

DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

CHAPTER THREE

For several years before 1975, the program of the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Quang Nam had included an introductory course on Zen teachings. Every summer, a regular evening class on Zen Buddhism had been offered, run by the superior monk who was the director of the Institute. This class was designed for monks and novices from other pagodas in the province who had come for the *an cu* period of intense Buddhist training. However, it could be said that the Zen spirit had only exerted its strong and deep impact since the day the Institute was dissolved to send its monk students to the field to work day after day like professional farmers, and especially since monk Nhu Chan appeared on the scene.

A disciple of the superior monk director, Monk Nhu Chan had gone to study at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Saigon. He was finishing his senior year and on his way to obtaining a bachelor's degree when the event of 30 April '75 occurred. He then left Saigon and returned to Long Tuyen pagoda to rejoin Buddhist practice.

Monk Nhu Chan was still young, under thirty, probably about twenty-six or twenty-seven, I would guess. He was short, sturdy, with dark brown skin. In the fields, he worked strongly and steadily. After only a short period working among us, he seemed to have realized that the depressing dullness embedded in our day-after-day hard labor would be lightened with a Zen air, so as to make it possible for young monks and novices like us to breath under the new regime. It was not as though he himself had brought Zen here. It could only be said that quiet and self-generated strivings of the novices in this place were activated and enlivened by monk Nhu Chan's powerful mental energy, leading to a newer, and livelier atmosphere for Zen meditation training. As with Sang, my close classmate who was also from my hometown, I was not beyond the pull of that energy.

In the days when no farm work was required, we were lectured by monk Nhu Chan on various sutras like *Kim Cang Bat-nha Ba-la-mat* (Vajrachedika-prajna-paramita or The Diamond sutra), *Lang Gia* (Lankavatara); *Thu Lang Nghiem* (Surangama or The Heroic Gate sutra). Previously, those sutras had been explained to monks or to us novices by the superior monk director. But through the guidance of monk Nhu Chan, I saw with greater clarity the path and ultimate goal of Zen Buddhism. Maybe by this time my mind was like a fertile ground which had been cleared by the superior monk director, and had been well-prepared with several years of focused study. As a result, monk Nhu Chan only needed to water and add nourishment before the good seeds which had already been sown would germinate and grow, initiating a stronger process of development. Like a blind man having just regained his eyesight, who would not feel tired of looking at his surroundings, I devoted my whole being to the contemplation of my own mind. I touched it, examined it, then played with it like playing with an orange or a ball, and

sometimes I threw it away to make it disappear into emptiness. As I watched its disappearance, I myself also disappeared with it, and my ego-self was no more. Then, I again saw myself reflected in emptiness...

