

DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

On Trai Thuy hill, especially along Sunset Path and those dirt paths leading to Hai Duc monastery, a great variety of flowers bloom beautifully throughout the four seasons. These are not limited to the ornamental potted flowers used as decorative items displayed in the front yard of the pagoda, around the main hall, and along rows of the monks' rooms; there are also wild flowers, though not the nameless species that spread profusely over the slopes of the hill. Rather, included among them are flowers from flame trees, queen crape myrtles, plum and cherry trees -- all being wild in the sense that they grow and explode into color, seemingly without control, on both sides of Sunset Path and along the belt around the monastery. Their flowers burst open by turns in specific seasons: bright orange-red flowers on the flame trees in summer; melancholy violet blossoms on the queen crape myrtles in autumn; pale yellow blossoms on the Chinaberry in winter; in spring, bright yellow flowers on the plum trees, and, most outstandingly, white and pink blossoms on the cherry trees. Indeed, one need only see what flowers display their beauty to know which season has arrived; while the dead flower petals scattered on the paths announce the end of a specific season. From afar, the flowers appear as variously colored bands, some stretching along close together, others patched at numerous locations over the hill. When taking a leisurely walk on Sunset Path, people have the impression of promenading under gorgeously colorful clouds.

In the spring of 1978, the flowers and leaves of winter had not completely disintegrated on the fertile soil during the first days of the year. But I well knew that a secret love had been buried with the passing of time.

Since the day I left Linh Phong pagoda, no longer having to set out everyday to offer prayer services, I had gone back to work at the soy sauce factory three days a week, from eight in the morning until twelve noon. Happily, I had also returned to my normal daily religious activities, my heart no longer burdened with the image of Nhu Nhu, as it had been for the several previous months. Only once in a while did I feel a touch of gentle sadness, which soon dissipated. My job was even lighter than the one I had undertaken previously. This was probably because the superior monk director, being fond of me and caring about my religious training, chose to assign light tasks, so I would have time to read and study more.

Truly, my job was the only one at the factory that allowed the worker to work and read at the same time. It could be said that this job was no different from the job of those young attendants who sit and keep watch on the alchemy kiln for Thai Thuong Lao Quan in the story *Tay Du Ky*, 'Journey to the West'. Yet, in truth, mine was even less demanding. The stove I was tasked to watch over was one that burned the sedimentary dregs of used motor oil and was regulated by a control switch. The huge pot sitting upon this stove was of cast iron and had a screwed-on lid, to which was attached a thermometer. There was no galenical, no miraculous medicine inside, only a few dozen

serum bottles full of sawdust. After having been steam sterilized for three hours, these bottles would be transferred to the lab where fungus mold was deposited in them. If the dial showed that the heat was too high, all I needed to do was to turn down the fire a little. When the required time was reached, I would turn off the stove, and leave it. After it had cooled down, the monks and nuns from the group in charge of making fungus mold would unscrew the lid and take those bottles of sawdust to the lab. During many days sitting and watching over that pot of sawdust, I managed to read a lot of books. I worked like that until the twenty-third day of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar, the week before Tet, the Lunar New Year, when I was given time off to take part in cleaning up the monastery.

On the last day of the year, after having finished my various tasks at Hai Duc monastery, I followed my master to Dien Tho pagoda in Dien Khanh District where, together with novice-monk Quyet, I cleaned and decorated the pagoda in preparation for Tet. At this particular temple, several young Buddhist girls of my age group, who were also my master's disciples, lent their hands to the pagoda tasks. Sometimes those girls talked with the novice monks residing here in the friendly and cheery manner by which members of the same religion sharing the same master interacted. They also exhibited their female loveliness and attractiveness. And once in a while one among them even approached me with the intention of getting to know me and becoming my friend, but my heart remained cool, uninterested, unmoved. Perhaps my heart also set its own conditions and reason, like the wild trees on Trai Thuy hill which send forth flowers only for a specific season and in a specific space. The only difference being, perhaps, that my heart showed off its beauty but once, then died. If that was truly the case, my mind would enjoy greater comfort and my religious life might have a chance to progress on the right path.

