DUST ALONG THE PATH

by **Vinh Hao**

CHAPTER FIVE

The foundation and the main section of the stupa dedicated to the late venerable monk Tri Huu had been completed. But the finishing touches had not been applied to the walls, and parallel verses had as yet to be inscribed as a necessary decorative feature in the shrine. The rest of the work would be taken care of by the present abbot, himself also a disciple of the late venerable monk. Having accomplished what we had come for, we all took leave, not staying even for a day longer, even though it was truly pleasant to be at this pagoda. It was the last month of the lunar year, and monk Thong Chanh had to be back in Nha Trang before Tet, the Vietnamese new year. He would not neglect his part in helping other monks in the yearly task of putting things in order and cleaning up the area around the mountain where his Hai Duc pagoda was located.

Out of the bus window, I happily gazed at the beautiful scenery of the country. The imposing Truong Son cordillera mountain range came into view now and then to the west, behind dense morning fog. Along the national highway, here and there appeared a thatched hut, or a row of houses crowded together as a small marketplace for a rural area. The rest was immense fields connected to one another and seeming to extend as far south as the highway went. When thinking of our country, I usually had in mind the image of those extending fields. Indeed, I had often gazed at such fields on my various travels from Nha Trang to the old citadel outside of it, south to Cam Ranh and Phan Rang, or north to Hoi An, Da Nang, and Hue. Yet, whenever I had a chance to look at them again, I still found them beautiful and my heart was filled with a certain love, so overwhelmingly deep. It appeared that only when spreading out together in a viewer's vision did the green of young rice plants and the blue sky express the most harmonious connection of the immense earth and heaven. It was true that what I saw now was not different from that green rice field underneath a blue sky, where Tuu and I had often gone "watching the water level" right after transplanting—to see whether there was enough water in the field. Here was the same kind of green rice seedlings that I had learned to transplant, and later on to harvest, pull off seeds, thrash, dry, rake, pan out or sift during harvest time. Everywhere rice fields appeared the same. But at this moment, the stretch of green fields on either side of the highway presented to me a different beauty. I could feel the love and vitality of my people blended in the soft and silky color of rice stalks.

Too many bombs and bullets had rained down over this land. Too many innocent people had fallen on these fields. Their sweat and blood had been shed for the hope of a better future for the country. They had no great dreams of many-storied houses, cars, fame, money, and high positions. They had only prayed that bombs and shells stop falling, and they longed to see compatriots throughout the country live together in peace,

staying close to this land and cultivating it to feed themselves. And now the war was over—yes, like monk Thien Phuoc said: the war had stopped—but both parts of the country together were being led into another delusory adventure. This very adventure which had not brought anything good and happy to the northern half of the country was now being forced on the southern half. It made people feel more insecure and more frightened than they had been under the impact of hissing bombs and exploding shells during the war. As I looked at the fields, at tillers instead of buffaloes pulling ploughs, at women bending to transplant rice seedlings, a suppressed sorrow suddenly flooded my heart. I would not be able to tell anyone about this, including monk Thong Chanh—my very close and precious spiritual elder brother. The emotion choked me and I really wanted to cry. I had not expected to see myself so impressionable as this. Only some months ago, my heart had been so unassailable that I had thought even eight winds could not have made it move (as a Zen Buddhist phrase says it: "eight blowing winds can't touch one's heart"; the eight winds being gain and loss, defamation and glorification, praise and disparagement, joy and sorrow). Perhaps after a bout of sicknesses, after a mental and physical shock, I had partly lost my self-control. Or perhaps, in the worldly view, I had begun to step into the best period of one's life, the period in which so much love and passion of youth would strongly, abundantly, and freely grow, unhindered by any power.

We arrived in Nha Trang when the setting sun turned violet on the horizon. By the time we reached the top of the flight of steps leading to Hai Duc pagoda—where the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Nha Trang had been situated—all the lights inside the temple were on. Hands joined, we both bowed to monk Hai Tue, my own primary master.

