

DUST ALONG THE PATH

by **Vinh, Hao**

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CHAPTER ONE

Since October, Hoi An had occasionally experienced heavy cold rain. The mornings immediately following the rain were shrouded in thick fog. Looking toward the garden from the veranda, all I could see was a cotton-like whiteness. It was biting cold. No one wanted to work in the garden in early mornings. Only when the sun was already high in the sky would some men roll up their sleeves and start picking vegetables or breaking up the soil for beds of green cabbage, the leaves of which were still wet with morning dew. Even birds and insects seem to have waited until the men's work time before they started their own twittering and chirping to greet a new day. A few ox carts were heard rattling along the asphalt road in front of the pagoda. Somewhere a cow mooed happily, waking up some dog from its sound sleep. The dog, startled, barked loudly.

The rice transplantation was completed two days ago. We were now having some days off before engaging ourselves in other tasks like planting green vegetables, beans, and corn. So I was free this morning to hang around the veranda, looking at bright sunlight over the cemetery surrounding the pagoda's compound.

Tombstones, big and small, jostled one another as though competing for territory. A number of graves were built grandly with roofs, fences and locked gates. But many of the remaining ones were no more than mounds roughly covered with earth; their headstones, if any, were but small pieces of wood rotten from long exposure to seasons of rain, looking quite desolate. Thus, in this society of the dead—the cemetery—one could see reflected the complexity of the society of the living out there beyond it.

Putting on a plain brown coat to protect myself against the chill, I wandered in the garden, thinking unconnected thoughts. From the day when the Institute of Buddhist Studies was dissolved and its young novices and students like myself became "farming students", I had not had an opportunity to let my mind wander like this. Indeed, by the methods of practice in Zen Buddhism, to focus the mind on external matters is considered an error, an illusion which hinders one's search for quietude and enlightenment. I was conscious of that even as I began to have those thoughts which had no connection with my religious training. But the stream of thoughts continued its course just the same, uninterrupted, meandering, like a flood rolling over low valleys and plains, discovering and filling up all nooks and crannies however deep or shallow, wide or narrow, which lay in its path. At first I used various practices of mindfulness to dispel those thoughts. But when they turned around padded with a few beautiful images and memories of the past, I found myself easily loosen the rein... My heart and mind became a wild horse galloping over a vast prairie.



I was eight, a fourth-grade school boy at the time. Coming home from school in the afternoons, I would put away my school things and immediately go out to the front yard where I would plunge into various games with my brothers of my age group. We played coin-throwing, hit-the-can, flag-snatching, and so on. The rather large front yard of my house was paved with bricks, serving as a very pleasant playground. Sometimes we also played the games preferred by girls like hopscotch, rope jumping, or the game of jacks played with chopsticks as jacks. We were just kids, so we would play whatever was exciting and would not care whether it was a boys' or girls' game. After play, we would wash and shower before sitting down for dinner. In the evenings, we would together go to the nuns' pagoda for prayers. Then we would go home for a deep sleep with beautiful dreams, dreams of watching movies or going out, of having delicious things to eat. In such a fashion my childhood peacefully passed until a ripple came one day that summer.

Next to my house lived Mr. Long. He was a high school teacher. His wife was teaching, too, in some primary school in Nha Trang, our hometown. The couple had a son named Minh and a daughter named Hang. Being next-door neighbors, we often played games together. Minh was six, old enough to join me and my brothers in our games while Hang, being so little, merely sat watching us. That particular afternoon, as usual, we were playing in the front yard, but Minh was not among us. Only when the games were almost over did he appear behind the window which opened to our yard. Seen beside him was the lovely face of an unknown girl, not of little Hang. The girl looked older than Minh, about my own age perhaps. Her very black eyes were big, with long curly lashes resembling those of a foreign doll. The sight of those eyes caught my breath and made me feel curiously weak, so that I was no longer able to play with full energy and attention. And how strange the girl behaved! When she saw my uneasiness and embarrassment, she herself timidly stepped aside to hide behind the window curtain. A moment later her face was visible again, part of her hair falling over one side and the uncovered left eye glittering in its search for me. I could not bear that timid but lingering look. Feeling awkward, I went back into my house.

