

DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

CHAPTER SIX

After a fortnight in the monastery, I grew bored with convalescence. In fact, I was no longer ill. The physical discomfort I had suffered was only external. My stomach pain was chronic, but it seemed to have grown less intense. I could no longer bear the thought of lying around idly, or taking a walk for sightseeing. Wanting to be involved in something more interesting and more rewarding, I followed monk Thong Chanh to the monastery library to check out some books.

The library was managed by monk Tue Van. It was open after dinner and whenever he happened to be there doing research. All kinds of books and sutras were neatly arranged. Besides sets of major sutras in Chinese and Sanskrit, there were also thousands of general books and periodicals, from research papers to literary works, from books of philosophy to romances and social novels, et cetera, you name it. Two big book cases held foreign language books—English, French, German, Chinese, Japanese. Being on a low level of proficiency in foreign languages, obviously I could not read these books in the original, but had to depend on their Vietnamese versions. I was told that the library had lost quite a large number of books during the chaotic period just before April 1975. Even so, the remaining books were enough to overwhelm me. This library had been established long before I entered monkhood. Five or six years before, when I was a novice here, I had known about its existence but for lack of time and guidance had never ventured there to check out books for myself. During my years in Hoi An, while studying and farming, I had not had a chance to visit a library either. Now, for the first time facing an ocean of books, I could not help but become excited and happy. Greedily I borrowed a pile and carried them back to my room. As a member of the monastery, I did not have to get a library card or follow any complicated procedure to check them out. Monk Tue Van needed only to enter my name and the titles of the books in a log.

Alone in my room, I virtually devoured the books in a week or ten days, then returned them and borrowed many others. I thought at that rate I would soon read all the items in Vietnamese which the library held. However, monk Thong Chanh seemed to have second thoughts about this. He considered that reading like I did, without discrimination, without any direction, was no good. So he decided to tutor me. At first, when he had not yet worked out a suitable syllabus, he gave me English lessons. But after only a short time, he proposed that I learn English from monk Phuoc An while he himself would tutor me in Chinese. Monk Phuoc An taught me English using the New Testament for a textbook. I did not know what monk Phuoc An had in mind. On my part, I knew well that given my low level of education, no matter how open-minded I was, I would not be able to digest the sacred scriptures of another religion through the medium of classical English. Eventually, considering that only monk Tue Van, with his vast knowledge, could teach several subjects at different levels over a long period of

time, monk Thong Chanh proposed that monk Tue Van be my only teacher who would decide on everything connected with my studies. I was very happy with this proposal. Thus, after discussing the matter with monk Tue Van and obtaining his agreement, monk Thong Chanh arranged for me to receive lessons in monk Tue Van's room.

The learning plan was designed by monk Tue Van himself based on my educational level which was measured by a test. The test was very simple. I was asked to translate the foreword in one of the volumes of the *Tripitaka* written in Chinese. This I accomplished within a day and submitted to him in the evening. Monk Tue Van read it over then praised me with a half smile, saying that I had translated a religious text in a polished and flowery style. In other words, my style was for creative literature, not for translation of Buddhist scriptures or something serious and precise such as research and discursive writing. Following from that, for my Chinese lessons, monk Tue Van chose T'ang poetry instead of Buddhist sutras. However, with regard to the subject of Buddhist teachings, he had me read the *Lankavatara* sutra, also in the Chinese version. I was required to learn and translate every word and sentence before listening to his explanation of the deep meaning they contained. It was such a balanced and sensible approach, avoiding partiality while retaining the original flavor. Besides classical Chinese and the *Lankavatara* sutra, monk Tue Van also taught me English. Three subjects were covered in six class sessions per week. I was free on Sundays. It was quite a busy time for me, because for only three subjects, monk Tue Van gave me a lot of assignments. He was a young Buddhist scholar of great intelligence who could build and expand knowledge around a small fact or idea. With such awesome intelligence, he seemed to take for granted that everybody could learn quickly and easily like himself. Therefore I had a hard time keeping up with so many lessons and tests which monk Tue Van gave me.