"Just arrived?" the master asked.

"Yes, master."

"Well, go refresh yourselves, then have something to eat. We'll talk tomorrow or the day after that."

I was backing away when master Hai Tue's call stopped me short. "Can you eat and drink normally now?"

"Yes, master, I can. Thank you."

He was silent for a moment, then said. "There's no need to rush into anything. Don't worry about the Eternal. It's there forever so you don't have to search right now for fear of losing it."

While walking to the dining room in the company of monk Thong Chanh, I wondered how my master could guess at my strenuous mental effort in religious training. Was it because every monk had to go through such a period in his early days? And did every master get sick at one time or another, working himself to death in his attempt to find the ultimate truth, before he eventually became a new person, as had happened with me just recently? The new person would be very ordinary, living in a pagoda like grass growing in the woods, without having to exhibit any far and high ideal or important purpose at all. He would simply breathe the fresh air, and carry out strict and austere work at the monastery and in the long run he would reach the aim and attain the ideal. That might come today, or tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, or some unknown day,

without his having to search with conscious efforts, without his having to dig into *koan* everyday, so as to become a Buddha or a saint immediately.

Before 1975, there had been a great number of workers in the kitchen of the monastery. Now one counted only auntie Bay and uncle Dong, the first cooked and the latter washed the dishes. The laborious task of splitting firewood was done by monk Hue An. Thus, including the monk, the kitchen staff was three.

The stove used in this kitchen was of a special kind, originally designed by an architect, for the preparation of meals for a lot of people, en masse. In the shape of a platform, it was made of bricks and coated with cement. A square-shaped chimney divided it into two sections, each of which consisted of a range of three burners. Each burner was about one square meter, on which were stacked eight heavy iron pot racks nesting compactly within one another, from larger to smaller, looking very much like the circles of a target's bull's eye. When a big pot was used, the smaller racks in the middle were removed. When a smaller pot was used, the big racks were placed adjacent to one another toward the center until the bottom of the pot was fully supported. The eight racks of different sizes, as such, allowed you to use pots and pans of any shape and size. Under the middle burner of each range was a cavity where firewood was burned. Firewood sticks were usually of large size, which would produce enough heat for all three burners. When one wanted to have the fire concentrated in the middle burner, two iron sheets were inserted on its sides to block the heat from spreading to the other two burners. This big demanding structure made the job of splitting firewood a taxing task. Before 1975, there had been over two hundred young monk-students here; splitting firewood for the kitchen had been assigned in turn to those strong monks familiar with the job. Now the monastery boasted only about twenty people who separately engaged in many other necessary undertakings, and therefore not enough able men were around to take on this specific task. Luckily, monk Hue An had volunteered to undertake it all by himself, and he did it all day long, month after month.

Monk Hue An was originally from some province in the south, which one no one knew for sure. His shoulders were not even, one raising up and the other drooping down. When he walked, only his left arm swung, while the right one hung still against his body. He was not crippled at all. He was simply accustomed to the posture. His protruding eyes were very bright. Happily, he would talk and laugh with everybody. Whenever he wanted to, no matter what time of the day it was, he would freely roar with peals of laughter. But sometimes he kept quiet all day long, saying nothing, as if he was angry with someone. If asked, he would glower then walk away without a word. The truth was he never got angry with anyone. His odd behavior made some people erroneously think that he was "mad" or suffered from some mental problem. Today, after having been away for some years, I met him in the kitchen and was surprised at the way he dressed. For a moment I had thought I saw a soldier volunteering his services in the pagoda to acquire merit. Monk Hue An had on his head a cap worn by local military people, a pair of boots, and a dirty short-sleeved undershirt soaked with sweat, which was matched with a pair of army pants. I gathered that firewood splitting required that type of clothing. A monk's normal thin tunic would not have stood the hard work and would have been torn, and he would not have any money to buy another one. Before 1975, even while rolling

