nam-2025-119250616195617897.htm>

and compassion to the realities of war, poverty, displacement, and social crisis.⁶

In contemporary Vietnam, engaged Buddhism often takes localized and community-based forms shaped by the needs of particular regions. At Phổ Lại Pagoda, this engagement is expressed through flood relief activities, educational support for children, charitable programs for disadvantaged families, cultural preservation, and the use of music, poetry, calligraphy, and digital media as tools for emotional resilience and community connection. Rather than presenting Buddhism solely as ritual devotion, Thích Trung Hiếu's approach emphasizes compassion in daily life, community solidarity, and the role of spiritual institutions in responding to contemporary social challenges.

Located approximately twenty-eight kilometers northwest of Huế, Phổ Lại lies within a semi-rural midland region where economic conditions remain modest and seasonal natural disasters continue to shape everyday life. Against this backdrop, the pagoda offers a localized model of engaged Buddhism in which religious practice intersects with social support, cultural preservation, and grassroots resilience.⁷

This article examines how Phổ Lại Pagoda and Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu reflect broader developments in contemporary Vietnamese engaged Buddhism, particularly within rural and community-centered contexts.⁸

⁶ Ann Gleig, "Engaged Buddhism," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, Oxford University Press, June 28, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.755>

⁷ Nhật Anh, "Phổ Lại – Ngôi chùa nhỏ giữa trung du, nơi long từ nở hoa" [Pho Lai – A Small Pagoda in the Midland Where Compassion Blossoms], *DesignPlus Magazine* (in Vietnamese), <https://www.designplus.vn/properties/95>

⁸ Thế Nguyễn, "Chùa Phổ Lại: Hành trình nhập thế từ những điều bình dị" [Pho Lai Pagoda: A Journey of Engaged Buddhism from Humble Beginnings], *Tạp chí*



Phở Lại Pagoda in Hue's midland region. Photograph courtesy of Phở Lại Pagoda, Huế, Vietnam.

A Different Kind of Teenage Choice

Thích Trung Hiếu was born in Phan Rí Cửa, Bình Thuận Province,⁹ into a family with deep Buddhist roots. His lay name is Nguyễn Hồng Tùng, and his earliest memories are threaded with temple life: the sweet bite of incense, the steady bell, the quiet reminders about compassion and karma. Nothing dramatic pushed him toward the robe. The choice was simply—and firmly—his. At thirteen, while most children are still figuring out school and friendships, he chose to ordain.

Đông Nam Á [Southeast Asian Magazine] (in Vietnamese), April 4, 2026, Hội Nghiên cứu Khoa học về Đông Nam Á - Việt Nam (Vietnam Association for Southeast Asian Studies), <https://tapchidongnama.vn/chua-pho-lai-hanh-trinh-nhap-the-tu-nhung-dieu-binh-di/>

⁹ On June 12, 2025, Bình Thuận was incorporated into Lâm Đồng province.



Thích Trung Hiếu (Nguyễn Hồng Tùng, born August 7, 1996), Abbot of Phổ Lại Pagoda in Huế, Vietnam. Photograph courtesy of Phổ Lại Pagoda, Huế, Vietnam.

His training took him from Long Quang Pagoda in his hometown to Thanh Phước Pagoda in Bến Tre, where he received the Dharma name Thích Trung Hiếu. In 2015, he was fully ordained as a bhikkhu at Bảo Tịnh Pagoda in Hậu Giang, and later completed intermediate Buddhist studies in Trà Vinh. These milestones did more than shape a young monk. They prepared him for a wider responsibility—one that would carry practice beyond personal cultivation and into the daily needs of a specific place.

In 2016, he made a decision that would reshape his life: he moved to Huế and took on the task of rebuilding Phổ Lại Buddhist Recitation

Hall—the humble beginning of what is now Phổ Lại Pagoda. The work started in hard conditions. The roads were difficult, facilities were minimal, and floods regularly swept the area. Staying was not simply a matter of residence. It was a long pledge—demanding stamina, organization, and a steady willingness to serve the people around him.¹⁰

Building a Pagoda—and First, Building People

When people talk about a new temple, they often start with the metrics: how long it took, how much it cost, what materials were used. Those details matter—but they don’t answer the larger question. What makes a place like Phổ Lại feel alive?

