

# DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For many years, in the period before I chose to enter monkhood, on Buddha's birthday my younger siblings and I accompanied my parents to the Provincial Pagoda. There we attended a festive ceremony, enjoyed a program of literature and the arts, and subsequently watched a procession move along the main thoroughfares, a parade composed of flower-adorned, decked vehicles belonging to public offices and various units of the armed forces stationed in the city, all escorting a palanquin bearing a sculpture of Buddha. Platforms displaying images or statues representing the infant Sakyamuni Buddha were set up everywhere. An overwhelming number of five-color Buddhist flags were strung along the streets, and every house where Buddhists lived was decorated with flags and colored lights. The decoration with lights, flowers, and flags to celebrate the birthday was only form, but it was a form that was necessary because it warmed the hearts of Buddhists who were given an opportunity to demonstrate their venerating faith in a master, a noble father to all mankind. That faith had been perpetuated through generations and ages to become a deep-rooted tradition for Vietnamese Buddhists, who made up more than seventy per cent of the total population of the country.

During my first few years as a novice, when we still lived under the second Republic of Viet Nam, festive celebrations of Buddha's birthday had never been cancelled or ignored because of the war. Buddhist or not, people enjoyed gathering at pagodas or out on the main streets to watch a procession honoring the Buddha. On such occasions, the streets leading to the Provincial Pagoda were always filled with streams of people. From its three-entranced gate, Buddhists had to press against one another to inch forward, crossing a huge front yard to get close to the major ceremonial platform and the area surrounding the front building. Sunset Path, Dawn Path, and the unnamed rough path leading from the Provincial Pagoda's imposing Buddha statue to Hai Duc monastery were almost completely overflowed with people. One could say that the whole of Trai Thuy hill had turned into a hill of human beings.

In contrast, since the communists took control of the whole country, festive celebrations of both Buddha's birthday and Christmas had been directly or indirectly prohibited. In their direct way, the authorities told pagodas and churches that they were not allowed to organize big festivals. Or, using an indirect approach, the government sent police to religious establishments under the pretext of keeping the important celebrations safe and orderly, while everyone knew that the ultimate purpose was to intimidate and scare away potential participants. On a more subtle level, right on Buddha's birthday and Christmas, the local government held meetings which various residential groups were required to attend, or organized one official commemoration or another of some not-too-important events having to do with the Party or with local history, or else mobilized people for a day of labor as a form of "dedication to Uncle Ho

and the Party". All these actions had been obviously geared toward reducing the number of believers who wanted to carry on their cherished traditions. When the state, in such a willful manner, interferes and issues an order against a large gathering, what common citizen would dare to participate in the religious celebration? When the state discriminates against religion, what humble citizen would venture to declare himself a Buddhist or a Catholic? The result was, on Buddha's birthday, monks and nuns were afraid of hanging Buddhist flags, of honoring Buddha by solemn ceremonies. Some even requested that Buddhist followers take turns to come to their pagodas at different periods on that day, so that at no time would there appear a crowd to attract police attention and harassment. When even well-established temples did not feel free to display flags and lights, naturally one could not expect to see private homes and public streets decorated with those same items.

Such was the way it was, that for the four-year period from 1975 to this year, 1978, one witnessed colorless and subdued commemoration of Buddha's birth. The imposing Provincial Pagoda showed no more than two strings of colored electric lights, accompanied by two strings of Buddhist flags. Together, running along the curved roof, they drew the simple image of a boat. Hai Duc monastery, in the meantime, had even less to boast: a single string of colored lights and one of cotton flags, forming a straight line across the width of the ancient main building. Thus, in terms of outward appearance, the difference between Buddha's birthday and ordinary days at Hai Duc monastery was indicated only by those two modest strings. As to the actual ceremony itself, it was performed not in broad daylight when many people could easily come, but at the early hour of 4 a.m. when normally resident monks would conduct the principal morning prayer session. At that hour, ten lay Buddhists at most came to participate, came from among those who lived in the adjacent neighborhood. Later in the day, after an early lunch, the monks three times circumambulated Buddha's statue then conducted a special ceremony where Buddhist followers donated to the monks foodstuff and various products like medicine, materials for the monk's robes, necessary commodities of daily use, and money. At the conclusion of this ceremony the main door of the front building was left open all day long for anyone who wanted to come and worship the Buddha. At the Provincial Pagoda, which was the central locus of the Provincial Buddhist Association, activities of celebration were similarly restricted.