More and more, I came to know my own mind clearly, to the extent that wherever I looked I would see it. And while reading or listening to sutras, following a discussion on Buddhist philosophy or observing some fact or event, it would appear that all these things helped in furthering my understanding of the real nature of mind. In fact, my mind seemed to have assimilated monk Nhu Chan's precise explanations of sutras and even his egocentric behavior, so as to develop fully as a blooming flower at the beginning of its season. It could be said that this period witnessed the utmost in my intellectual functioning. Several times I was surprised to hear, see, and comprehend things I seemed to have heard, seen, and comprehended before. Sometimes I could even know beforehand what the venerable monks were going to say or try to convey in a simple and thorough manner to the others. I also read again books on Zen teachings that I had studied several times before. However, this time, with my mind much sharper, I felt enlightened by every passage I read. The joy seemed to overflow the rhythm of my breathing, continuously second after second, and it was deepened and enriched much more with insights I gathered from prayer texts or even from mundane things in daily life. The most impressive experience during this period which I would always remember occurred in an afternoon session while, together with other monks, I was circumambulating and chanting aloud Buddha's name. I was then ringing a bell called *linh*, one of the three instruments in bronze found in Buddhist temples. The principal bell, *chuong*, heard both in regular prayer sessions and in more elaborate ceremonies, varies in size from that of a pomelo to that of a circle of arms. Shaped like a hollow bowl, *chuong* is placed snugly, its mouth facing up, on a ring cushion stuffed with cotton or cloth; and it is struck with a wooden pallet wrapped tightly in cloth or rubber. All this cushioning buffer makes the sound it gives forth deep and grave in tone. The second kind, *linh*, can be described as a small bell similar to those rattled by ice-cream sellers in Viet Nam, having a clapper in its cavity and a crown on top. One holds it by the crown and jingles it with its mouth facing downward, to hear the high-pitched and joyful sound of the clapper against its wall. Its crown is often elaborately engraved, and so is its outer surface, with images of Buddha or Bodhisattvas. The third type of religious instrument is called *khanh*, even smaller than *linh*. It has a handle by which it can be held with its mouth facing up. One uses a metal stick to rap against its lip, producing delicate sounds of even higher-pitch than those emitted from a *linh*. It had not taken me long to discern that when a prayer session is accompanied by a concert of different instruments, the basic musical measure is set by the slow or rapid rhythm of *mo*, another indispensable religious instrument, which is a hollow wooden block, rapped with a wooden pallet. The rhythm of *linh* and *khanh* is always twice as fast as that of the *mo*, and they usually are sounded when rhythmic chanting is in progress. In fact, in Quang Nam, the ringing of *linh* was done during circumambulation. On that particular afternoon, while listening attentively to the sound of the clapper against the wall of the *linh*, I suddenly came to grasp the meaning of *the sound of one hand clapping*, a famous koan which I had earlier studied for a few days without much understanding.

My religious training was not confined to scheduled sessions of prayers, meditation, and attendance to lectures on sutras. The hours of working in the field and

garden were also part of that training, a training without pause or interruption. Indeed, it seemed that after hours of physical labor, the monks and novices—not counting the elder ones of the *ty kheo* or bhiksu rank, and those of monk Nhu Chan's age—spent the remainder of their time completely involved in a way of living overwhelmingly enveloped in an air of Zen, which was promoted by monk Nhu Chan. It was true that he had an indescribable appeal expressed in his bright and lively eyes and in his strong voice that resounded like a copper bell. About ten remaining novices in the pagoda, including me, soon became obedient lambs submitted to that monk's shepherding.

However every movement has its ups and downs, its prosperity and decline. Less than two months into orderly and thriving activities in a Zen Buddhist fashion, the religious lifestyle, stimulated by monk Nhu Chan, suddenly lost its zest and seemed to disappear gradually along with his many days of silence. Until one night, after a hard day of work, we tired novices were lying down resting or sitting up reading when monk Nhu Chan burst into our room with a serious expression on his face. He was wearing a monk's formal garment, a long string of beads around his neck, and carried a small bamboo stick in his hand.

He walked to the middle of the room and said out loud, "Everybody, follow me. All of you! Come on, come on. Let's go to my place of worship and listen to *Kwan-yin*, the Goddess of Mercy's mysterious miracle."

I was immersed in a book then, and was not very pleased with this interruption, though I always enjoyed his religious lectures. But there he stood, urging, "Come along, hurry up! Those who wish for the supreme enlightenment of the Buddhas can't miss the chance to listen to Kwan-yin's 'secret words for intuitive perception'."

He was using a Sino-Vietnamese phrase to refer generally to the Buddhas' secret language that could only be heard and understood intuitively and directly through meditation, not through thinking and discussion.

The other novices, including Sang, quickly got up and put on their monk's habit and hurriedly ran after monk Nhu Chan, while I still hesitated. Tuu, the oldest among us, perhaps as old as monk Nhu Chan, seemed to acquiesce readily. He put on his proper garment, then walked out of the room with the others. They rushed out as if they were truly afraid of missing a golden chance. Unwillingly removing myself from my desk, I stepped over to the clothing racks for my own long garment. I was the last to leave.

