

# DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

## CHAPTER TEN

With time, monk Trung Hung's attitude toward me changed: I was no longer a spoiled novice in his eyes. Before leaving the preferred Hai Duc monastery, I had prepared myself for the idea of "remaking my life". Therefore, I had no objection to whatever manner the monk chose to correct me, or to recast me into another mold. In truth, though the fashion he employed to reform me was outdated, it nonetheless had its own logic. All the more so, as he did not go against any religious rules in pursuing this course.

The books of philosophy, of literature, and the novels I had brought from Hai Duc monastery were all burned by him. I was very angry, but I simply smiled. I knew he burned or confiscated my books with a view to forcing me to go back to Buddhist teachings. Thus, his intention was good, unlike the book burning that had previously been done by communist cultural cadres. Externally, the same act was committed by the communists and by monk Trung Hung; internally, the monk's act made me indignant, if not quite resentful. However, by this time, I had learned to bear it all in silence, to acquiesce to his wishes and to his way of teaching. All that was left on my desk was a notebook containing a collection of excellent passages from various sutras, as well as many gatha poems which I myself had hand-copied, and a copy of *Kim Cang*, the 'Diamond Sutra' in its Chinese version.

When around me my personal belongings, one by one, gradually disappeared, until the Sutra sat alone on the desk, my heart felt more at ease, a heart less burdened. Somehow, at this point in time, I was in the habit of giving things away. I gave anyone whatever it was they liked. It certainly was not because monk Trung Hung had burned, torn, and confiscated all my possessions that my desk became empty. And very quickly I was again my own real self, that self of the years before 1975. Obedient. Docile. Serious. Studious. It was hard for monk Trung Hung to find any mistake on my part, so as to scold me, so as to pick on me. Sometimes when he encountered a complicated part in a Sutra, he even came to me and asked about it. This showed that he was no longer jealous of my studies, as before.

The calm, dull lifestyle at Linh Phong pagoda suited me well. There no longer arose in me feelings of dissatisfaction, of frustration, or any thought of resistance. All confusing and disturbing thoughts about the wretched condition of the country, about unjust oppression inflicted on the people and the society by the new government; all the overwhelming zealotry for action inspired in me by images of the Zen monks of old, those monks who drew their swords and braved many battles against invaders, and inspired in me by the recent example of master Tue Van, who turned into a political activist to resist the new regime, unhappily ending up in prison; all these disturbances

abated in me. I was now truly a mountain novice monk, a monk showing myself in town only for prayer services, a monk spending the rest of his time about the top of the mount: time enclosed by plants and trees, time in the company of a senior monk and two novices whose young faces were imprinted with austerity, with marks of hardship.

However, the religious life was not meant to shelter monks who sat sluggishly still, passively, until they at last became Buddhas. It seemed to me there should be privations and obstructions on a person's religious path, trials to help train and develop the self-nature of true mind. No glorious achievements were attained without hard work. Whether I would be successful in some manner on the path to self-liberation remained to be seen, but adversities and trials I certainly had to encounter and overcome. Many of my predecessors had taught me so. I could say that I had not gone through any trial worth mentioning since I had renounced the world. If the previous year, 1976, when I was eighteen, the government had forced me to carry a weapon and go to Cambodia for the purpose of fulfilling "international obligations", or to the northern border and fight against the army of "brother China", perhaps that would have been a valuable test for me. In any event, even if that had happened, I would still have had the hope of returning some day to the pagoda, as promised by my own master. But these things did not happen. Perhaps the ghost of adversities knew that it could not wager me well with such a test, so it decided to attack me from another front.

My fellow novice Don knew a Buddhist family of Hue origins who lived and worked in Nha Trang. This family had a shop serving refreshing drinks. Though a devout Buddhist, the woman owner of the shop was too busy with both the business and household chores to often go to pagoda. In contrast, her younger sister, in her early thirties, was frequently seen attending prayers at Hai Duc monastery, and sometimes at Linh Phong pagoda as well. She had a down-to-earth name which was quite suitable for her sex: Nu, literally meant female. Don and I habitually addressed her as "elder sister Nu".

"Khang, you should come to my house with Don sometime," sister Nu once said to me. "It's so difficult for people to meet you, as you don't go anywhere. My elder sister has expressed her wish to meet with you. Every time Don comes for a visit, she asks why he does not bring you along so that she can see what you look like."

"Why does she want to meet me?" I was surprised.

"Because she heard that you are uncle Dan's son. Don't you know the relationship between your family and mine?"

"I am afraid I don't. What kind of relationship? I have never heard my family mention it."

"When my sister and I were little kids, when you yourself were not yet born, my mother was the nanny taking care of two of your elder sisters. Along with my mother, we too stayed in your parents' house. At that time, their house was in Hue. Or rather, it was actually in the village of Vi Da, near the causeway that connects it with the city of Hue."

"Really? I did not know anything about that," I said.

"So, my sister always urges me to invite you to our house," sister Nu continued. "Learning that one of your parents' children is a monk, she is very interested and eager to know you, that's all."

One day, on our way back from a trip downtown to purchase books, Don unexpectedly stopped me and pulled me toward a house.

"Where are we going?" I halted and grumbled.

"Come in here for a little while. It's a family I know. Let's pay them a short visit, have some refreshments before going back to the pagoda," Don said, with an entreating smile.

I followed him to a two-storied house, typically of three sections stretching from left to right. The three iron doors were shut tight. Don rang a doorbell. A short moment later, a woman of about forty opened the door.

