

# DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning, monk Trung Hung and Don packed their ceremonial robes to go to Mrs. Cam's house and help with the burial of Mr. Diem. Don observed that I should not have done someone only a halfway favor. It was odd to him that after having chanted prayers for a whole week for the old man, I now declined to go to his funeral. I only smiled. Still, I did not go. It also appeared that at the last minute monk Trung Hung did not want to have me come along. I wondered whether during the two times he visited that house he had noticed a special friendliness between Nhu Nhu and I, or our reluctance to part with each other. In any event, if he actually meant to check my wayward emotional development, then I would be thankful to him. It was best that I did not go along. The more frequently I met Nhu Nhu, the more discomposed my mind would become. And if I did not put a stop to it, I was afraid that at a certain point, I would no longer be able to control myself.

However, even though I had awakened myself to that reality, during the time monk Trung Hung and Don were down at the funeral, I could not stand or sit still. All through the day, I did not care to eat. I left novice Thai alone to chant prayers or do whatever pleased him. I wandered around the mount, then sat for hours on the steps in front of the pagoda, looking vaguely down toward the life below. *Dear Nhu Nhu!* I murmured her name many times. I had not expected that her image would appear in my mind in so clear and sharp a fashion as I now experienced. Whenever I thought of her, I instantly saw her facial expression, her eyes, her smile in my mind's eye. As much as I had for long been well-trained in contemplating the appearance of Amitabha Buddha and in reciting his name, now I was especially skillful in applying the same practice to the image of Nhu Nhu. The only difference was that when I contemplated Buddha's image, my heart was peaceful, serene, and pure; but when thinking of Nhu Nhu, I felt my heart being wrung out and anxiety grow to such proportions I could not breathe, could do nothing, nothing at all.

While my heart was in such a state of agony, a deep wish was strongly felt: I wished Nhu Nhu could have been present at that very instant, so I could have said to her just one single sentence. But what sentence would that be? Perhaps I would say: "*Dear Nhu Nhu*". Saying this would be enough. I would not have to say more than that. Upon this thought, I was content to sit quietly in the shade of the awning over the three-entrance gate and began to call Nhu Nhu's name, one time after another, repeatedly, just like the way I recited the Buddha's name. *Nhu Nhu, Nhu Nhu, Nhu Nhu, Nhu Nhu*. I called her name like that for hours, and unexpectedly had an absurd feeling of confidence that she would come to me, despite my knowledge that even under normal circumstances she was busy all day long helping her mother and did not go out of the house except to school, to say nothing of this day when she and her family were preoccupied with Mr. Diem's funeral. There was absolutely no reason to believe that she would come here to the pagoda. But I still believed she would.

Lo and behold, my belief came true, down at the foot of the mount! *Pray to Buddha and Bodhisattvas. Why should you pamper this dissolute child of yours this much?* The two down there who had just alighted from a motorcycle were definitely sister Nu and Nhu Nhu. Nhu Nhu had given sister Nu a ride. Sister Nu said something to Nhu Nhu, then stayed to keep an eye on the motorbike while Nhu Nhu alone made her way up the steps toward where I sat. I trembled uncontrollably, half believing and half doubting the reality unfolding before my eyes. Nhu Nhu wore a white silk blouse and black trousers -- the school uniform colors, which are also proper for funerals and mourning. The closer she approached, the faster my heart thumped with excitement. Since the slope was very steep, half way up she stopped to rest. Casually she looked up toward the pagoda and caught sight of me looking down. Expressing her pleasure with a radiant smile, she quickened her steps. Only at that instant did I recover. Standing, I hesitated for a moment, then hurriedly walked down to meet her at the halfway point. When there remained five steps between us, we both halted, and looked at each other. Nhu Nhu placed a hand on her chest. Perhaps she was too out of breath to speak. I was the first to find words.

"Why don't you rest a little bit before you talk. Anyone who climbs up these hundred steps feels as exhausted as you do. Sit down on a step right there," I said, then walked down toward her.

She did not sit down as told. Instead she just stood there and looked up at me, then said in a reproaching voice, "I'm not exhausted. I only feel thrilled. I don't know why I should feel excitement when seeing you again. Why didn't you come to my house? I've waited and waited but there was no sight of you."