When I arrived at monk Nhu Chan's room, all the novices had been settled for the session, kneeling on the floor. With their hands joined, they were wholeheartedly listening to the monk's lecture on the Great Compassion, *Metta cita*. I knelt down, joined my hands and listened, too. No explication of Buddhist principles by this monk was unhelpful to me. The chosen subjects were often described briefly but richly, every expression precise, none redundant or inadequate. Nonetheless, it might be said that this was the first time, without enthusiasm, I followed the others to monk Nhu Chan's private place of worship for his lecture on Buddhist teachings. It seemed there arose in me some rebellious impulse that had not begun to express itself until this moment, in this circumstance. Though in the end I had also done his bidding, it did not feel quite right in my heart. Perhaps my heart, normally flexible and gentle, would sometimes grow stubborn, firm, far from servile, so that it would refuse to accept anyone's guidance, especially when the guidance was no less than an imposition, a coercion. Only a free spirit was noble; no coercion of any kind could lead to nobleness, I thought.

The lecture was short, ending after about fifteen minutes. Together we all returned to our room. While hanging up the garment onto a hanger, I suddenly became aware of the strong impression that the group attendance to the lecture tonight was something comic. The atmosphere of Zen here appeared to have been colored with a touch of superstitious mysticism. I did not mean to characterize as superstition the Tantric school's manner of worshipping Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, for I myself had for many years practiced the *Chuan De* Buddha's incantation (Cundi Buddha's darani), through which I had attained intuitive enlightenment as expected. I only felt that when one was unable to resist the attraction of another person, to entrust one's faith in that person's control, or when one enthused over the guidance of someone of stronger will, one exhibited signs of fanatic superstition. The spirit of liberation and freedom in Buddhism could not accommodate that. And so I began to resist.

One morning, walking past the door to the dining room, I almost collided against monk Nhu Chan who was stepping out of it in a hurry. Following a second of shock, he dropped his question. "Why has Bodhidharma come from the West?"

This question was a famous koan from Chinese Zen Buddhism which anyone who had studied Zen teachings would have heard of. In my understanding, the essential meaning of it could be rendered simply as follows: What was the purpose for Master Dharma's journey from the East to China? What was the ultimate purpose of Zen Buddhism?

That he could spontaneously pronounce this question at the very moment of our near physical collision clearly indicated that monk Nhu Chan was in a high level of mindful concentration on the koan, which was awe inspiring. The question was voiced perhaps for my sake or for his own, or for both of us, depending on how you looked at the circumstance. But it was clear that he was waiting for my answer. Saying nothing, I smiled and walked away.

In truth, the smile and the turning away which I used as an answer represented nothing significant in the way of Zen. In books of Zen Buddhism one could find numerous anecdotes relating exchanges between masters and disciples by means of a smile, shouting, beating, and even by other odd actions. But here, my smile was only a very ordinary smile. I was not being preoccupied with contemplation of koans and therefore I could not respond to a koan. Also, I did not feel like borrowing from Zen books to act out a Zen-like behavior. It was possible that because at the moment he was virtually living with that particular koan, the question which monk Nhu Chan had posed to me was quite serious to him. But if I had attempted an answer, it would have been no more than a borrowed cliché, a simplistic imitation, which I would not enjoy. Therefore, my smile and my walking away carried a simple meaning: I refused to stay involved as a willing participant in the Zen movement which he had launched and promoted. Mystic superstition, scientific superstition, and Zen superstition, weren't they all superstitions? Monk Nhu Chan himself was not the superstitious type, but his manner of teaching and living the Zen way unwittingly had led the novices onto a superstitious path before they knew it. If I did not stop and resist, in the near future I would become a submissive young lamb. I did not want to be a lamb. I wanted to be a lion.

The following week, when passing by Sang's desk, I saw him examining a thick fragment in the bottom part of a broken glass. I stopped and asked him what was going on. Sang smiled, and without saying a word popped the glass fragment into his mouth,

bit and chewed it with a crushing noise.

I shook him by the shoulder, alarmed. “Who told you to do such a weird thing?”

“No one. I myself wanted to do this.”

“But... what’s the use of it?”

Sang only smiled. Irritated, I said. “No matter who you want to imitate or what you want to do, you must ask yourself if what you do is useful before you do it.”