"Ah, welcome. Please come in," she said with a warm smile.

"Hello, elder sister. How are you doing?" Don greeted her informally.

"Fine, thank you. Hello to you too. Oh, and this is...?" she inquired.

"This is Khang, the person you have wanted to meet," Don replied.

"Ah, Khang. Alas, it took such a long time to finally meet you. I have heard so much about you," the lady said happily.

"You have heard bad things about him," Don joked, "and now you may see for yourself, right?"

"Don't be so flippant, nothing of that sort. Come in. This way, please. And Don, please go ahead and take Khang to the living room. I will join you shortly. My sister Nu has gone to Hai Duc monastery. Maybe she will come back this afternoon."

It turned out that she was Cam, Nu's elder sister and the lady of the house. We entered the right section of the building and walked past a room filled with tables and chairs piled up on one another. Mrs. Cam explained to me that those pieces of furniture would be set out in the front yard in the evening for customers who came for refreshing drinks, coffee, and different kinds of sweetened bean porridge as dessert. We next passed a kitchen with many individual charcoal stoves lined up on the floor. A door in the left wall of the kitchen led to the living room in the central section of the house. As we approached this door, we caught sight of a girl standing and fanning a charcoal stove which sat on a small platform.

"Greet the novice monks, daughter," Mrs. Cam said to the girl.

I heard the girl's voice greeting Don who walked in front of me. "Good morning to you."

Only when the big muscular body of Don had moved to one side did the girl and I find ourselves facing each other. She stared at me as if transfixed, and forgot to say her greeting. Her hand stopped moving the fan. Without understanding it, I myself also stood still, fixed my gaze on her in a state of shock, with no idea how to behave. Even when Don had walked through the opening into the living room, I was still rooted to the floor by the connecting door. Perhaps that single moment, that tiny speck of most real time when I was involuntarily frozen in my tracks was but a very brief instant, but I had the sensation that it was a long dream unfolding, a dream wherein the whole universe ceased to breathe, the planets halted in their revolutions, and time itself abruptly paused so that the two of us were given a chance to look at each other in silent wonder. Our paths had never crossed. I had never seen her before in my life. Truthfully, since I had renounced the world, this was the first time ever, at the age of nineteen, that my heart was so strongly discomposed by a girl's appearance. Yes, surely, it was discomposure of the heart, not simply a heartthrob. One can overcome a heartthrob, and it will fade into

oblivion. But one cannot do that with the heart's discomposure. When one feels heaven and earth reel over and under oneself, one can never forget that powerful impression.

I did not know if Mrs. Cam sensed anything about this psychic phenomenon. All I heard was her raised voice.

"Nhu", she reminded the girl, "say hello to novice Khang. Now, daughter." Then turning to me, she smiled. "This is my youngest daughter, Nhu Nhu."

Only then did Nhu Nhu greet me. It was not the polite way of greeting by an inferior to a superior by bowing the head, or of a Buddhist believer to a monk by joining the hands together. She greeted me with a smile instead, her cheeks reddened by the heat from the hot charcoal stove. I could see sweat dampening strands of hair around her temples. The pink lips that had just bestowed on me a fresh-flowered smile quickly retreated to their normal positions, together forming a small heart, so pretty under a high, straight nose. Nhu Nhu lowered her big, bright eyes and directed them vaguely at the ground, instead of focusing on me. I had the feeling she was embarrassed because she had just become aware that she and I had exchanged a look which rocked the whole universe. As she stared down, my attention was drawn to her long eyelashes arcing up beautifully. To my eyes, that curved line was the abundant fullness of vitality, the powerful arching of a shore splashing waves, the flexibility, litheness and gentleness of blown grass, cumulus clouds floating on the blue horizon, the dreamy, graceful crescent moon soft against dark evening sky.

I entered the living room. Mrs. Cam sat with us. A little while later, Nhu Nhu brought in a tea tray. She poured the tea at a side table, then carried tea cups one by one to each of us. When placing a cup in front of Don, she said, "Please have some tea." When delivering one to me, she said nothing, only gave me a smile. She turned to go, and there flowed into my vision long hair, thick and shiny, hanging down all the way to the waist, hair inspirational as a waterfall cascading upon a high cliff face, as a forest of clouds cast upon the air. Earlier, back in the kitchen, I had not seen her streaming dark hair, perhaps because she had put it up while attending to her cooking. My eyes were still following Nhu Nhu when her mother's voice was heard.

"Novice Khang, her name is Nhu Nhu," she said. "She's my youngest daughter."

She had said the same thing just a little while ago, and I did not know why she said it again. Perhaps because she noticed that I watched her daughter.

Startled, I said rather awkwardly, "I find that she looks like my younger sister."

Quickly, Don put in some words to rescue me from my embarrassing situation. "Yes, she does. She resembles Uyen, doesn't she?"

I nodded my head, even as I realized well that there was nothing alike between my sister and Nhu Nhu as announced by Don, save perhaps for the same long dark hair and very light skin.

Mrs. Cam invited us to stay for lunch. "Please stay and share a meal with us. Let Nhu Nhu cook and serve you. She is a very good cook, and can prepare both vegetarian and meat dishes."

But I was determined to decline her invitation. Mrs. Cam saw us to the door. Nhu Nhu bowed her head to bid goodbye to Don, and sent me off with an incomprehensible smile.

Back at Linh Phong pagoda, I wrote down a few lines of verse to record the first romantic sentiment I experienced in my religious life.

