

DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

CHAPTER TWO

To travel from our Long Tuyen pagoda to Phuoc Lam pagoda, it would take us one-and-a-half hours, if we went along the main road circling around downtown Hoi An. We chose the shortcut which crossed the abandoned Korean barracks behind our pagoda and continued through many small rice fields and shanty houses cowering under rows of willow trees. Tuu referred to this route as "the field route" which would take us only a little more than half an hour.

The barracks seemed to have been built hastily and crudely, so that now, when they were uninhabited, there was nothing substantial left behind to indicate that there had been hundreds of soldiers earlier encamped on the location. Only some rusty sheets of iron were seen here and there. Within the first two months after the South was lost to the communists, local people came to dismantle, carry, pull, and drag away everything left of the barracks. From corrugated tin roofs, timbers, wooden boards, iron piles and cannon shell cases, to barbed wire and shoes in mismatched sizes—nothing was left to waste away. Some people picked up things without considering what they would use them for in the future. But it was wise to pick them up first, then at some point they would prove quite handy, it would seem. It was better to have these discarded things than having nothing—so said a Buddhist layman living near the pagoda (as if forewarning that when the proletarians came to power, people would be stripped of their possessions!). On the west side, outside the remaining fences of the barracks, stood a tall war memorial on a dry bank of sand where even weeds would not grow. Perhaps fierce battles had been waged here and a lot of guerillas attacking these barracks had been killed. The monument was built to commemorate them. Thus, as a whole, the landscape around Long Tuyen temple was all devastation, exhibiting nothing but marks of war and death. Quite the reverse of this was the temple itself. Looking back from a distance, I truly appreciated the simple but splendid beauty of Long Tuyen pagoda—not the splendid beauty of a huge, magnificent building, but the brilliance of a scene that only the eyes and hands of nature could create. Indeed, with its tiled roof and moss-covered walls, surrounded by a number of tall trees growing in no discernable order, only the pagoda appeared to be in perfect harmony with nature. Beside its Da Bao Buddha tower was a very old banyan tree, its crown of half-green, half-red leaves suggested the image of a parachute or a gigantic mushroom. A pond was seen to the right side of the three-entrance gate, around which stretched very tall willows which were not concerned in the least about their being in or out of line: some leaned eastward, others twisted westward. Growing haphazardly in the pagoda's garden was a great variety of fruit trees such as mango, plum, guava, amidst potted plants and other kinds of trees such as banyan, kapok, acacia, flame trees, eucalyptus. Free as grass in spring, they were all allowed to grow

wherever they preferred, provided that they did not spring up on walking paths or in the monks' rooms. Beauty in uncontrolled natural order. Walking further and looking back, I could contemplate Long Tuyen as a green island standing out clearly from the white sand bank of Cam Ha village.

We found signs of life only after having passed the abandoned barracks grounds. Fresh young rice seedlings transplanted a few days earlier draped over rice fields, their green hue shining in the morning sun quite pleasant to the eyes. Stretching in front of me, rice fields joined one another into a large piece of silk, undulating in the rhythm of a passing breeze.

In an unexpected moment of feeling gloomy, I blurted out to Tuu. "In the past, people wished that when peace came, barracks and jails would become hospitals and schools, deserted land would be turned into cultivated fields or developed into prosperous communities fully populated. How happy that would have been! If only our country had regained peace without the presence of either communists or nationalists, without factional discrimination which only led to revenge and ill-treatment of one another..."

"You're a dreamer," Tuu commented. "It seems that the dream of peace you used to have when you were at Bodhi Buddhist School before '75 still remains with you. You know what I mean, the dream that both factions, for the sake of national welfare would put down their guns and talk to each other in love and understanding. In fact, the nationalists could do so, but the Viet Cong wouldn't. I don't understand why, but it seems to me that the Viet Cong are not the kind of people who can talk without hate and prejudices."

"Maybe they've been trained to be such. But, in my view, when we hold fast to the idea that they are unforgiving and unchangeable, we ourselves are also full of prejudices, aren't we?"

Tuu smiled. "That's true. But honestly, they're the ones with prejudices. They're so zealously driven by their victory that all they can see is the desire to have revenge, to order people around, and to do everything as they please. They don't need to talk with or ask for anyone else's opinion. The result is that the number of schools and hospitals decreases, while police stations and jails multiply."

