

DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

CHAPTER TWELVE

In possession of a day off, I asked permission of monk Trung Hung to visit my master Hai Tue at Hai Duc monastery.

Once back in my private room in the desolate drum tower beside the main hall, I sat mute in sadness, not knowing what to do. I remembered that, right in this very place, I once had wished to find a friend who was not among the religious fellows I met everyday at the pagoda. That wish, at this moment of quietude, I came to recognize as a natural urge in a lonely soul at the age of adolescence. Now I had Nhu Nhu. I could regard her as a friend. But it was precisely her existence in my mind and in my life that made me feel more solitary and fearful than ever before. Her voice, and her sparkling and sometimes very sad eyes, filled my heart with joy and simultaneously gave me doubt that she was real. Indeed, a deep look into her eyes stirred my heart with profound feeling; yet, at times, I felt as if she were the embodiment of the whole illusory and fleeting world in which all notions, acts, and words exchanged by a couple were but pretenses. People pretended to love and to desire possession of each other. In actuality, they did so only in an effort to cover over, to wipe out, the limits of their small and delusory selves.

I locked the door, then wandered around the yard before heading toward the new house -- rather, the new row of rooms -- on top of Trai Thuy hill. During my lonely walk, another observation came into my awareness: once a person has become profoundly conscious that life is but a dream, an illusion, he can no longer exist and behave engagingly in the world like people around him, he can never relate to it wholeheartedly, never relate to it as normally expected. And the most painful thing for him to realize is that although he has the preconceived notion of renouncing the world, he is not brave enough to reject sweet beautiful dreams originating from it. I myself could confront and defeat greed, hatred and delusion that daily arose in me; and in such a situation I proved to be very strong and dignified. However, it was clear that when in the presence of Nhu Nhu, I could not control myself. She was the embodiment of illusions, of dreams; but these were lovely illusory dreams which my unenlightened heart had no power, no desire, to reject.

The new row of rooms on Trai Thuy hilltop had been occupied by the soldiers for awhile, and were then returned to the monastery. However, no monks cared to move back into those rooms. The place was virtually deserted. Nonetheless, the return of these rooms made the monks feel more at ease. The path from the monastery to the iron tower -- the iron-framed tower, shaped like a pen point, built on the highest spot of the mount -- had been cleared of obstructions. The monks could now walk, at leisure again, along this wide path leading to the great statue of Sakyamuni Buddha at the entrance to the Provincial Pagoda.

I sat at the foot of the iron tower, and cast my gaze in the direction of the sea. Seen from this distance, the dark blue sea was a straight line stretching across the

horizon, very calm, as though unmoved by the endless jostling and teasing of strong winds. How loftily beautiful nature always is! Sitting still in contemplation of the tranquility of the sky and the ocean had the marvelous effect of calming my heart, even as at the same time a soft light melancholy arose, grew, and overwhelmed my whole being.

I recalled the pleasant peaceful days when I had just entered monastic life. That was not so long ago. Only seven years had passed since then. But how different was my self at that time from the person I had become at present! An angel and a devil. A good-mannered novice and a romantic young monk! I wished I had not grown up, and had not lost the innocence of the novice Khang of those years. Though I had neither broken my religious vows nor made any serious mistake, all the same I suddenly saw myself like a white sheet of paper defiled with blobs of ink and all crumpled up. It seemed possible that I would be a loser in the game of spirit. I no longer had power to resist my heart. Hail to loving couples in the world! Do you have only one path to take, one only way out, which requires that you come together, attach yourselves to each other, and hang on to each other for the rest of your lives? Hello to all young monks who have extolled the ideal of renouncing the world and chanted the infinite wisdom of Buddha! Is it true that we all, at a certain point in our religious life, have to confront beautiful yet negative dangers like the obstructing danger of love, and to end up being defeated, suffering much pain and regret? No, it did not have to be that way. Many people had gloriously overcome obstacles. It all boiled down to the fact that I was not a strong person. I realized that I needed a virtuous and enlightened teacher who would relieve me of this heavy emotional burden. But first of all, I would have to gather enough courage to confide in that teacher all that had happened.

There were many virtuous wise superior monks in Nha Trang. To my mind, however, my master, monk Hai Tue was still the one to whom I would most easily feel comfortable baring my heart. Like all other local superior monks I knew, my master had renounced the world when he was very young, and subsequently had conducted his monastic life in utmost purity. He set a great example for young monks. I felt confident that he would show me a proper path to follow.

I left the iron tower and walked in the direction of the patriarchs' shrine and the nearby building for visitors. My master's room was located beside the shrine.



"Homage to Amitabha Buddha, honorable master," I said, joining my hands and greeting my master.

He was engrossed in a sutra. Hearing my voice, he stopped reading and looked up. "Ah, have you just returned?"

"Yes, master. We are free over there today, so I have come..." I stopped there, not knowing what else to say. Without warning, my whole body trembled. Since submitting myself to religious life, I had never thought of bothering my master with my personal matters.