Before 2016, there was little here beyond a modest recitation hall on a remote hillside.¹¹ From that near-empty start, Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu and local Buddhists built patiently, step by step: a main hall, quiet meditation spaces, monastic quarters, guest rooms, statues, a lotus pond, and the everyday infrastructure that keeps a pagoda running. By 2025, the grounds had expanded to nearly 2,800 square meters.

But the most important story is not the footprint of the buildings. It is how they rose. Phổ Lại did not grow from deep pockets or ready-made resources. It grew from many hands. People offered what they could: days of labor, small donations, bags of cement, stacks of brick. They hauled materials up the slope, joined construction teams, raised gates, and planted trees—turning faith into work you could see.

¹⁰ Thế Nguyễn, “Chùa Phổ Lại: Hành trình nhập thế từ những điều bình dị” [Pho Lai Pagoda: A Journey of Engaged Buddhism from Humble Beginnings].

¹¹ As recorded in the 2016 Land-use Plan of Phong Dien District (Decision No. 518/QĐ-UBND, Appendix 6 lists “Niệm Phật đường Phổ Lại” [Pho Lai Buddhist Recitation Hall]), <https://sxd.hue.gov.vn/Root/OldData/00.17.H57/UploadFiles/TinTuc/2016/4/5/518qdubnd2016kehoachsudungdatphongdien.pdf>

Locals don't describe him as someone who stands back and gives instructions. They remember him inside the work: planting trees, checking concrete pours, carving statues, writing calligraphy, staying up through long nights when the weather turned rough.

A line often associated with him—"Building a temple is, above all, building people. Without inner peace, bricks and tiles cannot form a true temple"—captures the heart of that approach. Here, the pagoda is more than a finished structure. It is what shared discipline, cooperation, and belief look like when they take physical form.

Seen this way, Phổ Lại is not only a place of worship. It is also a gathering point—somewhere neighbors lean on one another. That is why practical improvements, like access roads or flood barriers, matter here. They safeguard religious life, but they also make the surrounding villages safer and daily routines less fragile.¹²



The former temporary bamboo shrine, before the main hall was built (2016). Photograph courtesy of Phổ Lại Pagoda, Huế, Vietnam.

¹² Thế Nguyễn, “Chùa Phổ Lại: Hành trình nhập thế từ những điều bình dị” [Pho Lai Pagoda: A Journey of Engaged Buddhism from Humble Beginnings].

When a Pagoda Becomes Part of Everyday Life

In many places, pagodas feel most alive on festival days—when incense thickens the air and crowds arrive for major ceremonies—or in private moments, when someone slips in alone to pray. At Phổ Lại, the energy is steadier than that. Over the years, the pagoda has woven itself into daily routines, not just special occasions.

Here, community life doesn’t revolve only around holy days. Mindfulness retreats, chanting nights, Buddhist observances, youth activities, and small classes create a rhythm people can return to week after week. Children, parents, and elders come not only to pray, but to feel grounded—to learn, to listen, and to grow inside a shared moral space.

That sense of belonging becomes most visible during the annual Quan Âm Festival. The celebration carries deep spiritual meaning, but it is also when the pagoda turns outward and becomes a public cultural home. Calligraphy and handicrafts sit alongside Dharma talks and traditional performances; volunteers serve communal vegetarian meals; donations are converted into practical help. Here, religion doesn’t stand apart from local culture—it helps hold it together.¹³

Flood Season, and the Real Measure of Compassion

If there is a time when Phổ Lại’s role becomes impossible to ignore, it is when the water starts to climb.

Central Vietnam is no stranger to natural disasters—and being used to them never makes them easier. In those weeks, the pagoda’s value is measured less by sermons than by logistics. Scholarships for

¹³ PV, “Chùa Phổ Lại và đại lễ gắn kết cộng đồng vùng trung du” [Pho Lai Pagoda and the Grand Ceremony Connecting the Midland Community], *Phatgiao.org.vn* (in Vietnamese), September 17, 2025, Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, <https://phatgiao.org.vn/chua-pho-lai-va-dai-le-gan-ket-cong-dong-vung-trung-du-d96161.html>

students. Support for families on the edge. Care for children during festivals. Solar lights where the power grid fails. Repairs for damaged homes. Medical assistance. And, again and again, organized flood relief.¹⁴



Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu distributing gifts to local residents during a community charity program at Phổ Lại Pagoda (2026). Photograph courtesy of Phổ Lại Pagoda, Huế, Vietnam.