One afternoon about a month after I began my studies with monk Tue Van, over a dozen city policemen appeared at Hai Duc monastery. They surrounded it and searched everywhere to check on the number of permanent residents residing in it. About that time, I had just finished my lessons and was walking back to my room from monk Tue Van's quarters. On the way, I dropped by for a visit with an elder fellow monk-student named Phuong. His small room, no bigger than a storage space for odds and ends, was situated catty-corner behind the living room and the patriarchs' shrine. We two sat talking without knowing that all the while the policemen were inspecting the pagoda. They checked through the rows of rooms on the upper level and drove all the monks and novices down to the sitting room. Monk Tue Van was also asked to present himself to the policemen. Meanwhile, in Phuong's room, after talking with me for awhile, Phuong excused himself to go to the kitchen and fetch more hot water for tea. I sat at his desk, took a book and read it while waiting. In the kitchen, Phuong was accosted by the police who asked him to proceed to the living room where he would be "worked over" by them. Only myself, unaware of what was going on, sat there in Phuong's room leisurely reading and waiting for him to return with a pot of hot tea.

When the policemen were gone, Phuong came back and was aghast to remember that I had been sitting there all along. "What! You are still here? Well, so you did not present yourself to those city policemen, huh?"

"What presentation and what policemen are you talking about? I've been waiting for your tea."

"You really didn't know? Pray to Buddha. They've searched and checked

everything for sometime. So bothersome. And you've been sitting here leisurely waiting for tea. Imagine that! Aren't you lucky."

"Was it so? I had no idea. But what were they checking on?" I asked.

"They checked up on all those whose names are in the residence register of the monastery. Come to think about it, you're not a resident here, so I guess you needn't bother to report to them, right?"

"That's right, you can say I'm not a resident if a person is called a resident only when he has his name in a household register. Uh, I'm not a resident, I'm just one who stays over for a short while. This world is not my permanent residence."

Phuong laughed. "For people like you, the current word is temporary resident, you know?"

"Meaning residing temporarily? That's good. Residing temporarily in the temporary world, ha ha!"

It turned out that there had just been a quick check on the pagoda. Since this inspection had happened in the daytime, it meant that the main purpose was to see if those whose names were in the household register (equivalent to the family register under the former South Vietnam regime) were all accounted for. Perhaps that was why the policemen did not pay attention either to visitors or to those like myself who lived in the pagoda, but did not have their names entered into the pagoda's household register—which matter would have been problematic had the inspection been carried out at night. In any event, had they found me in Phuong's room, they would certainly have pulled me out to interrogate, and that could have been much trouble. They would probably have expelled me to my "place of origin", defined by them as the locality where a citizen was regarded as a resident and officially had his name in a local residence register. They would not have allowed me to remain here in Hai Duc pagoda because I was, by their definition, a legal resident of Long Tuyen pagoda in Hoi An.

In this limited worldly world, it seemed that the more one longed for Independence, Freedom, and Happiness, the more dependence, restriction and suffering one experienced. I remembered the day when I was prepared to leave Hoi An. I had gone with Tuu to the hamlet police station, to the people's committees of the village and district, to apply for a pass to Nha Trang. The village committee refused to grant me permission to leave, keeping my petition on file and telling me to wait for the People's Committee of the province to consider it. I did not want to wait and decided to leave regardless. So, now I had no legal papers in the eyes of the local government in Nha Trang. And probably I had also lost my legal status as far as the government of Hoi An in Quang Nam province was concerned. This would prove to be a real problem if the Nha Trang police asked me to show a pass.

During dinner on that same day, master Hai Tue looked at me with concern. Then he turned to monk Phuoc Chau, whose responsibility was to assist him in all administrative and paper work of the monastery. "Khang came back from Hoi An. I wonder how we should go about registering him."

"Well, let's ask Mr. Diep's advice. I heard him say that soon there would be a new round of household registration, so as to allow temporary residents to become official permanent residents. That's why the pagoda was checked yesterday afternoon. If what Mr. Diep said is true, let's ask him to enter Khang's name in the pagoda's register."