My master said, "What's the matter? Are you sick? Why you look thin and pale!"

His warm words threatened to bring tears to my eyes. Having been at a loss to decide to whom I could turn to confide the burden in my heart, at his expressed concern, I wanted to sink to my knees at his feet and lay bare all my innermost feelings. But then

something stubborn in me raised its head and stopped me. It appeared that the ghost of passion still wanted to take total control of the battle it had created for me. It did not want to give up yet. It forced me to continue bearing the emotional dilemma.

I pressed my lips together for a second, then said, "I am just not feeling well, but I am not sick, master."

"Has your stomachache recurred?" he asked.

"No, master, it's gone."

After a pause, he asked, "How is life at Linh Phong pagoda these days? I heard that you all go to perform prayer services day and night. Is that true?"

"Yes, master. We have to do it."

My master sighed. "These days monks must shoulder everything; sometimes, we don't have time for religious studies. Were we required to take care of mundane Buddhist activities after we had become Saints or Buddhas, it wouldn't matter how busy these activities kept us. But in reality we are still sentient beings, so we need much time for training, and we can't afford to devote ourselves to accommodating believers' wishes all day long. Moreover, to be in frequent contact with Buddhist laity, surely our heart will be moved every which way, not composed. We must know then, that once we are inclined to *trụ trì*, 'dwelling, abiding', we are bound to be entangled, caught."

"Do you mean to say that when our mind does not dwell in a fixed place, we will not be caught, or will not be in bondage?" I asked.

"I was simply thinking of the connection between the term *vô trụ*, 'non-dwelling', in the Diamond Sutra, and the word commonly used by the Buddhist sangha, *trụ trì*, 'to dwell and keep in control'. Literally understood, those two terms are opposite to each other: one referring to non-dwelling, non-attachment, the other to dwelling and clinging to. But actually, in their essential meaning, *trụ trì* is no different from *vô trụ*. What do you think? You often read and chant the Diamond Sutra, don't you? How do you understand the term *vô trụ*?"

"In truth, master, I have never put those two terms together in order to see the sameness between them. Now, from your explanation, I can see this: if *trụ trì* is taken to mean dwelling in the abode of the Tathagata, 'Buddha', then it is no different from *vô trụ*, because the Tathagata's abode means emptiness of all dharmas, of all forms. When one gains deep insight into the nature of Sunyata, 'Emptiness', one's mind has no place to dwell."

"It's not that one's mind has no place to dwell," my master replied, "but that it does not dwell anywhere. 'One should develop a mind which does not abide anywhere.' You remember that often quoted line from the sutra, don't you? How would you yourself translate it?"

I was perplexed for a moment, then replied. "Yes, master, I have read and interpreted it for myself from the Chinese version. But if I am to try to translate it into plain Vietnamese, I will render it like this: Do not permit your mind to cling to anything, to be attached to anything."

"Very good. To understand and to translate like that proves that you have grasped the essence. It's the principle of not permitting any thoughts of clinging to and craving for anything. So let me go back to what I said before: as long as there is dwelling, entanglement is inevitable. From my own experience -- the experience of one who has been the abbot of four different pagodas and has dwelled in this monastery a few decades

-- I realize that on both the theoretical level and the everyday practical level, if we stand still at one place we will get entangled in something. Therefore, if we are content with only *tru trì* in the literal sense, meaning to stay in and keep a pagoda, and if we do not strive for dwelling in Emptiness, then our religious life will go for naught. Do you realize that?"

I nodded my head slightly, my entire body breaking out in a cold sweat. My master had just taught me enough of what I was looking for, and I did not need to explain to him anything. We both kept silent for a long moment. Having nothing more to say, I bid goodbye and went back to Linh Phong pagoda. After having walked part of the way, I remembered that I wanted to seek his advice on something else. I retraced my steps.

"Homage to Amitabha Buddha, my master," I greeted him again.

"Is there something?" he asked.

"I would like to move back here, master."

"Then come back as you wish, because you are always one of us in this monastery. But how about the matter of your being registered in the residence book of Linh Phong pagoda?"

"Please, master, would you talk to Thay Trung Hung for me? I don't want to live there any more. I need to come back here. I need to be in peace and quietude. As for the residence registration, Thay Trung Hung only wants to make it difficult. Rarely do the police come to Linh Phong to check on us residents. Since not many of us stay there, the police don't seem to pay so much attention to us as they do here. But even if the police ask about me, Thay Trung Hung can tell them I am convalescing here. And if they want to confirm that information, they can find that I am actually here. There should be no problem. There is no reason why they should arrest Thay Trung Hung or myself for my being here."

"Fine, I'll talk to Thay Trung Hung someday."

"I would like to be back here as soon as possible."

"Why in such a hurry? There's no difference between staying there and here."

"Yes, master, to be sure both are pagodas. But... there is something different. Living there, my mind is agitated, perturbed. It drifts to so many worldly concerns. Talking about that, I would like to beg a favor from you: Please teach me how to control my unfocused and confused mind."