"And so the nationalists who have put down their guns now want to pick them up again and fight," I said. "And the dream of peace is still a dream. Just think about it. Given the situation, how can I stop dreaming of real peace?"

We both smiled. Joyless bitter smiles.



After having gone straight to the rear of Phuoc Lam pagoda to say hello to some friends, we paid our respect to monk Thien Phuoc, one of our former teachers at both Bodhi School and the Institute of Buddhist Studies. His room was in the building on the left of the main temple. He happily led us into the living room for a cup of tea.

"Young Khang, you've really grown up," said Monk Thien Phuoc. "Only a few months have passed since school was over, but you've grown so big and tall, a head taller than I. How old are you?"

" I'm seventeen."

"Oho! Only seventeen, with such a body. You're tall and handsome, too. This is certainly dangerous. Watch out!" He lowered his voice. "Watch out for a Madanja or she'll kidnap you!" he continued, roaring with laughter.

I smiled without saying anything. Since entering life in a pagoda, again and again I had heard that some Buddhist monk was degraded because of a love affair and had to return to the outside world. While I felt sorry for them, deep in my mind there appeared something approaching scorn and arrogance. It's just because they lack will power and determination, I thought. How can you talk about enlightenment to become a Buddha if you can't even overcome such a small temptation like women? Within a Buddhist temple, there are quite a lot of methods to help one stay away or to break off from worldly love and desires. In fact, you need to go no further than the four fundamental and common ways of mindfulness—called *Tu Niem Xu*—to be sufficiently strong to face the dilemma involved in the story of Madanja. And truthfully, you don't even need to use all of these four methods. Just one of them, such as *quan than bat tinh*—mindfulness of the body as impure—will suffice for the purpose of turning any seduction, any heavenly marvelous devastating beauty, into unwanted things to cast away. And so I believed.

In my understanding, *quan than bat tinh* could be explained and interpreted in many ways, but in essence it was the practice of fully observing and examining one's own body to perceive its truly dirty, ugly and worthless side. Once Buddha told those of his disciples who were not yet competent in this method to go to the place in the woods where the poor and the outcasts threw their relatives' corpses, and to sit there contemplating and reflecting on a dead body in front of them, from the first day until the day when it was decomposed and reduced to a skeleton. For those who were competent in the practice of contemplation—referred to as *quan tuong* or *quan niem*—it was necessary only to sit cross-legged in a quiet place and analyze meticulously the substance of each part of their bodies—skin, flesh, fat, hair, fingernail, toenail, blood, pus, phlegm, saliva, and so on. By that method of contemplation, a disciple would become disgusted with his own physical body. Hence, he would be able to detach himself from obsession with a nice and beautiful body. When he had mastered this method of contemplation, he could look at someone standing in front of him as though at a dry skeleton or a dirty decayed body.

Meanwhile, the case of Madanja was told as one of the Buddhist tales used to set the example for both monks and nuns. Madanja was a girl from an outcast family in India, in Buddha's time. One day, while she was drawing water from a well, a monk named Ananda, who was Buddha's cousin, happened to pass by on his way back from a round of begging for food. He stopped and asked Madanja for some water to drink. While offering it to the monk, she discovered that he was extremely handsome. His face, as well as his body, were so bright and stately that it was hard to imagine finding his equal in the world. Back home, she could not stop thinking about Ananda and soon grew love-sick. Learning of her dilemma, Madanja's mother helped her by engaging the services of a sorcerer. This man gave her a charm to lure and retain Ananda so that he would become her husband, for they all realized that officially proposing to a monk would never be found acceptable. It was not clearly known if the charm worked or simply because of a moment of weakness that Ananda accepted Madanja's invitation and came to her house. When she shut the door, Ananda awoke to the reality and knew that

as a monk he was not allowed to enter a female's house like that. Then he concentrated his mind on Buddha and succeeded in getting away from her. Everyday after that, whenever Ananda walked passed her house, Madanja never failed to follow him, watching him and waiting for a chance to embrace him. Ananda was troubled, but did not know how to deal with this matter. He reported it to Buddha and asked for advice. Buddha instructed Ananda to invite Madanja over to the monastery. Receiving Buddha's invitation, she was anxious. But she boldly made her appearance because she loved Ananda so much and would do whatever he asked.