up their sleeves to do any physical task, monk-students had always kept their attire neat so as not to damage the respectability of the religious community. If any of them wore an undershirt while splitting firewood, he would have done this in a discreet corner, not showing himself in such attire in the kitchen where Buddhist believers often came and went or gathered in crowds. However, after 1975, it seemed that the firm rules conventionally observed in the pagoda had relaxed to suit the requirement of manual labor throughout the country. Nobody reproached a monk clothed half as a monk and half as a worldly person, and not even when he was completely in worldly apparel like monk Hue An. Moreover, since he never cared for public opinion and was considered "mad", such reproach would prove futile anyway.

Auntie Bay was from Binh Dinh province. She was the loving mother of a dead soldier. Having lost her son, she volunteered to work in the pagoda to gain merit, faithfully attending prayer sessions and being a sweet surrogate mother to many novices and young monk-students who lived here in the Hai Duc monastery. From dawn to dust she cooked without showing any sign of fatigue, without asking for any recompense other than prayers for her son who had been killed in a battle. She was the most faithful, sincere, and nicest person I had known among the people who offered free services in pagodas. The monks coming from various places who stopped by or studied for some time at this monastery all thought the same way about her. Not only was she a believer devoting herself entirely to pagoda work, but sometimes she also expressed her motherly feelings to the resident monks and novices. One wondered if her dead son had been a novice himself, and she now transferred her affection and care to all monks as if they were her own sons. Indeed, cooking for them was not her only preoccupation. She also inquired after their welfare, offering them gifts or money to buy school books and medicine. Nobody knew where she got the money. One only noticed that she bought this and that as presents for them when necessary. Monk Thong Chanh said that at one time after April of 1975, when the monastery was short of money for food, auntie Bay had used money from her own pocket to solve that problem.

As for uncle Dong, he came from Dai Dien village in Dien Khanh District, which is part of our Khanh Hoa province. He was a sturdy man whose rough face was marked by a low forehead full of wrinkles above protruding bloodshot eyes. The nose had no ridge to speak of. It was flat, as though pressed inward, creating the impression of a groove running down from between his eyes. The big and flared nostrils exposed two wide holes that would easily accommodate two marbles. The lips were too thin for his wide mouth, the upper one curving upward in the shape of a roof. Brown stains were seen in between dirty yellow teeth. Perhaps that was the result of his smoking too much raw tobacco. He usually wore a brown short-sleeved shirt of coarse cotton. One never saw him in trousers, always in shorts of white or brown. He lumbered, the thudding of his bare feet could be heard from a distance. Despite his freakish appearance, he had a very pleasant temperament. Anything anybody said would make him laugh. Sometimes he did get angry, but soon after he would laugh again and forget about it. It was said that uncle Dong had previously been a monk, starting about the same time as had my own master. It was unclear why he had failed to remain in monkhood. But eventually he had returned to the pagoda and asked to be re-admitted—not as a monk, but only like a lay Buddhist. All around the year he worked for the pagoda and volunteered to do the hardest jobs at hand. Once I begged him to tell me his life story. But his verbosity,

coupled with a raucous voice accentuated by roaring laughter, prevented me from making out what he was saying. Any one who asked him about his life would be as confused as I was. As such, that coarse and simple man, even though he was present everyday at the pagoda, still remained a mysterious elusive character behind whose lusterless eyes was hidden a past full of glory or suffering—no one would ever know.

