

DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

CHAPTER FOUR

Tuu and I went to the vegetable garden located to the right of the main building. This garden was over two acres in size. Before 1975, the pagoda had allowed a poor family free use of it to cultivate their crops. Now that the family had gone away, it was used by the inhabitants of the pagoda to grow sweet potatoes and peanuts. The soil was very poor, sandy, and far from fertile. Every vegetable or bean seed planted here needed the help of animal manure or chemical fertilizer to germinate. Immediately after the seeds were sown, Tuu and I had been given the task of watering this two-acre garden everyday. Now, the vegetables and beans had grown, sending out pods and tubers, so we did not need to water them everyday any longer.

At a corner of the garden was a pond dug by the people of the pagoda themselves. Tuu and I would carry water from the pond for the large garden along the path sloping slightly toward it. This land was rather curious. You simply dug down at any spot you chose, about three to four meters deep, then you would get spring water gushing up and accumulating into a pond. The pond was not very large, its diameter only five or six meters; but some sections of it were deep enough that the water would come up to your eyebrows if you stood in them. The pond lay apart from everything else within the pagoda compound, so inviting with deep clear water under the scorching sun, so much so that often at noon Tuu and I could not help immersing ourselves in its refreshing coolness, and joyfully swimming about like buffalo boys. The spot was deserted and there was no passers-by to notice us. Sometimes we forgot all about solemn conduct because it was indeed pleasant to be little Buddhas swimming about in the pond.

We sat down on the side of the pond. The water was crystal clear. Once in a while a dragonfly playfully fluttered over it and made circles of little waves which spread out gently.

“I’m glad you are no longer sick,” said Tuu. Hearing no response from me, he continued. “The first day when I saw you sit still inside your mosquito net... I was really scared. I feared that other illnesses would appear. Sometimes I had this silly thought that you would be deep in meditation and then... would be gone forever. Really, how could such a miracle happen? All those different problems suddenly disappeared without the use of any medicine. Was it because you were continuously reciting an incantation? What magical incantation was that?”

I answered with a smile. In point of fact, I did recite one of the five common and famous incantations used in Tantric Buddhism throughout the last three days and nights. But I knew that it was mindfulness, freedom from false thoughts that brought amazing effects which are usually referred to as miracles. Had I recited another incantation or another Buddha’s name with such mindfulness in those three days, the result would have

been the same. The most important thing was still concentration, non-confusion. Nonetheless, the Tantric incantation which I had gotten used to reciting for so many years certainly did help to more readily bring me to the contemplative state of mind.

“You’ve got a letter and a telegram on your desk. Have you read them?”

“Is that so? I didn’t notice. From whom?”

“From monk Thong Chanh of the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Nha Trang. The letter came first. The telegram says that monk Thong Chanh is coming in the next couple of days.”

“Really? Is he coming for a visit or for something else? Never mind, I can read the letter to find out more.”

“He’s coming to see how sick you are.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well... because I was so worried about you, I wrote and told him about your condition.”

“Good Heavens! It wasn’t worth bothering him. Beside, what if word reached my family? It’s no good to have my parents worried about me.”

“But it’s too late now. It’s done. I won’t do so again. But to tell the truth, seeing you sick without medicine, I was terribly anxious. I saw no other way than sending the news to Nha Trang so that monk Thong Chanh or your family could find a way to help.”

“Thank you. I’m only afraid it’s a waste of monk Thong Chanh’s effort to arrive here and see me recovering. After all, it was no serious sickness to speak of.”

“What are you talking about? Of course you were seriously ill. Stiff jaw bone, numb teeth that couldn’t chew, mouth unable to open to receive food for a whole week. How more serious a condition did you want to wait for before you let them know?”