On the second day of Tet, I paid my family a visit. Two years had gone by without any major life changes for the members of the family, who had made no progress in their livelihood. As a result, the Tet atmosphere in the house was as desolately gloomy as it had been two years before, when I had come to exchange Tet greetings with them.

My father was over sixty. Even though he was still capable of working, he did not want to work for the new regime. According to my mother, my father's literary friends of the past, that time long before the division of the country in 1954, friends like Che Lan Vien, Vu Dinh Lien, Pham Huy Thong, Tran Thanh Mai, Tran Thanh Dich, in their post-75 trips south from the North had come to visit him, and thoughtfully proposed to recommend him for some type of work with the People's Court of Investigation in the city, but he had declined their offer. He would rather starve, and preferred to spend his time instead sitting in a corner of the tiny outdoor kitchen space, rolling cigarettes of coarse tobacco, looking vaguely up at the sky, or fixing his gaze at a stain on the adjacent wall.

Among his children who were single, my elder sister Hong, a former high school teacher and most notably a popular singer in Saigon during the last year of the Republic of South Vietnam, had failed to find any job after 1975. She had gone back to Saigon to ask for her friends' help in locating employment. My brothers Hieu and Huu, two years older and one year younger than me, respectively, had volunteered to go to the new economic zone called Nhieu Giang, located about 30 kilometers north of Nha Trang. This, they did after having endured for awhile much hardship as members of *Thanh Nien*

Xung Phong, the 'Union of Youth Volunteers', during which time they had engaged in all forms of manual labor, without earning enough to feed themselves, and without being officially recognized as legitimate workers, thus running the risk of being fired by state cadres as the moods of these cadres moved them.

Living at home, my elder brother Hau, also a former high school teacher, had joined a group of workers building and fixing bridges and roads, to receive for his labor the standard rice ration (about 10 kilograms per month) and no wage whatsoever. His younger sister Thuan taught continuing education classes "for the masses" in the local quarter of the city. For free. She did this in the hope that the state would deign acknowledge that her family was willing to work, that none of them wanted to stay idle and "sponge on society". The remaining three siblings, all younger than me, were still kids. My parents and these five of their fourteen children crowded together in their tiny house for Tet celebration. Being together under one roof for this significant religious and festive holiday was rather heart-warming, but a heartrending warmth one must say.

They only had tea to offer their guests. And perhaps I was the only New Year's "guest" they entertained. Other people were afraid to visit them, not only because they might become guilty by association with the family of a man who had worked under the former puppet government, but also because they did not want to inadvertently make my family lose face and dignity. They were probably right in suspecting that my family would feel embarrassed and awkward in receiving them during Tet when, according to customs and tradition, there should be at least a steamed glutinous rice cake, sugar-coated fruit and rice wine for hosts and guests to enjoy together. I sat drinking tea with my father for awhile at the old wooden table, the only table in the house. About half an hour later, I could not bear the depressive air any more. I stood up and emptied my pocket of my salary, the bonus allotted by the soy sauce factory, and *li xi*, the traditional gift money for Tet, given by my master. I gave it all to my younger siblings and asked them to share it among the family. Then I left. Respecting their sensitive feelings, I did not dare give the money to my parents or elder brother and sister. I could only offer a little financial help indirectly in the guise of Tet gift money for children.

Upon leaving my family, I felt guilty for having spent money buying the guitar, the flute, and too many books during the last two years. I should have lived quite simply and frugally, without needs and desires, as I had done during my days in Hoi An. Not only is a frugal, simple life a method of controlling one's body and mind, which is quite necessary for monks to accomplish, it is also a good way to participate and share in the suffering and pain endured by the unfortunate and wretched people of this world. Merely looking at my family's situation was enough to inform me as to how my people and my country fared at present. Current social conditions certainly would not allow me any longer to live my life to my liking.



On the way back to the monastery, I stopped by to visit Don at his calm temple. Seeing me from a distance, he happily came out to offer his greetings.

"Happy Tet to the poet Zen master!"

"Come on, don't call me that! You embarrass me. Are you staying put indoors, not going out at all during Tet?"

"That's right. You have your family here to visit; I have no one. So I just stay in and read."