The kitchen of the monastery was situated at a rather special location; it sat at the junction where two paths named Binh Minh (Dawn) and Hoang Hon (Sunset) met. Indeed, following either of the two from below the mount, one would find oneself led to the kitchen, which was connected with a row of dining rooms for novices and visitors. As such, from the wooden bench placed in a corner of the kitchen, where uncle Dong often lay with his legs crossed to take a nap, one could watch people come and go on the two paths. And after having walked along one or the other, people who came to the monastery naturally would want to stop at the kitchen for a rest or for some water to drink, before visiting the monks and novices or offering prayers to Buddha. Therefore, talking about Hai Duc monastery without mentioning its kitchen was to perceive only its quietude and not its dynamics. Indeed, this particular kitchen was an important spot. It was the very place to meet and gather, as all the paths in the monastery converged here. The monks who wanted to go from their rooms down to the dining room, to the main temple or to the guest house, all had to walk past or through the kitchen. Many preeminent monks of several generations, as well as many worldly poets and learned men, coming here for whatever reason, had all stopped by or rested on the wooden bench set against the main pillar of the kitchen. And today, coming back from far away, I myself came across a most romantic and lively picture, one that could only be presented in this kitchen with its long history. It showed the gathering together, in a harmonious and spontaneous way, of three extraordinary characters: monk Hue An, auntie Bay, and uncle Dong. One monk, one laywoman and one layman. They were persons of few words who worked in silence, performing the hardest and most mundane tasks all day long. In this spot of converging, they appeared like wild flowers which symbolized neither high intelligence in the monastery nor vast knowledge of worldly people. These flowers grew naturally from the earth, without any need to embellish themselves or any desire to adorn something else. They simply existed and in silence manifested their own personalities.

From nowhere, monk Hue An approached and his brief laughter startled me back to reality. He looked at me, inclining his head to one side to have a closer look. Then smiling and walking away, he said. "I see! I see!"

Both monk Thong Chanh and I did not know what it was that monk Hue An said he had seen.

A tray of food was laid out for us by auntie Bay in the small dining room adjacent to the kitchen. Looking at me, she observed, "Well, young Khang, you're so tall and strong now. You must have been working in a field, isn't it right?"

"Yes, auntie, that's right," I replied with a smile.

"What a pity! I know that monks and novices at other places have to labor all day long now and have no time for religious training. Come back here to live for good. We don't have to work so hard here. I heard you were sick for a while, right? All the more, you should come back here to recover. Don't go anywhere else, you hear?"

"He intends to come back now. See if our pagoda has enough rice to feed him,"

monk Thong Chanh interrupted, with a gentle laugh.

"Glory to Buddha! Formerly there were over two hundred monks to feed. But now most of them have left and only a couple more than ten are present, so there can't be any problem with that. Even ten or twenty more novices like you wouldn't be difficult for the pagoda to manage."

Auntie Bay went back to the kitchen. I partook of the meal as my mind wandered. The rule in the pagoda dictated that while having a meal, one was allowed to think only of the labor of others who provided him with food, and not to let his mind roam over other things. I had practiced and learned how to take a meal in such concentration, but for some unknown reason, today I gave free rein to my heart and mind. I was mulling over the issue of food in the pagoda revealed through the brief dialogue between monk Thong Chanh and auntie Bay a few minutes before. Obviously, for nearly one year now, since the 1975 national event, the practical matter of food had become an issue of concern for those living here. It was true that monks had to show their appreciation by spending some time in the day to think of the labor of those who produced food and clothing as well as those who donated them to the pagoda. But when adequacy of food and clothing became a condition on which a person was admitted to the pagoda, somehow that diminished the gentle and friendly feelings shared among those living within it. Since coming back to Hai Duc pagoda, I had not encountered any difficulty with regard to "food rations" (to use the current terminology) and lodgings, because this was the very monastery where I had my hair shaved to enter monkhood, and my own first master—monk Hai Tue—still assumed major responsibilities for it. However, just imagine an unknown monk from somewhere who asked to stay and study here, and the responsible monks had to think it over—even for only a few seconds—in terms of food rations! It was sadly clear that the pagoda was infected with a touch of worldly life. Before 1975, monk Thong Chanh, like myself, needed only to think of religious study, and he would not have uttered such a half-joking reference to food as he had just done to auntie Bay. Perhaps this imposing Hai Duc monastery was trapped in some economic impasse that I did not know about. I recalled Long Tuyen pagoda in Hoi An, which I had left only a week ago. There, since religious classes were dissolved in March of 1975, we monk-students had had no choice but to work everyday of the year to be self-supportive. Long Tuyen was in the countryside and hence had a field and a garden to cultivate. But Hai Duc monastery, situated on a high mount, had nothing but scenic beauty. Without donations form Buddhist believers, I could not imagine where the basic budget would come from. On second thought, I had totally forgotten that since I entered monkhood, I had known the monastery depended on its soya sauce factory for economic support. Regardless, the fact remained that I was concerned, really concerned, having no idealistic dream left in me.