"Do you truly love Ananda?" Buddha inquired.

"Yes... yes, I truly do."

"Do you want him to be your husband?"

"Yes, I do."

"You can do that under one condition. Do you agree to that?"

"Yes, I will agree to even thousands of conditions."

"Very good. Then have your head shaved to become a nun, and seriously commit yourself to religious life for about one year. If you are successful in that, I will allow you to marry Ananda."

Madanja was glad to accept the only condition imposed by Buddha which seemed easy to fulfill. After half a year studiously and continuously practicing various types of contemplation including *quan than bat tinh*, Madanja became enlightened, realizing how ridiculous her past passion was. She knelt down before Buddha to show her repentance. It was curious that even then, Ananda had not achieved any remarkable merit. Of the two, Madanja was later to denounce the world, but the first to succeed. And to her enlightened eyes, then, Ananda, the very monk whose body was fine and whose virtues were perfect, was only a common person.

And so the story unfolded.

"What are you thinking about, Khang?" asked monk Thien Phuoc, bringing me back to the present.

"Nothing in particular, master."

"Are you writing any poetry or prose these days?"

Tuu replied for me. "Only digging fields. Where can poetry and prose find a place these days, master?"

"But digging fields? Khang, do you have to farm, really?" Monk Thien Phuoc seemed surprised.

"Well, I'm old enough now, not too young any more, master," I answered.

"He digs very well and he's tough, too," Tuu cut in again.

"There's nothing wrong with farming. Here too, we all are rice farming, no one remains idle. But whenever you have spare time, you should resume reading and writing. You must keep practicing writing to improve your style, Khang. No genius can sit still doing nothing and expect to produce great works. Writing literature is such a noble undertaking," said monk Thien Phuoc.

I looked out to the yard where some sparrows were hopping about, idly observed.

"But after having sharpened my writing skills, what will I write, and for whom, master?"

"You're still young, how come you're so pessimistic? If you're talented, there'll always be a suitable place for you to use your skills. As a good writer, you can serve

society at any time, especially now that our country is at peace."

"Peace? You think our country is truly at peace, master?" I asked.

"What else do you think? No more shooting and killing between the two opposing sides. No more war. Don't you call that peace? And now, it's time for young people like us to commit ourselves to re-building and serving our country."

"I think reality out there may not be as simple as you visualize, master," Tuu interrupted.

I joined Tuu. "I heard from brother Nang that in other provinces, there has begun a movement to destroy so-called decadent cultural products. Books and other printed materials published under the former southern regime must be handed in to the local Committee of Culture; otherwise the Committee will come to each house to search thoroughly and confiscate them. It'll soon be Hoi An's turn to comply."

"Well, they will confiscate only what's classified as depraved literature, and whatever is good and beautiful will be retained, I'm sure," monk Thien Phuoc eagerly insisted. "It's a good thing to do, nothing wrong with it. Literature is beauty after all. Whatever is not beautiful should be thrown away and destroyed so that only refreshing, pure, fine things remain in our country. Isn't it similar to the aspirations which religious people like us hold dear and try to fulfill?"

What he said puzzled me greatly. The fact was that since the new regime had come to the south, all novices like us dropped out of school. We stayed within pagodas, devoting ourselves to Buddhist teachings while farming to feed ourselves. We were completely unaware of news and activities going on in the outside world. What we knew was only hearsay. The words just now uttered by monk Thien Phuoc sounded very much the way rumors would have it. How could one tell what was correct and what was not?

Suddenly something was triggered in my mind, and words jumped out of my mouth. "If we say that depraved things must be wiped out and only beautiful decent things are to be kept, then why is it that the fine Institute of Buddhist Studies had to be closed, ending the task of training monks? I heard that Van Hanh University in Saigon was also impounded by the government. More than that, all Buddhist schools in the country are no longer run by the National Unified Buddhist Congregation. They have all been placed under government control."