I did not know much about Mr. Diep. It was said that his family made their

appearance at the monastery some time during the chaotic period in early 1975, and were allowed to stay in the storage building for rice and firewood at the foot of the mount. This so-called storage facility, a structure of three compartments, had originally been called *Tinh Nghiep Duong*, a hall which housed male and female lay Buddhists who once a month came to the pagoda for religious training and practice. During the short stay of a day and a night, these believers would observe eight precepts and restrict their diet to vegetarian dishes only. In addition to the main section where was seen a Buddha's altar, there were also private bedrooms available in the back, with electric outlets and running water. However, during the war, *Tinh Nghiep Duong* had become a temporary residence for some reliable Buddhist families who had migrated down from Hue and Quang Tri and who had rendered services to the monastery. Subsequently, it had been turned into a storage location. At the time when Mr. Diep's family came, the storage was empty and the monastery allowed them to stay there, but only for awhile. Having no children, Mr. Diep and his wife must have found the storage building a good enough place to live. Therefore, when "the revolution arrived" in the south, the couple unilaterally decided to stay permanently in their temporary shelter. Eventually, the storage location for rice and firewood became Mr. Diep's own house. He even registered it as the official domicile of his own family. Furthermore, Mr. Diep also managed to acquire for himself the position as head of the city quarter at the foot of the mount, which extended to include Hai Duc monastery. Since that unilateral change of ownership, whenever the monastery bought rice, the rice had to be carried directly up to the kitchen on top of the mount. And firewood was stored in the deserted garage opposite the storage building. This was done as the monks no longer wished to bother Mr. Diep's family with the task of keeping an eye on these items. The garage formerly had held the two cars owned by the monastery, but since the cars were confiscated by the state, it served the new function well enough. Only one tiny room of the three-compartment storehouse was left by Mr. Diep for the monks to keep their bicycles in.

The following day, monk Hai Tue had someone invite Mr. Diep to the monastery to discuss the matter of my residence registration. This made it appear as though the pagoda had to ask permission from a worldly man of no substance to bring in a monk for religious training. My self-willed and arrogant mind could not tolerate this absurd matter. Therefore, when Lich, a new junior novice, knocked on my door and asked me to go meet Mr. Diep in the living room, I refused to comply. In actuality, according to monk Thong Chanh, the head of a city quarter had no jurisdiction over the registration of a household other than his own. Given that fact, I could not understand why my master still wanted to consult Mr. Diep.

"Report to our master that I'm not here," I told Lich.

"What if he tells me to go looking for you?"

"Then say you have looked everywhere but can't find me."

"That's terrible. I'm afraid of lying to the master."

"This isn't exactly lying to him. This is to save the face of the monastery, you know? Who the hell is Mr. Diep that he dares to hassle and force our master to present to him this person or that, before he cares to begin a discussion? Master needs only to let him know that there's a newcomer; that when a new register is made for the pagoda, the name of that person will be entered in it, and it will be sent to the police for validation. Who says the police will certify it only after Mr. Diep has seen my face?"

Novice Lich went back to report to our master, monk Hai Tue, that I was not in. It seemed that Mr. Diep did not believe it, or he considered that my absence showed a lack of respect for him. So after talking to my master for a while, he persistently declared that my residence registration could not be done. Standing by to fan my master, Lich could hear it all and related it to me later.

"In the case of Khang, I think it's difficult to have him listed in the pagoda's register, master," said Mr. Diep.

"Why? He used to live here. His name was in our official Family Register during the time of the former regime. He went to Hoi An to study and now he's back. Shouldn't it be a simple matter to take care of that?" my master asked.

"It's... it's because he was absent from here when household residence registration was being conducted by the city authorities. The former Family Register is no longer valid. At the time when the initial registration was carried out, everyone had to stay where they were. Following that, Khang's place of origin is Hoi An, and so he must go back to Hoi An. He has no need to return to Nha Trang."

"But Mr. Diep, his place of origin is Nha Trang, not Hoi An," my master protested.

"Well, wherever one registered one's residence then, that's his place of origin. Khang has possibly registered his residence in Hoi An, so just let him go back there. It's troublesome for him to come back to Nha Trang."

"Precisely because I thought it troublesome, I've turned to you for advice as to what can be done to solve the problem. He's sick, and there are inadequate medical facilities up there, while sufficient facilities here. Now we would like to ask you the favor of endorsing his name in the pagoda's register as a temporary resident. Then when the time comes for new residence registration, the government probably will permit him to become an official permanent resident here."