After dinner, it was still light. Again I walked out through the yard with small cautious steps. No more games were played. I stood just outside the gate which was covered with branches of brilliant purple red bougainvillea, idly watching the traffic, once in a while stealing a glance toward Minh's house. Over there, the kids were also standing or sitting around their gate after the evening meal. Glancing back and forth, again the girl and I caught sight of each other, then both grew shy and awkward. A moment later Hau, one of my older brothers, came out to join the crowd. Very tall for his age, he was regarded as a big brother even though he was only twelve. Hau stood still, seemingly just having an inattentive look-around (perhaps waiting to see a girl friend pass by). Even so, he caught the furtive glances of "the kid couple". Maybe the look in my eyes gave it away, the cunning look of an eight-year-old kid who already experienced the emotions of a young man, "*Stupefied I stand, eyes following from afar the fair lady's fluttering dress*", as described in a poem.* My brother took a few steps away from the gate toward the edge of the pavement, then slowly whirled around. In that position, he was at the apex of a triangle, facing me and the girl at the other two corners. I felt that he

* "*Đứng ngẩn trông vờì áo tiểu thư,*" poem by Huy Can, a great Vietnamese poet (1919 - 2005).

did so in order to clearly see the both of us and be seen by us. Hau cleared his throat to attract our attention, then called out to the girl:

“Hey...ey!” Obviously he did not know her name.

Not knowing what he wanted, I looked at him then glanced over to the girl next door. My brother, suddenly pointing at me and at the girl at the same time, said with a big smile:

“Hey...ey! This here is Khang!”

The girl hurriedly ran back indoors. I blushed and withdrew myself behind the gate. My heart was thumping. My brother Hau had been successful in embarrassing the two of us by the popular teasing game of matchmaking. However he did not linger on it for long, and never mentioned it again. But the two of us kids became friends.

Trang was a cousin of Minh's. Her nickname was Xu, “warty”, a name which was certainly not suitable at all for her smooth white skin. Even though Xu was not a nice name, I did not feel strange to call Trang by that name which everyone in Mr. Long's family seemed accustomed to. Everyday we went to each other's house to play, as joyfully as the rest of the gang. We were just kids. However, while playing games, Trang and I tried to avoid touching each other's hands. If we had to, in such games like tug of war when Trang and I were leaders of the opposing groups, we both felt embarrassed and hesitant. Usually, when I was in Trang's group, “our” group would win. But when Trang and I were in opposing groups, mine would always lose. Never was I willing to defeat her, even only in a game. I enjoyed watching Trang laugh happily in victory. Though of my age, Trang usually behaved as a more mature person, serious, not talkative. As such, to be able to make her smile and laugh was a pleasure, a victory enough for me.

Playing together in day time seemed not sufficient. Without any prompting and encouragement from the adults, in the evenings we also diligently accompanied one another to the evening prayer at the nuns' pagoda near our houses. Five of us went together, four from my family, with Trang the only one from Mr. Long's residence. Occasionally Minh and little Hang joined us too, but they would leave early before the end of the prayer session. In this “game” of prayer and recitation, without intention, I proved to really surpass Trang because I knew a lot of short prayers quite well, and my voice was loud and clear. Trang only said the words softly and deeply in her throat like a little bird suffering from cold wet weather. Every time I paused to listen to her, she consciously stopped her recitation by pretending to smooth her hair or change her sitting position. Trang was not as good as I was at recitation, but she was much more serious. Her facial expression was all sincere devotion when standing in front of the Buddha altar. And the more sincere Trang was, the more beautiful and lovely she appeared. Whenever it was the turn of the nun in charge to recite a sutra alone, all I did was fix my eyes dotingly on Trang, admiring her very black eyes, her straight nose, and her naturally red lips that looked as if they were painted with lipstick. A girl like her with a serious but charming demeanor was rarely seen. Her quiet and serene appearance greatly attracted me.