Monk Thien Phuoc was about to say something, but I plunged ahead. "And regarding the matter of writing prose and poetry, what papers are left to write for? I also heard from Nang that the paper *Thang Bom* (magazine for the children), as well as others like *Tuoi Hoa* and *Tuoi Ngoc* (magazines for the teenagers), were all closed down. Even periodicals for children were forced to discontinue, let alone those with serious intellectual and literary content meant for adults. That alone would show that something is wrong. How can one classify those periodicals as perverse, as harmful? Buddhist periodicals, major as well as minor, have also ceased publication. Religious books as well as publications by the authors Thich Nhat Hanh, Nguyen Hien Le, Bui Giang, Pham Cong Thien, Doan Quoc Sy, and many others, no matter on what subject matter, were all confiscated, burned. You yourself used to lend me those books to read, did you see anything abominable in them? Schools were impounded. Papers and journals were suspended. Publications belonging to private citizens were eliminated without any consideration as to actual practical content and quality. Everything is controlled by the government, so what is left to discuss or to do?"

Monk Thien Phuoc seemed a little startled by my outburst. He looked at me for a while, silently thinking, then shook his head with a smile and said no more. Sensing the tension, Tuu kicked my leg under the table, then said. "Perhaps there had to be some mistakes at the beginning, then things would be set right later. Isn't that so, master?"

The master nodded his head, quickly agreeing. "Yes, I think so. In the transitional period we should expect some mishandling, but gradually all that will be rectified."

"If so, later on our studies will also return to normal, won't they, master?" Tuu inquired.

"Certainly so," monk Thien Phuoc answered, his eyes on me.

I calmed down a little bit, but did not feel like expressing myself further. To break the silence, Tuu continued. "Master, beside our religious studies, do you think we Buddhist monks need to do something to contribute to the country after the war?"

"Good question. Of course we have to contribute something. For ages now, we Buddhist monks have not offered much practical contribution to life. Now is a good opportunity for us to roll up our sleeves and to work. After the long destructive war, from towns to villages, both the nation and the people need to recoup and the war wounds need to heal. Buddhist monks must be present everywhere to carry out their long-cherished yearning to save others and to help improve human existence."

Again I interrupted. "Master, no one objects to the idea that rolling up one's sleeves to work for the common good is the right thing to do. But to me the issue doesn't seem as simple as you say. Between Buddhist monks and the leaders of the new government there's a very big gap. It's hard to bridge that gap so they can come together in mutual understanding and trust, and work side by side for the reconstruction of the country. You know, it appears that the war isn't over yet. I've heard that remnants of the defeated ARVN are engaging in skirmishes in the Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia border areas, and at times even appearing in the Sat forest in the South and also in the highland jungles."

"That occurs infrequently. They're after all only remnants of a lost army that belonged to a completely collapsed government, and as such they can only be regarded as rebels. There's only war between the armies of two opposing governments. No one talks about war between a legitimate government and remnants of a lost army. Our country is at peace."

"I'm sorry, but I don't think so. I have the feeling that the South is being invaded by the communists, and its people are dissatisfied, and they want to recover this territory," I said.

Monk Thien Phuoc burst out laughing. "Invasion? There's no such thing. Vietnam is of the Vietnamese people. When China seized our land, we resisted; when France invaded, we fought; when Japan and America brought their troops onto our shores, we drove them away. Whatever can be called invasion here? We invaded neither China, nor France, nor Japan, nor America. We only recovered the land of the Viet people. The Communist North Vietnamese are themselves Vietnamese, they are not foreigners. They are our brothers after all, of the same home country."

"But..."

I wanted to say something, but did not know how to express myself. My knowledge was still too shallow to enable me to argue effectively with the monk. For one

thing, I had no clear concept of the communists and the new government. Only images had impressed themselves on my mind. They were simply images which had not evolved into concepts explainable in words: images of communist soldiers and policemen carrying guns, flags, and banners from the North into the South, disrupting and upsetting the way of life familiar to local people whose hearts were filled with fear. Imprisonment, executions, book burning. Those images were terrible beyond my imagination and comprehension. It was not as though I had never read novels, books and periodicals on the subject of war, about destruction and bloodbaths during the two world wars. I had denounced war as I felt horrified about the killing. But at least I could accept, or more correctly, I could understand the state of mind and circumstances of two opponents carrying guns and shooting at each other on a battle field. On the other hand, there was no way I could stomach the fact that men of power mercilessly coerced, oppressed and humiliated powerless innocent people who had no way to defend themselves. It pained me and repulsed me to view the oppression, the deprivation of freedom and the right to live; whether all that was done in the name of a doctrine, an ideology or a religion would not make one iota of difference to me.