"I already told you. I can't go, as there are Thay Trung Hung and Don..."

"I don't care about those monks. I only want to meet you, Khang."

Hearing her call me by name, I felt funny but at the same time secretly happy. Truly it appeared that she wanted to be my friend. While others saw me as a novice monk, she looked at me simply as a friend.

I assured her. "Fine, I will come to your home for a visit when I have a chance."

"Then come on down right now. I can see that you are sitting idle here. You are not busy at all."

"It's not possible. I must keep an eye on the pagoda, sound the bell, and attend to the evening prayers. But, what did you come here for?"

"Actually, my elder sister Huong would have given auntie Nu a ride here, but I took over. Aunt Nu said that Thay Trung Hung wanted you to allow us to collect the image of *Đĩa Tạng*, Ti Ts'ang Bodhisattva, so that he can set up a proper altar in uncle Diem's house. He thought we've got one, so he didn't bring it along. Auntie Nu is waiting down there."

"I know. Come on up and I will get you the image. Anyway, you should come and see what our pagoda is like."

We stepped up side by side. Reaching the landing under the awning over the gate, I stopped for a moment to wait for Nhu Nhu to catch her breath.

"Are you very tired?" I asked.

Nhu Nhu smiled without saying anything. Perspiration appeared on her forehead and temples. I pulled out a handkerchief from a pocket of my tunic and gave it to her. "Here, dry off your perspiration."

She took my handkerchief, briefly looked at it, then smiling, raised it to dab at her forehead, cheeks, chin, and the back of her neck. Watching her natural unpretentious manner, I felt pleased and somewhat touched. Right then, I happened to notice that sweat had accumulated and wet a small section of her thin silk blouse between her breasts. The trace of sweat was seen spreading around the little second top button. It was in fact but a tiny spot, which had for some reason drawn my attention. Nhu Nhu caught my eyes fixed on it. Self-consciously, she pulled her collar together, lifted it up so that the fabric would not stick to her skin, then let go of it while at the same time looking down at her chest. It was a spontaneous reaction as if she wanted to make sure that her collar protected her modesty. Without thinking, following the direction of her gaze, I had a glimpse of the very white skin under the collar. I felt a pleasant sensation spreading over my whole body, and an immense longing that had for so long been suppressed fiercely awakened. I believed this was the first time in my life I actually experienced the power of passion. Meanwhile, it seemed certain Nhu Nhu had seen my gaze and my loss of composure, for she looked embarrassed and turned her body slightly sideways, her eyes downcast.

I said, "Well, let's go inside. Let me fetch the image of Ti Ts'ang Bodhisattva for you to take home now, as your family is waiting for it."

I was about to move on when Nhu Nhu seized my tunic to detain me, then gave back my handkerchief. I was about to take it when I remembered that it held her sweat and her scent, which was rather awkward for me to keep. I said at one, "You can keep it."

"That won't do," she protested. "It's not mine. Moreover I don't wish for a separation. People say that giving each other a handkerchief is ominous, for the two people involved will be apart from each other. Don't you know that?"

I had to laugh at that, and took back the handkerchief. At that same instant it came to my awareness that Nhu Nhu had just stopped referring to herself by her first name -- a common way friends of the same age group choose to address one another. Instead, she called herself "younger sister", an intimate term of self-address used by a young woman in relation to a man she cares for. That sweet change intensified my emotion a hundred fold, weakening my knees.

Inside the pagoda, Thai was busy preparing the early evening meal. Nhu Nhu and I proceeded to the main hall. There, on top of a big glass cabinet was a wooden stand supporting a framed printed image of Ti Ts'ang Bodhisattva. I brought the whole unit down and placed it on a table nearby, then began to dust it off with a piece of cloth.

Nhu Nhu tried to take the cloth from me. "Let me wipe it," she said.

Since I did not let go of the cloth, she used both hands to pry away my hand. Our three hands entwined. Then all four hands interlaced. The cloth fell to the floor. Neither of us cared to pick it up. We stood still and silent, hands enclosed in hands.

A little while later, she spoke, her voice gentle and full of emotion. "Khang, your hands are so very warm."