Back in our room, I opened and read the letter from monk Thong Chanh which told me that he was coming to Hoi An not simply to visit me but also to take me back to Nha Trang for treatment. It also informed of the death of monk Thong Chanh’s primary master, the superior monk Thich Tri Huu who had been the founder and venerable abbot of An Quang pagoda. His *sarira*—cremated remains—had been taken to Linh Ung pagoda in the Non Nuoc area of this province, where a shrine would be built to worship him. Since monk Thong Chanh would have accompanied the delegation that transported the relics, and Long Tuyen pagoda was not out of the way, he had decided to stop by to pick me up.

For months, since I had to leave school to work in the fields and the garden, I had been too busy to think of Nha Trang and my relatives in that fine and gentle quiet city. I neither remembered nor knew well the reason I had decided to stay here instead of going back to Nha Trang when the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Quang Nam was closed down. The decision to stay seemed to have stemmed from a wish to show that my heart and mind would not be affected by circumstances. I wanted to prove that I was not so frightened by the communists’ arrival in the South that I would hurriedly leave school, run back to my hometown to hide behind my primary master’s back, or to be beside my family and relatives. In short, hard physical labor and lack of food would not drive me away from Long Tuyen pagoda. As such, my not going back to Nha Trang was no noble or meaningful act as was recommended in various letters from Nha Trang.

In truth, at one time in the past, my primary master had sent me to Linh Phong pagoda in Nha Trang to learn how to do manual labor and how to bear hard living

conditions. I had been an unwilling learner then. After 1975, my decision to stay on at Long Tuyen pagoda was meant for the same purpose; but more than that, it was also to demonstrate that I had become mature and ready to place myself in any trying circumstances that would strengthen my ability to endure hardship and misery. Was that not typical of the arrogance of youth? Now I reflected on all that with a scornful smile. It was no longer necessary to show anybody anything about myself.

All the novices who were enrolled in the same class with me in Hoi An had gone back home to Nha Trang since the first days of the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Sang had followed them about two months later. It was now January of 1976, nine months since the chaotic April-30th event. And for all this time, I had not set foot in Nha Trang to again visit my dear old pagoda, former masters and friends, and especially my own family living in the new circumstances of the country. Even in the matter of writing letters to Nha Trang, I had not kept up with the routine of writing once a week. I had managed to write my family every two months, and every four months to my primary master, monk Hai Tue, and to my mentor brother, monk Thong Chanh, who had given me guidance since the day I joined monkhood.

Now, the letter sent from Nha Trang by monk Thong Chanh triggered memory of Hai Duc pagoda high up on a mountain, surrounded by dark green and beautiful trees and plants. An indefinable feeling of excitement gently touched my heart. I had thought I had become a bronze or a wooden statue, unaffected by circumstances, but I was wrong. After three days of quiet meditation and continual recitation of sutras, I was like a deluded man who had just emerged from a long dark slumber, both his body and his spirit renewed, overwhelmed with an indescribable joy. By no means had I become a Buddha or a saint. Rather, it was as if I had been reborn with carefree heart and mind and greater optimism. In this spirit, when reading monk Thong Chanh's suggestion that I should return to Nha Trang, I immediately felt that I did truly want to do just that. It had been my preference to travel places, the further from my hometown the better. However, having been away from Nha Trang for a rather long time, that city now appeared to me as a new world, attractive, enticing. A new world in the new vision of a new person inside me. I realized that I no longer belonged to Long Tuyen pagoda.



Monk Thong Chanh arrived in the morning, when everyone in Long Tuyen pagoda had gone to the fields. I was still allowed to rest, undertaking some light tasks around the pagoda, which gave me more than sufficient time to talk with him. Monk Thong Chanh handed me a letter from my primary master in which was enclosed some money for the bus fare. My mother also sent a short note promising to tell me many things when I arrived home. Both my master and my family were anxious for my return. Monk Thong Chanh also strongly urged me to leave for Nha Trang. Of course I did not disagree.