So I was astounded to finally see that monk Thien Phuoc apparently reserved much sympathy for the new government. Indeed, like a number of other southern people, he had welcomed the new government as the representative of an ideal which is suitable and advantageous to our country and our people. Perhaps that attitude resulted from over-optimism, a blind trust in a regime on account of its promissory propaganda without any insight into its nature and reality. I was not sufficiently mature both in age and in wisdom to correctly evaluate the new government. But even so, I realized soon enough through sensitivity of feeling that often what was excessively flashy on the surface betrayed an absence of real value in its basic nature. Moreover, whatever group or organization depended solely on sheer force to expand and develop and to coerce others to follow their way could not be fine and good, no matter what sort of holy or lofty ideals they proclaimed.

Buddhist monks, having undertaken various studies and training, should not be as superficial as the common folk in their view of and cooperation with political powers in the world. Once they have chosen as their ultimate end the path to enlightenment and liberation, they should not be concerned about associating themselves with any mundane worldly ideal, I reflected. Even when a certain government or party advocates good policies purportedly designed for the good of society and the welfare of its people, it does not necessarily mean that they possess an ideal so noble that the monks should follow at the expense of their religious calling. The two ideals are different, one worldly, the other religious. Buddhism, after all, is a religion, even if in the simplest classification and definition of the term. If one argued that a religious man also has to walk some paths inextricably linked to worldly life—for example, by participating in social and humanitarian services—thereby he unavoidably must take part in the building of social life, one would do well to remember that such commitment is always encouraged in Mahayana Buddhism. As such, change of government would not in any way affect the ideal of saving all sentient beings held dear by Buddhist monks. There can only be governments that support or prevent monks from following their chosen path, but there can never exist any government that is entitled to impose its worldly ideal on the religious ideal of Buddhist monks. Generations of enlightened Buddhist masters have

beautifully exemplified the depth of Buddhist teachings, from the ideal of enlightenment to the doctrine of indwelling in the world to save humanity. Those who follow closely in their footsteps need only to look up to their predecessors for perfect and noble models, and there is absolutely no necessity for them to borrow, to imitate, to be overwhelmed by any other ideology or social ideal. At most, if Buddhist monks ever praise a certain policy promoted by a government, this expressed praise would be no more than an encouragement for a correct way which may prove beneficial to the masses. It certainly should not be construed as an expression of fear, of flattering, of so much admiration to the extent that the religious ideal favorably merges with the worldly desires of the group in power. Buddhist monks, those who devote all their lives to the task of perfecting their personalities and working for the welfare of the world—without demanding any material compensation or even mental privileges like fame, gratefulness and admiration by others—are like brilliant mirrors against which selfish and greedy people can look at their own bad reflections and change for the better. And so my private thoughts flowed.

Last month, Phuong, arriving from Nha Trang, had told me that most of the novices in the same class as I was in years ago had left the pagodas and merged into the new society. The news saddened me for several days. But then I tried to comfort myself with the thought that it was only because those novices still depended so much on their families that they could not resist their relatives' guidance in whatever circumstances. It was particularly so in the new social situation where the government, though also run by Vietnamese, was alien to the way of thinking as well as the traditional way of living of their southern compatriots.

Thus, one clear thing I learned was that a few among those who still wore a monk's habit had expressed admiration for a worldly leader and enthusiasm for the flashy display of revolutionary socialist ideals by the ruling party. This very fact startled and stupefied me. Perhaps in my view, monk Thien Phuoc was a typical representative of those misguided religious persons. I could not comprehend this state of affairs. The result was that I did not feel like talking with him any longer. I urged Tuu to go with me to the head monk from whom I borrowed the Lotus sutra. We then left.