Except during the time when I was a little kid in the period before taking my monastic vows, I had not been particularly fond of festivities that gather crowds. But even so, when this traditional religious day, Buddha's birthday, was not allowed to be fully celebrated, I felt sad, and my heart in some fashion experienced a sense of deprivation. That depressing feeling was all the more poignant this year, when celebration of Buddha's birthday at Hai Duc monastery was prohibited outright by the city police, not merely through verbal command as had been the case in previous years, but via a properly written order. The order stipulated that no crowd was to be seen at the monastery, that flags and lights were allowed only within the perimeter of the front building, and furthermore, that the monks' annual *an cu* period of retreat had to wait for "consideration and approval of the higher level". Whichever level the higher level was was not specified. It should be mentioned that ordinarily the annual *an cu* retreat for monks and nuns is organized for the three months of summer, from the fifteenth of the fourth lunar month (which coincides with Buddha's birthday) to the fifteenth of the

seventh month (which is *Vu Lan*, 'All Souls' Day', in Buddhist tradition). During those months, monks and nuns strictly remain within their respective pagoda compounds for intensive mental training and for exchange of experiences in religious practice. They are not supposed to go out at all, except for emergencies, the exception being granted upon agreement of their own congregations.

For days before the birthday, having heard that Hai Duc monastery had to wait for approval from the police to hold their annual *an cu*, the Buddhist community in Nha Trang was in an uproar. Young monks at the monastery openly expressed their dissatisfaction with the board of directors, especially my master. On behalf of the Venerable Thien Sieu, former general director of Hai Duc Institute of Buddhist Studies which had been dissolved in 1975 at direction of the communist government, my master was the manager who looked after all activities in Hai Duc monastery as a religious establishment. Simultaneously, he was also the head of Hai Duc monastery as a household. Thus, before the government, my master was directly in charge, the primary responsible personage. Since he was the link between the two sides, most of those associated with the monastery entertained the expectation that he would represent the monastery in protesting against the government's prohibition of *an cu* retreat, a most ancient Buddhist tradition -- so ancient, in fact, that *an cu* was already practiced during the Buddha's lifetime, thus predating even the tradition of celebrating Buddha's birthday, later established by his disciples. In actuality, protesting was easier said than done, for if they were in my master's position, none of the young monks would have dared to utter an objection to the government during a time of high tension. Silently, my master endured the monks' severe criticism. Some of them considered him feeble and a coward. I did not venture to express any opinion with regard to their critical comments on my master. However, like the other young monks, I was disgruntled with the interference by the state into internal monastic affairs.

In a meeting held a few days before the birthday celebration, a young monk opined, "It's just because we asked that the police think they have the right to give permission. Had we not applied at all, they wouldn't have had an occasion to prohibit our retreat or to tell us to wait for their consideration and approval. They were already extremely unreasonable when they set limits to our celebration of Buddha's birthday, which is an age-old tradition for us. But let's say we can accept that, on the grounds that the celebration will inevitably draw a great number of people from outside the monastery, which is against their established regulations. However, *an cu* is our internal business, a regular annual event throughout the ages, within the confines of our monastery and without the participation of any crowd. So why do we have to ask and wait for their permission?"

My master explained, "You can ask Thay Phuoc Chau who supervises your activities in this monastery, and he will confirm what I am telling you. First, I want to remind you that the government has previously issued the order that if we want to organize a ceremony, we have to submit an application beforehand. According to this, we may hold a festive celebration of the birthday only when the government has granted permission. In other words, we are not allowed to proceed with it quietly without their knowledge and consent. As to the matter of *an cu*, I certainly did *not* ask for their permission. On their own, they issued that conditional stipulation. Besides, they told us

to wait for consideration, they did not say that *an cu* is forbidden. Perhaps they will inform us about their decision before, or at the latest, on Buddha's birthday."

My master's explanation did not help relieve him of backbiting gossip after the meeting. Because of this controversial matter, there spontaneously arose between the monks and the board of directors an uncomfortable gap.

On the morning of the day before Buddha's birthday, I was assigned the task of cleaning up around the meditation hall of the Venerable Thien Sieu, general director of the monastery. I was squatting down pulling up grass when the Venerable stepped out of his hall. He rolled up his sleeves and joined me in my task.

During the *an cu* period in 1976, when I had just returned from Hoi An, the Venerable had called me to his meditation hall, taught me a few things about religious training, then gave me some money to buy medication for my illnesses. I knew I would never forget the warm affection and hopes which superior monks like him had for me. Two years had flown by quickly since then. Another *an cu* season was around the corner, but the practice of which was uncertain, depending on the whim of outsiders. My heart was filled with sadness and resentment.

The Venerable silently pulled up grass. I had the impression that he was also disheartened by the government's interference with our annual retreat. After a long while, he asked me, "Are you quite well now? Have you recovered completely from your illnesses?"