Once, after dinner, my brother-in-law took me and my younger brothers and sisters for a ride along the beach in his jeep. When we returned home, the evening prayer at the pagoda was in progress. I asked my siblings to go to the pagoda with me but none of them wanted to. So I went alone. On my way, I stopped by Mr. Long's house which

was situated between mine and the pagoda, with the idea of asking Trang to accompany me. Minh told me that she had already left.

I walked hurriedly along the veranda flanking the main hall on the upper level of the pagoda. Looking in from a window, I saw four nuns on the high platform near the Buddha altar, and below, Trang, standing behind two old people. I stayed in the shadow by the window and peeped at Trang who was then prostrating. After each kowtow, she turned her head toward the door as if expecting someone. With the sensitivity of a child, I knew she was waiting for me to show up. She had no way of knowing that I would be coming from the side door and not through the front door as usual. By chance, while sitting down to chant the last part of the prayer, Trang turned her head toward the window and caught sight of me. She smiled, and so did I. Then, discreetly, she waved me in. The gesture was like an order, as if she had some authority over me. Obediently, I walked in and stayed by her side.

"Why are you so late?" she asked in a whisper.

"Eh... I've just come back from our outing."

"Hush, lower your voice. You seem to spend too much time in play."

We sat side by side, chanting the prayers. It was the first time we shared a prayer book. It was one of the hard cover copies of the Phap Hoa text (*Saddharmapundarika Sutra or Lotus Sutra*), which the nuns locked away in a book case and distributed to attendants at the beginning of each prayer session. I was late, and there was no copy available for me. Since I had to read from her book, I simply sat passively and let Trang turn over the pages. Trang had beautiful fingers, white and small. I could not concentrate on the chanting of the text. I neither saw nor understood the words. My attention was focused on the hand turning the pages—like a self-deluded person who stares at the finger pointing to the moon instead of looking at the moon itself.*

Afterward, we walked back to our houses together. We took our time, walking side by side slowly, at leisure, not knowing what to say to each other. When we reached her place, I felt tongue-tied for a moment before I could bid her good bye.

"Well, Xu, here you are. Go in then. Come over to play tomorrow, won't you?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going home now, Xu," I said before turning away.

"Wait a second. I already told you not to call me by that nickname, how come you keep using it? My name is Trang, you know."

"Uh, ah... I won't do that again. Forgive me, Xu, uh, Trang."

Pretending to be offended, she pouted her lips and pushed open the wooden gate and entered. But immediately she turned and gave me a smile before disappearing into the house.

After a shower, I went to bed, but my eyes refused to close. I kept recalling the warm sensation when sitting beside Trang and cherished the memory of her pouting and reproaching gestures.

Getting up early the next morning, once again I stepped out into the front yard, anxiously waiting for Trang to come over. Curiously, from that day on we no longer could act naturally during the games. Trang mostly sat watching and rarely joined us. It felt as though Trang and I had become "adults" among the gang of playful children.

* A common metaphor of Buddhist Theory in which the moon stands for the Truth, the ultimate goal, and the finger stands for the Dharma (Buddhist doctrine), the skillful means.

What we still liked best was our regular attendance at the evening prayer at the pagoda. Arriving before the session started, she and I would stand on the balcony to enjoy the cool breeze from the river. From where we stood, we could actually only make out parts of the river winding behind shanty-houses with corrugated roofs. In fact, in the dark of the night, the presence of the river could only be detected by reflections of light here and there flickering on its water. It was referred to as Xuan Huong swamp, but we children preferred to call it a river. When Trang and I were at a loss to find any other topic to talk about, we idly discussed the river. We commented on how muddy it was, how funny it could be called a river when no boats or sampans were seen traveling on it; how the star Venus had appeared too early in the evening so that it was no longer reflected on the water. After having exhausted all the small talk, we kept quiet and looked around, up and down from the sky to the earth, fudging with sideburns, adjusting a hair clip, cracking fingers, peeling off a rusty layer of paint from the railing. Silence. But it was a heart-felt pleasure in companionable silence.

Those amicable summer days had to come to an end. When school children were busily preparing bags and necessary stationery for the coming school year, I found more topics to talk with Trang about.