*Stars in a fine sky, her beautiful eyes sparkle  
Jet black hair a stream into a calm river flows  
Feelings intoxicated, to the lonely windy top  
of the mountain  
I return  
Dust Along the Path to my heart softly attaching*

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Half a month after my first visit to Mrs. Cam's house, when the worldly emotional response -- not at all suitable for a monastic person -- had abated in me, sister Nu came to Linh Phong pagoda to talk with monk Trung Hung. At that time I was engaged in chanting *Kim Cang*, the 'Diamond Sutra', and therefore did not know of her visit. I had taken upon myself to schedule this session of chanting everyday at two in the afternoon -- which was not part of the daily activities of the pagoda. The purpose was to dig deeper into the meaning of Prajna, the Enlightened Mind, the Buddha-Mind. It was also aimed at erasing my own illusions and dreams upon meeting Nhu Nhu.

When I emerged from prayer, Monk Trung Hung called me. "Khang," he said, "you know Ms. Nu's house, don't you? She came a while ago asking us to conduct a *câu an* blessing ceremony to pray for the health of a certain sick old man living next door to her house. I want you there, on behalf of the pagoda, to recite the confessional sutra *Thủy Sát*. Recite it and pray as long as necessary until the man regains his health."

Monk Trung Hung never forgot to mention his favorite sutra. *Thủy Sát* literally meant 'water repentance', an abbreviation of the title of a book on repentance written by a Buddhist master in China. The symbolic story behind it relates the master's experience of using pure water from the mountain to wash away an ugly boil on his knee: the pure water representing mindful sincerity; the boil, sin. His disciples, having high regard for this book, recited it as a sutra when they needed to show repentance, thus establishing it as a traditional Buddhist confessional text.

Monk Trung Hung's words startled me and made me tremble with anxiety, even as my heart felt strangely full of eagerness -- an eagerness absent compassion, without concern for whoever the old man was, because it seemed to suggest that I wanted to use this journey as an opportunity to again see a beautiful maiden. Indeed, in the last two weeks, my heart had often been visited by fluttering emotions about Nhu Nhu. I knew at once what this was supposed to mean. I had tried to suppress it by sitting meditation, sutra chanting, reciting the Buddha's name, and focusing more on incantations. Furthermore, I had repeatedly refused to accompany Don to sister Nu's house for a visit. Thus, now, when monk Trung Hung assigned me to conduct this prayer service, I was of two minds about it, feeling very awkward. I wanted to beg off from performing the task, and at the same time I wanted to go for it. I did not want to go, for if I went, I would inevitably see Nhu Nhu again, which would revive the overwhelming throbbing emotion I had labored upon, employing considerable effort of concentration to wipe it out. On the other hand, I wanted to go because I had never refused to go to town for prayer services by assignment or on request; but more than that, it was because in the depth of my heart, I knew I would like to have a chance to look at Nhu Nhu again, at her dreamy eyes, her

innocent smile, and her seductive long hair. I was not sure if I should decide right then to accept the assignment. After a short moment of hesitation, I resigned to it, telling myself I should do as the circumstance dictated if I had no legitimate reason to refuse the task.

"Why am I going there alone?" I finally asked.

"Because Don and I have to divide our time among many funeral services throughout next week. Thai has to stay behind to keep an eye on the pagoda. There aren't many of us here, so you can't expect either of us to accompany you. Moreover, in this case, where *câu an* prayers have to be recited for so many days, we needn't send a whole group to satisfy their request. You alone will suffice."

I tried one more time to talk my way out. "What if you let Don go there for the blessing ceremony, while I go with you to the funerals?"

Monk Trung Hung hesitated for a short moment, then pronounced. "That won't do."

"Why not, Thay?" I asked.

"Because I've said it's not possible. I'm used to going to funerals with Don. Besides, Ms. Nu told me that her family wanted to invite you personally, that no matter how many of us can attend, you must be among us. Who knows what their intention is? They simply invite whoever they like."

"It isn't necessary for us to comply with their wish in choosing a specific monk to conduct the blessing ceremony," I said for form's sake.

"Of course it isn't, but you go ahead. Why should you decline? You are no longer busy working at the soya sauce factory these days."

I did not know what to say. I acquiesced in silence.

As to why I did not work at the soya sauce factory any longer, it was due to new organizational arrangements in the Buddhist community. Two months ago, during a meeting of the provincial sangha, it was decided that Linh Phong and Phuoc Dien pagodas were tasked to cope with contingencies in the matter of performing prayer services at private homes. It meant that these two pagodas were obliged to meet demands for such services on behalf of other Buddhist temples in Nha Trang, particularly Hai Duc monastery. Buddhists in Nha Trang could knock on the door of any Buddhist temple in the city to request the presence of a monk or monks when they needed to have ceremonial prayers at their homes. But if the monks at that particular temple were preoccupied, they had the right to refer the request to either Linh Phong and Phuoc Dien pagodas, and in this case the monks at these two places had to take turns to substitute for those initially on demand.

Conveniently, this substituting obligation was considered a task assigned by the soya sauce factory. By this arrangement, along with the monks at Phuoc Dien pagoda, monk Trung Hung, Don, and myself of Linh Phong pagoda were practically paid workers of the factory, even though we never showed up there. It could be said that this was a heavy task imposed on us at Linh Phong, which took up a rather large amount of our time. While monk Trung Hung, Don, and I went out to attend to various ceremonial prayers, Thai alone had to take all responsibilities for activities and ceremonies at our pagoda. Curiously enough, it appeared to me that monk Trung Hung was happy to accept the new arrangement, for if he had not enthused over it, he could have rejected it outright without any problem during the meeting of the provincial sangha. Fulfilling such a substituting task, I sometimes had the feeling that I, together with the other monks at

Linh Phong, were no more than popular shamans and sorcerers. In the end, I comforted myself with the thought that if we at Linh Phong pagoda had not accepted the task, other pagodas would have to have done it, and would have been placed in the same unfavorable circumstance. The spirit of "suffering for others" would not allow a monk to shirk hardship by shifting burdens onto others. Furthermore, chanting prayers for the benefit of Buddhist followers was a form of religious training and practice.