"Abandon the methods of contemplation, and focus on meditation."

"What if I practice meditation but still cannot concentrate?"

"*Vô trú*, non-dwelling," my master gave his short reply.

Kowtowing, I acknowledged his teaching. Then I made my way back to Linh Phong pagoda. I felt that over half of the heavy burden in my heart had been lifted away.



Nhu Nhu stood hesitantly outside the fence near the gate of three entrances. I was washing my hands after the noon meal when I happened to look out and catch sight of her. All attempts at controlling my heart in the last few days forgotten, I joyfully stepped out into the yard and walked toward her.

"Hello there, Nhu Nhu. Don't you have any classes today?"

"I only drop by for a short visit with you, then I'll go to school right afterward. It's still early. Khang, I don't know what to do."

"What are you talking about? You don't know what to do about what?"

She seemed about to cry. My heart went soft at once.

"What's wrong? What do you want to do?" I asked.

"Not being able to see you... I can't do anything. Must this situation go on forever? Do you know what to do? I'd like to see you everyday. If you can't come to my house, I'll come here around noon, before school. I'll be at the foot of the mount. Will you wait for me down there? There is a cement platform on the right of the flight of steps. We can sit there and talk until it's time for me to go to classes."

"That's not possible. How can you study when you come here often? Moreover, you must watch out for Thay Trung Hung. If he knew of your visits, he would tell your parents."

"Then think of some other way, Khang."

I hesitated then plunged ahead. "I don't know what best to do. We can't meet at your house as your family does not allow it; and as for this place, it's a pagoda. Even though no one would forbid us to meet here, we ourselves must know that it won't do. Listen, Nhu Nhu. There is something I want to tell you. But please don't be upset, okay?"

"Go ahead, just tell me whatever you have in mind. Oh, by the way, you still owe me the three words you promised to tell me. Remember? Is that what you want to tell me now? No, I'll let you owe me that for awhile yet. Anyway, come to think about it, those three words should not make me sad, right? So why do you have to caution me about what you want to say? Or do you want to tell me something else?"

Her carefree innocence made me reluctant to come out straight with what I was thinking. I had to finally yield to her persistent urging.

"It concerns you and me," I said. "Maybe we both have simply experienced the typical exuberant emotions of youth... but, in reality, we don't have any special feelings for each other. Moreover, it's impossible for a monk to love the way worldly people do. Because that's not proper at all, and no one will accept it."

"But, Khang, you said to me once, that it's not a sin for a monk to remove himself from religious life, that one can always practice Buddhism in worldly life. Isn't that so?"

"It's true that a monk who returns to ordinary life can practice religion at home as a Buddhist layman, and he can do whatever else he wants with his life. But in this case, I am still a monk living in a pagoda, so it's definitely not permissible."

"If so, then... why don't you resume an ordinary life? If you do so, no body will forbid us to meet. I am sure my parents would also allow us to see each other often. And that will make it easier for me."

Sadly, I looked deep into her eyes. "No, it won't work."

"Why not? Don't you have any feelings for me?"

I could not and did not reply. Sulkily she turned her face away and made a tentative step to go. Again my heart yielded, making it impossible for me to be definitive with her.

Hurriedly I pulled her back and said, "It's just that I have never thought of giving up my religious life. That doesn't mean I have no affection for you."

Upon my words, she became happy at once. Turning to face me, she said, "That's good enough for me. Well, then, it's okay if you don't wish to abandon your life in the pagoda. After all, I am used to seeing you this way. Every time I think of you, I see you exactly like this." So saying, in a gesture a shop girl normally would make to introduce a sales item, she extended her arm toward me while her eyes traveled over me from head to toes. "If you were to change... by growing your hair, wearing a shirt and slacks, maybe I wouldn't like it very much!"

Pray to Buddha! How could she say that? She actually still wanted to see me keep the appearance of a shaven-headed monk wearing a monk's habit. It seemed that in her eyes, a monk's outfit was more suitable to my looks, and she only liked me and loved me in the form of a monk. So everything went back to square one, nothing had changed.

I had to raise the issue again. "But a monk is not allowed to love like worldly people. We both know that it should not be done."

"We don't love the way other people do," she said.

"Then what is our fashion, can you tell me?" I asked.

She smiled, then said, "I don't know how to name the fashion, but it's different. When other people love, they stroll together downtown, go to a movie, to the beach... then they get married, become husband and wife and have children together. We are not moving in the same direction. We only want to meet each other for conversations that please the heart. When not seeing each other, we are filled with sadness and longing, not being able to do anything right. That's all."