"Yes, Venerable, I am fine now, thank you," I replied.

He was quiet for a moment, then talked in a cheerful voice. "Pulling up grass and weeds is also a method of religious training, do you know that? People say that when pulling up grass, you must uproot it entirely. That saying can also be applied to religious practice, to elimination of 'klesa' or moral affliction. Grass, especially this type, nut grass, is the same as moral affliction. Though cultivated by no one, it grows and spreads abundantly all over the garden. We must take pains to pull up each and every stem, and pull it up by the roots. Don't think we can simply cover it with gravel and earth, or bury it deeply, and that will be good enough to take care of it once and for all. The deeper we try to bury it, the more easily it takes root."

His words jolted me. It felt as though he had read into my inner emotional struggle. I kept mute, silently engraving on my mind the simple but precious instructions offered by the Venerable. Indeed, what he said was no less than a warning that I had to be mindful of on my religious path.

Exactly on Buddha's birthday, the supervising monk Phuoc Chau, on behalf of my master, related to us the latest news: the city police issued an order in writing, which forbade us to hold our *an cu* retreat this year for reason of the requirements of political security of the whole country. The news made the Buddhist community more dissatisfied, and as a result my master was ridiculed and disparaged even more. The monastery was enveloped in a very tense atmosphere. Nonetheless, by consensus among us, a simple birthday celebration was to be held at noontime. Afterwards, individual monks at the monastery were to practice the *an cu* retreat on their own for the three months of summer, without following the traditional rites and rituals normally required.

All through that morning, everywhere I turned I heard my master discussed by others. Many younger monks referred to him irreverently as *chu ho*, 'head of household', instead of using the proper appellation like the manager monk, the abbot, or his own

religious name. Addressing a senior monk of high virtues in such a fashion revealed that they no longer had any respect for him, for *chu ho* was a secular crude term coined by the communists and used in the south only after 1975. This saddened me a great deal. I was sad not only because my master's dignity was violated, but also because disrespect for senior monks was indicative of the fact that the hierarchical order of the pagoda had been shaken to a large extent under the present circumstances of the country. When communist cadres of my own age shouted at, abused, and called an old monk or a man old enough to be their great-grandfather by the term *anh*, 'brother', or more accurately rendered in this circumstance as 'fellow', it was certainly a sign of cultural depravation in the context of traditional Vietnamese values. And once, in the eyes of a communist cadre, a pagoda or a church was no different from an ordinary house, and correspondingly an abbot or a vicar no more than a 'fellow' head of a household, subjected to his supervision and control, it was clear that religion as the symbol of national morality was no longer a solid foundation upon which truth, goodness, and beauty could be nurtured and protected for the people. I was not sure from what sources, from printed books and articles, or from the words of some respected personality, that I very early on gained insight into such a social phenomenon. And the awareness alarmed me, presenting to my vision the image of myself and my compatriots sitting in a car without brakes running down a slope, its driver passionately self-absorbed in a dream full of mythical elements. There spontaneously arose within me a wish -- rather, an urge. I wanted to do something to awake the driver, or at least to find some way to stop the car. The urge set my heart on fire. But, on assessing myself, I knew that though having reached the age of nineteen, I was still an ignorant and incapable novice. In the monastery, I was only older than three other novices. What could I do, and what could I contribute to my country? And would any one see it necessary to accept my humble contribution?

My master was sitting at a small table on the veranda of the living room, a pile of records in front of him. But his sad eyes were diffuse, directed toward some vague distance. I did not know whether the young monks' derisive comments had reached his ears. I hoped that even if he had been made aware of them, he did not need to feel concerned. In light steps, I moved toward him. He looked up and merely nodded his head in greeting, then again diverted his gaze toward some horizon.

A moment passed before he said, "If I remember correctly, it was about seven or eight years ago when you renounced the world. Yes, that's right. It was around 1970 when Hai Duc Institute was still the Intermediate Institute of Buddhist Studies directed by the Most Venerable Tri Thu. He came back from Saigon then for a two-week stay in the monastery. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, I do, master," I replied.

My master nodded. "The Most Venerable had you summoned to this living room where you prostrated to him in greeting. Remember?"

"Yes, I do, master. The Most Venerable also asked me to light incense sticks on the patriarchs' altar," I said.

"That's right. Do you know why he asked you to do that? Because the Most Venerable wanted to look at your physiognomy and observe your manner of conduct. When you had gone, do you know what he said? He told me to let you follow him to Saigon, let you live near him to be his *thi gia*, 'assistant' or 'attendant', and pursue your

Buddhist studies and practice at Quang Huong Gia Lam monastery, which he himself had founded. A lot of monks and novices lived there, and they all went to school. But at that time, seeing that you were still very young, I asked his permission to let you remain here. I also promised the Most Venerable that I would send you to Saigon to serve him when you were grown up. It's a pity that it's not possible now."