The conversation with monk Thien Phuoc stayed in my mind for days, keeping me in a dark reflective mood. It seemed to me that the common sickness shared by the fanatic and the superstitious was the love of preaching and arguing for what they had learned by heart, eagerly persuading others to acquiesce without bothering to know anything about the other side's view and belief. When those who set out to conquer believed that whatever concerned their side was always right and, of course, whatever held by the other side was wrong, they would not refrain from imposing their ideology on others. This imposition was the seed of disaster, causing war to spread everywhere. History showed that ideological warfare was more destructive than wars originating from the greedy desire to seize land and property or from passion for power. This was not difficult to understand. Those who were greedy for power might not have the ambition to force the losers to believe in the same things they did, whereas to those who conquered in the name of ideology or religious belief, power was only one of their ultimate ends.

I was very disturbed when monk Thien Phuoc seemed to be unconditionally

enamored with the new government. But still I highly honored him, partly because he was a young talented member of the sangha and partly because he was an intellectual who respected others' beliefs and thought. Even though he praised the new regime, he did not try to persuade me to do the same. To each his own way—it could not be otherwise—provided that he really did something good for mankind, I thought.

About a month later, I learned that monk Thien Phuoc was no longer at Phuoc Lam temple. He had voluntarily returned to the world and committed himself to the task of re-building the country as the new government encouraged. His education, in addition to the virtues of modesty and patience he had acquired as a monk, certainly would help him contribute a great many good things to society. I did not dare to think that he was wrong. I only hoped that his commitment stemmed from his loving-kindness for others and that he had chosen the most suitable way to carry it out; that it was not his intention to help strengthen a worldly government, a political party which, as I understood, were not much liked and trusted by the people.

"Khang, you have a visitor," Tuu said with a slightly sardonic smile, as he came into our common room.

Turning toward the door, I saw a soldier take off his hat. I had not made out who he was before his friendly words came through his smile. "How have you been? Didn't you recognize me? You looked lost."

Only when he came closer and gave me his hand to shake did I recall who he was. Tan was an old friend, though not a close friend. He had been a novice like me. Years ago, he and I participated in the same novice ordination ritual where we accepted the ten precepts of a *Sa Di* (*Sāmanera*) held in the Institute of Buddhist Studies here in Quang Nam. He was some years older than I. Previously, while still a novice, he had already been dark-skinned. Now as a soldier, his skin was even darker, with a healthy sheen. He became robust and firmer. I did not know what to say, so I just smiled at him in greeting.

"I thought you would have gone back to Nha Trang," Tan said. "Yesterday, I stopped by Phuoc Lam temple and the monks there told me that you're still here to do labor. So I decided to visit you at once, today."

Tan's voice betrayed genuine joy and pleasure. In spite of that, I could not help perceiving a distance between us. It was a strange, very sad distance felt between two old friends, two old acquaintances. I wondered if we had been friends because we had worn the same Buddhist garment and now we had become strangers because we wore different clothes.

Since there was no chair in the room, Tan sat down on the little bed adjacent to mine. Before 1975, this room had been the bedroom of novices of the *Ca Diep* (*Kasyapa*^{*}) rank. The room was large, holding eighteen small beds for eighteen persons. There were now only five of us left, but the eighteen beds remained where they had always been. No one had bothered to remove the unused ones. Tan and I sat on two beds set toward the back of the room. Looking from where we were, I was struck by the awfully desolate air exuded by the empty beds, an air one would feel in a hospital or a morgue. Images of the tumult, panic, and fear expressed on everyone's face during the great evacuation a couple of months before April 30th were edged in my mind and heart. But only now, sitting silently in front of an old friend wearing a loose communist army uniform, did I really feel their impact. I forced a smile to cover my awkward silence. A

* The name of an Arhat who was one of the ten major disciples of the Buddha.

while later, recalling what he had said, I blurted out. "If I go back to Nha Trang, it's for my Buddhist studies; and if I remain here, I'll pursue the same thing. So I don't think it necessary to go back there. I'm staying here to continue my religious training, not to comply with doing manual labor."

Tan seemed a bit taken aback by my words. But quick-witted as he always was, he smiled and said at once. "Is labor so bad that you have to reject it? Everybody works now. The whole country works. No one sits idly pointing his finger and exploiting others' labor any more. We soldiers labor, too, not only carrying guns to fight the enemy."