I burst out laughing. She truly was innocent like a child. What more could I say? Who could criticize and reproach pleasant, though quaint, ideas of a little girl in love whose wishes were so pure? I really could do nothing but laugh. At the same time though, deep in my heart, I wondered if such a platonic relationship would remain so, or with time love would grow in different directions, the commonplace directions taken by all living beings in this world. I was only two years older than Nhu Nhu, but my love was in no way as simple as the way she conceived it. I had often read in books that the female matures earlier than the male in the love relationship. But in Nhu Nhu's case, perhaps due to some special influence from her family, she remained so innocent at the age of seventeen. But sooner or later, she would lose her innocence, just as I had lost mine since meeting her. And once innocence was gone, worldly ties would come one after another to surround us and drown us; there would be nothing romantic left to enjoy.

"Well, I have to go to school now. Remember, I will come tomorrow at the same time," Nhu Nhu said, then stood there undecided, as though she was looking for an appropriate parting gesture, or waiting for me to say something.

I forgot completely that I should have rejected the time and place of the meeting which she had just suggested. Nor did I remember to lie to her, as I had promised myself, by saying that I would be going away and therefore would not be able to see her again. I ran my hand along her lustrous silky long hair. She bowed her head. A very strong sensation ran along my arm. It had been a long time -- from when I chose to become a monk up until now -- since I last touched someone's hair. The Buddhist sangha considers hair and beard symbols of grief and sorrow, so all monks must have their heads shaved; this measure also serves to distinguish their appearance from that of worldly beings. In fact, once in awhile, to remind myself to be mindful, I followed one of Buddha's instructions as recorded in the *Di Giáo* sutra, the text of the 'Last Teachings' of Buddha

before he departed from this world, by touching or rubbing my shaven head. As the very short hair, shaved close to the skin, pricked my hand, I was mindful all the more of my religious status. But now when my hand stroked her very long raven-black hair, I had the impression of touching a fanciful dream from a long-gone karmic incarnation. Oh, how pleasantly cool and shiny these threads of grief and sorrow!

From the east wing of the pagoda came the sound of a door opening. Startled, I withdrew my hand.

"Go to school now, Nhu Nhu, or you will be late," I urged.

She descended the mount. I watched her for a while, and mumbled to myself: "Love is not as simple as you say, my dear girl."

On that same afternoon, my old master Hai Tue came to Linh Phong pagoda and was received by monk Trung Hung in the west wing. The two masters talked with each other for quite a while. I gathered my master came to discuss the matter of my moving back to the monastery. Indeed, after having seen my master off, monk Trung Hung came back in and called me.

He said to me in derision, "Your master told me that you want to go back to Hai Duc monastery to recuperate for some time. Well, you're grown-up now. Do what you want as you please. No one can stop you. Just look at Don. He didn't want to live here any more, so he ran off to join another monk in clearing land, living in comfort in a quiet house and not bothering with attending to a pagoda's activities. And you, you left here once before, and now again, as you can't bear any hardship. You're so used to an easy monastic life where you are pampered by your own master and get whatever you demand. Surely, life here is too hard and miserable for you. You go to the larger monastery over there, and you'll get your own room, someone will serve your meals and wash the dishes after you finish eating. There are clean toilets and bathrooms, and you can use as much water and electricity as you like without having to worry about short supply. For entertainment, you can borrow from the monastery library all sorts of books including novels and short stories. More than that, there is also a TV set, a movie projector, a volleyball court, a ping-pong table. Everything you would want is there. Go, it's more comfortable to carry on religious training there. It's so miserable here, there's no way you can bear it."

Politely I said, "Please, the issue is not a choice between a comfortable life and a miserable life..."

Monk Trung Hung cut me short. "Enough, you don't need to say more. I am never wrong in judging people. Whoever can't bear the living condition here will turn out to be good for nothing in the future. Run to comfortable places as you wish, then you'll see. What are you standing there for? Pack your stuff and go to the monastery now. Ah, I'll tell you what, out of respect for master Hai Tue, I let you go stay with him for awhile. Some day if the situation gets tight, and the police cause difficulties, both you and Don must come back here. Otherwise I'll cross out your names in the residence registration."

Not saying another word, as commanded, I quietly went to the east wing to pick up my things. Seeing me getting ready to leave, Thai came near and took my hand.

In an emotional tone of voice, he said, "Take care of your health over there. Truthfully, I am very grateful to you. It can be said that during your time here, I learned from you a lot of useful things. The books that you sneakily brought back for me to read

really opened my mind a great deal. Now, you are leaving..." That was all he said before he choked up and could not finish his sentence.

I had not expected such a feeling-filled expression from a novice who talked loud and freely, who often played pranks and sometimes teased me. The more he was loath to see me go, the more I felt perturbed, having the unpleasant feeling that I was a coward running away from difficulty, leaving him behind to bear alone all the heavy load of work as well as the solitary atmosphere of Linh Phong pagoda. But I had no alternative. I had to go.

I said, "Thai, try to stay on with your religious practice here. It will be best if you are always mindful of the virtue of resignation and forbearance, and consider it as your method of training. If you ever have any problem, come and see me at Hai Duc monastery, so I may try to find a way to give you some help. Remember that."