I left all my books and most of my personal belongings as presents to Tuu. My traveling baggage consisted of a monk's robe and a tunic-and-pants set. That was all. There was something pleasant, exhilarating in the act of carrying a traveling bag to go, especially the act of leaving behind all one's "possessions". Perhaps this was the second time in my life that I clearly recognized the joy of departure and abandonment. The first time, nearly six years ago, was when I threw my school books into a trash bin at the bus

station from where, in secret and empty-handed, I took leave of my family to join the religious life. However, this time, among the books I left behind was the Phap Hoa text, of which I had hand-copied about two-thirds, and which Tuu promised to complete copying before returning the printed text to Phuoc Lam pagoda. That was the only incomplete task which I had to put aside and leave behind in Long Tuyen pagoda. Thoughts of this seemed to diminish my joy a great deal. I had a strong feeling that for many years I would not be able to forget that there was an incomplete hand-generated copy of the Phap Hoa text in Chinese, which I had left behind in that pagoda. I gathered it was true in life that when one had an unfulfilled deep wish, one would forever feel anxiety and uneasiness about it, which one could neither confide in others, nor dismiss from the depths of one's heart. Once you allowed yourself not to honor a small wish or a small promise, chances were that your heart and mind would easily become less disciplined, inclined to dishonor greater wishes and more significant promises.

In the afternoon, I accompanied monk Thong Chanh to Hoi An bus station where we caught a bus to Non Nuoc area, which was well-known for its Ngu Hanh Son (five mountains). These five mountains were actually no more than high hills, originally five islands left behind by the receding ocean. There, the monk had some unfinished business to attend to before taking me back to Nha Trang. Learning that Ngu Hanh Son was included in our itinerary, I grew all the more excited. After a time of farming, now I would have a chance to enjoy the most beautiful scenic view in Quang Nam Province.

It was getting dark when we arrived at Non Nuoc. By the time we walked up the steps of Linh Ung pagoda which perched on one of the five mountains, darkness had prevailed. Countless brilliant stars sparkled against the black velvet curtain of the firmament. Even from the yard of the pagoda, I could still hear the sound of waves splashing onto the sand bank below. The sound was sometimes like a devil's furious roar, but also so majestic and arrogant that I could almost taste the beauty and sublimity of nature in it. It was an endless piece of epic music of which nature was the only musician capable of playing.

Three other monks who had just come from Saigon were staying the night in the pagoda. Like monk Thong Chanh, they all had been disciples of the late superior monk Tri Huu. The monks gathered and talked happily, discussing the building of a stupa—a Buddhist shrine—by the side of the pagoda to worship their dead master.

Since there was not enough room in the pagoda to accommodate many guests, we all lay together on a broad plank-bed of hard wood. The sea breeze coming in through an open window kept pulling away the edges of the mosquito net from under the mat. We had to use books to secure the net in place. Nonetheless, the cool breeze was pleasant. Before falling asleep, I still heard the waves splashing onto the shore. Majestic, exquisite, endless. I had never before spent a more pleasant vigil.

The next morning, the monks started to build the foundation for the stupa. Being a "child" patient in their eyes, I was exempted from work. I took a walk toward the three flights of stairs at the entrance to the main hall of the pagoda, then sat down on a parapet of stone. This was an ideal spot from which to gaze at the sky and the ocean. The wind was blowing in constantly from the open sea. I could taste the saltiness and see the blue of the ocean. The location of Linh Ung pagoda on this mount was really unique in comparison to other Buddhist temples I had known. It was only a short distance to the ocean from the foot of the mount, so that from where I sat I could even see sand crabs

hurriedly hide themselves under the sand or run nimbly for food when the waves drew back from the shore. It seemed the morning dew had not completely disappeared on the immense surface of the sea, probably because the sun was covered by dense clouds.

Idling alone for quite a long while, I suddenly was aware of the approach of two people who called out their greetings. "Good morning!"

I turned around. A soldier in uniform was with a young girl wearing an ordinary blouse and trousers. I noted only that much with a glance, not seeing their faces clear enough to guess at their ages. Awkwardly I responded. "Good morning to you both."