I asked monk Thong Chanh. "By the way, does our monastery engage in rice growing or vegetable planting, or in some sort of production?"

"Well… The board of directors did consider it, but they haven't come to any decision yet. I've heard that the superior monk Dong Minh will give us some work in the soya factory. You know the monastery depends on the factory for financial support, don't you? It has been managed by a few lay Buddhists. Now maybe it will have to expand to include other production activities which can be handled by members of the sangha, especially by the personnel from our pagoda. The same situation is seen at every pagoda

these days. We all have to be self-sufficient to a certain degree. In fact, we must take part in production to survive. Anyway, the factory is considered a small production enterprise, so the tasks involved are rather light and not time consuming like the farming you did in Hoi An. But that'll be in the future. Now you're still sick, so recuperate first. There, go on with your meal."

The following day, when having breakfast in the dining room, I met the rest of the monastery's people. There were more than twenty people in total—a very small number for this large monastery. I knew most of the monks here and they all knew me too. The only exception was monk Tue Van, whom I met for the first time. In 1974, when the Hai Duc Secondary Institute was changed to Higher Institute, monk Tue Van had been invited from Saigon to be a member of the faculty. At that time, I was at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Hoi An, so I did not have the privilege of meeting him.

I had heard of monk Tue Van and read a number of his writings published in the Buddhist magazines *Tu Tuong* and *Van Hanh*. I had also bought a few books which he either had written or translated. Unfortunately, I read but did not understand much of them, because they were above my level of knowledge. On the other hand, I loved and learned by heart some of his poems. Monk Tue Van, of tawny complexion, was diminutive and thin. His forehead was lower than what Vietnamese would normally expect in the physiognomy of a highbrow intellect. His thick black eyebrows set off his alert bright eyes. Most unique were his eyelashes: they were curly, long, and very black like the false eyelashes that, when still at home, I had seen my sisters glue over their true ones. The high-bridged nose added to his fine facial features. Monk Tue Van usually closed his mouth firmly, but when he smiled immense kindness and open-mindedness were manifested. He was the type of man who attracted others. I liked him immediately when I first met him.

My mother came to the monastery to see me the following day. She was thin as she had always been, but also appeared sickly, sad and worried. Up to that moment, I still had no knowledge of how she and the rest of the family lived in these times of change. During the years away from home, I had been concentrating on religious studies only, and almost never thought about my family. Now, being back to Nha Trang and facing my mother, I was still in the dark about my family because my mother did not volunteer any information, and also because I did not know how to start a confidential conversation.

Tet came a few days later. I asked master Hai Tue's permission to visit my family on the very first day of the new year. From the monastery I walked to my former house, the old house holding all my childhood memories—which I believed would welcome me with its familiar comforting face. But looking toward it from a short distance, I was surprised to see no sign of the trellis of scarlet red bougainvillea lacing and gracing the gate, which had been the most outstanding feature setting off our house from others on the street. The trellis and the flowering plants, older than I, had been built and planted there by my maternal grandfather. Coming nearer, I realized that they all had been uprooted. How empty and bare the gate had become! Even the white-washed walls, which had sealed off the front of the house from the street, were two-thirds demolished, leaving only two small sections standing on either side of the gate. Entering, I was more