I bowed to monk Trung Hung, then took leave. Thai saw me off to the three-entranced gate. This landmark immediately reminded me of Nhu Nhu, of the time and place of meeting which she had told me of at noon earlier in the day. I stopped involuntarily in my tracks, not knowing how to deal with the matter. Tomorrow and perhaps for several following days, around noon she would come and wait for me at the foot of the mount, in the intolerably hot sun. No one should have the hard heart to let an adolescent girl wait for a long time without knowing why the one she waited for did not keep his promise. How could a person like me heartlessly break my promise to her? It was true that when she arranged the time and place for us to meet, I did not verbally express my agreement, but my silence and lack of protest was no different from an implied promise.

Seeing me standing still and disturbed for awhile, Thai solicitously asked, "Do you want me to relate a message to anyone?"

Startled out of my pondering, I turned and looked at him. How very sharp this kid was! You couldn't hide anything from him.

Rather embarrassed, I smiled at him and said, "If my family asks, you can tell them where I am. But if anyone else comes and looks for me, please say that I have gone away, maybe to Hue or Hoi An, that I will never return here, and you don't know my address. Please say that, won't you?"

Thai replied with a big smile. "Don't worry about it. It's an easy request to comply with. But don't think it's the end of it all, brother."

I looked askance at him; then, laughing, I walked down the mount. The disappearing act would not put an end to the emotional matter, I knew that. But what alternative did I have? The more I met Nhu Nhu, the more confused my mind became, and the more there was no way that mind could concentrate on my training. Sometimes, I felt like another person, no longer a good monk. I needed to recoup what I had lost: right path, determination, and particularly a pure mind not entangled with emotion and passionate love.



My foolish fling with feeling and emotion was no different from the man who falls down a cliff face at such an extremely high speed that no one can stop or catch him, and he himself does not have any chance to grab onto something to save himself. Though I attempted to avoid Nhu Nhu by removing myself to the monastery, I still felt

myself vulnerable to the urgings of my heart, which I seemed to have no power to resist. While sitting in meditation, chanting sutras, reciting the Buddha's name, I could not stop my mind from wandering in a hundred directions, unfocused. Very often I saw Nhu Nhu in my unsettled dreams. I noted that in my inner struggle, when I could not control one aspect of my psychology, other aspects would soon follow and be corrupted. Observing and reflecting upon the direction my heart and mind had taken, I was jolted by the realization that I had been falling down that terrible cliff face ever since my days of illness in Hoi An. I had come back to Nha Trang in the negative state of mind of a convalescent, and from there it was easy to let myself go freely with impulsive feelings, with passion for literature and music. And also with the waste of time involved in singing love songs and doing physical exercises to build my muscles, exercises not actually done because of a genuine concern for my health.

One kind of abandonment led to another, so that finally, when faced with feminine beauty, given natural emotional impulses and the attraction between male and female, I no longer had enough energy to resist. I fell. Yes, I fell into a sweeping current of self-indulgence and lethargy. I could not predict as yet what would happen to my religious training and practice in the days to come. But I certainly had the feeling that the hitherto assured self-confidence in my iron will had become shaky. I had often scorned some of my predecessors who had easily allowed themselves to become depraved by mediocre sentiment. And now, I felt ashamed for my unworthy arrogance. Even though the sentiment between Nhu Nhu and I was still pure, I knew if a favorable condition presented itself, there would be no power that could prevent an explosive expression of our eager and romantic hearts.

As usual, every time when he came back to town from Suoi Do, Don paid a visit to me at the monastery. It appeared that he was no longer troubled by his sentimental attraction to my younger sister Uyen. I decided to tell him, in all truthfulness, about my avoidance of Nhu Nhu.

Don shook his head. "But some day surely Nhu Nhu will discover that you live here, that you have not gone away."

"Perhaps by then the whole matter will have cooled down."

Laughing gently, Don said, "I hope for your sake it will be that simple."

I sat there, saying nothing for a moment. Then, inspired by an inner urge, I talked without pause. "What I need to do now is to strengthen my inner power. If it's not sufficiently firm, I will fall when confronted with obstacles. Sometimes I have the suspicion that previously, if I appeared serious and proper, or what you may call virtuous, it was merely because I was protected in a strict environment. To think about it, inner power can't possibly develop in one who hides from troubles and is protected by religious precepts and circumstances. I had thought I was very firm. I was wrong. Had I been firm in my faith, meeting Nhu Nhu would not have so stirred my heart, would not have made my mind go in a hundred directions like this.

"Just think, we young novice monks on our religious path often face this contradiction: if we remove ourselves completely from the everyday world, we can't save living beings; but when we come close to life, we are bound to be contaminated by it, since our inner power is not sufficiently strong to protect us. And that's not all. Developing inner power relies not solely on our utmost effort in meditation, but also on our going through trials in real life. In this regard, the famous booklet *Luận Bảo Vương*

Tam Muôi, 'The Buddha's Samadhi Treatise', says that one who undergoes Buddhist training must voluntarily place himself in difficulties and before obstacles. It sounds like a paradox, doesn't it? Previously, I thought the statement very sound. But now I have doubts about it, because, in reality, you will sink immediately in adverse circumstances if you don't possess inner power. Certainly, I have ideals, a definite purpose, and also a proper environment for the training of my inner self; but, even so, I don't seem able to stand firm on the path I have chosen.