Sang was two years younger than I, only fifteen. Though not much older, I felt responsible somewhat for his welfare because we both were sent here from Nha Trang by our same primary master for further studies. Sang would have gone back to Nha Trang when the Institute of Buddhist studies was closed down. But since I was unwilling to return there, he stayed on here too. Now he was trying hard to learn petty mystic tricks and this really saddened me. The way to enlightenment and liberation did not depend on mysterious magical acts that impressed people. However, since he and I were but school fellows, not blood-relations, I did not have any authority to interfere in Sang’s personal life. I could only give him some words of caution. He did not care to listen.

In the first few years after leaving Nha Trang, Sang and I had been very close to each other. But since the time I became ordained as a *Sa Di*, observing ten precepts whereas he was still a junior novice accepting five precepts only, we had been drifting apart from each other. It was not simply on account of our different levels of ordination. It was more likely because we, especially myself, had grown up. Another thing was that in the last school year before the ‘75 event, the superior monk had divided the class into three groups, instead of two as before: two groups accepting ten-precepts, one called *Ananda** and the other called *Kasyapa*; while the third accepted five-precepts and was named *Rahula*** . I was grouped in the second and Sang in the third. Each group, composed of about ten to fifteen novices, had its own room. That extended the distance between Sang and I, so we were no longer close enough to caution or help each other as much as before. As a result, now I had no say regarding what he was doing, especially because Sang seemed to be the type prone to become delusional and fanatical.

The day after, as I was reading a book in the common room, novice Dung approached, touched me lightly on the shoulder and said in a low voice. “Khang, I don’t know where Sang has learned to crunch up glass chips. It’s awful to see.”

Dung, a native of Quang Nam province, was one or two years older than I, easy going and very likeable.

“I don’t know where he learned it, either,” I said. “But crunching up glass chips is no more than a petty magic trick. It’s of no benefit to our religious training or to life in general, so why should we bother learning it? It’s really silly. I didn’t expect Sang would get involved in such a superstitious practice. I did advise him against it, but he didn’t seem to care for what I said.”

“Yes, that’s it, the issue is mystical or magic power. You’re right. Only those who believe in mysticism do that kind of thing. It seems monk Nhu Chan is a highly-skilled magic worker.”

“What? Do you mean to say he trained in mysticism?” I exclaimed. “I thought

* Name of the Buddha’s cousin who was one of his ten major disciples—as mentioned in the previous chapter in the story of Madanja.

** Name of the son of the Prince Siddhartha (the former position of the Buddha in the Kapilavastu Kingdom). Rahula was one of the Buddha’s ten major disciples too.

he's a follower of Tantric Buddhism."

"Well, mysticism isn't so much different from Tantric Buddhism, you know. Both have long prayer sessions conducted with secret words and incantation, and both utilize charms and magic..."

"But the purpose of Tantric Buddhism is self-liberation and enlightenment, not the same as that held by mysticism's followers. Tantric Buddhism doesn't advocate the use of amulets and incantation as its ultimate end."

After a pause, Dung resumed. "Maybe I did not say it right. Monk Nhu Chan doesn't practice mysticism, only follows Tantric Buddhism. Possibly what happened was that seeing some friends resort to the voodoo type of magic, monk Nhu Chan showed them his true Tantric Buddhist amulet and incantation to prove that their magic activities were only games. That's all. But seeing this, Sang was enamored with it, and asked for instructions. I was told that it wasn't monk Nhu Chan who taught Sang to crunch up glass chips. Again and again, Sang begged to learn about mysticism, but his request was denied, so he tried the magic act all by himself, believing that if others could do it there was no reason why he himself couldn't."

"It's pure nonsense, isn't it? Sang looks gentle, and he prays to Buddha all the time with his eyes half-closed in concentration. Yet, at the same time, he likes to ape the practice of magic. But what's the aim of learning it? Is it to intimidate others? And it seems he didn't enjoy crunching glass chips in private. Yesterday, he waited until I was around before he put a glass fragment into his mouth to bite and crunch. He wanted me to see it and admire him."

"Yeah, it's awful," said Dung as he turned to leave.