"And your hands are so tiny, Nhu Nhu," I said.

"So are yours. Your fingers are long and tapered at the end like those of a girl. This type of hand is called a pen-pointed hand, the hand of an artist. Khang, do you write prose or compose poetry?"

For some obscure reason I could not identify, her question startled me. I let go of her hands, feeling ashamed for having held them, for having thus cultivated unworthy

notions: that of love, that of affection. I stooped to gather the cloth, then continued to wipe dust from the glass covering the Bodhisattva's image.

I shifted to another subject. "Your aunt Nu is waiting for you down the hill. We'd better hurry up or you will be scolded."

No longer trying to snatch the cloth from me, Nhu Nhu watched me finish the task. Pushing her hair back away from her temples, she asked, "When did you enter monastic life? And why did you want to renounce the world?"

I laughed. "I entered life in a pagoda at the age of eleven. But I already told you that before."

"So, how long have you been a novice monk? Six or seven years perhaps?"

"Yes, something like that."

After a short silence, she resumed. "Well, then, do you intend to be a monk all your life?"

I answered, smiling. "Naturally, when entering a pagoda, no person thinks that he will be a monk for just a certain period. To be a monk is to be a monk forever."

"But what if some day he doesn't want to live a monk's life any longer?"

"Do you mean to say he doesn't want to reside in a pagoda?" I asked. Seeing her nodding her head, I went on with my explanation. "In that case, he'll just go home and continue living a religious life under a different condition, in the same way that your aunt Nu does. In Buddhism, there is nothing binding: a person decides to enter monkhood of his own will, and likewise he can leave it. A monk at a pagoda and a layman practicing Buddhism at home, both can lead a religious life."

"Ah, that's good," she exclaimed.

"Good and also not good," I said.

"Why?" she asked, and stopped smiling.

"It's good to have the freedom to choose a condition in which to practice religion. However, when the person is not tied down by any obligations, he will easily give up his goal."

"But it doesn't matter if he halfway stops being a monk, as he can still go on leading a religious life at home. That's what you said a little while ago."

"Sure, we all know that. But all the same, partially giving up a serious search for enlightenment doesn't deserve discussion," I said, and felt depression creeping into my heart.

Nhu Nhu picked up a prayer text and turned the pages casually while looking askance at me. "So... have you ever thought of...?"

"Well, it's done," I interrupted her. "You'd better go down quickly now to join your aunt before she loses her patience."

She refused to budge, and attempted to continue the conversation. "Do monks... have the right to love, Khang?"

"No," I replied.

"No? How about in relation to me? Don't you have any feeling at all?"

"Uh, of course I have feelings for you. As an elder brother does for his younger sister."

She looked deeply, inquisitively into my eyes. I looked away.

Turning to the cleaned frame, I said, "It's all right now. This wooden stand is very heavy, and even more so with the glass frame it holds. I don't think you can carry it yourself. Why don't you walk ahead, and let me take it down the mount for you?"

Nhu Nhu wore a sad face, kept silent, and quickly walked out of the main hall. While waiting for her to put on her shoes, my heart again became stirred to see the gloomy expression on her face. Sadness and sulkiness only increased her beauty. I promptly put on my sandals and hurried after her. Reaching the front yard, I called out, "Nhu Nhu!"

She did not turn her head around, but simply stopped and stood still at the gate, waiting. I walked over and stood beside her. We both kept silent, looking down the mount. Instantly, I forgot all about canons, vows, rules of abstinence, Buddha's name, incantation, meditation, concentration... I saw only myself existing in the world, as an ordinary sentient being, as a worldly young man of nineteen obsessed with passion, selfishness, and a desire to possess what he loves. I, a youth at the age of abundant vitality, was standing close to a graceful lovely young girl. Neither a visible nor an invisible wall was there to hamper me.

In a tremulous voice, I confessed, "Awhile ago, I sat here looking down the mount because I missed you."

She kept mum. Time lapsed before she spoke up. "As a monk who is not allowed to love, you couldn't have missed me at all."

Seeing that she was still in a sulk, I smiled and continued. "Which human being does not know love and affection? The only thing is, either he expresses or hides his sentiment."