I thought that would be all, that then each would go about his own business. This was not the case. They seemed interested in starting a conversation to get acquainted with me. After whispering something to each other, the soldier looked at me and asked. "You are a monk in this pagoda, aren't you?"

"No, I'm only a visitor. I'm from Nha Trang," I reluctantly replied.

"I'm surprised that a youth like you would enter a monastery."

I turned to look toward the ocean. His question had no connection with the pure and splendid new day reflected at that moment in the boundless blue water. What was so strange about joining a monastery that these people had to wonder? I had left home for six years, and during all this time no one had asked me such a question laden with half pity and half sarcasm, as had this soldier. No, that was not quite true. I had had a similar experience once before. At that other time, no question was asked; only mocking was engaged in, mocking with sarcastic intent. It was the morning following the day when the communist army had seized Da Nang city. Together with several novices from my home town of Nha Trang, I was then walking from Da Nang to Hoi An. A convoy carrying communist soldiers passed by. When it had to slow down because of some traffic jam ahead, the soldiers traveling in it looked and pointed at us, then noisily shouted out:

"Hey, why are you so sloppily dressed?"

"They're monks of the South, don't you know, comrade?"

"What kind of monks are those that look so young?"

"Why did you enter the pagoda, old monks? Were you lovesick or just orphans?"

We walked on silently. Suddenly, one of the novices pulled at my arm. He was frightened. "Look out! They're shooting us!"

I lifted my head and looked at the soldiers. One of them was violently pointing his gun toward us, as if he was going to shoot. I did not know if he was only intimidating us just for fun, or whether he might have some more serious intent. But the other soldiers standing beside him actually tried to hold him back, restraining his arms with great effort. We novices had not done anything wrong, so we had no fear of being shot at by anyone. But in my heart I could not help feeling a little bit sad when we were regarded as objects that had to be eliminated. Perhaps in a communist's eyes, we monks were useless people who ran away from civil obligations.

Now, this soldier and his girl had asked me a similar question. Although the words they used and the way they posed the question were more polite, the implication was the same. They would not accept the idea that young people could renounce the world. In their view, the youths had to roll up their sleeves and engage in "concrete, practical" tasks so as to contribute to construction of the country. Those concrete and practical efforts could be demonstrated neither in Buddhist sutras nor in prayers, nor in

contemplation, mindfulness, repentance, correction of one's being, perfection of behavior, negation of self... To them, concrete things had to be those that people could see, touch, chew, swallow, or stuff into their pockets.

I kept silent, saying nothing in reply to the soldier. It was partly because his statement was not exactly a question to be answered; but most of all, I did not feel obliged to explain my entering monkhood to strangers, especially to those who thought they were right and knew everything about life.

Again I turned toward the open sea. The water had now lost its deep blue hue. Dazzlingly reflecting the morning sunlight, it spread out like a splendid roll of golden silk. From high above, a sea gull dived down into the waves for its prey and then flew straight up, made a circle in the blue sky before turning toward the shore and landing on a deserted mound of sand. Unlike the beach in Nha Trang, the shore of Non Nuoc was not one where many people came for a swim or a stroll. All the eyes could see was sand and more sand. In the distance, nearby a small fishing boat, some men were pulling in their net. It was so curious that the beach, full of gorgeous morning sunlight, should be quite deserted.

Apparently prompted by the young girl, the soldier spoke up again. "You are too young to enter monkhood. Did you have some problem in life?"

I turned to look at them for a second, then answered them with a smile. I bid goodbye by raising one hand, the gesture both indicating that I did not care to talk and also meant as an apology. Turning away, I quickened my steps toward the inner part of the pagoda. It was not that I had any prejudice against those two people. I simply felt the distance between them and myself could not be bridged by some exchange of words. And what was the use of such exchange for either side? It would only lead to further misconception and misunderstanding. I might as well just keep silent and smile. It would not matter what anyone else thought. I was sure my attempt at explaining would end up in an argument, while I was the type of man who was not interested in arguing at all.