Only a while later did it dawn on me that perhaps Dung took pains to clarify the matter of Sang's weird act as a way of assuring me that monk Nhu Chan had nothing to do with Sang's learning of a magic trick, that Sang did it on his own. Dung was a younger protege and admirer of monk Nhu Chan. He did not want to see monk Nhu Chan blamed for having led my own younger religious brother on the wrong path.

A month later, monk Thong Nghia came up from Nha Trang to take Sang back to his hometown. Sang came down with a severe illness after he reached Nha Trang and was sent back to his family to be treated. In that fashion he returned to the world and soon became a policeman in some village of Dien Khanh district, Khanh Hoa province, of which Nha Trang is the capital.

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As a matter of fact, before learning that Sang had re-joined the world and became a policeman, I had heard that monk Thien Phuoc had exchanged his monk's habit for that of a cadre. So I was not very surprised to hear the news, only felt sad. Still young and not having completed his studies, how could Sang keep his heart and will steady when throwing himself into life out there? All the more, what could he hope to contribute to the country and the people in his police uniform which was at present only a symbol of violence and oppression in the eyes of people of the South? Why did Sang choose such a path to re-enter worldly life? Was that because of his family's circumstances or was it from his wish to rebuild the country as monk Thien Phuoc had advocated. I did not imagine that Sang shared the same noble and firm intention that monk Thien Phuoc

possessed. At the tender age of fifteen with a low level of religious training and a shallow general knowledge, he would be crushed when immersed in life. All the merits he had gained and guarded for a long time in the Buddhist monastery would soon be lost.

As for monk Thien Phuoc, it was said that after leaving monkhood, he had returned to his native town where he held a certain important position in the People's Committee of the district, managing co-operatives that sold foodstuff and miscellaneous items. In point of fact, that job, that position, was nothing great for a person who had nurtured the dream of becoming a Buddha, or a Bodhisattva who would save living beings, or a lesser dream of becoming a chief monk. Nonetheless, through discussions with him in the past, I knew that at least he had already formed clear and lofty purposes and objectives when he decided to shed his monk's garment and practically participate in the reconstruction of the country as the new authority called for. No one could tell if the new regime truthfully wanted to reconstruct the country, but one could be sure that monk Thien Phuoc was serious about that vision. The government thus gained a good cadre, whereas the Sangha lost a fine member. I only hoped that that cadre had made a correct choice for himself in participating in worldly affairs.

Some people, including a number of Buddhist monks—monk Thien Phuoc being a typical example—thought that the way monks lived and the activities they conducted were so detached, bringing no practical benefits to human life. The so-called practical benefits, in essence, alluded to advantages in material comfort, from clothing to food, from medicines to money, houses... Though those who had that point of view did not deny the Buddhist noble purpose and intention to serve life, their criticism of Buddhism for not being pragmatic would seem rather harsh, if not altogether mistaken, with regard to the ultimate objective of Buddhism. Because of their wrong interpretation, they wanted to introduce reform and change so that Buddhism could boast such and such programs of social relief work which were undertaken by other groups and religious establishments. In actuality, social charity work and programs which contributed in a "practical" way to life and mankind were not at all contrary to the spirit of commitment to life exhibited in Mahayana Buddhism. On the other hand, it was not necessarily true that a religion, especially Buddhism, had to depend on those kinds of work to be worthy of existence for centuries. Nor was it right to say that those actions of social commitment would lead more people toward enlightenment. The noblest objective of Buddhism was to bring enlightened mind to mankind. With it, man could really save himself from endless pain and sufferings in life.

There had been a time when I myself thought that a Buddhist monk had to do something more positive and practical than mere meditation and recitation. Those thoughts resulted partly from the active nature of my youth, and partly from the impact of an appeal made by a famous senior monk named Nhat Hanh who was inclined toward reform of both social life and the Buddhist way of living. That appeal was expressed in many of his books, notably in *Dao Phat Hien Dai Hoa*, Modernized Buddhism. Young monks, or more precisely adolescent monks like myself, enthusiastically enjoyed reading Ven. Nhat Hanh's books. The frenzy found its parallel in the time past when people had read with passion martial arts novels by Kim Dung translated from Chinese, or fiction by Tu Luc Van Doan (Self-Reliance Literary Group, most prominent in the 1930's). Nhat Hanh proposed ways to concretely contribute to worldly life, essentially through voluntary social work. And he actually put his ideas into practice, not only propagating