She brightened up, and turned to look at me. "Did you sit here long, then?"

"Over an hour."

"You just sat here idly?"

"Not idly. I was preoccupied with thinking and longing, and also praying."

"Praying for what?"

"Praying that you would come, so that I could say a few words to you. Just three simple words."

"Tell me, then."

"Hmm. For some reason I don't seem to remember them. They came to mind again just a moment ago, but now I can't recall them."

Nhu Nhu smiled happily. Her eyes were lit with intelligence and a dreamy romantic touch. She said, "You said you wanted to say three words only, right? I know. I have heard my classmates explain the meaning of those endearing three words, like three flowers blooming in the heart."

"If it's something everyone knows, then I am afraid it's not what I have in mind. No one else can imagine it. By the way, what are the three words that your classmates told you?"

"No, I won't tell you. It's very odd, embarrassing."

"Ai ya! Look down there. Your aunt Nu is waving her hand to call you," I said.

Flustered, Nhu Nhu urged me. "Tell me, tell me your three words, then I will go."

"Don't bother about it now. I will tell you another day when I remember them. Now you should go before your aunt gets mad and scolds you. Let's go."

After a moment of reluctance, she walked ahead, and I followed right behind carrying the framed image of the Bodhisattva and the stand. Half way down, I had second thought, and decided it would be all right to let her know the three simple words I had in mind.

I called out to her. "Nhu Nhu, I remember now. Stop and I will tell you those three words."

She stopped and whirled around. Tiptoeing, she whispered into my ear. "It's okay, don't tell me now, save it. I already know what you want to say, Khang. Tell me when we see each other again."

Then giggling, she continued walking. After a short distance, she turned her head around and said, "You are usually at the pagoda, not going anywhere, right?"

"Some days I don't go anywhere, but sometimes I am out all day offering prayer services as requested by the laity. Why do you ask?"

"Because, when I am free, I want to come here for a visit. You also, Khang, remember to come to my house when you have some free time."

At the foot of the mount, I waited until Nhu Nhu had mounted the motorbike before placing the image set behind her back, which sister Nu as the pillion rider would hold in place. Only when they had disappeared around a corner did I begin to go back up to the pagoda. Miraculously, my feet glided over the steps light as feathers floating. In no time at all I reached the three-entrance gate. I stopped on the step where Nhu Nhu and I had stood together. Looking down the mount, I recollected all her words and gestures. She was already seventeen, but sometimes acted like a child. I smiled to myself. Actually, I liked her childishness.

Just as Thai emerged from the west wing, I entered the pagoda. Smiling, he said, "Who is she? Who could she be who makes you bustle around in such a conscientious way? I have never seen you like that before."

"You talk nonsense. She is sister Nu's niece. I became acquainted with her during the time I chanted prayers at her house, that's all. Just now she came to fetch the image of Ti Ts'ang Bodhisattva."

"Don't hide it. Since yesterday after coming back, you have not been your normal self, and so I knew something special must have happened to you."

This young novice is so glib, I thought to myself. He is only fifteen or sixteen, but he already has a sharp eye. But, come to think about it, it's because I can't hide my emotional impulses. If I allow myself to go on like this, not only Thai but many other people will see through me. This is no joke, I concluded.

Thai and I shared the early evening meal. We were not supposed to converse during mealtimes, but Thai felt like talking.

"Listen," Thai said, "during the time you were at sister Nu's chanting prayers, Miss Lan came up on several occasions looking for you."

"What? Who is Miss Lan? I don't know anyone of that name. But why asking for me?"

"You really don't know Miss Lan? She's the Chinese girl who is the daughter of the lady owner of the ice factory."

At the mention of the factory that produced ice, I remembered right away the four-storied building across from the secondary gate of the pagoda, at the foot of the mount. But I still could not visualize a girl named Lan who lived there. Once, monk

Trung Hung had me take his bicycle there. He often left it in that building instead of carrying it up the mount. At that time I saw a few girls sitting around chatting in staccato Chinese, without knowing who was who among them.

