

Understanding Asia: Religion and Society

The Tattered Leaf Covers the Torn: Women's Buddhism as Grassroots Charity in Vietnam



(Scan for registration)

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03. June 2025
16:15 – 17:45

Zoom event

Studies of humanitarianism tend to focus on the large-scale. They analyze disaster relief, international diplomacy, development politics, and privatized welfare. These studies highlight globalizing trends and policies that suggest generosity is becoming homogenized into "industrialized philanthropy." Yet when global trends actualize in local communities, diverse ethics and interpretations of care reemerge. Differences flourish and conflicts arise over how to best care for others. My research examines this intimate point at which national trends toward philanthropy are enacted on the ground by focusing on the role of women among grassroots Buddhist charity movements in Vietnam. Informal giving and "random acts of kindness" are difficult to quantify, meaning they are often overlooked among large-scale studies of humanitarianism. Yet these everyday ethics of care are also a major way that women, particularly low-income and middle-class women, transform gendered ethics of care into civic engagement and moral citizenship. Moreover, as many women draw on Buddhist teachings and practices to explain care in Vietnam, their religious ethics permeate secular and public institutions such as hospitals, universities, and social service programs. Close qualitative research shows how - even as processes of giving are increasingly globalized - the motivations, experiences, and relationships that arise from giving can vary greatly by context, depending on intersectional dynamics between donors and recipients. Researchers must always attend to questions of who is giving to whom and why for a comprehensive understanding of how social service needs are being met amid high-speed development and privatization in late socialist countries like Vietnam.

Sara Ann Swenson is an Assistant Professor in Religion at Dartmouth College. She holds a PhD and M.Phil. in Religion from Syracuse University. Her book *Near Light We Shine: Buddhist Charity in Urban Vietnam* is forthcoming with Oxford University Press. In addition to researching Buddhist charity and grassroots humanitarianism in Vietnam, she also researches topics of gender, sexuality, wellness, and healing among international networks of Vietnamese Buddhism.