"There are now already more than twenty names in the pagoda's register. The more residents there are, the more difficult to add another one. The state doesn't want to see a large number of people gather in one place, especially when the majority of monks and novices here are young men. It's very difficult, master. Even temporary residence isn't permitted him, let alone permanent residence. Why didn't he stay where he was in Hoi An? What did he run back here for? He was very lucky to have his residence registered in Hoi An. He only asks for trouble by moving here."

"I already told you. I called him back because he's sick."

"Good Heavens! You only trouble yourself unnecessarily. There are state hospitals everywhere to take care of everyone. It's the same up north and down here."

"State hospitals, you say? Alas, they have no medicine at all. Whenever a monk here gets sick, we ourselves have to find proper medicine for him, as no hospital can provide good drugs. Here we all have to depend on private doctors and medicine bought from private stores, you know."

Mr. Diep stopped talking for a while, then finally concluded, "I still think the police will not allow his name to be entered into this pagoda's register. With any luck, maybe you can arrange for him to be included in the book of another pagoda having a smaller number of people. This monastery is already full."

My master sighed. "Twenty odd people doesn't make it full. Don't you remember that formerly we had more than two hundred residents here?"

"That was then, but this is now..."

Lich only attended to the discussion up to that point before he returned to my room.

In the afternoon, after meal, monk Hai Tue summoned me. "Concerning the matter of applying for your residence in this pagoda, it seems impossible according to what Mr. Diep said. The reason is they don't like to see our monastery full of people. To reduce the number is easy, but to increase it is very difficult. Therefore, I would like to have you go in a couple of days to Linh Phong pagoda and ask the abbot Trung Hung to write your name in the register there. You only ask to have your name entered there, but you still live here. Initially, you can be a temporary resident in that pagoda. Then when the new residence registration takes place, they will certify you as a permanent resident. I think that's the best way. I'm sure Monk Trung Hung out of respect for me will try his best to help you with this matter. To think about it, formerly you did stay and study at Linh Phong pagoda for a time, didn't you? Listen, you only wish to be at peace in order to continue your religious training, so put up with whatever they want and settle this matter once and for all. Resign yourself and tolerate difficulties before you can hope to be in a position to pursue your studies."

"Yes, master," I said.

I could only be stubborn like a mule toward other people, but never toward my master. I listened to whatever instructions he gave me, never daring to say my own thoughts.

The following day, in the company of monk Thong Chanh I walked from Hai Duc monastery to Linh Phong pagoda, both temples on the same mount but not directly connected by any path. The little trip would involve going down the mount on our side, walking through a neighborhood, then ascending it again on the other side to reach our destination. Five years before, I had been sent by my master to this same Linh Phong pagoda so that I could start out as a novice monk in a small place, instead of having an easier time in the bigger Hai Duc monastery.

Monk Thong Chanh knew more than anyone else the fact that during my former stay at Linh Phong pagoda, I was not treated well by monk Trung Hung, its abbot. Therefore, while we were on our way, he expressed his concern.

"It's really is a small world! In the end you have no choice but showing yourself at Mr. Trung Hung's place again. Well, pay no mind to it. Just bear with it for the sake of your legal residence. Probably monk Trung Hung has mellowed down and is no longer his former self. Moreover, you're not asking him to put you up in his pagoda, because you will continue to live in Hai Duc monastery."

"No problem, master. I'm not worried about monk Trung Hung. I only feel sad when monks like us, and our pagodas in general, must be controlled tightly, and must follow too many worldly rules and regulations."

Monk Thong Chanh was silent. After a long walk, we reached Linh Phong pagoda. In no great hurry to go inside, we sat resting in the shade of two old tamarind trees flanking the three-entrance gate.

From this spot I could see the traffic on Highway One and houses bordering the road leading to Hai Duc monastery. Observing people's activities and movements from a high position, I pondered, is a very entertaining game for arrogant and ambitious men. When people are tiny like ants in your view, their movements become funny and humble.