At the mention of a journey to a far away place, especially to Saigon, my whole being trembled with emotion, as if the distant southern land was waiting for me with something very intimate, something very appealing. However, I was puzzled as to why my master thought it could not any longer be done.

Quite anxious, I asked, "Respected master, why is it not possible?"

"Because... because of nothing having to do with us. The Most Venerable still lives in Saigon in his monastery. But this government requires that everybody get a travel pass to go anywhere and have his name listed in a residential registration book wherever he wants to live. So how can you manage to go down there? Last month, Thay Thien Vinh stayed away somewhere for three nights. As a result of that, the city police summoned both him and myself to the station where they interrogated us and asked us to write self-criticism for a whole week. Then they sent different agents here to check and keep an eye on us. The police warned that they would arrest whoever absents himself from the monastery for even only one night without asking for their permission beforehand. Thus, everyone would rather stay where he lives and no one wants to go anywhere. It's not that we're afraid of them. Only, we don't want to trouble other people in the monastery."

"Ah, I thought there was some other reason. But if that's the only reason then..."

I had not finished my sentence when my master cut me short. "Enough, no more discussion. Maybe sometime later they will relax their control on people's movement and residence. We'll consider it then."

The conversation ended at this point. But I had the feeling that my master did mean to tell me more than what he said. It appeared to me as if he intentionally suggested the idea of going away by bringing it up. Some time not long ago, I had thought that my master did not want to see me stay close to him. Now the same thought occurred again. I was sure I was not wrong in my interpretation. My master wanted to see me go far away. I shared the same thought. I wanted to leave. This familiar place here, even though still beautiful and poetic to me at present, seemed too cramped.

I was about to turn and walk away when my master called out to stop me. "Do you regret that I didn't let you follow the Most Venerable to Saigon?"

Respectfully, I replied, "Not at all, master. I can study and practice religion wherever I stay."

"Of course it's so. Nonetheless, some place is suitable to us at one stage of our life, while another place is suitable at another stage. Do you understand the real reason why I didn't want to let you go then?"

"No, master, I don't."

"It's simply because at that point you had just joined us, not having gone through any religious training. I was concerned that you would be easily affected by turbulent circumstances in Saigon and become spoiled like many young monks and novices."

Bowing my head, I silently thanked him for his thoughtful concern, and at the same time felt ashamed to realize that up until now, after eight years of religious studies,

I was far from being well-trained. It was not difficult to remember that for awhile in the recent past I had lost my way in dreaming so much of Nhu Nhu's image, to the extent that mindfulness and meditation was impossible. My master could not know that, were an opportunity presented for me to move to Saigon right now, I would go with a mind no more disciplined than when I had just begun my days as a novice. As I pondered on this, my master continued with his explanation.

He said, "I'm not saying that now you have enough firmness of mind and heart so that there's no fear of being tempted by external conditions. Everyone has his weak point, but if he knows it well enough it can be turned into a strength. Actually, what I want to speak with you about is not weakness and strength." My master paused, then went on in a deep voice, "To be weak or strong isn't an important issue. What matters is to be intact. And in my view, only the southern land is suitable to you. What a pity that a small thing constrains a great thing! Oh, is that the bell ringing to announce the beginning of the ceremony? Well, let's go get ourselves ready."

On my way back to my room I was puzzled by my master's last sentence: "*What a pity that a small thing constrains a great thing!*"



The monastery had no way to notify all Buddhists that the police forbade a gathering of many people. As a result, a lot of people came and attended the official ceremony honoring Buddha's birthday. In the middle of the celebration, while standing with my hands joined and my face directed toward the Buddha's statue, I suddenly had the sensation of being watched from behind. The gaze of whomever it was must have been charged with so intense a need that it sent a shivers all over my body. I did not dare turn around to look. When the ceremony was over, keeping my face toward the floor, I walked hurriedly back to my room. Just as I finished changing from the ceremonial robe, someone knocked on my door. It was a rather quick rap at first, followed by series of three knocks, tentatively, anxiously.

I approached the door and asked in a low voice, "Who is it?"

There was no reply from the outside; or if there was, it must have been a soft utterance that was drowned out by a concert of noises and voices of people milling around the veranda of the front building nearby.

I opened the door and faced Nhu Nhu. In a few seconds of bewilderment, when I was lost for words, I took note of her tearful eyes raising to look at me with both joy and reproach.