"Another school year is coming. Have you bought notebooks yet?" I asked.

"Not yet," she answered softly.

"What school are you at?"

She kept silent for a moment, then said without looking at me, "I'm not going to any school in Nha Trang."

"What? Really?"

I was surprised, not understanding what she meant by "not going to any school in Nha Trang". But Trang did not seem anxious to elaborate further, so I just let it pass.

Some days later, my elder brothers and sisters organized an excursion to Bich Dam island off the coast of Nha Trang. We children in the family were allowed by our parents to go along. The small ship maneuvered by a couple of uniformed sailors took about an hour to reach the island. Once there, like my brothers and sisters, I was absorbed in diving and swimming, feeling neither tired nor bored. Only on the way home in the afternoon did I think of my little girl friend next door. I wished to share my joyful experience with her who stayed in a house that always appeared so dull and sad. If the children in that house had not had us as playmate neighbors, I imagined they would have been even more depressed. I wished Trang had been with me on the island, but there was a limit to the number of people allowed on the ship. Even my elder brothers and sisters could not bring their friends along.

After a shower to rid myself of the sea water, I quickly dashed to Trang's. But I could enter no further than the small yard. The sliding door grille was secured with a big padlock. Obviously no one was home. I walked home disheartened. From time to time, I ran over to check, only to see that the lock was still on. No light was seen in Mr. Long's house when evening came. The silvery padlock sparkled in the dark to assert its presence. Alone, I went to the pagoda. I sat chanting the prayers just for form's sake, feeling empty and depressed. No sign of activities was detected in Trang's house when I walked past it on my way home. I gathered that, early that morning, when we had started our journey toward the sea, Trang and her relatives had been on their way to some place out of town.

Throughout the next morning, I sat in a daze in the front yard, longing to see the communicating window opened – the window which, whenever she wanted to talk to me or ask me to come over, Trang had used to open, and by which she had often sat pretending to be engaged in reading comic books or looking idly at the sky. Some of my classmates came and asked me to go swimming with them at the beach, but I begged off.

The window was not opened until late afternoon, before dinner time, but the sky blue curtain stayed hanging behind it. My heart trembling with joy, I ran to her house. Minh was playing around the sliding door. Seeing me, he said at once, "She's gone. No longer here."

What a rascal he was, too sharp for his six years of age! He made it sound as if Trang was the only reason for me to visit his house. But I did not mind his mischievous remark. Instead, I almost felt gratified. Wasn't it an unwritten acknowledgement that Trang and I were a pair of intimate friends?

"Where to?" I asked.

"To Phan Rang, where else?"

I hesitated for a moment:

"Where is Phan Rang?"

"Phan Rang is another town far away. Yesterday Dad and Mom took us along when they sent Xu back to her parents. It was so far that it took us a long time to reach there even by bus."

"When will she be coming back here?"

"I don't know. If her parents let her come back, then she will. My mom said Xu will be allowed to come to Nha Trang only on summer holidays."

"Is that so?"

I stumbled home. Standing under the bougainvillea trellis for awhile, I wondered why Trang had never mentioned anything about this situation. Feeling quite dejected, I ran inside. Hiding myself in a dark corner behind the family altar, I abandoned myself to crying.

How curious it was that I had never felt the need to ask Trang about her presence among Mr. Long's family. Perhaps I intuitively sensed that the explanation would not thrill me. Or perhaps I was so happy to see her everyday that the thought that she was not here permanently never occurred to me. We were not old enough to think in advance about what would come to pass. Perhaps on her part, Trang hadn't known exactly when she was to return to Phan Rang. Or she had had some idea about that, but did not know enough that when two close friends were to be apart, they would need to say goodbye to each other. It was also possible that she had grown homesick and therefore was too overjoyed with the prospect of going home to remember her new boy friend.

I only cried over this once. The following days found me returned to school and playing with my friends as usual. But every time I passed by Mr. Long's house, a wave of sadness surfaced and softly squeezed my little heart.