As for me, every time I watched people and things from a height, I always felt myself in soaring high spirits, having the sensation of becoming noble and surpassing all the ties inherent in the world below the mount. I said to monk Thong Chanh, "It would have been better if we monks were in different circumstances. We ought not be tied down by worldly rules and regulations."

"If you wish so, you have to live in a jungle or on high mountains where there is no sign of human beings."

"Yes, that's true. But please just think... it's so depressing to see our pagodas under the control of local policemen."

"In Rome do as the Romans do. You must obey the general rules of whatever country you live in. There's no exception."

"But that's why I said it's so depressing. Having learned from the supposedly civilized socialist manner of conduct, these policemen insolently address venerable and superior monks as their equals, using the impersonal 'I' and 'you' and no honorific words. And they also display feudal manners, giving themselves air and being bossy. It's not in the tradition of Buddhist monks to kowtow to any imperial power, but now we have to lower ourselves in relation to those less cultured policemen. Whatever has happened to our vow to renounce worldly concerns?"

Saying these words increased my anger.

Monk Thong Chanh appeared anxious, perhaps because he did not want me to concern myself with matters connected with the new government.

"All right, I see what you mean. But let's talk about something else," he said.

Sitting still for awhile, I suddenly recalled a poem.

"Master, years ago novice Tam Hanh copied for me a four-line poem that he wrote. Let me recite it to you.

*Expanding clouds cover the mountain top
As my mind longs for a climb across mountains and forests
All alone by the bank of a stream
Homeless, I lead a free-floating life.*

I was moved to tears as I stated the last line.

Monk Thong Chanh patted me on the shoulder and offered words of comfort. "Just live and maintain your good will regardless of time and circumstances. There will be things contrary to your wishes in the new society. But isn't it true that your will power will become stronger and firmer when challenged by adverse circumstances?"

His words struck me to the depths of my soul. Long ago I had learned by heart the ten things to keep in mind and to contemplate, which are described in an essay entitled "Luan Bao Vuong Tam Muoi", itself incorporated into the *Tripitaka*. Indeed, I used to silently recite them everyday when I was in Hoi An. Yet, since coming back to Nha Trang, I had forgotten about them, not saying them even once. Now, as monk Thong Chanh referred to an idea in the text, my heart, tremendously exhilarated, seemed to see the light. Pressing my lips together, I looked up into the sky above, then recited to myself.

Nowadays, those who are trained in our religion don't want to learn to

practice it under difficult circumstances. As a result, when forced to confront great obstacles, they are unable to deal with them, and abandon the ultimate goal of self-liberation and enlightenment. How extremely regrettable and depressing that is.

After sitting there a little longer, we made our way into the pagoda to meet with monk Trung Hung.

"Amita Butsu, how are you?" Monk Thong Chanh was the first to state his greetings.

"Pray to Buddha. It's been a long time since you were here last. Ah, here's novice Khang, isn't it? Oh my, you've grown quite a bit. You just came back from Hoi An, right?"

I joined my hands to greet monk Trung Hung, then stood quietly waiting for monk Thong Chanh to broach the subject. After hearing all about it, monk Trung Hung asked. "Isn't monk Hai Tue able to come for a visit?"

"He's not well. He's asked me to come and talk with you, hoping you can help Khang as soon as possible, because the time for new residence registration is coming. If you want to have monk Hai Tue himself explain the matter more clearly, I'll tell him so. And monk Hai Tue will come to present the matter to you when he feels better."

"Oh no, no. I'm simply asking after his health. Of course, any of you can come to discuss it with me. Khang here can come alone to talk about it, for that matter. It's so good to have you here. Well, please have some refreshment. The matter of Khang's residence is simple, really. A novice from Hue has just come to join us, so I'll take care of the residence registration for both of them at the same time."