In a quivering voice she could only utter my name, "Khang."

I stood stunned and gazed at her for a rather long moment before it dawned on my consciousness that the image I thought I had buried with the passing of time was alive and clear right in front of my eyes. What was more, it did not exist merely as an imprint in my memory, but materialized in a living being, fresh and gloriously beautiful in the national dress *ao dai* of pure white, her shiny dark hair hanging loose over delicate shoulders.

Trembling beyond my control, I said awkwardly, "Have you just come for a visit, Nhu Nhu?"

"But today is Buddha's birthday, Khang. I saw you chant prayers just now, so I followed you here after the ceremony. Is this your private room?"

"Yes, it is. Come in, Nhu Nhu," I said as I opened both door panels all the way.

Nhu Nhu softly stepped in, glancing around the room. I brought over for her the only chair in the room, then sat down on the divan. Nhu Nhu delicately lifted the back flap of her ao dai forward in preparation to sit down. But she seemed hesitant to settle herself into the chair. Instead, she cast a glance toward the opened door as if looking or watching out for someone. Her nervous gesture reminded me that she had been strictly forbidden by her parents to have any contact with me.

I asked, "Who did Nhu Nhu come with?"

"With a classmate of mine. I told her to sit and wait for me outside. How lucky that I agreed to accompany her to this monastery, and therefore, by chance, I saw you again." She managed to say only that much before tears welled in her eyes, then flowed in streams. Her voice turned into a sob. "My dear Khang. Is it true that you have just returned from Hoi An? Or have you been here all along? You want to avoid me because you don't love me. Is that how it is?"

I hemmed and hawed without being able to give a reasonable answer. Awhile ago I had been anxious that those who walked past the veranda of the front building could hear us or look at us with inquisitive eyes. But her sobbing, as it aroused sympathetic feelings in my heart, removed that concern. I got up and walked to her. My left index finger slightly touched and dried her tears. Her face was a bit thinner than when we last saw each other. In a moment of tenderness at the thought of her suffering these last few months, I was again oblivious to all ideals, aspirations, and the towering high hopes of a monk. I gently put my hand on her shoulder in a comforting gesture. She turned her head sideways, pressed her cheek against my hand, holding it firmly between her face and shoulder. Her tears dropped onto the back of my hand. After a while, sensing that she had calmed down somewhat, I lifted her cheek and withdrew my hand, then returned to the divan.

I lied to her. "I did go away. I went to Hoi An. I have just returned little over a week ago. Didn't Aunt Nu tell Nhu Nhu?"

"Auntie Nu? No, lately she hasn't mentioned anything. Previously, sometimes she said you went to Hue, sometimes she said you went to Hoi An. I didn't know which was correct. And she didn't say it to me, only to my mother, but intentionally loud enough for me to overhear, so I would entertain no hope of seeing you again. Anyway, now that I've met you once more, I will not let you go away quietly without saying goodbye to me like before. You were very cruel." Again she cried. "Tell me the truth, dear Khang. You stayed away not because you didn't love me. I am certain of that. Had you not loved me, you wouldn't have had to bother like that." Choked with emotion, she paused briefly, then continued, "If you have affection for me, there's no need for you to run away from it. To love each other is not a crime. I think it's a crime only when we hurt each other."

"Yes, *anh* was at fault. I was heartless toward you, Nhu Nhu. But I didn't know what else to do. There was no sense in avoiding this small offense of heartlessness, only to commit a bigger offense later." I said this, and was taken by surprise at the ease with which I spontaneously said the word *anh*, 'elder brother', in referring to myself, *anh* being the endearing term a man uses to call himself when talking to the woman of his heart.

This was the first time ever, since our paths had crossed, that Nhu Nhu heard that intimate word from me. Her face flushed red as her lips blossomed into a lovely smile. She immediately announced, "I know that from now on nothing can be an obstacle to us."

"How so?" I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "No one can hamper the truth. Don't people often say that? If I'm sincere, and you're also sincere, nothing can obstruct us any more."

She made the statement in a tone of voice full of self-confidence and optimism. Poor Nhu Nhu! She did not know and understand that at the pagoda, I had been taught a way of looking at worldly life, according to which all that is seen as false and even what is considered true are but deluding images in a dream. Even though I sometimes was so obtuse that I forgot all about that illusory basis, sooner or later all things would present themselves to me in their ultimate nature.

There appeared the light gait of a girl approaching my room. She did not venture to utter a word or step in. The big drum placed right in front of the door obstructed my view so that I did not see her face. But I could easily guess that it was Nhu Nhu's friend.

I said in a low voice, "It seems that your friend wants to leave."