them on a theoretical level. His effort was seen clearly in the School of Youth for Social Service in Phu Tho Hoa. This was a school not designed exclusively to train young monks and nuns to perform social work. Instead, its main objective was to offer instructions and guidance to many worldly young males and females who wished to commit themselves to serving the needs of society. Workers of this school accomplished many useful things in helping to heal wounds and to sooth pain suffered by average people during the protracted war and recurrent natural disasters. Ven. Nhat Hanh's publications and his deeds were like the necessary awakening sound of bell at the time when Buddhism seemed to stay dormant and passive. However the various appeals he made, as well as the good works he did, were by no means new values added to enhance the basic nature of Buddhism. They were only new on the surface. And they were only new to Vietnam. Venerable monks and Buddhist scholars, including Ven. Nhat Hanh himself, had responded warmly to the call made by Mahayana Buddhist masters from other countries to modernize the Buddhist way of living. Owing to better environmental circumstances and human conditions, Japanese masters (like D. T. Suzuki) and Chinese masters (such as Thai Hu) preceded Vietnam's Nhat Hanh by several years in invoking the spirit of social engagement, as well as renovation and modernization of Buddhism. But all the same, the only thing they contributed was to provide more vitality to existing Buddhist activities.

Being true to the fundamental principles of *tu bi*, compassion, and *vo chap*, unconcern for appearance, non-attachment, Buddhism in the calculating eyes of worldly people undoubtedly appeared negative and slow in comparison to other religions in so far as expanding the religious establishment and recruiting followers into membership was concerned. However, from this mere factor one could not conclude that Vietnamese Buddhist monks had not done anything for the people and the country. You only needed to turn your eyes toward the countryside to perceive how socially engaged the Vietnamese Buddhist clergy always was. Monks in rural areas, those living in small village pagodas, had been contributing to society quietly, without public announcement, all prompted spontaneously by circumstances and sincere feelings. Their contributions could not be acknowledged in a written account of income and expenditures, or in a report of relief efforts. In fact, it could be said that social commitment exhibited by various established social work and charity organizations was only a modernized, publicized version of the humble, quiet resignation to a life of sharing which traditional Vietnamese Buddhist monks had led for ages, blending into the joy and sorrow of fellow peasant villagers, giving and receiving both materially and spiritually.

Buddhism in no way prevented its workers from throwing themselves into social service activities. All those activities were different ways of realizing one's compassion, which were commendable. Still I did not consider them "the end" in itself. It would be an irony for those who had rejected worldly concerns to turn around and work for practical values forever expressed in fame, money, and material accumulation. To chastise Buddhism for not having contributed to life in a pragmatic manner was tantamount to criticizing Sakyamuni Buddha for having renounced the throne in order to search for truth, thereby attaining enlightenment, the purpose of which was to save all living beings. If even kingship was considered frivolous and therefore abandoned, what greater or more valuable material possession could there be to offer life? Buddhist monks and nuns followed Buddha's example to leave their families, to reject position and

status with associated material benefits, and as a result they became propertyless like Buddha. And since everyone knew they were poor, no one looked for concrete material contribution from them. Suffering people of this world expected from Buddhist clergy something different, something more noble and significant than ephemeral material objects which they could receive from charity and social relief organizations.

Perhaps monks Thien Phuoc, Tan, Sang, and some of my classmates did not share my thoughts. They wanted to do something practical for life through social commitment, and their commitment took the form of cooperation with the new government as a cadre, a soldier, a policeman. I did not want to conclude so soon that they had made the wrong decision. But I believed that time and reality would show them that the wants and needs of human beings were not confined solely to food and clothing. Buddhist clergy could offer life many lessons on self-examination and self-liberation from pain and suffering, even though these could not be eaten and worn. Spiritual contributions were immensely more valuable than material ones, and in actuality were immeasurable. But if one insisted on a comparative evaluation, one could well reflect on the answer given by Siddhartha in Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* when asked what he was contributing to life:

"Everyone gives what he has. The soldier gives strength, the merchant goods, the teacher instruction, the farmer rice, the fisherman fish."