"You're better off that way. Visiting my family did nothing but make my heart heavy, as I can do nothing to help them out."

"What's the matter? Are they in trouble?"

"Not the kind of trouble you are thinking of. Rather, it's the same old matter of unemployment."

Don boiled water to make tea. He offered me some sugar-coated fruit and water melon seeds to munch on.

I continued, sad of mood. "I don't know when this government will stop treating soldiers and civil servants of the former regime with such hatred. You know, my uncle's widow has three daughters, each married to a South Vietnamese military officer. All three men served at the rank of major: the first, an army doctor; the second, a combat engineer; the third, a member of the air force. After '75, the three were dispatched to re-education camps. It's really terrible for their families. Three years have passed, but the men have not returned, while their families thought they would be gone for only a week or two. Judging from the situation of my relatives, I would hazard a guess that from the whole of South Vietnam at least a hundred thousand people were sent to re-education camps. It's such a waste. I'm sure you know that the majority of military officers and high ranking government officials of the former regime are knowledgeable and capable. When they are all imprisoned and their relatives maltreated, how can this country fare better?"

Don joined in. "It's really an elementary and ignorant regime."

"No, not ignorant. 'Sick' is a better word. Don, something is heating up the blood that runs in my veins..."

"Forget it, friend. Just endure it. It's the karma of our people; we can't do anything but accept it."

"How can you say that? I concur that we cannot change what is called karma, a predetermined destiny generated by actions accumulated over time. But if the seed for a particular karma has not yet been sown, or was just sowed, that karma can, of course, be modified. At this point in time, if you say that the south, or the whole country, is subjected to communist control because of the people's current karma, and we can't do anything about it, then I agree. But how about from now on, going into the future? How about the governing policies of the regime? Those can easily be re-shaped, starting from the beginning; and such action can, itself, be considered a karma seed that is newly sowed, or about to be sowed. It's new, so changes or corrections are quite possible. If the communists don't want change, people should do it for them. In other words, the people should take upon themselves the task of doing what the communists fail to do for the welfare of all."

Don looked at me, flabbergasted. Waving one hand in a gesture of dismissal, he said, "Whoa! Stop it, please. They're using such violent bloody force to control, who would dare go against them?" He shook his head slightly. "Drink your tea, and let's talk about something else more pleasant. Uh, have you seen our young friend Thai lately?"

"No. Do you know how he's doing?"

"I met him yesterday. He's happy now."

"Happy in what way?"

"Thay Trung Hung gave money to Thai and Xung to pay for tutorials in math and English."

"What?! Is that true?"

"It's true. Why should I lie to you? Thai himself told me about it."

"Pray to Buddha. Thanks to heaven and earth for having turned a stone into a flower. Great! What made Thay Trung Hung change so much?"

"I don't know. Perhaps he has begun to listen to suggestions by some close and reliable Buddhists. It's also possible that he does what his own family has requested. Novice-monk Xung is Thay Trung Hung's younger brother, who has just come from Hue and now lives in Linh Phong pagoda. Having arranged tutorial lessons for his brother, he must feel obliged to do the same for Thai."

"Whatever the reason, that's a very much better situation than what we knew before. I'm glad for Thai."

"But that's not all. Thay Trung Hung has also undergone a bigger change."

"You don't say! What else?"

Don lowered his voice. "Thai said that Thay Trung Hung is making arrangements for both Xung and Thai to flee across the border."

"Excellent! If so, I believe that Thay Trung Hung has completely changed into another person. If you remember, only half a year ago, we were made miserable by him, but now he's generous and progressive. How can I not feel glad? Of course, this positive change in him no longer has any impact on us; but from now on, novice-monks at Linh Phong pagoda will feel much more at ease."

This new information evoked from memory what had happened six months earlier. I had then been living at Hai Duc monastery as arranged by my master with monk Trung Hung. One day, Thai from Linh Phong pagoda came to deliver an order from monk Trung Hung.

"Thay Trung Hung says that starting from this evening, you and Don must sleep at Linh Phong pagoda. He doesn't care where you go, what you do during the day; but you have to spend the night there in the pagoda. Tell Don for me when you see him, will you? Thai also said that if you two refuse to follow this instruction, he will cross your names out of the residence registration immediately. Oh, he also said that you must get back there before eight in the evening."