Coming back into the pagoda yard, I walked around to the side of the main building to find the monks busying themselves with construction of the shrine. Monk Thong Chanh told me to go inside and rest. Just then I realized that the soldier and his girl had followed me into the yard. They stood there as if waiting for me to turn around. I continued on my way, then sat in the long dining room in the back of the main hall. The two of them again followed me, and without ceremony installed themselves in a row of chairs opposite me. This was the first time I saw people sit down without invitation. The soldier continued to question me with ironical and provocative facial expressions, while his girl was smiling her sweet smile at him all the while. It was as though she wanted to show her support of an interesting debate which she thought her soldier lover would surely win, what with all dialectical materialism and invincible Marxist-Leninism together with numerous lessons that he had learned by heart like a parrot.

"Well, I see that you don't want to answer me about your personal affairs. But can you tell me if you believe that there's a real Buddha in that picture?" said the soldier, pointing at the picture of Buddha placed on a small altar in the middle of the dining room.

His question sounded so silly to me that I only wanted to ignore it and walk away for my rest. But then I thought that if I refused to answer, I might never have another chance to explain clearly and reduce their prejudice against Buddhist monks. I was about

to open my mouth when monk Thong Chanh walked in and interrupted. "What's up, young Khang? Why haven't you gone in and rested instead of sitting here?"

The soldier slightly nodded his head in greeting. Then with the air of a self-assured man, he shifted his gaze at once to monk Thong Chanh as his object of attack. "Ah, I was asking this young monk if you all believe that a Buddha exists in that picture. Surely you do, don't you? You believe so, and that's why you've set up an altar to worship him."

Monk Thong Chanh smiled and said in a cheerful voice. "Well then, do you yourself believe there's Mr. Ho Chi Minh inside the photo that you put in a glass frame and hang in your house or state offices?"

"Oh, you mean the photo of Uncle Ho? That's different. We hang his photo to commemorate his merits, his accomplishments. It's not because we believe that he's seated in the photo."

"That goes for us, too. To worship Buddha is to think with gratitude of Buddha's good merits, and seeing his image everyday is one way of reminding ourselves to follow Buddha's good example. Certainly it's not because we superstitiously believe there's a Buddha sitting in the picture. It's merely a simple form of remembering, that's all, dear lady and gentleman."

"If it's only for remembrance, then why don't you hang Uncle Ho's photo?" the soldier retorted. "He was patriotic, he contributed a lot to the country, he set a good example for people of all classes. So why don't we all honor our Vietnam's Uncle Ho instead of worshipping a Buddha from another country? Uncle Ho was not different from Buddha at all. So why did you waste your energy bringing in a foreign Buddha to worship?"

"It's because you've only read books by 'Uncle' and those published by the state and no other kinds, that you can't see the difference between national revolutionary and a patriarch who established a religion for all of mankind. If you had an opportunity to read various kinds of books from other countries and by other peoples, also books on other religions, other doctrines and philosophies, you would want to remember and honor many other men and not only your Vietnam's Uncle Ho.

"There're quite a lot of venerable great men in the world. Those great men and sages are for mankind, not belonging to any single country. If your Mr. Ho Chi Minh was worthy of being admired by other countries, surely you would be proud and happy and you wouldn't want to dampen their admiration of him, would you? Thus, although Buddha was from India, he was so transcendent that non-Indian people could not help venerating and worshipping him. And in reality, Mr. Ho Chi Minh in your eyes was one credited with having provided good service to the country, so you are grateful to him and think that this whole country must show gratitude too. But do people in other countries know who he was? On the contrary, Buddha, being Indian, is known by the whole world. And for the past twenty-five centuries, and in the coming millenniums, too, people in many countries have been and will be revering and worshipping Buddha. That's the difference, don't you see? In countries without war, people don't worship revolutionary warriors. We Vietnamese have been sunk in continuous wars for a thousand years, so we only know how to worship and feel proud of feats of arms and of brave fighters, and how to boast of the number of enemies killed. In fact, revolutionary fighters usually have only their heroism to be praised. But heroism is just a grain of sand in the desert compared to

the virtues of a Buddha, one who was completely enlightened and no longer engrossed in worldly passion.