"It would seem, then, that 'The Buddha's Samadhi Treatise' is meant to address only those who choose to travel the Bodhisattva path, and does not apply to the *tỳ kheo*, 'bikkhu', the monks ordained in the traditions of Hinayana Buddhism and belonging to the sangha, those who are in search of self-enlightenment and self-liberation only. A Bodhisattva, who also seeks self-enlightenment and self-liberation but expands his vows to focus on saving all beings, may sometimes stumble because his inner power is not strong enough. But that won't matter. He can take this stumbling as a lesson to be learned from life's suffering, and with that received wisdom he will pick himself up and continue along on his path. Even if he were deprived of a monk's robe because of his stumbling, that would not be a problem either, as the robe is only a matter of form, that which can be seen and observed from the outside. Such a person would know that any man, as a living being possessed of Buddha's self-nature, has the potential to attain self-enlightenment in whatever form and under whatever circumstances. Empowered by that faith, only those who train in Bodhisattva practices can become actively engaged in the everyday world without hesitation.

"In the meantime, traditional *tỳ kheo* monks, while extolling Bodhisattva practices, waver, and remain unclear in both will and conduct. Indeed, wholly devoting themselves to observing precepts and protecting the dignity of the sangha, they can never commit themselves fully to involvement in the world. To save living things is the great vow they nurture in their heart, yet they do not dare to engage in secular life for fear of contamination and loss of virtue. At the same time, they feel insecure and anxious for not being able to fulfill the vow of benefiting all beings due to their retreat behind closed doors and the concentration of their time and mind on a single method of religious training, with a determination to become Buddhas in this present life..."

Don cut in. "And that's why in our Mahayana tradition we have *tỳ kheo* monks also accept the Bodhisattva ordination and precepts." "It's no more than a matter of form. They do that seemingly as a way of gaining psychological balance, not as a step in the direction of real engagement with the world of suffering out there. Do you see any marked difference between a traditional monk who does not accept Bodhisattva ordination and one who has? None. They are the same. As I see it, acquiring the Bodhisattva ordination only gives us more precepts with which to form a defensive belt in protection of a life of virtues; it does not really expand our path toward effectively saving the world."

"But..." Don said, grinning, "so far, what are you trying to prove or defend?"

"I am not defending anything at all. I only feel that, in fact, when we avoid worldly life, that avoidance is simply caused by a high regard for the monk's form, starting with his robe, not at all because of any vowed action. We think more highly of form than the ultimate wished-for liberation, enlightenment, and saving sentient beings. By hanging tightly onto the monk's robe, at best, we can count on benefiting all beings

only through lecturing, preaching, chanting prayers, and conducting ceremonies, or -- more in keeping with our contemporary times -- through teaching and offering charitable social services by monks and nuns, much as do sisters in the Christian tradition. Really, think about it, besides the activities just mentioned, what do monks do that is more positive? In truth, those among us who are more progressive have re-integrated themselves into worldly life, leaving no tracks behind. And simply because they no longer keep the monk's form, we discount them altogether. Similarly, people in general judge us by form. Monks who still have shaven heads, wear ceremonial robes, chant sutras, and preach the Buddhist doctrines are trusted and respected; but if they neglect those concrete formalistic activities, they appear worthless. But Bodhisattvas devoted to the practice of saving all living beings are not concerned with form, are they? The more we are finicky about form, the less we are able to do something great, something really useful and beneficial to life."

"Tell me then," Don said, "what else do you think monks should do besides the traditional activities? And do you really think the monk's form is no longer necessary?"

"No, I didn't mean to say that. Don't misunderstand me. The form, of course, is necessary, but it's not so overwhelmingly necessary that we must see it as the top priority, as even above and beyond the great vow of saving all beings. What I want to say is, we monks, for the most part, have not truly engaged in fulfilling the great vow because we are so bogged down with form."

"So, what then do you think we should do, if you are to say that we have become truly engaged? And how can we be thoroughly engaged while retaining the monk's form?"

"Don, all I can say at present is that I am concerned more with religious vows than with form. I would pose the question to myself a little differently. I would ask: *How can we devote ourselves to a concerned engagement with the world without losing sight of the ultimate aspiration for liberation and enlightenment, and the vow to benefit living beings.* As to what a monk must set out to do in such engagement, well, personally speaking, I have not formulated clearly what I really want to do; nor have I identified which path is truly most suitable for me to take. Moreover, I would think that the manner of engagement changes with time and social circumstance: it can't remain the same at all times, in every place."

Don nodded his head a few times, pondering "From what you have said, I can see that you have considerably changed your view of our religious training and practice. Formerly I found you..."

"Rather conservative, right?" I said, finishing his sentence.