"All right. Thank you. I will tell Don. We'll be there tonight. By the way, has anyone come and asked for me since I left?"

"Yes and no," Thai replied, with a straight face.

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, someone came. No, because that person did not enter the pagoda, just lingered around the steps at the gate for awhile, then left without seeing anyone. Had that person come in and asked me, I would have answered clearly. I did not dare to go out on my own and probe. That person came three, four times, then was not seen again."

This novice never forgets to bring his wit with him, I thought.

That evening, Don and I arrived at Linh Phong pagoda at seven, each carrying a bag holding a monk's robe, a mosquito net, and a book to read. Around three in the morning, when monk Trung Hung and Thai began their morning prayers to offer spiritual merits to others, the two of us left to go back to our respective actual residences. We followed the same procedure on subsequent nights.

For the first few nights, we turned on the neon light in the east wing and sat under it at a big table to read our books. But one night monk Trung Hung asked Thai to call us to the west wing.

"Thay Trung Hung says that whether you are studying or merely reading, you should do so at the small table in the west wing to save electricity," said Thai. "The neon light over there is only sixty centimeters long. The one here is one hundred twenty centimeters long and consumes too much power, he said. Moreover, why can't we all gather at one place, both for reading and studying, instead of separating into two groups so that we need to use two lights?"

There was a touch of sarcastic humor in Thai's voice. Don and I resigned ourselves to following him to the west wing, which we did, clutching our books. Seeing that we behaved well and complied with his order, monk Trung Hung was inspired to push further.

"Don, what book are you reading?"

"I am reading *Phap Hoa Huyen Nghia*, so I can better understand the essential meaning of the Lotus Sutra, as the book promises to deliver," Don answered.

"How about you, Khang?"

"*The First and Last Freedom* by... uh, Krishnamurti," I replied.

"Who is he? Is the book in a Western language?"

"No, it's in Vietnamese."

"But what is it you've just said, something about 'kitna' 'kitni'? Let me see it. Is this the one? Who is the author? Is he a Buddhist?"

"No, Thay," I said.

"Then why are you reading it? You don't seem to concentrate on reading sutras. Aren't Buddhist texts sufficient for your reading? Have you actually read all the three Buddhist canons?"

"One doesn't have to read all Buddhist sutras before being allowed to read other kinds of books. I would think we should read all kinds of books, if we hope to expand our knowledge."

"Don't argue with me! You dare to oppose what I say? Tell me, isn't it correct that among the rules for a sa-di novice, there is one that says you may not read any other kind of books? Don't you know that, even though all of you have learned the rules?"

"Of course I know that. But there are also exceptions. Moreover, those sa-di rules and regulations are too old. Many things about them need to be modified, so that they can be in tune with the times," I stubbornly reasoned.

"There's no exception for anyone. From whom or from what source did you learn that there are exceptions to the rules and that rules can be changed? Do you want to correct the rules taught by the Buddha?"

"Precepts taught by the Buddha cannot be changed. But rules, especially those that regulate our conduct and our different daily activities, are not necessarily the same at every time and place, and therefore they should be adjusted to particular times and circumstances. Moreover, the book *Sa-di Oai Nghi*, which specifies rules for behaving with dignity for a sa-di novice, and which is extracted from *Bach Truong Thanh Quy*, 'Precise Monastic Regulations' written by Chinese Zen master Pai-chang Huai-hai', contains no more than internal regulations for daily monastic activities. Those regulations were created for Zen monasteries in China in the past, and we simply adopted

them. They're not exactly the teachings of the Buddha. If the old patriarchs themselves could create rules and regulations, I don't see why monks of the present cannot change or modify them."

"Don't talk too much. I want to know if you've already learned by heart all the four books of rules for a sa-di."

"Of course I did that a long time ago. Thay, you yourself knew that before leaving Nha Trang for Hoi An to attend the Institute of Buddhist Studies up there, I had memorized well all those books," I answered.

"Then let me hear you recite them from the beginning to the end," monk Trung Hung said.

"Why do you want me to do that?" I asked.

"Just say them all, then I will tell you why."