"And that's saying nothing about the various levels and different kinds of heroism, depending on the circumstances and unique perceptions of each people at a certain time. Victory in a battle doesn't constitute heroism as a matter of course. In this regard, our Buddha once said: 'To win a battle against ten thousand troops isn't equal to conquering yourself. To conquer yourself is the most glorious victory.' Only that much can show you the difference. So, to say Mr. Ho Chi Minh was exactly the same as Buddha is no different than to compare a firefly with the sun. A firefly emits light, as the sun does, but aren't they different from each other?"

The soldier's face grew purple with suppressed rage. He sat there for awhile with a forced smile and did not say anything else. Sensing the tension in the air, monk Thong Chanh continued with a smile. "Have you made a tour around here? There's many beautiful natural caves. Please take a walk at your leisure and when you grow thirsty, come back here. We have rain water, very cool and refreshing."

The soldier nodded his head slightly, then took the girl away. I watched as he staggered like a wounded man. Fortunately, monk Thong Chanh had talked to them with a happy voice and easy manner, so nothing regrettable had happened. Perhaps monk Thong Chanh and that soldier were of the same age group, no more than twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old. But between these two Vietnamese young men, there was really a tremendous gap in regards to their outlooks on life, in their respective ideals and missions. Given that such a gap existed between two persons of the same generation, one could imagine how much greater a distance between their generation and mine, or between a northern soldier and myself an adolescent novice, a simple citizen who had not taken part in the game of ideological war between North and South Viet Nam.

If monk Thong Chanh had not come to talk to them, I did not know where my own explanation would have led the conversation or debate. The soldier's childish questions, coming from his shallow level of cultural sophistication, were not so difficult as to require a high level of reasoning to respond to. Nevertheless, since I was not an eloquent speaker, I might have caused the talk to drag out unnecessarily. Usually, whatever I could manage to express was meant to please others, to give them satisfactory explanations rather than to win an argument. It required sufficient time to conduct an argument. I was grateful to monk Thong Chanh for having put an end to that confrontation in a neat fashion. But just a little while later, I unexpectedly felt in my heart compassion for that soldier. No one in this world deserved more pity than an ignorant one who always thought himself wise. Words escaped my mouth. "I rather pity them."

Monk Thong Chanh rejoined. "Yes, they deserve pity. They were born and grew up in such a repressing environment that they have become the way they are. They're not as lucky as we, but think they are more fortunate. They know one thing only, but assume they know all."

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Since being a child, I had had the habit of feeling sad after waking up from a nap in the afternoon, especially when I had nothing to do. I did not know why, and could not find any explanation for it. I just felt a silent melancholy in my heart whenever I woke

up to the dry sunlight over the gate, or to the sound of rain pattering on the roof. Every sound and sight evoked an immense melancholy in me at the moment right after a nap. It was not different from the feeling of a man missing his train which was supposed to take him to a pleasant place to meet someone close to his heart. No, certainly that was not all. The sadness seemed even deeper. It was attached to a sense of anguish and disappointment for not having done anything significant or worth doing while time coolly went by. Moreover, it also approached something like a longing of an orphan who had wandered everywhere since his childhood, who did not know where his native land and neighborhood really were, any more than he could recall the faces of his parents and relatives. But he felt homesick all the same.