"Something like that. Wasn't it you who once said that all a monk needs to do is live in a pagoda and try his best to study the religion; that he should not be concerned with anything else? You also criticized those who want to reform or change Buddhist activities, those who advocate positive engagement in life, or seek to strengthen the sangha organization, and so on and so forth."

"True, I used to think that way."

"And now you think differently. Why?"

I took a sip of hot tea, as an answer did not come forth immediately.

Outside the window, a branch of violet flowers swayed in the breeze. Gently, a little sparrow moved from one branch to another. I thought of Nhu Nhu. I wondered if

Nhu Nhu's appearance in my life had effected a change in my view of religious study and practice. I often questioned myself, entertained such doubts about myself. And from the depths of my heart, the answer came and was positive.

However, the idea of engagement that had just begun to arise in me was not for the purpose of returning to the world and getting married to a certain young woman, Nhu Nhu, for example, with a view to living a secular life. If Nhu Nhu's image, Nhu Nhu's body and soul, appeared in my life in a romantic way, and was instrumental in changing my religious perspective, all that simply served to pull me out of the sluggish and conservative mental state I had always been in. Indirectly, she had helped me learn that, in truth, I had no remarkable inner power to be proud of, certainly no power which would justify my scorn of those who had stumbled because of attachment to feelings and emotion. And this recognition, in turn, awakened me to the fact that even if I had read the great vow a thousand times, I remained an outsider looking upon life with indifference, one who kept the monk's form but let living beings alone with their suffering. It took much more than mere verbal praise of engagement with the world to realize the value of benefiting all beings. There had to be active engagement, I thought.

When mulling over the Bodhisattva style of engagement, I did not think about social service programs like those of charitable organizations which distribute money and gifts to the needy. To me, that type of activity was simply a scratch on the surface and not concerned engagement in the full sense of the term. This activity had the magnanimous effect of temporarily soothing pain and suffering, but it could not resolve any fundamental and important dilemma related to the human condition. True concerned engagement was not the mere act of dressing a wound without bothering to discover how to prevent the causes leading in the first instance to it. Nor was engagement a plunge into the world only to drown in the vulgarity of ordinary life, or to allow oneself to be controlled and ordered around by worldly powers. Rather, the thought of true engagement brought to mind images of heroic monks, monks whose exemplary representatives were Tue Trung Thuong Si, the 15th-century 'Eminent Monk of Supreme Wisdom' who participated in the fight against the Mongol invaders, and the present-day monk Tue Van.

Indeed, from those examples, engagement meant to devote one's life and essence to experience Buddha-mind in this illusory world, to neutralize the delusory ignorance of violent powers, to turn this miserable life on earth into serene Nirvana, and to serve suffering beings with respect, consideration, and loving-kindness. What reasons made such a good-natured person and poetic soul like monk Tue Van choose to engage the world and land in jail? They all came from cultivating loving-kindness in relation to life. That loving-kindness was above and beyond the monk's form, above and beyond such that monks could temporarily *take off their religious robes and put on warrior's outfits*, to use a cliché referencing such occurrences in history. When the country was in decline or faced foreign invasions, Vietnamese Zen masters and monks did not ignore their civic responsibilities, but, instead, were ready to commit themselves to service of the motherland, including fighting on the frontlines. When the country was in peace, they returned to their thatched temples, to their dilapidated pagodas nestled in the shade of large trees.

One wondered if the ideal of such engagement had been nurtured through the ages, thus becoming the traditional way of life of Vietnamese Buddhist monks, a way of

life infused into the bloodstream of austere figures wearing modest coarse robes? Monk Tue Van and four other monks of the same organization in Saigon were not the only ones imprisoned for the crime of struggling for the people's right to live. Three years before that, immediately after the communists had established control of the South, twelve Buddhist monks had self-immolated in Can Tho. From Hai Duc monastery, monk Phuoc Vien had returned to Hue, his hometown, to participate in the Buddhist struggle movement led by Superior monk Thien Tan, and he ended up going to jail together with a number of monks and nuns in that city. Venerable Thien Minh had recently been arrested for his role as leader of an anti-communist force. Those events not only spoke for the generous aspiration held by Vietnamese monks to benefit other beings, but also demonstrated that the nation was in midst of such a terrible disaster that humble monks, aspiring for no material benefits, power, or fame, had to temporarily leave the Buddha altar and their prayer books to practice the religion along worldly paths.

I poured some more tea for Don, then said, "I don't know how to answer your question. There are many reasons for a person to change his view of life. Sometimes it's a matter of age and experience; other times, because of social circumstances. And at times it involves a certain personal sentimental matter. But let me ask you a question, Don. How did you feel in your heart when told that some of our respected masters were put in prison by the communists?"

"Of course I felt very sorry for them, how else?"

"No, what I means is... uh, this is difficult to say. I am not even sure what I want to ask you. Let me see... uh, I simply want to know your opinion on our superiors' decisions for active participation in a struggle movement when they witnessed injustice."