Taking my silence as a sign of acceptance, monk Trung Hung gave further instructions. "Each day, you chant the whole *Thủy Sám* confessional text. You can have three sessions a day, and chant one book of the Sutra in each session. Besides those three sessions, whenever there is some spare time, you can also recite *Phổ Môn* prayers in addition. There's no point in being idle down there." By "Pho Mon", he was referring to the chapter titled "Avalokitesvara" in the Lotus Sutra, related to the compassionate Bodhisattva Kwan Yin, known in Vietnamese as Quan-Am.

"Do I take this to mean..."

"You'll spend the nights there, yes. You must chant prayers day and night, and only come back here when the old man feels well again."

"Oh dear," I exclaimed, rather stunned, supposing the monk was joking.

"Why such an expression? Can't you do that? Don't you want to help save a sick old man?"

"Of course I want to. But I did not expect that I would have to stay the nights down there. And why must I chant prayers day and night? I will be out of breath chanting alone like that."

"You only need to chant in a low voice," said monk Trung Hung, trying to calm me down. "I didn't tell you to chant aloud. The main thing is to pray sincerely for the man. He has been sick for eight years, so he won't hear anything anyway."

"But," I persisted, "how about my staying there night after night? Do the local police permit it?"

"It's all taken care of. They said it's okay, so it is. Just go and pray with all sincerity. That place isn't so far from here. In case the police question, say you just came from this pagoda to say prayers to help the man, that's all."

His words were final. I had to go. I had no reason to say no. I did not have to hesitate, to feel uneasy, to repent, to reproach myself at all. It was the pagoda that sent me; I did not volunteer to plunge myself into that situation down there. And so at five that afternoon, I folded my monk's robe and some changes of clothing, put them in a bag, then together with a copy of the confessional sutra *Thủy Sám* in hand, descended the mount.

While shuffling down the one hundred steps from the pagoda, I pondered my inner dilemma. As passionate love is one of the greatest obstacles faced by a monk, I should follow the advice given clearly in the essay which is incorporated in the *Đại Tạng Kinh*, 'Tripitaka Sutra', that a monastic person must learn to confront all obstacles -- not run away from them -- if he hopes to find the path to self-liberation and enlightenment. It is precisely opposition and destruction that help reinforce one's will in order to attain one's noble goal.

Maybe I did not comprehend fully the spirit of the message in the essay. And maybe I only deceived myself, justifying my eagerness to reach a special destination by quoting canons. In any event, the thought of such advice in some way pacified me. At

least I was conscious that I was plunging headlong into confronting a challenging obstacle.



During my first visit to Mrs. Cam's home in the company of Don, I had entered the house through its right section and subsequently was received in the middle section. This time I found out that Mrs. Cam's husband had ceded the left section to his elder brother's family. The old man who had been lying sick for eight years for whom blessing prayers were requested was no other than this elder brother. He was Nhu Nhu's uncle, a close relative.

In the living room, sister Nu and the family of the sick man briefed me on his condition. Nhu Nhu brought me some refreshments. A light orange T-shirt, molding the contours of her body, was tucked inside her light-blue blue jeans. She looked lively and cheerful. Again she smiled gently, and I was dazed with feeling. Blinking my eyes to shut out her image, I tried to compose myself.

"Excuse me," I said as I stood up. "I would like to go see the gentleman, then begin to say prayers right away." I wanted to get quickly out of this part of the house where Nhu Nhu was, so that I would be in a properly calm state of mind for the prayer session.

The sick man was named Diem. He had been bed-ridden for almost eight years. It was hard for his family to look after everything for him. For a week now, he had been in a coma, naturally without any intake of food or liquid. Feeling sorry for him, I conducted a long session of prayer and chant, with all sincerity and concentration, not allowing myself to be distracted by anything.

But when I went back to Mrs. Cam's home and received a glass of fresh limeade from Nhu Nhu, watching her lithe gait in walking back and forth, my heart again started to stir, to waver, to grow enraptured. I did not expect that my heart could so easily be touched. I wondered if it was simply because my will power was not strong enough to keep my heart calm in face of beauty. Or was it because lust is a terrible force that can break all the merits already gained by a person like me, one whose heart was impressionable and vulnerable?

After a rest and dinner, I conducted another prayer session for Mr. Diem. It was past ten in the evening when I finished the two-hour-long prayer. Mrs. Cam summoned Nhu Nhu. "Go upstairs and make the bed for novice Khang. Use the mattress stored behind the Buddha altar."

Nhu Nhu promptly did what she was told, then came back down and said, "It's done, mother."

"Then show novice Khang where his bed is," Mrs Cam said. "It's already late. Tell the others upstairs not to make a racket and disturb our guest."

Nhu Nhu smiled at me. "Please, let's go."

I followed her as she went ahead up the staircase. She stopped at each turn along the way, looked back and waited for me, smiled, then walked on. A patient, lovely guide. Pray to Buddha, why are you placing me in this situation? I silently questioned. How can there be such a living being who behaves both properly and playfully?