"I'm not ashamed that I also engage in manual labor. But that's not the reason that keeps me here. Moreover, labor is never an end in itself. Well, that's enough, we don't need to discuss it. Have you just joined the army?"

"For only a few months now."

"Master Thien Phuoc said we are in a time of peace. Why is it necessary to carry guns?"

"How about entering monkhood? Is it still necessary?"

"Yes, it's necessary as long as human beings suffer and need help to attain salvation. The practice of religion doesn't depend on changes brought about by war or peace. It won't do for a person to hide in a pagoda during time of danger and wait there until things return to normal before rejoining the world again."

"I'm not sure I like your insinuation. When did I ever hide myself in the pagoda? I did in fact enter monkhood, but now I don't think that continuing with religious life is to be recommended, that's all. So I have returned to the world and joined the army to devote myself to the country. This is a very good thing to do, you should have encouraged me."

I burst out laughing. "Wah! I was only kidding, but you're offended. I had thought... Oh well, forgive me."

At that moment, Tuu entered with another novice named Dung. Tan sat quiet, greeting them with a smile. I seemed to recall that in those days when he was still a novice, I had never seen Tan join his hands in the Buddhist fashion to greet anyone. He was a swaggerer, quite arrogant. He did not attempt to make friends with anyone and no one wanted to befriend him. All the same, during that time, for some unknown reason, he had tried to be close to me. He bought books for me and engaged me in idle discussions about philosophy. I talked with Tan as I did with many other novices during the ordination ritual and the period of intense meditation and study called *an cu*, or *Varsika*, during the summer that year. But he and I had not become close friends. However, after the ordination ritual, Tan continued writing letters and sending books to me from Phuoc Lam pagoda. The letters always reiterated that I was his best friend. Now, perhaps because he still considered me his best friend, he had come to visit unconcerned as to whether I would happily welcome him or not.

The presence of the other two seemed to make Tan feel uncomfortable. He asked me to go outside with him for some fresh air. Unwillingly I agreed, walking with him across the yard in front of the main building to the cool corridor bordering the unused classrooms. Stopping to rest on a flight of steps, Tan said. "The novices here seem to be looking at me with very strange eyes, without any friendliness. But I don't care. I don't really give a damn about what they think. I'm visiting you today, Khang, because of our

old friendship. I don't know why but I never forget you. I know that you always seemed indifferent, seeing nothing worthwhile in the rather shaky friendship between us. But come to think about it, that doesn't apply to our relationship alone, right? Many other novices also wanted to be friends with you then, but you weren't close to anyone. I wonder what you think about your friends, including me. It looks as though you look down on us because you think you surpass us all."

"I think no such thing," I protested. "I've never felt myself superior to any novice I've known either from the pagodas or from the same class. I wouldn't dare to look down on anybody. What do I have so special that I'm entitled to do so? All novices were my close friends."

"Considering everyone your close friends amounts to having no close friend at all," Tan concluded.

"Why do we need closeness which is an emotional attachment? Buddhist monks should not desire emotional ties with anyone, even if it's only friendship. It's certainly good to have friends throughout our religious training for mutual support and encouragement. But I don't think we should make it an issue to distinguish between a close friend and a casual friend and then treat them one way or another accordingly. All friends are friends, isn't that good enough? This view doesn't contradict Buddhist practice at all."

We fell silent for a moment. Tan resumed his train of thought. "Even now, you're still talking about entering monkhood and taking up religious training, about the matter of renouncing the world or remaining in it. You sound so out-dated."

"Then you think... there's no need for religious studies these days?" I asked.

"Give it all up! Have you forgotten what I wrote in those letters I sent you?"

"What letters? What did you write?"

"Good Heavens! The way you asked shows that you didn't care to read my letters."

"Oh, those letters you sent me long ago... which discussed philosophy. I read them but didn't understand much, so how can I remember? Anyway, those letters are of the past, they don't concern what we are discussing now. Let's get back to the matter of study. Talk to me seriously, would you? It's interesting that you've just come out of a pagoda and now you're saying religious studies are no longer needed. Please explain that."