Of course monk Trung Hung could not have forgotten that it was my own master, monk Hai Tue, who had delegated him to head Linh Phong pagoda. My master had been its official abbot before that. Since there was so much work for him to take care of, he had handed Linh Phong pagoda over to monk Trung Hung. Now my master was asking no more than a small favor from monk Trung Hung, a simple matter, really, as after all, I had lived and studied at this pagoda as a novice. The request for this small favor was based on personal religious relationship, not at all imposed in the name of monk Hai Tue's previous status. But it seemed that monk Trung Hung preferred to stick to impersonal administrative principle, a rigid principle which he himself had created. If not in so many words, he had actually demanded that my sick master himself descend the mountain from the side of Hai Duc monastery, walk around its base to this side, then ascend it to reach Linh Phong pagoda, so as to present my case to monk Trung Hung. Luckily, monk Thong Chanh was sharp enough to see through this power game and snubbed it as soon as it began to surface.

As a matter of courtesy, monk Thong Chanh and I followed monk Trung Hung to the main building to worship Buddha, before walking around to see more about the changes since I had been here last. Arriving at the row of rooms east of the main building, I met two novices. One was known by his religious name Phuoc Duc, or Duc for short; the other was Nguyen Thai, or Thai for short. Duc was the person who had just come from Hue, as monk Trung Hung had earlier informed us. Thai was also originally from Hue, but he had been here since before 1975. Duc, about five or six years older than me, had been ordained as a *sa di*, or sramanera, of ten precepts. (In Vietnamese

Buddhist sangha organization, one can distinguish two classes of the *sa di* order. The first consists of young novices accepting five precepts, who retain a tuft of hair when they receive their tonsure, and who wear only large-sleeved gray robes during religious ceremonies. The second class, Duc and myself among them, consists of those accepting ten precepts, who already have the tuft of hair shaved off and wear plain religious frocks, unlike those worn by ordained regular monks or *ty kheo*, also called bhiksu, which feature patch-work.) Thai was about fourteen or fifteen years old and still wearing a tuft of hair on the front part of his head. While Duc had a tawny complexion and was built like an athlete, Thai was pale, light-skinned, and skinny. Throughout the time monk Trung Hung was engaged in conversation with monk Thong Chanh, Duc and I exchanged information and thoughts about our studies, and also reminisced about classes and school before 1975. Quickly we became friends.

After awhile, Duc led me out to the yard. "Listen," he said. "You mentioned that you were being tutored by venerable monk Tue Van, didn't you? Then you're very lucky, indeed. I understand that a few monks in the monastery as well as from other pagodas begged to study with him, but he didn't accept them. Do you think you can ask him to allow me to take lessons from him together with you?"

"Well, it would be a pleasure to have you taking the same lessons from monk Tue Van. But I really don't know if he would want any more students. Let me check on that."

"You said he teaches you three subjects, right? I only wish to join in the study of the *Lankavatara* sutra. To tell the truth, since the Institute of Buddhist Studies was dissolved, I've not been able to study at all. So sad. Here, we do nothing but go out performing special prayer services all day long, and that's just meaningless. If you could get monk Tue Van to agree to teach me the sutra, I'd be very grateful to you."

I was touched by Duc's genuine desire for knowledge. Thinking about the present situation of Duc and Thai, my heart reached out to them. I remembered only too well that I myself had spent half a year in this pagoda. Though I could not recall all the difficulties I had encountered then, I certainly could not forget that monk Trung Hung was a stick-in-the-mud and a hard-to-please person. Any youth would soon lose his youthful vitality when placed in Linh Phong pagoda under the control of this monk. I felt sorry for Duc and Thai. At once I promised that I would convey Duc's wish to study with monk Tue Van.

Monk Trung Hung himself entered my name into the residence register of his pagoda, in the last section of the book reserved for temporary residents, where Duc's name was seen. Thus, according to this register, Duc and I were supposed to be staying temporarily. Seeing that the request had been granted, monk Thong Chanh felt reassured and took me back to Hai Duc monastery. I was told that monk Trung Hung had to take the book down to the People's Committee of the local quarter for certification, that the matter of your residence was by no means settled just because the head of a household wrote your name in it.

The day after, during the English session, I presented Duc's request to monk Tue Van. The master did not look so pleased with the idea, and only agreed after a moment of hesitation. I went to Linh Phong pagoda in the afternoon to give Duc the good news that he could start his lesson the next day. Learning about this, monk Trung Hung summoned Duc to his side. "Have you learned all there is to learn about the two basic kung fu sessions of religious training and practice? And the four books of precepts for

sramanera? Do you know that the *Lankavatara* text is very difficult? Even I myself don't have a thorough grasp of it, though I've studied it. You youngsters rush to learn it, but I'll bet you won't understand it at all."