On the upper floor of the middle section of the house, in the room looking down to the street, was an altar designated for worshipping Buddha and the family's ancestors. Placed behind it was a small metal bed frame fitted with a mattress -- the kind of bed often seen in big hospitals in the city. Nhu Nhu had covered it with a white sheet, on top of which lay a big pillow. The pillow case, also white, featured an embroidered image of a branch with three rose blossoms.

"You can sleep here," Nhu Nhu said, quite unselfconsciously. "And the bathroom is in this direction."

She led me to a lighted room. "These are your towels," she said, pointing at a set hung behind the door. "Put your dirty clothes into the basin in that corner, and Nhu Nhu will wash them tomorrow morning." She referred to herself by her given name, in the third person, a friendly way of addressing oneself.

After a short pause, she continued. "If you need something else, please feel free to ask me."

"Thank you, Nhu Nhu," I said.

Instead of replying in the usual idiom with "not at all", she merely looked up at me, smiled, then said merrily: "Sleep well."

Nhu Nhu entered the large bedroom by the side of the Buddha altar. Before softly closing its door, she poked her head out. Seeing that I was still standing where she had left me, she smiled once more then disappeared behind the door. I turned to my bed, removed some clean clothes from my bag and headed to the bathroom. As I was walking in the hallway toward it, I saw Nhu Nhu stepping out of her room in a nightgown. The gown of soft silk, with tiny printed flowers of different colors, hung loosely down to her mid-calves. Her long hair, in concert with the thin gown, swirled to the rhythm of her graceful steps. She appeared like a fairy coming down to earth, or the folk-tale Snow White. I did not know why she followed me, so I stopped and waited. Approaching me, her hands pushing back locks of hair from her face, Nhu Nhu tiptoed a little to be close to me so that she did not have to speak aloud.

"The shower head in the bathroom is broken," she said. "So I already poured hot water in the red pail there. You can mix hot water with cold water from the tap in that empty blue pail. Do you want me to do it for you? I did not know how warm you like the water to be."

"Well, it's okay, I can do it myself. I don't want to trouble you. You should go to bed."

After bathing, I washed the clothes I had just changed in the bathroom, as I was reluctant to let Nhu Nhu wash them for me. Since I had entered life in a pagoda, my clothes had never been touched by a female's hands. Though my heart was stirred with warm feelings because of Nhu Nhu's care in making things comfortable for me, at the same time I felt embarrassed, ill at ease as though there was something disagreeable about it. When the washing was done, I did not know where to dry them. I finally contented myself with putting them on a hanger and hooking it over a wire stretched across a corner of the room.

The mattress on my bed was of a very soft kind. When I lay down, my whole body sank deep in it, so much so that its two edges met and folded over my face and body, suggesting the image of earth filling up a grave. There was no way I could sit straight-backed on this mattress to meditate and recite Buddha's name before going to

sleep. I resigned myself to lying-down meditation. Through one eye not completely covered by a world of white mattress and sheet, I saw that the ceiling was also white. Surrounding me was a bleached white space recalling the image of a sanitized room in a hospital I had known some time in the past. After lying still for a while, I had the impression that my whole being had sunk into the lowest world, a world where nothing but vague and confused images and emotions piled up, tumbling and pushing against one another, rendering my body and soul now numb, now dizzy in a weirdly chaotic state of consciousness.

*How wonderful it is, the fragrance that emanates from this pillow. Perhaps it's the sweet smell of Nhu Nhu's hair. Oh, watch out! You are distracted from meditation and Buddha's-name-recitation. Pull your mind together now. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật, Homage to Amitabha Buddha. The pillow case has three embroidered roses. Again you've lost your concentration. What, anyway, does it matter to neglect meditation just for a short moment? Oh, the sweet gentle fairy with her shiny hair swaying rhythmically along in the thin silk gown. An ma ni bat di hong, Um Mani Padme Hum. Homage to the compassionate Bodhisattva Kwan Yin, please save my soul. It is she who spread the bed sheet and placed her pillow here for me. The springs of this bed screech with the slightest movement, screech all the time. I wonder how old Nhu Nhu is. Maybe sixteen. Seventeen at most. Her skin is very light. Her eyes have a melancholy look. Maybe it is not sadness, but only a dreamy look. Yes, one says that youths of our age are full of dreams. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật. No traffic is heard on the street. Quiet night. Someone is talking softly in the bedroom separated from mine by a single wall. Nhu Nhu's room is on the other side of the wall. Perhaps like me, she is lying awake. Listen, all these trifling notions that have entered your mind are but dreams, don't you know? Even your prayers to Buddha have been untrue. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật, Homage to Amitabha Buddha. Homage also to Nhu Nhu the fairy descending to earth with a lovely smile and sad dreamy eyes. Forget it, forget it. Don't think nonsense any more. Pray to Buddha, then go to sleep! Oh, but if I should eliminate all longing thoughts, all dreams, then shouldn't I forget about praying to Buddha also? After all, thoughts and ideas of any kind are but illusions. Stop rationalizing. Pray to Buddha now. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật. But as long as there is no need to stop praying, it seems also not necessary to forget the image of, and thoughts about, a fairy named Nhu Nhu. You are going around in a circle with your confused reasoning. Pretty Nhu Nhu, please come to my side and tell me what you like in this world. No, no, please distance yourself so that I can keep my mind at peace to pray to Buddha. Nam mô A Di Đà Phật.*

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I got up very early, as was the habit observed at the pagoda. But instead of sitting in meditation in bed, I went before the Buddha altar. If I sat on that soft mattress, I was sure my back would soon become bent into the shape of a shrimp. Just as I sat down on the floor, I remembered that before sleep the night before I had completely forgotten to pray, and subsequently had sunk into a sleep filled with worldly dreams.