Since I kept mum, Thai continued. "You don't know, really? Aw, this particular girl is very funny. She also fluttered around like you did a while ago. She came and asked for you, yet she did not know your name. When I asked which novice she was looking for, she said, 'The handsome fair-skinned monk.' I thought she was thinking of Thay Trung Hung, but that wasn't so. She described a gentle young monk who doesn't talk much, who is shy like a girl, but handsome. Talking like that is beyond comment! She thought I am just a kid who is quite innocent of everything, so she said whatever she wanted without embarrassment. Then she firmly asked to see you. I told her you were not around, but I could take a message for you.

"She did not, however, have any particular message, and said she only wanted to say hello, as she had come up a few times without seeing you. Perhaps she wants you to flee across the border semi-officially with her. Only that kind of issue would require a private talk with you, don't you think?

"Hey, if she suggests that you join her in marriage so the two of you can leave the country, why don't you just promptly agree to it, then once you are abroad, work it out in a suitable way. Her whole family is taking care of the necessary procedures to leave. You really don't know Miss Lan? She's about eighteen or nineteen, the one who once in a while brings us rice and oil donated by her mother's ice factory, donations which you yourself have accepted from her a few times. You know, she's the one who looks like what's-her-name, your younger sister."

"Ah, in that case," I replied, "I know who you are talking about. But, it's too tiring to discuss. Let's finish our meal. Nowadays, even if I were allowed to leave the country officially, I wouldn't go, let alone leave semi-officially."

Thai laughed loudly. I bowed my head and ate, thinking to myself: Nhu Nhu alone was enough to make me drown in the Sea of Life and Death. How could I even think of the prospect of a Lan -- or no Lan?



There were times when I viewed life and all its associated activities as but a dream, or an operatic stage upon which everything that transpired was a put-on, as something distinctly untrue. When I participated in it, it was no more than taking part in a big game. That perspective was influenced by Buddhist canons, most of all the Diamond Sutra, which I regularly read and chanted. However, when I started to enter the romantic game of love, I found that, in truth, it was not at all a game. Or to say it more correctly, love is a game that players do not have the moral right to fool around with or to make light of. It is okay ethically for one to attribute any nature whatsoever to life or love -- dreamy, illusory, phantasmal, imaginary, conspicuous, electrifying -- provided one truly comprehends the essential impermanence of each such reality. But when one confines oneself solely to concepts, and thus to surface understanding, it is inevitable that anything and everything -- from the surge of waves upon the ocean to ebb and flow in the vertiginous worlds or worldly lovers -- will present itself as a reality, as fact and entity actually existing. All those realities have their own lives. Though their existence is

limited and short, they have a share of physical and spiritual energy, thus they embody desire, longing, anger and resentment, possessiveness, suffering...

Given such real human conditions, I was swept into the intoxication of love in a blind manner, so much so that I could in no way resist the desire to see Nhu Nhu. Usually I persuaded Don to go with me, because his visit to Mrs. Cam's house was nothing out of the ordinary. Under the pretext of accompanying Don, I would visit Nhu Nhu. However, in the presence of Don, she and I could only greet and look at each other, and were not able to say anything personal. Indeed, the situation between us had become different after Mr. Diem's funeral. We could no longer talk to each other as freely. Whenever appearing at Mrs. Cam's with or without Don, I was always received as a special guest of the family by Mrs. Cam herself or by sister Nu. During such a visit, Nhu Nhu was but a child serving tea to the adults. It was commonly regarded as improper for a child to sit and interfere with her mother's conversation with visitors. In any event, seeing and smiling at each other partly gratified our longing. Nhu Nhu was at home only in the mornings helping her mother with household chores while her father and elder siblings were at work. She went to school in the afternoons, and assisted her mother in selling refreshing drinks in the evenings. It was impossible for the two of us to find a chance to talk alone. I had the impression that her family had vaguely detected something going on between Nhu Nhu and I, and had consequently adopted some preventive measures.

Unable to talk to her for many days, I became frantically frustrated. At one point, when I could contain myself no longer, on impulse I wrote her a letter and mailed it. On the envelope I did not write the name of the sender, only her name and home address. Though I wrote the letter with utmost care and caution in anticipation that it would not reach her, I had a strong suspicion that I could not conceal the emotional bond between us. I never received an answer. And because of this, I guessed that her family had intercepted the letter and came to know of our intimate feelings. I was so ashamed, I no longer dared present myself at her house.