Nhu Nhu pushed back a few stray hairs, quickly dabbed at the residue of tears in the corners of her eyes, then turned toward the door.

"Right, that's her," Nhu Nhu said. "She is Giang, my classmate. She introduced me to this monastery which I did not know before. Wait for me, I'll talk with her for a moment."

She went outside. The two girls talked for awhile before Nhu Nhu returned.

She said, "I have to go. My friend has something to do, and she must be home by two-thirty. I want to stay with you until later in the afternoon because I haven't finished saying all I want to say. But it's awkward to let her go back alone. In a few days I will come again for a visit, and I will stay longer to compensate for the days I did not see you. Oh, by the way, I'm on summer vacation now. I will find a way to come to you more often. You're not going anywhere, are you? Before I forget, I want to know for sure if you're staying here for good, not going back to Hoi An anymore. Is that right? Maybe you'd better give me your address in Hoi An, just so, in case you disappear again, I will know where to find you."

"Ummm, don't bother about that. I'm not going to Hoi An again, so what's the point of having the address there?" I tried to get away from it, but she insisted on having her way, so finally I was obliged to write down the address of Long Tuyen pagoda.

When I handed her the scrap of paper with the address on it, she held my hand for a moment, then tiptoed up and whispered in my ear, "I missed you so much."

She moved away. But as she reached the door, Nhu Nhu turned around again to add, "There's one more thing. I'd like to caution you: If you see Aunt Nu, don't tell her I came here today. Just pretend as though I didn't know you're here. It's better that way. Good bye."

Mutely, from the window I watched her and her classmate pass through the crowd, walk down the outdoor stairway in front of the front building, then disappear behind the stone wall by the flagpole. Her white ao dai fluttered in the gentle breeze. My unsettled heart was stirred again. Alas, all practice of contemplation, all hard work in meditation were gone, having fled with that thin silk dress. No matter how hard I tried, I could not wipe her image out, purge it with the *quan than bat tinh* method -- mindfulness

of the body as impure. That method, at the moment, appeared to me as no better than an attempt to deface purity, or to attribute dirty, ugly substance to purity. The method was no longer effective. She had appeared before my eyes to dominate my heart in the purest, most virtuous and noble fashion. I closed the window. I stood still for a long time. Myself. There I was. In indefinable emotions.



It had all proved such a waste: the painstaking effort to stay away from Nhu Nhu for half a year. I had thought it a sensible smart move to return to Hai Duc monastery where a quiet peaceful atmosphere helped keep my heart and mind at rest, and where I could benefit from being near my own master, a highly virtuous monk. But, in the end, it had not taken much to reverse that course. Through a mere chance meeting once again, Nhu Nhu had knocked down my firm resolve with her tears, her smile, her innocent hope. Indeed, just like the Venerable Thien Sieu had advised me, love is really like wild grass, the deeper you bury it, the easier it takes root.

Under the circumstance of that meeting, with many people milling around the veranda of the main building with inquisitive eyes and with her friend waiting outside my room, Nhu Nhu and I talked to each other from an awkward distance and only for a very short time. Such constraints of time and milieu did not allow us a chance to become tuned again, so as to fully lay bare our thoughts and feelings for each other. Consequently, from the minute she left, I fell again into the stupefied foolish mental state of the previous months and days when I still resided at Linh Phong pagoda. It could be said that I degenerated like one with an incurable disease who cannot focus his mind on any other thing. At times, I thought I could not wait for her any longer. I wanted to go to her house uninvited. But then I had sense enough to try to restrain my heart's desire, keeping my promise of not revealing to her family that we had seen each other again. I sat dumbly in my room or hung around the front building to wait for her. In such a fashion I watched each hour and each day go by, even though Nhu Nhu had not promised to come soon.

It was not until a week later, at the hour of rest after lunch time, that she came. Since it was on a weekday, the area surrounding the front building and the drum tower was deserted. Not a soul was around. The monks in the monastery were taking a nap.

A completely hollow week had passed, which to me was an eternity of anxious longing. Given such keen anticipation, when hearing the knock on the door, I at once knew it had to be her. Opening the door and seeing her face, I trembled violently. Silently, Nhu Nhu took a step closer. She looked up at me; then, after a slight hesitation, embraced me. I wrapped my arms around her slender body. It was the first time we held each other. No word was necessary. No explanation was called for. There was only the beat of two hearts against each other, hearts sounding the romantic steps of a loving couple eloping hand in hand to some alien land where no sign of other human beings and their social conventions was detected.