shocked to find half of the brick-paved front yard occupied by a completely closed room made of wooden boards. This yard had years ago served as the playground for us children. And how could I forget that opening onto the right side of the yard had been a small window of the house next-door, through which the girl named Xu had showed her face… in days far past. Now, nothing of the old scene still existed. In front of me was a completely closed world, with walls and board partitions jostled against each other as if competing for every square foot of ground, disregarding the necessity of empty space for balance and harmony. Bewildered, I stood in the middle of the remaining portion of the yard and looked toward the house itself. I could not believe it was the same old house where I had grown up. I must have lost my way and come into a neighbor's house, which also had white-washed walls and yin-yang tiles like mine!

At that very moment, my youngest brother and a little nephew emerged from the narrow path running along the left side of the house. Glad to see me, they provided escort to the smaller house in the rear of the compound. Formerly, this small house had been the temporary shelter of my uncle Hai's family. Uncle Hai was my mother's elder brother. Later, it had become "our house". And "our house" of yore, now had a new owner who was no stranger, but one of my cousins. As the eldest grandson of my maternal grandfather, this cousin of mine had come as the heir to seize the ancestral home which, before 1975, no one but my mother had cared to look after. It turned out that the boarded room in the front yard was the "residence" of my uncle Tu, who was the father of this cousin. Uncle Tu's wife—the cousin's own mother—had died long ago, and uncle had gotten married again to a widow, and they had had two kids. All four of them lived in the front yard room. It was obvious that when the country had gotten new rulers, our house also had had a change of owners, and lost its former beautiful and dignified appearance.

At present my whole family had to pack themselves into the rear house. Fortunately, uncle Hai's wife, a widow, and her three daughters had gotten another house, and they yielded the rear house to my family so we would have shelter. Uncle Hai had been executed by the Viet Minh prior to 1954.

"It's only a matter of appearance anyway. Who cares?" I comforted myself upon stepping into our house. My parents had had a lot of children, fourteen of us. My eldest sister had gone to America to study, got married, and stayed on over there. My second elder sister was married to an air force officer of the former regime. She lived in Saigon with her children, waiting for her husband's return from a re-education camp. The third one in line, a brother, was also married with a child and lived in Saigon. My parents' fifth child, a daughter, had a family of her own, too. Her husband had been a South Vietnamese officer in the Political Warfare Bureau and was now considered missing in action. She had left her son with the family here and wandered off to Saigon to seek employment. Thus, with four of us married and living elsewhere, and myself belonging to a pagoda, my parents had the remaining nine children clustered around them in the rear house built for four people—as tiny as a pigeon loft.

My family was bankrupt. The meaning of the term "bankruptcy" was made clear to me through my family's circumstances at present. It was a reality that revealed itself to me a few minutes after I had entered the house, watching my brothers and sisters move back and forth and talk in whispers to one another. Their tumultuous talk had abruptly ended in silence when I first stepped in. After a long absence, my return seemed

disconcerting to them. I gathered they were not sure in what capacity they should receive me and how to address me. They simply looked at me and smiled. The smiles on verge of tears. The smiles that half wanted to hide and half wanted to show all the misery and pent-up anger for the breakdown of the large family in the changing condition of the country. They were all unemployed. It was such an incredible thing! All my elder siblings, counting from the first to the last sister older than me, were well-educated. Half of them had been high school or primary school teachers. For months the whole family had thrown themselves into the changed society to look for jobs, any kind of honest job, but nobody could get even a most humble one. They were willing to engage in manual labor as coolies, porters, bridge-and-road construction workers and the like, but they were not eligible for work in the eyes of the new government. The simple reason was that my father had worked for the former South Vietnam regime. By association, the whole family was condemned by an unwritten indictment to the fate of the downtrodden "puppet regime". Thus had we boasted so many jobless members for over nine months. All the items of property the family had possessed—and they were, indeed, very few and small—had been exchanged for rice to feed themselves. Huu, the brother two years younger than me, had to sign up to join the Union of Youth Volunteers, after having failed to locate a job for a long time. The Union, in fact, was a paramilitary group sent out to border areas and thick forests, where, enduring all sorts of misery and danger, they cleared the way and built roads for the People's Army to reach its various destinations. Thus, only Huu found a way out of the cramped, poor and depressing house, paying a rather expensive price by giving all his youth to an enterprise and an ideal which held nothing noble to brag about, as he well knew.