In 2020, when severe flooding hit central Vietnam, the pagoda helped deliver more than 1,200 relief packages—worth about 464 million Vietnamese Dong—directly to affected households.¹⁵ In 2025, as flood-

¹⁴ Hoang Nguyen, “Stitching Compassion: Thích Trung Hiếu and Community-Based Buddhism in Central Vietnam,” *Buddhist Channel*, February 8, 2026, <https://buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=55,13675,0,0,1,0>

¹⁵ Phương Linh, “Chốn về bình yên giữa miền trung du Huế” [A Peaceful Retreat in Hue’s Midland Region], *Báo Thế giới và Việt Nam* [The World & Vietnam Report] (in Vietnamese), October 5, 2025, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vietnam, <https://baoquocte.vn/chon-ve-binh-yen-giua-mien-trung-du-hue-329769.html>. Also see, “Phóng sự cứu trợ lũ lụt bà con Thiện nguyện Chùa Phổ



waters rose again in Huế, Phổ Lại kept its gates open day and night so residents could take shelter. The two-story meditation hall became a shared refuge, stocked with clean water and basic food, phone-charging points, and medical supplies, with boats and life jackets ready for emergencies. During that period, another 1,070 aid packages—valued at over 411 million VND—were distributed.¹⁶

More than any single campaign, the pattern is what matters: a small religious institution functioning as a reliable safe point in a crisis. Compassion stops being an abstract virtue and becomes something you can hold. A floor to sleep on when you have nowhere else. A life jacket when the current turns mean. A bag of rice, a cup of clean water, a charged phone—small things that restore dignity and connection. In

Lại - Huế” [Flood Relief Report: Charity and Humanitarian Activities at Pho Lai Pagoda, Huế], November 7, 2020, *YouTube*, Thích Trung Hiếu (in Vietnamese), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHmDycKJcPg>

¹⁶ Lê Huy, “Đội cứu hộ vượt lũ, khách sạn ở Huế mở cửa đón dân: ‘Cứu thêm một người là thêm một hy vọng’” [Rescue Teams Brave Floods; Hotels in Huế Open Doors for Residents: Saving One More Person Means One More Hope], *Tuổi Trẻ Online* (in Vietnamese), October 28, 2025: “Nước lũ tại Huế dâng cao, chùa Phổ Lại mở cửa 24/24 giờ đón người dân lên trú lũ miễn phí, ưu tiên trẻ em, người già, phụ nữ mang thai và người bệnh; thiền đường hai tầng được bố trí làm nơi nghỉ tập thể với điện, nước sạch, tủ y tế và lương thực cơ bản, đồng thời trang bị xuống và áo phao để hỗ trợ bà con [Floodwaters in Huế rose rapidly, and Pho Lai Pagoda opened its doors 24/7 to provide free shelter for residents, prioritizing children, the elderly, pregnant women, and the sick. The two-story meditation hall was arranged as a communal refuge equipped with electricity, drinking water, a first-aid cabinet, and basic food supplies. The pagoda also prepared boats and life jackets to support local people during the flooding], <https://tuoitre.vn/doi-cuu-ho-vuot-lu-khach-san-o-hue-mo-cua-don-dan-cuu-them-mot-nguoi-la-them-mot-hy-vong-20251027235532647.htm>. Also see, “Summary of Buddhist activities at Phổ Lại Pagoda in 2025,” Video *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pho_Lai_Pagoda_Buddhist_Activities_Summary.webm?embedplayer=true

moments like these, faith is expressed not only through doctrine, but through the ability to organize care at the exact moment it is needed.¹⁷



A community vegetarian buffet during the Grand Quan Âm Ceremony at Phổ Lại Pagoda (July 6, 2025). Photograph courtesy of Phổ Lại Pagoda, Huế, Vietnam.