Nhu Nhu served me breakfast at a table reserved for house guests. As she placed a small tray in front of me, she asked without looking at me. "Could you sleep last night?"

"Yes, thank you," I hesitated a moment then added, "how about Nhu Nhu?"

She replied, smiling. "I am only concerned that you could not sleep in a strange place. As for me, I slept in my own home so there should not have been any problem. But, actually, I did not go to sleep quite easily last night."

I did not know if she insinuated something special in what she said, but as a stickler for nuances of expression, I immediately came up with wishful interpretations, and felt a lightness in my heart.

After breakfast, I went to Mr. Diem's home for a morning prayer session. Upon returning, I found the set of tunic and trousers which I had washed and hung in the bathroom the night before ironed and neatly folded, lying on the bottom of my bed. So, in the end, my clothes have been touched by a female's hands, I sighed.

I went to the Buddha altar, chose a book in the book case nearby, and sat reading it. Suddenly out of the corner of my eye I saw someone walk quietly to my bed then tiptoe out. I sat up straight to look, and saw Nhu Nhu carrying my brown robe, the outfit that a monk wears when going out. Quickly I stood up and walked toward her.

"Where are you taking it?"

"To wash it."

"No, that's not necessary. Please leave it, Nhu Nhu."

"Let Nhu Nhu wash it for you," she said firmly. Then throwing my long robe over her shoulder, she walked away with it in spite of my protest.

I stopped and felt rather helpless. For years I had been known as a fastidious, serious young novice monk to whom the Buddhists who frequented Hai Duc monastery and Linh Phong pagoda always showed awe. They refrained from laughing and cracking jokes or talking loudly in my presence. And when I said something, they would not contradict me in any way. But Nhu Nhu paid no deference to me: contrary to my expressed objection she was going to wash my robe just the same. How glib! But... well, that's okay, I shouldn't be a stickler for that, I decided. Her nonchalance was very lovely, and it held something dear and intimate.

That was the ways things evolved. During the four days and three nights I stayed there, Nhu Nhu served my meals, made my bed, washed and ironed my clothes, cleaned my temporary living quarter, looked for books for me to read, and called me to the living room to watch TV whenever there was any program she thought good (though truthfully to me no program was better than sitting-beside-Nhu Nhu). At times, she came and sat right by my side on the same couch to watch TV. When a comedy was on, she laughed innocently, sometimes even forgetting herself and gripping my shoulder, only to be startled and draw herself back shyly. Pray to Buddha, please let me be as innocent as she is, or my heart will jump out of this chest in no time at all.

On the third night, in dark shadows, some small figure approached my bedside, gently placed a hand on my forehead the way a mother does when checking on her sick child, then planted a soft gentle kiss on it. I jerked open my eyes and recognized Nhu Nhu in the same long silk gown printed with colorful tiny flowers. Seeing that I was observing her, she withdrew her hand rapidly then disappeared in the dark. Also as promptly I sat up, rushed to the door, looked both ways, but saw no one. Back in my bed, I could not decide if the incident was a dream or reality.

In the morning, Nhu Nhu came in to tidy things up. I could not help but blurting out.

"Nhu Nhu, last night... last night."

"What about last night?" She asked, in all innocence.

I changed the subject. "Slept well last night?"

"Yes, thank you. And you, novice Khang?"

"Well, it was too hot to sleep well."

"Hot?" Nhu Nhu seemed surprised. "The weather was rather cold, but you still felt hot?"

"Yes, hot. Perhaps because of the mattress."

As Nhu Nhu left the room, I came to the conclusion that what I thought had happened the night before was but a dream. Whether it was a dream or a real happening, I shouldn't have thought of mentioning it or confronting her with it, I reproached myself. She is so innocent, why must I bother her about it and spoil her innocence? Moreover, even if there really occurred such a romantic encounter, it must be considered but a dream, I thought.



I had chanted the entire *Thủy Sâm* confessional sutra three times, but Mr. Diem had shown no sign of regaining consciousness. Given this situation, there was no way he could even try to sit up, much less recover from his illness, whatever it was. And since he continued to stay unconscious, I wondered if it was at all sensible for me to linger here much longer, dangling on the edge of a most challenging obstacle, and in all likelihood losing my soul in the poetic and romantic "valley of love", to use a cliché I had often seen in popular literature. Furthermore, during the four days spent at Nhu Nhu's home, despite the fact that the chanting occupied quite a lot of my time and that Nhu Nhu's presence filled me with joy and heartfelt emotion, I missed the pagoda. The small Linh Phong pagoda, ordinary and dull, which lacked basic utilities, nonetheless offered me a place I could call my own. While worldly people considered the pagoda simply as a proper location where they came to worship Buddha, to pray and enjoy a calm atmosphere for contemplation, I found its beauty and usefulness lay in another direction. I was narrow-minded in my relations with the world, in my view of everyday life at the pagoda. I considered the pagoda exclusively as "the monk's world", where monastic people swim like fish in water, fly like birds in the sky, live in a free state of being, and are not tied down by anything. And in my estimation, that particular world could retain its true nature only when it was completely absent of worldly visitors. For how could you hope for an ethereal atmosphere in which to contemplate the self-nature of being if you could not avoid the sight of worldly people eating and drinking, talking and laughing, continuing with their mundane acts of living? By this, I did not mean to say that the door of the pagoda should not be wide open to welcome Buddhist followers from everywhere. But simply and honestly, in my experience, the pagoda looked most like a pagoda when all believers had gone home, leaving the monks quite alone in their separate unworldly world. Therefore, during the four days deep in the feeling, or illusion, of love, I still missed Linh Phong pagoda.