Before 1975, my father had been the Head Clerk of the provincial Administration Office, in charge of many of its important functions. He had undergone re-education after collapse of the Government of South Vietnam. He had recently been released temporarily because of suffering from serious high blood pressure and dropsy, which had made him rave in prison at any time of day or night. Now, he was sitting still, his swollen feet soaking in a basin of saltwater.

My brothers and sisters were standing or sitting around, depressed and embittered. It was Tet, time for celebration of a new year, but it seemed as though the house was enveloped in an air of mourning. No pastry and sugar-coated fruit, no tea, no fire crackers, no flowers, no smiles, nothing at all. Facing that sorrowful sight, I wanted to cry. In my family, except for my elder siblings living far away, perhaps I was the only one present here who did not bear the same painful and humiliating karma. Silently, we sat together in this tiny house, no words exchanged. Only my eleven-year-old youngest brother and the four-year-old nephew, who had welcome me in the front yard, were playing with each other without care. But I knew well that they got neither new clothes nor small gifts of money to enjoy Tet, as befitted their age of innocence. And I also knew, if I lingered for awhile longer, we all would possibly shed tears upon the enameled tiles on the first day of spring—not an auspicious beginning. I got up, emptied my pocket, and left on a small table all the money I had. Then hastily I returned to the pagoda.

The three days of Tet finally passed. During the following days, monk Thong Chanh took me to the beach for some fresh air. Sometimes, we also welcomed a sea breeze coming into the belfry on Trai Thuy hilltop, or took a mountain path to the great

statue of Buddha, from there to gaze at the ocean and the town through thin evening fog. Those romantic and beautiful natural sights were always the same, nobly splendid, and not affected by the changes the country saw through its different regimes. Ironically, I now looked but could not see or appreciate anything. The illness with which my body had been inflicted seemed to have much abated. But I began to keenly feel the pain in my soul. This was not derived simply from pity and compassion for the condition of my family, and for the present social circumstances. Rather, it was a feeling of loss, a feeling of an unfulfilled anticipation. Since my return to Nha Trang, it seemed that, in the depths of my mind and heart, I had carried some kind of hope. I wanted to search for something new, nicer, and more durable. It was obvious that when you eagerly plunged into nothingness in an extremist fashion, your heart and mind would not be broken up by the insubstantial collision, as anticipated, but rather would flip over backward, returning to the starting point.

Ambling from the hilltop down to my private room, for the first time in my life I was suddenly conscious of a nameless pain writhing in the depths of my heart. I suffered. This was not the suffering of a person afflicted by a poisoned arrow. I did not get shot with any arrow. I only heard arrows whistle past me from every direction, and I trembled and fell down into an extremely deep abyss, never reaching its bottom. Oh, the indescribable pain! The pain of having a need to lean on someone, to be comforted and taken care of. Yes, that was right. I came to realize that I needed a friend. Previously, I had had some rather close friends: Buddhist novices. Now, they were not around, and even if they had been, I would not have needed them anymore. Those friends, in whose company my mind had been stimulated to gain greater understanding and to conceive of more noble aspirations, were no longer necessary, as they could not do anything for this pain. I needed another kind of friend, different from those I had had in the past. A friend who might not care for my high hope or my ambition to become liberated. I could not imagine what this friend would be like. But I knew for sure that this friend would be like me, a suffering and terribly lonely being. Indeed, an insecure and empty soul like mine was at present needed an escape, or at least, such a friend.

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