¹⁷ Bảo Yên; An Như, “Bản Tin An Viên TV: Lễ Dâng Y Hoàng gia Thái Lan – Nghi thức trang nghiêm tại Việt Nam Quốc Tự,” [An Viên TV News: Royal Kathina Ceremony of Thailand – A Solemn Ritual at Vietnam Quoc Tu Pagoda], YouTube (Television news report in Vietnamese), An Viên Television (BTV9), November 1, 2025, Segment covering flood-relief at Phổ Lại Pagoda 10:33–11:54: *Tại thành phố Huế, chư Tăng Ni đang ngày đêm dốc lòng cứu trợ. Nhiều ngày qua, chùa Phổ Lại trở thành điểm phát quà tập trung, nơi từng phần lương thực, thực phẩm được trao tận tay người dân vùng ngập. Phần quà tuy bé nhỏ nhưng là cả tấm lòng yêu thương lúc khó khăn, hoạn nạn. Ông Hồ Đức Năm, Bí thư chi bộ tổ dân phố Phổ Lại, phường Phong Thái, thành phố Huế, nói: “Thay mặt lãnh đạo địa phương, chân thành cảm ơn đoàn thiện nguyện của thầy Thích Trung Hiếu đã giúp đỡ cho nhân dân chúng tôi. Một miếng khi đói bằng một gói khi no, lá lành đùm lá rách.”* [In Huế City, Buddhist monks and nuns have been working day and night to carry out relief efforts. Over the past several days, Phổ Lại Pagoda has become a central distribution point, where food and essential supplies are delivered directly to residents in flood-affected areas. Although the relief packages are modest, they reflect a spirit of compassion during times of hardship. Mr. Hồ Đức Năm, Secretary of the Party Cell of Phổ Lại residential area, Phong Thái Ward, Huế City, said: “On behalf of the local authorities, we sincerely thank the relief team led by Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu for supporting our community. A small help in times of hunger is more valuable than abundance later; those who are better off help those in need”], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtPBLi9CWOQ&t=633s>

On June 12, 2025, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha of Huế formally acknowledged Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu for his contributions to Buddhist and community welfare activities in the local region (Decision No. 153/QĐ-BTS, issued on June 12, 2025).¹⁸



Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu travels by boat to deliver relief supplies to flood-affected communities in Huế during severe flooding. Photograph courtesy of Phổ Lại Pagoda, Huế, Vietnam.

Art as a Way In

One of the most distinctive parts of Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu’s work is how he uses art—not as ornament, but as an entry point into the Dharma.

His 12-track album *Thiền Ca Chùa Phổ Lại* (“Zen Songs of Phổ Lại Pagoda”), officially registered in 2021,¹⁹ captures that philosophy.

¹⁸ Phương Linh, “Chốn về bình yên giữa miền trung du Huế” [A Peaceful Retreat in Hue’s Midland Region]. Also see, Image *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bang_tuyen_duong_cong_2025_thich_trung_hieu.jpg

¹⁹ Certificate No. 6489/2021/QTG, dated September 16, 2021.

Released on mainstream platforms such as Zing MP3,²⁰ Nhac.vn,²¹ and Spotify,²² it carries Buddhist sensibilities into the places many young listeners already live—online and in their headphones—reaching them not through scripture, but through melody, emotion, and story.²³



Local residents gather at Phổ Lại Pagoda to receive emergency relief supplies during the 2020 floods in central Vietnam. The humanitarian aid program was organized by Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu, abbot of the pagoda, to support affected communities in the Huế midland region. Photograph courtesy of Phổ Lại Pagoda, Huế, Vietnam.

²⁰ “Đón Gió Xuân Thiên” [Welcoming the Spring Breeze of Zen]. *Zing MP3* (in Vietnamese), <https://zingmp3.vn/bai-hat/Don-Gio-Xuan-Thien-Hoang-Tuan-Minh/ZZ9OEDZ7.html>

²¹ “Tiểu sử Thích Trung Hiếu” [Biography of Thich Trung Hieu], *Nhac.vn* (in Vietnamese), <https://nhac.vn/nghe-si/thich-trung-hieu-atAWnPK/tieu-su>

²² “Vu Lan Nhớ Mẹ Hiền” [Vu Lan, Remembering a Kind Mother], *Spotify* (in Vietnamese), <https://open.spotify.com/track/ooDk2Z6zzA1RhEZ9b0D3gx>

²³ BBT, “Chùa Phổ Lại: Hành trình kiến lập mái chùa giữa đại ngàn,” [Pho Lai Pagoda: The Journey of Establishing a Temple in the Great Forest], *Cổng Thông tin điện tử Cộng đồng 54 Dân tộc Việt Nam* [Electronic Information Portal for the Community of 54 Vietnamese Ethnic Groups] (in Vietnamese), August 3, 2025, <https://54dantoc.vn/dan-toc-ton-giao/chua-pho-lai-hanh-trinh-kien-lap-mai-chua-giua-dai-ngan-151.html>