Not until almost a month later did I ask Don to go with me to Nhu Nhu's house again. We arrived around noon, just after lunch time. Sister Nu received us in the living room. The person who served tea was one of Nhu Nhu's elder brothers, not herself as usual. I did not think this change was a coincidence. While Don conversed with sister Nu, I dealt with my extremely worried and anxious heart. I felt at fault for having written and posted the letter. It was possible that for many days Nhu Nhu had, by herself, endured in silence all the reproach by her family, the nature of which I had no way of knowing.

While I was on tender hooks, suddenly Nhu Nhu entered the living room from the kitchen. Sister Nu was sitting with her back to the connecting door, engrossed in conversation with Don, and therefore did not know of Nhu Nhu's appearance. I alone was able to see her. When our eyes met, I noticed tears welling in hers. She was on her way to school, carrying her notebooks. With the right arm hanging down to her side, not raised for fear of being seen by Don, she gently lifted her hand and waved goodbye to me. I made it appear as though I nodded my head to indicate my attention to what was being said between sister Nu and Don, but in fact I did so to respond to Nhu Nhu's wave. She turned away and left, hair streaming behind her in a rhythm of sadness.

I had kept my emotional entanglement a secret, not confiding it to anyone, including Don who was my best friend at that point. Even so, on our way back, Don broached the very subject.

He said, "For some reason recently Nhu Nhu looks so sad. But so do you, Khang. Are you two angry at each other, or what?"

I was startled. "Why do you ask that?"

Don covered his mouth with his hand and laughed. "How can I not notice? Quite easy to know. There's no way you two could hide it. On the day of Mr. Diem's funeral, when learning that you would not be coming to the ceremony, she grew quite disheartened. Then, in the afternoon, seeing me sitting by myself, she approached me and asked so many questions about you. As for you, every time we visited the house without seeing Nhu Nhu around, you were like a lost soul. But at those times when we met her, you looked cheerful and full of optimism. It's different today though. Both of you looked low in spirit. Why? Do you need my help in some way?"

I did not reply. Seeing that I did not want to reveal anything, Don shifted to another topic.

When we arrived back at the pagoda, I stood in a daze on the rear of the mount, looking down toward the town. Don came up, stood beside me and offered consoling words.

"Whatever the anger, it will dissipate with time," he said. "There's no need to be overly concerned and sad."

"There's no anger at all. Rather, it's because I wrote Nhu Nhu a letter, which foolishly enough I sent it to her house through the mail. Probably her parents saw the letter and read it. I feel sorry about that letter. I think it may have caused Nhu Nhu much trouble."

"What do you plan to do about it now?" Don asked.

"What plan? I thought you came out here to give me some advice. And you still ask me what I plan to do?"

Don split his sides with laughter. I could not help but join him in his mirth. A moment later, I said to him in a more serious tone, "I was kidding with you just to feel less depressed. I really think I should not get involved in emotional matters. I should have known this and avoided engagement from the beginning. I don't understand why I abandoned myself so easily to it. The result is that, for now, my mind is so perturbed, so unsettled that I can't concentrate on my training. Thinking about it in this frame of mind, it appears that maybe the dilemma faced by Nhu Nhu and myself can be regarded a touch of grace that helps awaken me so that I can return to my quiet life.

"A monk must be in his dotage to talk about love, don't you think? Because where does it lead? Nowhere at all. No sense whatsoever can be made of it. Knowing that, but still plunging into the love game, is quite mad. For a monk to aspire to worldly love is pure greed. It's a pity for those who don't understand that and fall in love with monks. I feel sorry for Nhu Nhu. She is very innocent. When she feels affection, she indulges in it without knowing well whether or not it's advisable to love a monk. She does not know anything. It was all my fault. If I had planned on returning to the world and proceeding with my emotional involvement with her, it would have been a different matter. But I have no such intention. Then why did I reveal and express my feelings to her? Doing so only hurt her."

My self-reproach seemed to affect Don, for his face clouded over with quiet thought. A long while passed before Don said, "I am in the same position."