I spoke to sister Nu in private. "I understand that Mr. Diem has been bed-ridden for eight years. If no doctors of either western or oriental medicine could cure his

sickness, how did the family think that a blessing ceremony would save him now that he is about to die? "

Sister Nu agreed. "I already told Thay Trung Hung in so many words, that Mr. Diem is not simply sick, he's dying. We are certain that he will die. But we don't know why he can't give up living. Of course, the family hopes that he will be well again; no one wants to see him die. However, as you can see, under the circumstance, no member of the family wishes to see him suffer much longer both physically and spiritually. If he were conscious, I am sure he himself would want to have his life ended so as to not burden his wife and children. It's been eight long years! Actually he wanted to die during the first year of illness, but his family would not hear of it, and they have endured much hardship and pain to take care of him up to the present. I think Thay Trung Hung misunderstood what I said, and that's why he asked you to conduct a *câu an* blessing ceremony. In this case, it should have been *câu siêu* prayers for a suffering soul, don't you think?"

I said, "In that case then, let me go back and explain all that to Thay Trung Hung, and ask him to allow me to conduct a *câu siêu* instead of a *câu an* ceremony."

"Never mind," sister Nu stopped me. "You'd better stay on here. I myself will go to the pagoda and try to again explain the real situation to him."

"Why?" I wanted to know.

"Because I am afraid that while you are away from here, Mr. Diem may die without any one on hand praying to guide his soul in his journey to the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha. And that would be a pity for both himself and his family."

So that was the way things stood at the moment. I could not think of any excuse to do otherwise, and therefore resigned to staying and let my worldly emotion freely grow. That Heaven should torture my sensitive heart so! Had monk Trung Hung or novice Don shouldered the task of chanting prayers for Mr. Diem's benefit, wouldn't it have been better? How could a soft-hearted and extra-sensitive youngster like me hope for self-liberation when placed in such a tantalizingly romantic setting like this house?

When hearing that I wanted to go back to Linh Phong pagoda, Nhu Nhu had grown so anxious that she could not sit still. Only after I had agreed to let sister Nu go to consult monk Trung Hung on my behalf did she return to her cheerful self. As if I were expected to not leave her house ever!

Sister Nu came back in the afternoon. Seeing me, she said at once, "Thay Trung Hung is coming by bike. He wants to have a look at Mr. Diem's condition before he can decide what sutra you should chant."

Monk Trung Hung paid Mr. Diem a visit, then discussed the matter with his wife and children. Returning to Mrs. Cam's home, he spoke with me in confidence. "Starting this evening, you chant *Ti Ts'ang*, the Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra, for Mr. Diem's soul until he passes away. You should know that this sutra describes how the Bodhisattva tries to save souls even in the various hells, and moreover it also teaches the way to pray for dying people, and therefore we usually chant it for *câu siêu* purposes. And remember, when Mr. Diem dies, send someone to inform me."

I ventured to voice a suggestion. "Thay, is it all right to chant *Kim Cang*, the Diamond Sutra? Because, as I know it..."

"Know what?!" monk Trung Hung cut me short. "When I say chant the *Ti Ts'ang* Sutra, you just chant the *Ti Ts'ang* Sutra."

I did not give up yet. "But, Thay, chanting the *Ti Ts'ang* Sutra will also prolong the service for a few more days, not at all different from chanting the confessional text *Thủy Sâm*. When his family requests that we pray to prepare his soul for early departure, I think we should recite the shorter Diamond Sutra. I am sure he will be able to depart from this world after one prayer session, in less than an hour."

"You don't know anything at all. Just chant the *Ti Ts'ang* Sutra!"

Monk Trung Hung then handed me a copy of the *Ti Ts'ang* text that he had brought with him. So I spent three more days and three more nights chanting this sutra. Despite my effort, no change could be seen in Mr. Diem's condition. He could not die, nor could he live like a normal human being. He was almost sixty, but looked as old and decrepit as a nonagenarian. His eyes were tightly closed; his mouth wide open. Each time he inhaled, his whole skinny chest raised up, pushing his head and neck toward the head of the bed. I had the impression that even though his whole body tried to gather strength like that, it did not succeed in drawing any oxygen into his lungs. I was deeply moved by his dying. If he had been my own relative, I was sure I would not at all want to see him prolong his decaying life. One more moment in such manner of existence did nothing but add another dark karmic trace. Pathetically, he would not let go of his attachment to the body.

Mrs. Diem, in the presence of her eldest daughter, discussed her husband with me in confidence. "As you can see, he has prolonged this bed-ridden condition for eight years. In the last ten days, he has been breathing hard like that, but is actually in a coma. Do you think you can find a way... to really pray for his soul to be free from suffering? I mean, please chant the proper sutra to help him leave this world peacefully. We love him very much, and don't want to see him suffer any longer."

I said clearly, "If you all truly request it, I will comply. So please get ready. I recommend this: if he passes away while I am reciting prayers at the Buddha's altar, please let me know immediately so that I can come to his death bed to conduct a ceremony to send off his soul. All of you will have to keep calm, stand around the bed and chant Amitabha Buddha's name. No one is allowed to cry."