The songs travel across a wide emotional landscape: reverence for Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; quiet reflections on impermanence and karma; glimpses of monastic calm; and tender portraits of family bonds and everyday compassion. In a larger sense, the album is translation work—turning teachings that can feel distant or abstract into something listeners can hear, carry, and understand.²⁴

Music is only one dimension of his creative and spiritual life. Thích Trung Hiếu also writes poetry—published in literary collections²⁵ and journals²⁶—and practices calligraphy, painting, and Buddhist statue carving. Through essays, Dharma talks, and short videos, he continues the same mission in another register: bringing Buddhist teachings into contemporary life through language and images that remain close to ordinary human experience. Some of his works include “The Old Woman in Rags Prays at the Pagoda with a Sincere Heart” (*Cụ bà áo rách đi chùa long thành*), “Three Benefits of Building a Pagoda” (*Ba lợi ích xây chùa*), and “Letter from COVID-19 to Humanity” (*Thư Covid-19 gửi nhân loại*), written in 2020 as a meaningful humanitarian message that used the

²⁴ “Thiền Ca Chùa Phổ Lại – Tác giả Thích Trung Hiếu – Album 2025,” [Zen Songs of Pho Lai Pagoda – Composed by Thích Trung Hiếu – 2025 Album] YouTube, Thích Trung Hiếu (in Vietnamese), August 18, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5_v5vsSigo

²⁵ “Ngôi nhà văn chương. T.5 (sách tập)” [Literary Home, Vol. 5 (Collected Volume)], *Thư viện Quốc gia Việt Nam* [National Library of Vietnam] (in Vietnamese), <https://opac.nlv.gov.vn/chi-tiet-tai-lieu/ngoi-nha-van-chuong-t5-20267574950302172948>; and “Various authors, ed., Áo Diệu Thu Vàng” [Golden Autumn Robe], (in Vietnamese) (Hanoi: *Thế Giới Publishers*, 2017), pp. 349–352. ISBN 978-604-77-3704-8.

²⁶ Thơ Sông Hương, 10-2025 [Song Huong Poetry, October 2025], *Tạp chí Sông Hương* [Song Huong Journal] (Literary magazine, in Vietnamese), Huế, Vietnam: Liên hiệp các Hội Văn học Nghệ thuật Thành phố Huế (Union of Literature and Arts Associations of Hue City), Section “Thích Trung Hiếu”: poems *Rừng thiền* (“Forest of Zen”) and *Mây nước* (“Clouds and Water”), <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c538/n34054/Tho-Song-Huong-10-2025.html>

image of the virus to convey reflections on health, family, gratitude, and contentment. His Dharma talk “Austerity Practice and the Sympathy of the Abbot” (*Hạnh đầu đà và cảm thông trụ trì*), also attracted millions of views on Facebook.²⁷ Under the guidance and creative vision of Thích Trung Hiếu, social media has gradually evolved into a form of “digital Dharma platform,” extending Buddhist teachings, compassion, and community engagement into contemporary online life.^{28,29}

*Xây chùa để xóm quy Tăng học đạo từ bi đến,
Dựng cổng cho làng hướng Phật tu nhân hỷ xả vào.*

Translation:

²⁷ BBT, “Chùa Phổ Lại: Hành trình kiến lập mái chùa giữa đại ngàn,” [Pho Lai Pagoda: The Journey of Establishing a Temple in the Great Forest], *Cổng Thông tin điện tử Cộng đồng 54 Dân tộc Việt Nam* [Electronic Information Portal for the Community of 54 Vietnamese Ethnic Groups] (in Vietnamese), August 3, 2025, <https://54dantoc.vn/dan-toc-ton-giao/chua-pho-lai-hanh-trinh-kien-lap-mai-chua-giua-dai-ngan-151.html>. Also see, “Thư COVID-19 gửi nhân loại – Tác giả: Thích Trung Hiếu – Thông điệp Covid gửi bạn [“Letter from COVID-19 to Humanity” by Thích Trung Hiếu – A Message to Humanity During the Pandemic] YouTube, Thích Trung Hiếu (in Vietnamese), May 10, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydfd6SkeeiQ>; and “Hạnh đầu đà và cảm thông trụ trì – Chia sẻ: Thích Trung Hiếu” [Austerity Practice and the Sympathy of the Abbot – A Dharma Sharing by Thích Trung Hiếu], Facebook, Chùa Phổ Lại, (in Vietnamese), June 7, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=476615638374374>