I lost count of the minutes that flowed into quietude. But I quickly came to my senses when I realized that we risked being seen in each other's arms, as the door was not completely shut. If someone happened to catch sight of us in such a compromising position, not only would we be in disgrace, but the reputation of the monastery would be damaged as well. Gently, I disengaged myself from the circle of her arms, walked to the

door and opened wide its two panels. Only then did Nhu Nhu seem to recover herself from our indulgence.

Placing a hand on her chest, she mumbled, "Hello, Khang. I must leave right now. My family has been told that I came here with Giang on Buddha's birthday and met you. A certain person who attended the ceremony here on that day saw us and reported it to Aunt Nu. I was given a severe scolding. Oh, I don't know what to do. Today, while everyone was having their nap after lunch, I stole off to visit you for just a little while, so that you wouldn't have to wait too long. Give me the address of this place and I'll write you, okay? No? Why? You're afraid that other monks will get hold of my letters, aren't you? *Troi oi*, heavens! Why can't I be as free as my friends? Oh, maybe... maybe because you're not like other boys. Because you don't want to return to worldly life. You want to become a monk of fame, don't you?"

"No, it's not so, Nhu Nhu. Don't speak to me in that cynical tone. It's simply because I don't want to go back to the world, that's all. It's not because of fame or anything like that."

"But, I know that you love me. Am I not correct? Tell me, tell me the truth. Do you love me?"

I stammered softly, "Yes. . .s, yes I do."

"Even so, you still don't know what you yourself must do? I'm feeling miserable because of my family's disapproval and reprimand. Don't you know that?"

Disheartened, I turned to look out the window. "I know," said I. "That's why I once told you that we simply responded to each other impulsively like two young inexperienced people are wont to do. We should not have. We can't go on. I myself have struggled to give up this impossible matter."

"But you just can't give it up," she observed. "You avoided me for over half a year! And what end result did that achieve? A couple of days ago, Aunt Nu told me the truth about your whereabouts, that you never went to Hoi An. And she also abused me because of that. She thought that you were determined to forget about me, and that I still felt no shame and went on indulging my emotions. Hearing that, I should have felt too humiliated to step out of the house. But I can't help myself, because I can't bear the thought of being without you. My dear Khang, no matter how you judge me, I want to tell you that I want to meet you, to see you everyday. I'm crazy, am I not? I really don't know what to do. Perhaps I should just be grateful for whatever opportunity I have to meet you."

"Nhu Nhu, listen. Maybe it will be easier if we can consider each other as elder brother and younger sister."

"Is it your solution? Even supposing it can be done, do you think my family, and other people, will ever accept the notion of spiritual kinship between us? You're only good at trying to avoid the issue, instead of confronting it so as to resolve it outright."

Her words jolted me and made me feel ashamed. She was right. I did not expect such sharp observations from one so young. It was true that I could only resort to avoidance, that I was short of lucidity, courage, and the steel to resolve our emotional entanglement in a satisfactory fashion. I wanted to love her and be a monk at the same time, doing my best with all my heart in both cases. Yet I fully realized that those two areas of existence are allowed to go side by side only in some Buddhist sects in Japan and Tibet, while their co-existence is not acceptable in the two major schools of Buddhism in

Viet Nam. In a moment of impetuosity, prompted by consideration of my selfish and minor right to emotion and feeling, I nearly foamed in anger and wanted to shout to everyone: Why? Why is Buddhism in Vietnam not the same as in Japan and Tibet? Why doesn't a monk have the right to love? Why am I not allowed to love a very lovely person? Why am I forced to choose between two things I treasure equally?

Seeing my mute reaction, she changed her tone of voice. "Khang, are you angry with me? Please forgive me. I don't mean to attempt to force you to do this or that. I know you've been practicing religion since you were very young. You're not like other youths. The pagoda doesn't teach you how to deal with an emotional affair -- and you don't have any experience with such things either. I appreciate that. Actually, as I said to you once before, I want you to remain as you are, dignified, decent, honest, sincere and a little bit. . . well, naïve." She suppressed a giggle, then continued. "And you're a handsome and loveable monk. I love you the way you are. I'm not asking you to return to the world, or. . . to marry me. It's just because everyone prevents me from meeting you, from contacting you, that I must think of ways to be with you every single day."

She stepped closer and raised a hand to stroke my chest as a pacifying gesture. I removed her hand and said, "Never mind. I am not angry with you at all. I'm just sorry that I'm so weak..."

"Do you mean you're not strong enough to cut off your emotional attachment to me?"

"No, I don't mean that. I mean I'm weak in the sense that I don't have enough courage to make a choice. Do you know, Nhu Nhu, that I sometimes find my passion for you is about as great as my passion for the path of self-liberation? Unfortunately, the two passions have to go in the opposite directions."