My house, of the traditional style, was roofed with yin-yang tiles and comprised three sections. In the central section were our ancestral altar which stood behind the one reserved for the worship of Buddhas, where an image of Quan Am Bodhisattva was placed. My maternal grandmother's bedroom was in the left section, and my parents' bedroom was found in the other. We children slept in the rear area of the house. Extending from one side of the house to the other was the attic built with solid ironwood

timbers. The larger portion of it functioned as a storage area where my family kept things which we rarely made use of. The smaller portion, right above the Buddha and ancestral altars, was taken up by a smaller altar where was placed a big image of the great Buddha, Sakyamuni. I often looked up to the Buddha high up there, silently offering prayers and asking for blessings. Once, when I missed the little girl friend very much, I frantically scrawled this line repeatedly across sheets of paper torn from a notebook: "*I wish that my dear Trang will come back.*" I rolled up the sheets into a wad, tied it neatly with an elastic band, then flung it up into the attic. I took care not to aim it at the Buddha's small altar. Every morning my mother placed a fresh glass of water on it, and she would easily find the wad if it had landed there, and would discover my secret prayer. That secret wish I only dared to confess to the Buddha. Presiding high above, surely, Sakyamuni would see that I actually sent my wish, no matter where it was lodged. Having done that, I felt quite relieved. I began to hope that Trang would return to Nha Trang some day soon. (At that point in time, I did not know that my request written on a piece of paper was not unlike a petition submitted to the emperor at court, or to Buddha during ceremonial prayers at pagodas. The only difference being my manner of throwing my petition into the attic, short of solemnity and respect.)

A few months later, when I had completely forgotten about the wad of paper containing my wish, my mother sent two of my elder brothers to the attic to clean it up and put things in order. The wad was found by Hau, my twelve-year-old brother who had teasingly matched Trang and me as a pair and inadvertently brought us together.

Using his fingers to remove dust from it, he said, "Now, what in the world is this wad of paper? Maybe it's grandfather or great-grandfather's will which lets our family inherit a fortune."

Then he untied it and read. Handing it to eldest brother Chu, Hau observed, "Someone wrote something silly on these pieces of paper. It's a kid's handwriting. Read and see for yourself. '*I wish that my dear Trang will come back*' What do you think this means? The line was written a hundred times, just like what we are forced by our teachers to do in class as a punishment."

Chu took a look at it, then burst out laughing convulsively, "Whose handwriting is this?"

"Maybe it's Khang's. He was often seen spending time with the little girl in Mr. Long's. Maybe her name is Trang."

Standing below and hearing their words, I was scared and was about to flee when Hau's call stopped me short. "Khang, is this wad of paper yours?"

From the attic he threw it down at me. I picked it up, knowing full well it was my own product. There was no way to deny it, but I tried any way.

"Dunno whose," I mumbled.

"Lying, rascal! The handwriting is yours, no one else's. And Trang is the little girl next door, right?"

I was reduced to silence and felt ashamed. But I still did not want to submit myself to their ridicule.

"Oh, I remember now. Yes, this is my handwriting. But the Trang mentioned here is our sister Trang who is coming back from America to visit us, not any little girl."

"If so, what's the name of the little girl in Mr. Long's house? Speak up, speak up right away, don't think it over," Chu yelled.

I replied at once. "Her name is Xu."

"What? What did you say? Say it again. What's her name?"

"She's named Xu."

Clutching their tummies, my two brothers laughed their fill. "Her name is Xu? *Xu*—Warty? Fluffy? Ha, ha, ha..."

After a good laugh, my brother Chu called me over and said in a serious tone, "Schooling first. No more *xu* or *xi*, warty or rough. You hear me? How could you begin at such an early age to 'plant a *si* tree of passion' for a girl, having this kind of silly prayer? Romantic rascal! You aren't old enough for that, so stop it."