"This subject is taught by monk Tue Van, so I shouldn't be worried about not understanding it. I'll ask him if I don't understand, and by asking I'll get further explanation. Moreover, monk Tue Van knows well every student's level of education, so I'm sure he'll find a suitable way to explain things to me. If Khang can learn, so can I."

"That Khang, huh? He's different from you. He always wants to take a short cut, to engage in extra-curricular studies, to take more lessons and tutorials. It's all so ill-organized, showing no firm foundation. Do you want to be spoiled like him?"

I was standing nearby and talking with Thai. Overhearing the exchange in which I was mentioned as "a spoiled guy", I was startled. So it turned out that in monk Trung Hung's eye, I was nothing but a decadent fellow, short of self-discipline.

When Duc saw me off to the gate, I said to him. "It'll be all right if you can't attend the class. I'll let monk Tue Van know. To tell the truth, I'm afraid monk Trung Hung thought that I've enticed you into..."

"Huh? Let him say whatever he wants to. It will be quite a shame if I don't take up this chance to study with monk Tue Van."

Since then, once a week, Duc attended the *Lankavatara* sutra class with me. He and I became closer and closer as we were the only two young monks in Nha Trang who were nominally "in the same class" in spite of the fact that the Institute of Buddhist Studies had ceased to exist in the early years under the new government.



My private room was rather special as it was not one among the rows of rooms occupied by the monks and novices. For the first few days after my return to Nha Trang, I was assigned to stay together with several novices in a common room by the side of the front building. Following that, I was shown by monk Thong Nghia (who was monk Thong Chanh's junior) to an unoccupied room which suited me well. It was in the drum tower located on the left of the main building. Previously, the main building was flanked by the drum tower and the bell tower, which, as their names indicated, housed the pagoda's ceremonial drum and bell. Now, however, the drum and bell had been removed from inside the towers and placed outside the doors of the towers for easy access. Monk Phuoc Chau, manager of the monastery, who had a separate private room, used the vacated bell tower for his nap at noontime. The key to the drum tower was given to me by monk Thong Nghia. I explored my new room and found it ideal. It could be said that it was the first time in my life that I had a room of my own. The tower was two-leveled. In addition to a door opening to the side veranda of the main building, the lower level also boasted three very big windows in the other three walls. The back window, adjoining the novices' rooms where I had stayed before, was completely covered with thick wooden boards. The side window, opposite the door, opened to tall shady frangipani trees, which rustled in the wind all day long. And from the front window, one could view willow and peppermint trees gracefully swaying in the front yard, and behind them, in the far distance, the outlines of dark green Hoang Nguu mountain. My desk was

set by this front window. The room, about twelve square meters, was pretty small. But I could not ask for more. All I needed was a private corner of my own away from the others. Moreover, in addition to this tiny room on the ground floor, I was also blessed with a completely unfurnished room of ten square meters on the upper floor, which was reached by a wooden staircase near the door. The four walls of this upper room were marked with four round windows cut in the design of the Chinese character for Longevity. The cut-out sections among the different strokes of the character allowed a cool breeze to come in from all directions. Though it was a little bit inconvenient that the windows had no sashes to open and close, the room was still ideal as a place for meditation. Just by closing the door on the ground floor as well as the lid covering the staircase, I would assuredly be left alone in my contemplation without any interruption.

Indeed, my drum tower was in an isolated spot, set apart from the rooms of other monks. No one came around. Once a fortnight, there was a confessional prayer session at eight in the evening when male and female Buddhist believers gathered around the veranda in front of the main building. And also, only during the three months of summer, did Buddhists come together to chant prayers at noon. When they participated in ceremonial prayers, I also joined them, but did nothing different so as not to be noticed. Many people in the monastery, including my own master, did not know that the drum tower had become my room, so scarcely did anyone drop by for a visit. In principle, the matter of accommodation for the monks had to be monitored by the managing monk. But after 1975, when the number of two hundred resident monks dropped to twenty or so, anyone could choose for himself the room he liked. Furthermore, the drum tower was not even an actual room, so my occupying it in no way caused anyone inconvenience.