"I am very moved. I admire them tremendously," Don said, genuine sincerity in his voice.

I prompted him. "Isn't there something else besides those feelings?"

Don said nothing, seemingly deep in thought for awhile. "I want to follow their example and do what they do," he said. "The only problem is, I feel myself incompetent, not able to do anything worthwhile."

I assailed him with a further query. "In fact, I am not really interested in asking whether you admire them and want to follow in their footsteps. I only want to know, if you feel there is some force that propels you to engage yourself in the same way they have. There must be something in your heart that urges you on, isn't that right?"

Don smiled as he replied. "There's nothing in particular. It's simply discontent with what is objectionable, with the tyranny of violent power. Or, maybe, it's the desire to bring peace and happiness to the great majority of the people."

"That's the very reason. Yes, I agree. But I myself feel that there is something full of enticing force behind or beside the great vow of saving all beings. Don't you feel that force of attraction?"

Don thought about it for a moment, then shook his head.

"Hmm. I can't believe it's just my own psychological dilemma. Let me try to explain it to you."

I stood up. Propping myself against the table, elbows locked, hands grasping the table's edge, I continued to express my thoughts while looking through the window. While talking, I felt a strange excited energy surge through me.

"Besides the great vow of benefiting and saving all beings, so that everyone may experience happiness," I said, "it seems to me that a monastic person so engaged also must have the desire to personally shoulder for mankind all extreme miseries. This we have read over and over a thousand times from the eighth enlightenment described in the *Bát Đại Nhân Giác* Sutra, 'Eight Ways of Enlightenment of the Enlightened'. But only recently, when mulling over the masters' imprisonment, was I able to perceive the enticing power of voluntary suffering and accepted adversities. It seems that only the human condition can fully arouse or evoke the immutable eternity of Buddhahood. Is that why it's possible, even for a person not yet completely enlightened, to have a fearless heart?"

"Extrapolating from this thought, I have a question with regard to the subject of compassion, or loving-kindness, as discussed by Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh and a number of other learned monks. According to these masters, loving-kindness is nurtured and strengthened only by frequently and directly facing human suffering, suffering in ordinary life. Viewed in that light, loving-kindness has its limit, because it needs a condition of misery in which to survive. So, does this mean there is no loving-kindness when human beings don't experience pain and suffering? And if compassion appears and disappears depending on the presence or absence of worldly suffering, how can it be boundless, infinite, and immeasurable as we are taught? At any rate, given this perception of loving-kindness, please don't think I am crazy when I reveal to you my thought. I think that, in actuality, except for the case of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who were perfectly liberated and enlightened, the main motive that draws monastic persons toward engagement with the task of saving sentient beings is the desire to experience Buddhahood through the very extreme pain which they themselves must bear; it's not really the wish to deliver all beings from all suffering."

"From what you have said, loving-kindness has no meaning anymore." Don sounded discouraged.

"Why not? I don't deny loving-kindness. You think the desire to experience Buddhahood and the act of saving all beings are two different things, do you? I see the two as one. I believe that loving-kindness generates the vow to save the world, and the desire to experience Buddhahood in turn motivates monastic people to fulfill that vow. In our Mahayana tradition, there is no engagement which is meant exclusively for the benefit of others; neither is there religious training and practice for self-liberation that does not include the wish also to save all beings. Bound to that great vow, even as we monks know there is no end to suffering, we still continue on the Bodhisattva path with the determination to save all sentient beings from pain and misery before we become Buddhas. Why do you think this is the case? It's because human suffering and passion are all false, illusory, while Buddhahood is truly there forever. Therefore, engagement in worldly life is aimed ultimately at gaining spiritual experience of the immutable eternity; the main purpose is not to set right or to save illusory dreams!"

"Pray to Buddha. What you said makes a lot of sense to me. Considered like that, engagement in saving all beings will take on a different meaning, won't it?"

"That's how I understand it. You see, in the eyes of the world, or more precisely, on the concrete level of practical conduct, such engagement clearly embodies the vow to save worldly life. Only, in the depths of the mind and heart, or on the level of essence, we know that it also includes the desire to attain Buddhahood. As a result, numerous

superior monks in this country of ours, throughout many dynastic periods, followed in one another's footsteps to commit themselves to the task of saving the country, supporting the people, and protecting the religion and religious studies. Not all of them were successful in fulfilling their vow to save worldly life. When they were successful, it was good, as the country grew prosperous and peace prevailed, thus benefiting the people. But when they failed, it really did not matter. They were ready and willing to shoulder any type of suffering. And now, right before our eyes, there are Thay Thien Minh and Thay Tue Van... For now, they have failed in their struggle. But they are at peace with themselves in prison, having risked their lives in shouldering the pain and humiliation of the motherland, and having carried out their great vow to clean up bad karma for benison of the people..."

That was as much as I could utter before words stuck in my throat. We both sat in a long silence.

"Someday, when you are ready to walk that path," Don said, "be sure to call me."

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