I was not afraid of becoming a useless person in this world simply because I did not have enough practical contribution to show. My only concern was that I did not possess sufficient intelligence, energy and will to reach the end of the religious path I had chosen for myself. In any event, the changes of the country, as well as in my masters and friends, somehow had the effect of urging me to try harder in my religious training. I became more studious than ever before, so studious that no small period of the day was spent outside of meditation and recitation, even while I was working in the field and the garden. Furthermore, since the change of regime which had resulted in the ending of religious classes for us monks and novices, what was more interesting and rewarding for me to occupy myself with than to continue religious studies on my own? The prevailing circumstances—thus both obstructive and advantageous—left me with no choice other than to concentrate on one single preoccupation. The dream of going to India, Thailand or Japan for further studies was thrown to the wind. Likewise, the attempt to practice creative writing in prose and in verse had no room to play any more, becoming unnecessary. Well then, this hoe, this shoulder pole supporting two barrels full of water, each footstep, each moment, they all would serve as means to transport me toward that peaceful original Oneness.

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From the experience of my predecessors, I learned that in religious training, the more extreme an attitude or tendency a person held, the less likelihood he would be successful. Some monks had gone mad for having plunged headlong into intense meditation without the aid of proper methods, while others had become seriously ill and had to be confined to bed, unable to even recite Buddha's name. Still others, who had always been solemn, serious, strictly observing Buddhist precepts and devoting

themselves full-time to practicing Buddhism, unexpectedly got trapped in an earthly love affair, from which they could not free themselves, resulting in their return to the world to start a family. I was told all those things by my masters and elder friends, but I did not believe what I heard. It was especially hard to accept the view that the more intensely a person immersed himself in religious practice the more readily he would generate bad Karma which would undo him. Rather, the reverse made sense to me, that the more serious the person was in his Buddhist training, the lighter the Karma he would encounter. In light of this, together with an extremist tendency inherent in my heart and mind, I threw myself into Buddhist practice with passion and enthusiasm, determined to attain enlightenment during this present existence, not having to extend the efforts into my next reincarnation.

And sure enough, I fell sick.

Even so, I still did not believe that I myself had invited bad Karma as people said. The simple explanation seemed to lie in the obvious fact that having concentrated too much on development of heart and mind, I had neglected to take care of my body. It had nothing to do with Karma at all. In any event, sickness was what I had to bear, four types of illness attacking me concurrently.

That morning, Tuu and I were carrying water from the well on the grounds of the pagoda to fill basins in the kitchen and the toilet. I pulled a bucket of water up from the well which Tuu then carried away. When he became tired of running back and forth, we would switch roles. At one point, just as I was about to pour the water from the bucket into a waiting barrel, I slipped on the moss-covered surface around the well. My whole body hit the cement floor. I pushed the bucket down on the ground as a buffer to lessen the impact, but my cheek and a part of my chin still bumped hard against it. Even the bucket, made from the top part of a cast iron bomb-shell case, was terribly dented from the force pressed down with my hand.

Throughout that day my right jaw felt numb, and the pain emanating from it seemed to penetrate the bones. Chewing food was out of the question when even swallowing soupy porridge proved difficult. Thus, I went without food.

When I woke up the next morning, my jaw stung worse. In addition, my eyes turned red and rheumy, presenting quite an irritation and discomfort. Then around noon, I discovered that the part from the left corner of my upper lip to the tip of my nose was covered with open sores. To top all that, whether on account of my going without food or because of anxiety, I was not certain, my old problem, gastritis, reappeared. The excruciating pain shot up around the upper part of the belly near the chest. I resorted to suppressing it by focusing my thought on the area between my eyebrows as a way of distracting attention from the pain. At times I contemplated an imaginary cool and soothing air penetrating my whole body, especially my belly. I slept when the pain decreased. No medicine was available.