Stubbornly I resisted. "Let's wait for the next *gioi dan* platform of precepts ceremony when a ty kheo monk receives his precepts; then I will recite them all for you."

"No, I want to hear you say them right now to see if you've actually learned the rules and understood the sutras so well that you want to read books outside the religion," monk Trung Hung said in a harsh voice.

Unable to restrain my rather insolent impulses, I said firmly, "I'm not obliged to recite my lessons to you." This was the first time ever that I used the standard and neutral term "toi" for first person to address myself in relation to him -- which term implies distance and/or equality in a relationship.

I continued, "Moreover, the ultimate purpose of learning rules is to practice them, not necessarily to know them by heart. What's the use of memorizing them when one's mouth repeats them well but one's thoughts, words, and deeds show not a trace of dignity, no conformity to the essence of the dharma?"

"Are you alluding to me?"

"Why do you think I'm alluding to you personally? I'm simply speaking the truth. A time will come when religious heritage, religious discipline and even religious doctrines need to be reformed and rectified so as to be suitable to the condition and means of livelihood of contemporary human beings. Thay Nhat Hanh himself expresses such an appeal in his book *Dao Phat Hien Dai Hoa*, 'Modernized Buddhism', which I'm sure you yourself have read."

I had to bring in Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh's authority to awaken monk Trung Hung because monk Trung Hung was an admirer of the popular Zen author and was proud of having entered monkhood at Tu Hieu pagoda in Hue, the same place where monk Nhat Hanh had begun his religious life.

"Is that truly the case? Does Thay Nhat Hanh himself actually advocate that? Well, if that's true, it only stands to reason. Thay Nhat Hanh is highly educated and very knowledgeable, so he's able and has the right to advocate changes. But as for you, you're only a novice, you must know your place. You must improve your understanding of the four books of rules, learn classical Chinese, read the sutras. How can you be so silly as to entertain the idea of reforming the rules, when you can't possibly finish reading all Buddhist sutras during your lifetime? And someone like you could spend his whole life as a sa-di novice without becoming a good person!"

"I don't demand reforms. I am talking about it simply to remind you that I no longer have the obligation to recite sutras to you in the fashion of a student reciting

lessons to his teacher. I am here not to learn from you the elementary lessons that I already received as a little novice a long time ago."

"Then get out of my sight, and never come near this pagoda again. Don't even dream of any connection with this place," monk Trung Hung said, stressing every word.

I realized he wanted to threaten me regarding my residency in his temple. Since I was in disagreement with him, he would likely ask the local police to cross my name out in the residence registration book. This was something I had previously been very afraid of. But, somehow, at this moment I did not really care.

I said, "Thay, you can come straight to the point and tell me that you want to remove my name from the registration book of this pagoda. Isn't that what you have in mind? You don't need to beat about the bush. Even if you were King of this world, you would have to leave it some day to be liberated. So what's there to fuss about a name entered in a residence registration book? In fact, why should I be connected with this pagoda? Why do I have to carry what I need every night from Hai Duc monastery to spend the night here? It boils down to retaining my name in the book. Now, I don't care about it any more. You can erase it as you please."

Then I got up, left the table and walked out to the yard. I heard monk Trung Hung's voice behind my back.

"Well then, go away for good!" he said. "As from tomorrow, you won't have your name in the book of this pagoda."

Hearing that, I somehow felt even more emboldened to walk into the night, straight down the mount and back to the monastery. It was perhaps the first time ever that I was most loquacious and unruly in expressing my view, in expressing my discontent with monk Trung Hung's manner of teaching.

Around four-thirty in the morning, Don knocked on my door. He said he had wanted to run after me earlier that night, but had been prevented by monk Trung Hung.

"You really took a risk," Don said. "What if he actually does what he says? It will be quite troublesome for you. If you want to be firm with him, choose to do it at the right time. You should wait until you have your name listed at some other place before you give up your residence at Linh Phong pagoda."

"I think it was the right time to say what I said," I replied. "How much longer should I wait? He always uses the issue of legal residence to control and threaten us. What he does is tantamount to leaning on the authority of the government to hassle and oppress fellow monks in the pagoda."