I did not understand what he said. Trang and I were close friends because we liked each other. What was all this about planting a tree of passion? Any way, I was glad to be dismissed by my elder brothers. I took the wad of paper to the front yard where I burned it. I felt slightly insulted because my brothers had laughed at Trang's not-so-nice nickname. Adults seem to pay much attention to names, I thought. I can't see anything ugly which the name Xu suggests. You have to look at her, talk with her, accompany her to the pagoda and sit praying beside her in order to fully appreciate her beauty and loveliness. A name isn't so important. But how strange and unfair brother Hau is! It's he who gave Trang and me the idea of becoming a pair of close friends in the first place. But now he has turned around showing no sympathetic understanding to me at all, joining Chu in making fun of my friend's name and reprimanding me for my emotions. This boy's heart isn't a pig's or a cow's sold at the meat market, so cheap and common. It has its sincere and gentle throbs.

The more I pondered about this, the more I felt guilty toward Trang. I blamed myself for being such a coward that when pressed, I disclosed her nickname to show that she had nothing to do with the name found on those sheets of paper. I remembered that once she had asked me not to call her by that nickname, and I had stopped doing so as promised (even though I thought it was cute). But the damage had been done. I had no courage to go back to my brothers and tell them her true formal name. They would not believe it any way after having known the name that made them laugh.

Time passed, and again summer came around. Anxiously I waited for Trang's return, paying no mind to my brother Chu's warning. He might have felt the need to give a warning at that point, but no one would put too much weight on friendly relationships nurtured among children in the same neighborhood. But days followed days and I waited in vain. It was not until mid-summer, in July, after coming back from a swim in the sea, that I spotted Trang, her black hair cascading over her shoulder, moving in and out of sight behind that familiar window. Unable to contain my joy and excitement, I rushed toward her, calling out happily:

"Trang!"

The girl turned her head toward me, a little startled and hesitant, then smiled. "Now, where's Trang that you see here? Are you dreaming? I already told you this morning, but you still continue to call me Trang. Silly!"

Stupefied, I asked, "This morning? What are you talking about? And whatever did you tell me?"

The girl rolled her eyes upward, glowering at me. "Exactly this morning, of course. I explained to you, but you don't remember, do you? My name is Thuy, not Trang."

So saying, she then abruptly turned her back to me and resumed playing with little Hang, letting me stand rooted to the spot, bewildered. At first, I thought Trang herself was teasing me by pretending to be someone else, or she no longer cared about me. However, it only took me a short moment to register what the girl had just revealed. Obviously, she was not "my dear" Trang. My friend Trang would not talk so loud like that, neither would she glower at me in such a sharp and rough manner. Moreover, I absolutely had not talked with her that morning. Surely there must have been some mistake, some confusion somewhere. It was quite a puzzle.

Then it occurred to me that this girl ought to be Trang's sister. Though she shared Trang's facial features, she was thinner, shorter, and most of all, of a different disposition. She was glib, active, joyful, whereas Trang was quiet, a little melancholy, soft and gentle. I was mistaken then. Still, I hoped that Trang had come together with this sister Thuy and perhaps she was somewhere else in the house. I stayed put for awhile longer to see if Trang would happen to show her face. Instead, a moment later, it was Minh who approached the window. Full of hope, I happily beckoned him:

"Where's Trang?"

"You mean Xu? She didn't come this time."

"Then who is it I just saw who... looks so much like her?"

"Oh, it's Thuy. She's Xu's younger sister. It's her turn to be here this summer."

"Is that so?" I uttered weakly.

So that was it. Minh confirmed my mistake. I turned away, my heart heavy with disappointment. I did not know how many brothers and sisters Trang had, who would together with her take turns to spend summer vacation in Nha Trang, and when her turn would be next. All I could do was wait.

Upon entering my house, the first person I saw was Huu, the younger brother born two years after me, who was sprawled on the big dais placed to the right of the altar. He was engaged in writing or drawing something. In a flash I remembered that this brother's face resembled mine a lot. Perhaps it was he who had talked to Thuy this morning, and just now Thuy had taken me for him. Gloomily I sat down beside Huu.

"There is girl named Thuy in Minh's house who looks exactly like Trang. I mistook her for Trang."

Huu rolled on the dais, laughing. Insolent lad! What was there in such a small matter that was so funny? Uneasily I laughed along with him.

"This morning when I saw her, I also thought it was her elder sister Xu," Huu said. "But this girl is named Thuy. She seems to like me very much."