Tuu proposed to take me to a doctor. I smiled and said with difficulty through the stiffness of my jaw, "I have no money to pay a doctor."

"Go and ask the Superior monk for some."

"No."

"Do you want this to go on?"

"It'll be over in a few days."

"Nonsense. You must go see a doctor. Or, maybe you can visit the doctor of folk

medicine, Dr. Nhu Tanh. He might not charge us novices anything. After all, he's a lay Buddhist who has taken the Bodhisattva ordination vows."

"I don't think so," I objected. "He treats illnesses and sells medicines to make a living."

"We'll pay him then. It's still cheaper than going to a modern doctor."

"Let's forget it. I have no money left."

"I do have some," Tuu insisted. "Just borrow some more and you'll have enough for it. It'll be OK."

"Thank you, but no, I don't really want to go."

"Then let's try coin rubbing to scrape the ill wind from your body."

"Coin rubbing? Why do I need it when I don't have a cold?"

"Oh, well. Rubbing a coin, pricking the flesh, sitting in front of a steam pot, they're all good if not for one ailment then for another."

I burst out laughing, but did not take his advice. For months now, poor monks and novices like us had depended on folk methods for cure of whatever illness. Especially popular was the practice of rubbing a coin against the skin of your throat or your back "to scrape out the ill wind that causes the flu and colds", pricking the flesh superficially to squeeze out bad blood, and having a version of a steam bath by sitting with a pot of steamed herbs under the cover of a blanket. There were no medicines around. Private drug stores were all closed down. The only doctor we knew, a Buddhist who had treated everyone in the pagoda for free, had gone to Saigon or some re-education camp. Even common drugs like aspirin were scarce in the pagoda, let alone special kinds of medicine for my particular chronic and external problems that needed medical attention. It had become customary that whenever a novice was sick with whatever illness, another would have him lie down then practice on him the methods of pricking and/or coin rubbing. It was almost like a blind trust in the magic power to cure inherent in these traditional methods, which cost nothing, and which anyone could do. Some were actually addicted to this traditional way of treatment, so they even asked to have it done to them when they were simply not well or not sick at all. I was not fond of this fashion; rather, afraid of it. So I did not allow Tuu to use a coin on me.

Toward the third day, my jaw was so stiff that I could neither move it nor whisper even a word. On top of that, since I had not had any food for three days, I felt too weak to sit up. So I just lay there.

All the monks and novices in the pagoda had to work in the field all day until early evening, when they would return for dinner and the evening prayer afterward. No one had time to look after me, except for Tuu. He also worked in the field, but as soon as he returned to the pagoda, he attended to me first of all. Since no medicine was available and I could not eat anything, Tuu expressed his care by asking after my condition, fanning me, or washing my clothes. He seemed very depressed for his inability to help me get rid of my physical problems. While he was sifting through piles of letters and books in a drawer nearby, I handed him a piece of paper on which I had scribbled a few words:

*Let's switch beds. I myself will treat my own sicknesses in the next three days.
Don't worry.*

He looked at me full of doubt. Obviously, he could not imagine what I was planning to do. But in the end he fixed up his own bed, then carried my mosquito net over. I chose his bed which was set at the end of the room, between two windows but away from drafts. The location was suitable for a makeshift little room within the large common room, which I produced by stretching out my blanket and net as dividers. Our pagoda did not have separate rooms for us young novices, so I had to improvise as such for a private corner of my own.

I forced a smile with my dry lips, then dragged myself to the rest room. Tuu stepped close, offering to help me but I declined. The distance was not far, but it seemed to take forever for me to reach my destination, walking like an old man with faltering footsteps.

Returning to the bed, I began to sit and recite the *Chuan De* incantation for three days and nights without interruption. During those three days, I felt a lightness of being, my heart and mind soaring up into the air like a thin silk thread. Sometimes, I felt myself a sound floating toward infinity. For many continuous hours, I experienced the state of deeply meditation often referred to in various sutras.

After the third day of concentration, I left the bed, my eyes no longer red, the skin around my nose healed, my jaw unlocked, and my belly peaceful. I laughed and happily said to Tuu. "I want to take a walk."