"I know that. Still, we must be tolerant. You're the one who always reminds me of that. So try to put up with it. It's not the right time yet. Try to maintain your present residency until you've found another one, or at least until you've got your identification card. Otherwise, you'll be in trouble. For example, if the police stopped you in the streets and you had no ID to show, you would end up in jail."

"It doesn't matter if they put me in jail. In fact, I want to be in jail to practice religion for a while."

"Oh, stop it, friend. Don't joke like that or it will really happen to you one of these days."

"I'm not joking," I said. "Aren't we all, at present, already in jail? Don't you see that the residence registration is a form of imprisonment? If we go to jail, it will be simply a matter of transferring our residence to another place. There's no difference."

"Well, in essence they seem the same, I agree. Nonetheless, it's still more comfortable to be outside than inside a jail. Come on, try to endure the situation for some more time. Go back to sleep at Linh Phong pagoda tonight. Yielding to Thay Trung Hung is like doing what the folk saying advises: 'There is no shame in avoiding an elephant.' After all, he is old enough to be our elder monk brother. Anyway, awhile ago, before I left the pagoda, Thay Trung Hung called me over for a talk."

"What kind of talk?"

"He said, 'From now on, all of you can do whatever you please. I won't bother supervising your studies and your reading any longer. Tell Khang to come back here to sleep at night.' That's exactly what he said."

"There's no radical change that I can see in that."

"Yes, there is. Now he allows us the freedom to study and read. He will not check on us regarding that activity. We only spend our nights there to avoid trouble with the police."

"Heaven and Earth! The right to freely study and read is my own right; I already have it; he can't give it to me. Why is it that the way he talks sounds so much like the communists? Everything is strictly forbidden, then occasionally one little thing is allowed; and he considers that as having granted us the right to freedom!"

"Don't argue any more. Just enjoy whatever comes our way, and eventually we will gain other freedoms. As I said, endure a little while longer. Actually, what Thay said shows that he has yielded a step for you. In return, it wouldn't hurt for you to yield a step too, don't you think? Moreover, do you have the heart to see me go there alone? I dread the thought of walking there every night without you beside me to talk with."

In the end, I accepted Don's advice. And from that very evening, I again accompanied Don to Linh Phong pagoda. No longer obliged to gather in the west wing to study and to read under monk Trung Hung's supervision, Don and I did not feel it necessary to be there early. So, instead of showing up at eight as before, we arrived before ten -- the hour when the police began their routine search and residency check. Appearing at that hour, we never encountered monk Trung Hung. From around nine, he would keep to his schedule of chanting *Chuan De*, the 'Cundi incantation' addressing Kwan Yin Bodhisattva, in his private room for about an hour before retiring. He never failed to keep this schedule. It might be said that this faithfulness was the most noble virtue in him, which I always respected, in spite of many occasions when I was discontented with him and stubbornly contradicted him. Upon arrival, all Don and I needed to do was knock on the door of the east wing, and Thai would open it to admit us. At three thirty in the morning when Thai rang the great copper bell, we would leave. Monk Trung Hung only knew that we had been there as reported by Thai.

Yet, one night, when we knocked as usual, Thai opened the door only wide enough to poke his head out.

"Dear fellow novices," he said. "Please understand my position. I don't dare to let you in. Thay Trung Hung told me to close the door at nine and not allow anyone in after that. He said that if you two want to come in, you have to show up before that hour. But if you come late and I still admit you, he would kick me out of the pagoda."

"Never mind, we understand," I said to Thai. "Go ahead and shut the door. If Thay Trung Hung asks, tell him we have come, and it's okay, we can sleep on the veranda."

We then broke branches of jujube trees growing on the back side of the mount so as to make a broom with which to cursorily sweep the rear veranda of the east wing, where we would sleep right on the floor. Thai emerged to give us our mosquito nets which he had retrieved from our shared room, as well as to lend us a good broom and provide us with extra lengths of string so that we could tie the four corners of our nets to the pillars. This part of the veranda looked toward the sea from which a brisk breeze blew throughout the night. Having no straw mats under which to tuck the loose end of the nets, we had to use our books and slippers to keep them from being lifted by the breeze.