Quietly, Nhu Nhu raised her head and gazed deeply into my eyes. Perhaps it was the first time she came to really realize my dilemma. She knew only the path of love, and when it was obstructed she could always find another. Her trouble and her pain could be obliterated by time. As for me, either choice would leave me, through the rest of my life, with a smoldering torment in the extreme depths of my subconscious, or in any dark corners of my soul.

All of sudden Nhu Nhu startled. She looked at her watch and said hurriedly, "Listen, Khang, I must go now. If I linger on, my family may come to know -- and that will be the death of me. Oh hello! What's that staircase for?"

"It leads to the attic above."

"Is someone...up there?" Nhu Nhu asked, rather anxious.

"Of course not. This room is mine, so is the attic. Who else can live up there?"

"May I have a quick look at it?"

"Not now. You can look at it another time. Right now you must go if you don't want to be caught and reprimanded."

"You're right. Listen, I have a question, and you must answer truthfully. I was about to forget the most important thing I'd like to talk with you about."

"All right, go ahead," I said.

"But don't misunderstand me."

"Come straight out with it. How can I understand or misunderstand what you haven't said?"

"I want to come and stay here with you for a day and a night. Can I?"

Flabbergasted by her wish, I mumbled in trepidation, "Uh... that'll be very awkward... and also dangerous. What if someone sees you?"

"Don't worry. On my way here, I looked and realized that it can be done. Your room is isolated, so no one will ever know about my visit."

"But... there's a monastic rule which says..."

"There, you already misunderstood me. Do you think I'll do objectionable things? I haven't urged you to violate any law, so why are you talking about rules and regulations? I want to come and see you just like I've gone with Giang to Ninh Hoa and stayed the night at her grandma's home. All I want is to be with you, to talk with you, to confide in you everything all through a day and a night to my heart's content. I don't think this can be done any other way. Please gratify my wish. Say yes, say yes quickly, so that I can leave before it's become too late."

"Yes...s. But... when? I'm so scared. Perhaps we'd better think about this carefully." I said this keenly realizing I did not have enough courage to welcome her appealing suggestion.

"No, we must decide right now, because this weekend Giang will be going to Ninh Hoa again. Yesterday, she came and asked me to join her on the trip, and my parents already gave me permission. Now, if you agree to have me come here, I'll tell her in private that I won't go with her. But to my family I'll say that I'll go with her. Do you follow?"

"No. You talked very fast and in a round about way, so I don't catch it."

"Oh dear, honestly! In brief, my family permits me to go to Ninh Hoa, but I won't go there. I'll come here and stay the night, then leave by the evening of the next day. Do you understand now, my naive brother?"

"I understood. But..."

"There's no but. Listen, on Friday, exactly at seven in the evening I'll be here. Please leave the door open for me then. Don't let me knock on it or call you for long, okay?"

"Yes. But... . Nhu Nhu, when you're home, think it over carefully. And see if you should do it. I'm afraid that..."

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you feel contempt for me?"

"No."

"Then that's good enough for me. My sole purpose is to be close to you, to talk with you for a whole day and a whole night. Don't think about anything further than that or you will feel apprehension. You said you wanted to regard me as your younger sister, then go ahead and do so. As for me, I understand well what I myself want. I'm not afraid, so why should you be? Remember, Friday night at seven. Today is Tuesday, so we have one, two, three more days. Now I must go home. Ah, if I'm not here by eight, you'll know that there's some difficulty, and don't wait for me. I'll try to come another time."

So saying, she tiptoed close by and planted a kiss on my cheek. I blushed and bowed my head. She giggled as she turned to go.

I suddenly recalled something and called to her. "What if there's difficulty here?"

"If I find any obstacle here, I'll turn around and go to another girl friend's house, or I'll go home and say that I canceled my trip to Ninh Hoa. Something like that. Goodbye now."

After seeing her off for a short distance, I stopped at the steps of the front building and watched her hurry down the mount. I could not help smiling at the thought that such a little and sweet person could plan and cope with circumstances so quickly. Yet, I also felt bad for her. She was not of the type to become a spoiled and loose girl; and to me, her soul and her entire body were as pure as snow and ice. In spite of that, she had to resort to manipulation of things by lying to her parents and deceiving her friends, just so she could be with me simply for the sake of talking and relieving herself of the longing for me. What and who caused this? Was it because of her family and social conventions? Or, was it because of me, a greedy monk who had not possessed adequate inner strength and firmness to decide on one or the other of the two obsessive passions he had?

Back in my room, the thought of her coming on Friday evening shook my whole body. A very earthy arousal took hold of me.

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