And now I woke up from a nap in a pagoda. I lay quietly for a long while on the wooden dais, searching for whatever was lost or forgotten which tormented my heart so. I could not identify anything. Instead, I clearly heard noises made by more than one person echoing from the yard. The louder the talk and laughter, the heavier my heart grew. I stepped out of the room to see for myself. A large group, consisting of members of the Buddhist Youth Organization, were engaged in their outdoor activities. Young boys and girls were standing in a circle around their senior, the leader brother. This brother used a whistle to monitor several vigorous and interesting games. As I stood watching and listening to the joyful laughter of these worldly youths, the feeling of sadness disappeared from my heart. I had not participated in that happy innocent world since I left home to enter a pagoda. For a long time now, I had not cared for these games which I considered childish and meaningless in the context of monkhood. Now, being a little more mature, I suddenly felt something like regret. I was not sorry about my renouncing the world, but I regretted that I had not been able to fully enjoy my childhood. Why didn't I ask my parents' permission to join the Youth Buddhist Family when I was still a child? I asked myself. And why did I choose to enter monkhood when I was so young, instead of waiting until later, for example until I was seventeen as I am now?

"Well, you are up. Did you have a good nap?" monk Thong Chanh asked as he came over from a side of the pagoda.

Startled, I turned around and mumbled awkwardly. "Yes, I did have a good nap, and then I heard the noises..."

As though he could read part of my feeling by the expression on my face, monk Thong Chanh said. "They're having fun, eh?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Did you join the Buddhist Youth Organization when you were a child, Khang?"

"No, master, I didn't."

"So you're feeling regretful now, aren't you?"

"No, it's not so. I don't have any regret."

Together we watched the games quietly. There were over thirty boys and girls whose ages ranged from about seven to twenty, except for the leader brother who was about Monk Thong Chanh's age—twenty-seven or twenty-eight. He was monitoring the games in a sprightly and eager manner.

I was following the activities with complete absorption when monk Thong Chanh continued, his tone of voice pleasantly serious. "At merry feasts in this life, we only see the nicest smiles and the most elegant appearance displayed by the guests. We have no way of seeing each person's private life outside those feasts. When these young people

return home from their Buddhist Youth Organization's activities, they also have pain or very dull and boring things waiting for them. Look, do you see the senior leader brother standing in the middle of the circle? Does his face look familiar to you? Try to recall. You don't remember? There, look again at the photo hung from that pillar!"

I looked toward what monk Thong Chanh was pointing at. It was a black and white photo inserted in a glass frame that I had seen and been told about the day before. The Buddhist monk in the photo sat crossed-leg in the middle of a street, right in the path of a few approaching tanks. I was told by monk Thong Chanh that the photo had been taken by a foreign newsman and printed in the American TIME magazine. The event had taken place in 1966 when Nguyen Cao Ky ordered his soldiers to attack, and artillery to bombard, a number of pagodas in Da Nang. The monk in the photo, known by his religious name Chanh Tri, who sat in meditation to block the path of the tanks, was the same senior brother seen guiding the Buddhist youngsters in the yard at present. Surprised and sad at the same time, I turned to look at him again.

"He returned to worldly life before 1975," monk Thong Chanh continued. "He threw himself into life to search for other meanings and purposes, those he thought were better and more practical than what he had done in the pagoda. But in the end, he also grew tired and disappointed, realizing his going back to worldly life was wrong. He wanted to enter monkhood again, but couldn't because of his family circumstances. He then became resigned to joining the Buddhist Youth Organization instead, and took the role of a senior leader brother guiding younger generations in their religious study. Since leaving the monastery, he has experienced a lot of pain from various worldly bonds. So now he's trying to find joy in guiding the young ones in healthy activities."

Upon hearing this story, I broke into a cold sweat. Yes, monk Thong Chanh was right. Life is like a merry feast that everybody wants to take part in. But there aren't any prolonged feasts.

Though monk Thong Chanh did not agree, I still asked to go along with him down the mount and carry rocks up for building of the stupa. Not totally recovered, I could only carry small rocks, and soon grew exhausted—perhaps because the slope was too steep. A man would grow tired even just going up and down the mount with empty hands, let alone walking with rocks on his shoulders.

That evening, inside the mosquito net, I could no longer hear the sound of the waves. I was tired and fell asleep early. In my dreams, I saw many girls chasing me along a shore pulsating with tidal waves.