"Pray to Buddha!" I exclaimed. "You too...? Even a person like you?" I took my head in my hands and sat down on a big rock nearby.

"I should be the one who asks you that very question, not the other way around," Don declared.

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking up at him.

"Because you are always serious, rarely playful, all day long engrossed in reading the sutras and books. If you open your mouth, it's only to talk about Zen and the Heart Sutra. Sometimes I have the impression that you are as dry as a log and cold like a stone, and so I thought you would never know what it is to be touched with emotion. But then at last you've fallen in love! It's I who should ask: 'How come *you* also know how to love?' "

"Homage to Buddha," I quietly observed, "look at yourself and see why I am puzzled. It's strange to imagine love blooming in a person of your type, but it's not strange in one like me. Even though I am really passionate for Zen and the Heart Sutra, sometimes I am soft and romantic enough to play the guitar and sing love songs. Moreover, I also write poetry and stories. I am not an unfeeling person, am I?"

"And talking about you: There is your favorite song titled "A Mother's Heart" by Y Van. And some other songs. Oh, yes, I remember, you always sing "My Village", "Longing for my Pagoda", "Tu Dam Pagoda, my homeland". All of them express a deep feeling for the mother, the country. Who could imagine that your heart beats another tune, another rhythm? You say little, always keep yourself imposing and virtuous, and you walk fearlessly like a bear, but you are actually gentle and soft like a deer or a handful of fresh-plowed earth. On top of that, you even had four Chinese characters tattooed on your arm referring to the Buddhist goal of liberation from the Bonds of Life and Death. Judging from your upright demeanor, who would think that you can be moved by human emotion?"

We both laughed for a long while; we laughed until tears filled our eyes. We had never before laughed that much.

After this laughing fit, laden with shame and self-awakening, we lapsed into complete silence. Only then did it hit me how ridiculous it was for me to engage in the game of love which I knew quite well would not yield any good result. What would be the outcome if Nhu Nhu and I went further and further with our emotional involvement? Would we become husband and wife and have kids? No! The thought never entered my mind. I always considered such a path commonplace and vulgar, very much a karmic circle which binds people to suffering. Therefore, while my heart ignorantly demanded its inherent right to be itself, all the will and zeal of youth in me insisted on committing myself completely to the path leading toward enlightenment and self-liberation.

There was no denying that I was by nature light-headed, sensitive, and susceptible to emotion. But that did not mean I was unable to struggle against obstacles. In the inner struggle, I had had occasions to devastate and destroy the ghosts of sadness and depression when they had poked their heads out of their dark cave. Given that experience, I did not comprehend well the reason why I could not readily overcome the enticing powers of love. Was it because I had been used to imagining those ghosts wearing cruel, deceitful and devilish faces, so I was not prepared for their attack to come

from a face and countenance so correct and decent, so gentle and lovely? The brave valiant soldier might rush into the battle without fear, waving his sword to stab at monsters and ghosts. But how could he allow that same sword to freely dance toward its target hidden behind a graceful and beautiful face? How could he raise his sharp sword to cut a bond when only a strong word or a careless gesture was enough to make that beauty shed tears and sulk? Those tears, seemingly containing acid, were capable of rusting a weapon wielded by the hero in both physical and spiritual battles.

I shuddered to contemplate examples of failure demonstrated by a few of my monastic predecessors. Once getting entangled in emotion, a monk is like a horse without a rein, rushing onto a battlefield full of unknown traps. Though it can of its own volition act as it chooses, lying still or prancing and neighing freely, in no way can the horse foresee the dangers awaiting it. And once the monk is trapped like the horse, he can never be saved. All wishes to perform marvelous deeds, to overcome life's adversities and escape death, will go for naught.

I said to Don, "I am trying to get myself disentangled from that entrapping net. What in the world are you trying to slip into it for? It's terrible. I thought I alone was in trouble, and counted on you to stand by and caution me, to give me advice, so that I could look for a way out. Who could have known that you too are entering the same boat?"

"You think I've just gotten emotionally involved, do you? It's not true that I'm trying to slip in just as you are looking for a way out. Actually I fell into it before you did."