Upon hearing my instructions, Mrs. Diem and her family were very upset, as if the matter of Mr. Diem's imminent death was far beyond their expectations. Mrs. Diem wept. I consoled her with gentle kind words. Waiting until she calmed down a bit, I again reminded her of what was to be done, then began to chant the *Kim Cang* Sutra, as I deemed suitable, rather than the *Ti Ts'ang* Sutra as instructed by monk Trung Hung. In truth, I did not have any first hand experience in chanting sutras. I had only learned from my old master of Hai Duc monastery what was to be chanted under this kind of circumstance, but I had never practiced it. My old master's over-forty-year-long experience in coping with contingencies in the matter of conducting Buddhist ceremonies was of course more superior than that of monk Trung Hung. With regard to the case of one who was stuck for a long time in between life and death, my revered master explained that it was because the person was burdened by his karma, his mind reluctant to part with this earthly world; or, because there was something he had not accomplished in this life, he tried to hang on to his helpless deteriorating body. When confronting such a circumstance, we monks needed only to chant the *Kim Cang* Sutra, and the wretched person would awaken, abandoning all worldly desires and attachments so as to be reborn in the Western Paradise of Amitabha Buddha. Some people even believed that if you

concentrated on your prayers, any prayer text would provide the same desired effect. In theory, that was very reasonable; but, in reality, it was not so as demonstrated by the practical experience of generations of monks. For any particular sickness, according to folk wisdom, there is a suitable effective medicine.

As expected, even before I finished chanting half of the sutra, Mr. Diem breathed his last breath. Mrs. Diem and her family did exactly what I had recommended. No one wept in an attempt to pull him back. They all stood around the bed and chanted Buddha's name along with me.

After having taken care of a number of necessary things to prepare for a funeral, I returned to sister Nu's home. Monk Trung Hung had just arrived upon the family's invitation. As soon as he saw my face, the monk said proudly, "See what I mean? I told you to do exactly what I said and things would turn out all right."

I kept silent, and continued putting my ceremonial robe in the bag. Then I went upstairs to gather my tunic and get ready for leaving.

Nhu Nhu fell in step with me. "Going back to the pagoda, are you?"

"Yes. I've finished my task."

"But my mother said you would stay on to attend uncle Diem's funeral."

"No, Thay Trung Hung and novice Don will take care of that."

"Oh, is that so...?" Nhu Nhu's voice seemed to be choked with emotion.

While I put on my regular monk's robe, Nhu Nhu said, "It feels so sad somehow."

"Yes, of course you must be sad, as your uncle just died."

"No, it's not that. Surely it's sad that he's gone. But I am saddened by something else... Remember to drop by for a visit, won't you? I am busy with both school and with household chores and I can't go up to the pagoda. Please remember to visit frequently, otherwise I will be very unhappy."

Surprised, I turned to look at her. Her words revived the emotion I had just buried deep in my heart. During the past week, I had seen her everyday, heard her voice and laughter, talked with her, and been pampered by her attention to my daily needs in food and drink, and even to the cleaning of my quarter and the washing of my clothes. My sentiment for her could not but grow, unhindered. Curiously though, right in the last minutes when witnessing Mr. Diem's death, all the throbbing emotions in my heart had sunk deep into oblivion, and I had thought that after leaving this house, everything would fade from memory. But it was not to be so. After a week under the same roof, if even a young novice monk like myself, who had trained in religious methods of concentration and meditation, was not free from heartthrobs, how could a naive adolescent girl like Nhu Nhu hold back emotional impulses? I detected tears welling in the eyes that lifted to meet mine. And perhaps because of that lingering look, I was touched and involuntarily my hand in a consoling gesture was raised to gently stroke her cheek, when simultaneously she also raised her hand to press mine against her face. Her tears flowed down in streams. Startled, I withdrew my hand.

"Is something wrong, Nhu Nhu?" I asked.

She shook her head and let go of my hand.

I said awkwardly, "Don't cry any more."

I lifted a corner of the front panel of my long tunic to dab the tears for her, then hurriedly bid goodbye. "I have to go. Thay Trung Hung is waiting downstairs."

Nhu Nhu walked a few steps with me toward the staircase, then stopped at the landing. As I descended, she called softly after me. "Be sure to come and visit with me."

Monk Trung Hung was waiting for me to go back with him in the cyclo being called. I asked him to go ahead by himself, as I wished to walk back alone. The whole family was concerned, thinking I was upset about something.

"Khang," Nhu Nhu's mother said, "the children already went to call a cyclo. Just sit down for a short while and it will be here."

I tried to smile happily to reassure them that nothing was the matter. Monk Trung Hung also put in a few words for me. "Never mind, just let him walk. He prefers walking. We have a bicycle at the pagoda, but he never makes use of it. He goes on foot all the time. That's good exercise any way. All right, go."

I said goodbye to everyone once again, then set out without looking back. In fact, at this moment, good exercise was not in my mind at all. All I wanted was to leave that house quickly so that all the emotions, inmost feelings, and illusions that had occupied my mind for a whole week would also be left behind; or at least the distance would soon make them fade away and no longer be clinging to me.

Against hope, even after having walked a relatively long distance, my heart was still throbbing, discomposed. I had chanted the *Kim Cang* Sutra to liberate Mr. Diem from his dark karma, but I had no idea what I had to do to liberate myself from the bonds of romantic love which had wrapped themselves around me in Nhu Nhu's hair locks, so soft and silken shiny.

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