The rascal! He was barely seven! I walked away leaving him alone with his silly laughing.

Several years went by, but Trang never returned to Nha Trang again for her summer vacation. I had not expected that we were to be apart forever without having a chance to properly say goodbye to each other. Neither did Thuy come back after that summer, but Huu did not seem to suffer the least. Probably because Huu and Thuy had not become close friends like Trang and I. It was just as well, I concluded, for I did not wish to see my younger brother caught in this kind of unpleasant experience of separation.

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Four years after that memorable summer when I had met Trang, I entered a Buddhist temple as a novice. Five more years had passed since then, during which time I had stopped thinking about that "romantic" event of the past. Venus still rose every evening, but the old river familiar to us had been turned into level ground from where grew the central market and many-storied apartments buildings. Red flowers on flamboyant trees in the old years had been reduced to dust. And no longer was seen sparkling flickering light reflected in the dark water of the river at night. Today, for no apparent reason, I allowed my mind to travel down memory lane. Shaking my head, I sat down on the edge of the veranda bordering a row of deserted classrooms, and attempted to restrain my wandering mind by focusing on a brown stone protruding from a bank of white sand in front of me.

When I finally stood up, the sun had risen rather high. A funeral was in progress, featuring a small group of people silently entering the cemetery. It was said that the new government authorities forbade any group gathering for whatever purpose, and also outright prohibited ceremonial practices considered in their socialist view to be superstitious. As a result, this funeral was attended by very few people, accentuated by the absence of traditional funeral music. Further, without spiritual support from a monk or a priest, the family in mourning appeared sorrowfully lost. Other mourners seemed nervous, possibly about the danger of being apprehended for taking part in what was officially forbidden or discouraged. The sight of their pathetic circumstance was even more poignant than the fact that one of their loved ones had departed from them forever.

A pagoda surrounded by a cemetery was certainly a site favorable for religious practice. On the other hand, it would appear that it brutally crushed my youthful vitality and hope. Indeed, notwithstanding moments of reliving tender memories, this was the first time since I renounced the world that I felt tired of this dull and depressing place. In the early mornings upon arising all I could see around me was graves. In the afternoons, again, what I faced was the setting sun spreading its fading light on the neglected graves. How could beautiful dreams and aspirations take root and grow in such an environment like this? Of course, when one had renounced the world one had to abandon all earthly desires, too, in order to easily step into the realm of self-liberation. But, obviously, the sight of death—the other side of life—also had the same effect that living did on us: it was capable of rendering one's soul desolate. The only difference was that one was at rest while the other in activity; one withered while the other was fresh.

My back grew damp with perspiration when these thoughts flooded my mind. I did not know if it was the right way to think. And suddenly I had doubt about my ability to conform to Buddhist training. In a different living condition, how would my mind behave? Would I be able to walk through life with a carefree state of mind? The fact was that, when watching that funeral, my heart sank, weary and depressed. What made me feel that way? Was it an expression of pity and compassion? Or was it simply a result of the acquired habit of regarding life as a worthless piece of rag? If I had truly been liberated from worldly concerns for good, I should not have sighed and felt deeply troubled any longer when witnessing the vicissitudes of life. I then was far from that goal of liberation. Once in a while, my heart still felt perturbed, unsettled. There seemed to be lurking in me a certain kind of urge, very vague but not uncomfortable. I did not know its face, but I could feel its power smoldering in a corner of my heart. Certainly such signals were never in accord with Zen Buddhism. I had a lot more to work on in my

training before I could attain complete quietude, free of images of pain and suffering.

A refreshing breeze from the vegetable garden invigorated me. I turned back to my room, remembering my promise to accompany Tuu, a novice like me, to Phuoc Lam pagoda for a visit with monk Thien Phuoc and some friends, from where I also wanted to borrow a copy of the Phap Hoa text in Chinese. I was in a mood to make a hand-written copy of it, partly to study more deeply this sutra which I had recited as a child during that memorable summer, partly to give myself a means to review and learn more Chinese characters which I had not had a chance to look at since the Institute of Buddhist Studies was dissolved.