"Heavens! This is too much. I am shocked. But now that we know each other's secret, we should remind each other to keep away from it, do whatever we can to give it up. By the way, what about your story? I am curious to know a little bit about your romantic circumstance, so I am informed enough to watch over you. Who is she? Maybe she is someone in Nhu Nhu's family? Nhu Nhu has many elder sisters. You frequently went to her house; obviously, there must have been a good reason for that."

"No, she's not among those girls. She is... she is one whom you know best."

"I know her well, you said? I am not acquainted with any other girl besides Nhu Nhu, much less knowing some other girl well. Moreover, if I knew her well, I would not let you and her love each other! Well, who is she? Tell me. No point in hiding it."

"I'm not trying to hide it. Give me time to tell you properly. What's the rush? But I have to warn you that my story is not like yours. My love is one-sided. It's not a case of 'loving each other' as you dreadfully suppose."

"Ah, a one-sided affair sounds better, as it's easier to get out of it. Who is she then?"

Don hesitated for a fraction. Then smiling, he uttered the name neatly in a low voice, "Uyen."

"What?! Uyen? My younger sister?"

"Yes. That's why I said you know this person very well. But... Uyen does not know anything about my feelings."

"You mean you keep to yourself your secret sentiment?"

Don shook with laughter. His laughter sounded pathetic. I did not dare to say anything that might hurt his feelings, even though in my heart I did not like the idea that he chose my sister as his object of love. I dreaded the thought that my family might think I condoned the development, because once in a while when going back to my parents'

home for a visit, I had taken him along. All the while, I had never suspected that he would fall in love with my sister.

After he had laughed until he cried, Don became anxious, his sad eyes looking fixedly toward some place below the mount.

"Listen," I said. "Whether I know the girl or not is not the issue. What matters is to give it all up. I promise you, and you must promise me also, that from now on, by all means possible, we must bury, or rather, we must abandon completely the emotional adventure which is so useless for our religious training. Do you agree?"

Laughing softly, Don replied, "Yes, I agree."

The following week, Don left Linh Phong pagoda and moved to stay with a monk named Thien Huu in another monastery, also on the same Trai Thuy hill, only about a hundred meters from Linh Phong pagoda. However, since trees and weeds grew so thick and in confusion around it, one could not find any path connecting the two pagodas. If I wanted to visit Don, I would have to descend the mount, walk along the National Highway to the Provincial Pagoda, from where I would then climb up almost a hundred steps before reaching Don's new residence. Monk Thien Huu had a plot of uncultivated land on a hillside in a place called *suối Đổ*, about 30 kilometers south of Nha Trang. Don went there with the monk to clear that land for growing crops. Sometimes he stayed there for a whole month. According to Don, the place was very beautiful. Hearing him calmly describe the beautiful scenery with not a hint of sadness on his face, I was glad. I hoped he would soon forget all about his pitiful one-sided love so he could remain a virtuous and pure monk.

Thus, with regard to Don, it could be considered that the matter of the heart was resolved peacefully. But as for myself, I was far from free of the sweet dilemma. I failed to keep the promise I had made with Don. During the period when Don was absent from Nha Trang, I sometimes went to Nhu Nhu's house to see her again. And once in a while, around noon, when she should have been going to school, Nhu Nhu -- on the excuse that her class was cancelled because her teacher was sick, or by any reasonable justification that a teenage schoolgirl-in-love could think of -- came to the pagoda to see me, and I was extremely happy about that. Each time she said goodbye, we both were loath to part. After she had left, my heart was in melancholy throughout the rest of the day. At night, I madly missed her to the extent that I could not concentrate on meditation and Buddha's name-recitation. I wondered if there was no longer any way out for me.

In fact, the nature of my emotional dilemma was different, not as simple as that of Don. Even though the relationship between Nhu Nhu and myself had not grown too profound, my heart was not that of a pig or a cow sold in the market: laid on some slab, inanimate. I could not push it around, play with it, have fun with it. Its voice could not be suppressed by a mere statement of intention, by a promise to forget about it. Not at all: every single second I could clearly hear it throbbing its strange and mysterious rhythms, rhythms harking back to a certain previous karmic incarnation, unknown perhaps, but most assuredly romantic.