²⁸ Thích Thể Hiện, “Chùa Phổ Lại giữa đại ngàn” [Pho Lai Pagoda in the Great Forest], *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu Phật học* [Journal of Buddhist Studies], (in Vietnamese), September 8, 2025, <https://tapchinghiencuuphathoc.vn/chua-pho-lai-giua-dai-ngan.html>

²⁹ Hoang Nguyen, “Stitching Compassion: Thích Trung Hiếu and Community-Based Buddhism in Central Vietnam,” *Buddhist Channel*. Also see, “Thư pháp Thích Trung Hiếu – Phật Pháp Tăng” [Calligraphy by Thích Trung Hiếu – The Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, Sangha] YouTube, Thích Trung Hiếu (in Vietnamese), November 14, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3NIPTXCIvA>; and “Kiệt tác tạc tượng Phật của thầy Thích Trung Hiếu tại Chùa Phổ Lại” [A Buddhist Sculpture Masterpiece by Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu at Phổ Lại Pagoda], YouTube, Thích Trung Hiếu (in Vietnamese), July 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rezV3zYMXk>

Build a temple, so the village can gather in the Dharma,
Build a gate, so people can turn toward compassion.³⁰

In just two lines, the verse shows more than poetic skill. It points to a guiding conviction: compassion is not only something to contemplate; it is something to build, shaped into real places, real habits, and real acts, where spiritual life and daily life can meet.³¹



Buddhist statue sculpture by Thích Trung Hiếu, reflecting his artistic practice at Phổ Lại Pagoda (2022). Photograph courtesy of Phổ Lại Pagoda, Huế, Vietnam

³⁰ Phương Linh, “Chốn về bình yên giữa miền trung du Huế” [A Peaceful Retreat in Hue’s Midland Region]. Also see, “Wikiquote, Thích Trung Hiếu,” https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Thích_Trung_Hiếu

³¹ Thơ Sông Hương, 10-2025 [Song Huong Poetry, October 2025], *Tạp chí Sông Hương* [Song Huong Journal] (Literary magazine, in Vietnamese), Huế, Vietnam: Liên hiệp các Hội Văn học Nghệ thuật Thành phố Huế (Union of Literature and Arts Associations of Hue City), Section “Thích Trung Hiếu”: poems *Rừng thiền* (“Forest of Zen”) and *Mây nước* (“Clouds and Water”), <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c538/n34054/Tho-Song-Huong-10-2025.html>

A Small Pagoda, Bigger Questions

Across continents, faith communities are wrestling with the same modern pressure: in an era of glowing screens and thinning attention, how does religion stay present let alone feel necessary?

Phổ Lại offers a quiet answer. It doesn't trade away its identity; it learns to speak in new registers—finding fresh ways to carry enduring values into the lives people are living.

Phổ Lại is not a famous heritage site or a major religious hub—and that is part of its power. Because it is small, its impact is easier to see. When a spiritual community stays close to the everyday needs of its neighbors, belief becomes practical, and felt in the way people are supported, gathered, and protected.³²

At a time when religion is often treated as either cultural heritage or a private matter, the story of Venerable Thích Trung Hiếu suggests something else: faith as ethical and social infrastructure—the human systems that help a community hold together when life turns hard. In this view, a monk's role reaches beyond ritual. It includes building relationships, responding to social needs, and creating cultural forms that keep spiritual teaching alive in contemporary life.

Perhaps this is the clearest way to understand “engaged Buddhism” at Phổ Lại: not through grand declarations or monumental architecture, but through the steady work of turning compassion into something concrete day after day, person by person.³³

³² Ngọc Hằng, “Xuân yêu thương – Hành trình gieo hạt lành từ chùa Phổ Lại” [Spring of Compassion – A Journey of Sowing Good Seeds from Pho Lai Pagoda], *Phật sự Online* (in Vietnamese), 2026-03-16, Vietnam Buddhist Sangha Central Office, <https://phatsuongline.vn/xuan-yeu-thuong-hanh-trinh-gieo-hat-lanh-tu-chua-pho-lai-27>

³³ Bình Minh, “Về chùa Phổ Lại và Thương...” [Visiting Pho Lai Pagoda and “Thương ...]. *Phatgiao.org.vn* (in Vietnamese), 2024-04-24, Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, <https://phatgiao.org.vn/ve-chua-pho-lai-va-thuong-d83096.html>

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