For the first two months, it was rather pleasurable to lie on the open veranda and gaze at the moon and stars before drifting off to sleep. But eventually the chill winter was ushered in, accompanied by occasional night rain, which came without warning. The rain splashed into our nets, rendering our clothes dripping wet. We had to run through downpours, around to the front veranda to keep ourselves from getting wetter and numbed by gusts of cold wind. In spite of that effort, we still shivered and our teeth clattered. Even the most effective methods of concentration could not have helped us control our trembling. And silently, we huddled together awaiting the dawn.

Once, as we were shielding ourselves from the unwelcome rain, Don said, "Sometimes I feel as if we were orphans. We are away from our families in order to join monastic life, but we are not allowed peace of mind to study and practice the dharma."

I kept silent, not knowing what to say to comfort him. Don was six years older than I, but he was still full of feelings of attachment for his family. Whenever saddened or humiliated by something, he talked about his relatives. Perhaps it was because his family lived further away than mine.

From another angle, because of this period, during which we freely slept on the veranda, without having Thai wait up to admit us and therefore having the impression of not connecting with anyone inside the pagoda, gradually we came to feel no necessity to be present at night at the east wing any more. I went back to sleeping in Hai Duc monastery; Don, in his quiet temple. Thus ended the business of carrying a mosquito net every night from one pagoda to another at our chosen hour. Likewise, the matter of our legal residence registration was not seriously raised again -- except when an election was held in the secular world. At such a times, Thai told us to go to Linh Phong pagoda and pick up our voter's cards from monk Trung Hung.

I could not forget that a short time later, Thai was hit rather hard with a cane by monk Trung Hung. Thai had to run away from the mount, and did not dare return. The reason was not revealed. I was told by Don only that Thai had left Linh Phong pagoda, that he had wandered around and ended up sleeping on the veranda floor of the Provincial Pagoda, his hunger and thirst, his experience of cold and hot weather unbeknownst to everyone. Finally, because he did not know where to go, and because he was afraid his name would be deleted from the pagoda's registration, Thai decided to return to monk Trung Hung.

Recalling all these recent events at Linh Phong pagoda, I was now truly pleased to learn that finally monk Trung Hung had changed. There must have been a certain special person or circumstance that shook loose that human mass of iron.

In a moment of inspiration, I said to Don, "Do you see that if Thay Trung Hung can change, there's hope that the painful karma of our people also has a chance to alter. I

believe that with their hearts sincerely and fervently open to embrace the motherland, someday people together will be able to wash away the karma of the whole country."

Don looked at me for a moment, then said, "It seems that these days you often talk about the motherland, the people, and the cleansing of karma. I'm afraid that a day will come when you're no longer interested in being a poet and a Zen master, but will become a patriotic scholar."

I smiled and said goodbye to Don. He walked some short distance with me before the words came right out of his mouth. "Someone wanted to know if you came back to Nha Trang during Tet to visit the pagoda and your family."

"Who?"

"Nhu Nhu. Who else? I feel sorry for her. She still thinks that you went to Hoi An."

"Humm... Thai didn't mention meeting Nhu Nhu. So I wonder who could have told her that I had gone to Hoi An."

"I did. You also asked me to tell her so, if she asked. Don't you remember? It's too bad that I had to lie to her."

I sighed. A feeling of pain crept into my heart. "I don't know what else to do," I said.

"I think you did the right thing in avoiding contact with her," Don reassured me. "The only thing is, it's such a pity regarding Nhu Nhu. She looks very sad. Every time I visit her family, I notice that her eyes seem ready to shed tears. Seeing my face must make her think of you and miss you, I bet."

"So how did you answer her?"

"Answer about what?" Don asked. "Oh, about whether you came back to Nha Trang for Tet? I told her I didn't know."

"Good. Yes, keep it that way, saying that you don't know my whereabouts. Let her bury me, just as I've buried her."

"What a terrible thing to say! *Bury* is a strong word. Wouldn't it be better to say *forget*?"

I smiled a meek agreement. Saying nothing further, I went straight in the direction of the monastery. You can't forget something unforgettable, I thought to myself. I could only hope to bury it with the sweeping flow of time -- and with movement in space.