"Actually I've come to visit you with a purpose, not without a reason," Tan said. "Frankly, I feel that the years spent in the pagoda were such a waste of youthful energy. We didn't do anything useful for human life, neither did we get any concrete advantages for ourselves. I'd like to advise you to give up this religious life, the sooner the better; otherwise you will regret it later on. For even if you don't withdraw from it right now, some day you'll have to, anyway."

"We renounced the world for the purpose of pursuing religious training. If we did not fulfill that aim, then yes, it would be a waste of the youthful period of our life. Moreover, we entered monkhood to prepare ourselves for the task of supporting the spiritual life of human beings. If we didn't train well, what good could we do for ourselves, let alone for others? This fact can apply to anybody under any circumstances at any time. The person who does not live fully the ideal he has nurtured will find his life empty of meaning. If someone can't find anything advantageous during his training in a

pagoda, it's because he hasn't truly studied yet. What I mean to say is, that person may not consider religious training as the ultimate aim, but only uses the garment of a monk to conceal himself from something in the world. To renounce the world in that fashion is certainly a waste of time. As for me, I wouldn't dare to say that I understand Buddhist teachings very well or that I've done something useful for mankind. But I can definitely say that I will never regret having left the world for religious practice. Do you actually feel it necessary to advise a person to give up what he likes most, to which he devotes his whole heart and mind? Look at you now for instance, you are passionately pursuing a certain worldly ideal, but I don't see that I should convince you to give it up and follow me on my chosen path. It's up to you to commit your life to it after you have examined and approved its real value."

"But I'm not discussing the nature and the value of the ideal you are pursuing, Khang. I am looking at the practical side of it."

"What do you mean?"

"As I've just said, if you don't abandon the religious life now, you'll have to in the future as a matter of course. There won't be any religion left on earth. Because I like you very much, I am forewarning you about this true fact so that you can think about it and plan your course of action."

I smiled, rather arrogantly and full of self-confidence. "Someday on my religious path, if I fail and give up my ideal, the reason will definitely not be because I'm coerced by any person or any power."

"You are sure about that?"

"Quite sure. I have chosen of my own volition to renounce the world, and I will also maintain the freedom to decide whether to return to it. Nobody can force me."

"Regrettable! Just wait and see." Tan said, a half smile on his lips.

Not being able to contain my irritation, I continued. "And it's shallow to say that once having belonged to a pagoda one can't do anything useful for life. Benefits don't always have to be visible before they can be called as such. A cloud passing in the sky may be useless in your eyes, but it'll be great for the state of mind of someone who wants to relax and contemplate nature for her aesthetic beauty. If one only looks for so-called concrete benefits, then at present in my eyes and in those of the people of the South, soldiers like yourself are not doing anything useful for the country. While you say that it's peacetime, that the war is over, the army keeps increasing the number of soldiers. Nearly one million troops, isn't that right? Novice Nang told me so. What a horror! What are you doing now except engaging in military exercises? Who you'll fight in the future is anybody's guess. Practically, one only sees that people have to toil in order to feed you. Show us what concrete benefits you contribute to our country, then."

"Not right now, but you'll see it soon enough. Our army will go to Cambodia to perform our international duty... On the other hand, we must defend our country against the threat of attack by the Chinese. We are preparing ourselves for the future when the country will need us."

"So is the case with a monk. Whenever people need it, they'll see immediately some benefit that a monk offers them. That benefit doesn't have to be something that can be displayed, and it's not confined to food and clothing. You're a man carrying a gun, not directly producing rice and clothes, then surely you must know the type of benefits I'm talking about, don't you?"

The long silence which followed felt heavy between us. The sun was high. The white sand bank near the corridor reflected dazzling light. Footprints of men, birds and cattle were superimposed on one another over the waves of sand, suggesting a black and white, dark and light, jumbled, undefined painting—like a work created by a painter in one of his disintegrative moods.

I had not expected that there would be a time in my life when I had to talk so unkindly to my friends. And the strangest thing to me was that my stream of thought at the moment was far from gentle and simple, far from the purity of a painting of nature dressed in Zen qualities. It seemed true that every type of stream and river enjoyed moments of peace, but also could not avoid stormy days—a fact that I myself and fellow novices of my age group had not noticed for many years.