Since my room was in an isolated and quiet corner near the front courtyard of the temple, I usually enjoyed a leisurely stroll around the area before sitting on the stone veranda floor, at a spot near the flagpole which afforded me an unobstructed view of the setting sun dragging its last rays over immense rice fields located to the southeast. Such fields stretched alongside National Highway One, from the town of Dong Nai near the ocean to the villages south of the city of Nha Trang. The last fields merged with groves of coconut and the Nha Trang River. All around me, this way and that, was an infinite confabulation in shades of blue and green hues. Blue sky, blue ocean, blue mountain, green rice fields, green forests, blue river, and nearest me, green leaves of tree branches hanging down, spreading out: all shades in all directions.

Amidst that vault of sky and earth, I enjoyed watching most white storks soaring from Dong Nai across the rice fields, over and above the tall trees along the highway, then around the back of Kim Son pagoda located on another mountain. They disappeared, then reappeared in the grey mist blanketing rows of coconut trees, finally losing themselves in the brilliant crimson of the southwest horizon. In fact, every day without exception, a little while after six in the evening, a flock of white storks flew by, arranging themselves in a V shape. Five minutes later, another flock of storks followed, also neatly forming a V shape against the sky. Then about three minutes after that, there appeared a lone stork flying after the second flock. Perhaps this was a playful member always late in joining its group. And one never knew, it might prefer to fly alone, to flap its wings leisurely by itself at the end of a day of wandering around. Inexplicably I liked that lonesome bird. Hence, every day while watching for the flocks' evening flight, I always felt full of anticipation for the lone stork's appearance, as if it were the only being

that could actually represent life and symbolize the lonely yet wonderful flying path on the borderline between eternal heaven and earth.



One afternoon, I went to monk Tue Van's room for my Chinese lesson. From a distance, I could hear the low and high-pitched sounds of the guitar resounding in his room. I entered quietly, and gently pulled aside a chair, then sat and waited. His musical skills were superb. I had yet to learn how to play the guitar, but since I had a sensitive ear for music, I was able to enjoy his solo performance. (After all, when a child, I had listened to my brothers and sisters playing music and singing, and the record player in my house had worked endlessly for many hours a day to accommodate our many different tastes.) Monk Tue Van was playing a piece of western classical music which I had never heard before. But it did not matter much to me whether it was familiar or not. It was his manner of playing music and enjoying it simultaneously, with complete passionate absorption, which truly moved me, mesmerized me, and pulled me unwittingly along the stream of music. Monk Tue Van lay stretched out on his divan, his head propped up rather high with pillows, the guitar in his arms, eyes half closed, the ten fingers like proficient dancers moving rhythmically and gracefully over the frets in accordance with high and low tones, slow and fast rhythms. When he came to the last part of the composition, I could almost hear surges of waves splashing against a green bank, shaking leaves and grass on the sand, while a white stork was soaring up and up. He seemed to be deep in a state of ecstasy where there existed only the flow of sounds and silence, succeeding one another, then merging together into one, spreading out, overflowing, overflowing. I myself sank deep into that delicate and marvelous stream of sounds.

Even though the music had stopped for quite awhile, I remained in a daze, unable to disengage myself from its spell. I was only snatched out of it by his question. "Have you been here long?"

"No, master, I've just come in," I replied.

Monk Tue Van made himself some coffee at a small table, had a few sips, and finished smoking a cigarette before reading with me a work in its original Chinese, titled *Dang Vuong Cac Tu* by Vuong Bot. Vuong Bot was a genius who was extolled as one of the Four Pre-eminent Poets of the early T'ang dynasty in China. Monk Tue Van briefed me on the story behind the work. It was said that one year, Diem Ba Du, the commander-in-chief of Hong Chau, had a banquet held at Dang Vuong pavilion. He invited all writers and poets as well as great aristocratic families, from whom he would ask for poems celebrating the structure. However, the ultimate purpose he had in mind was to create an opportunity to show off his son-in-law's talent in poetry. Coming by boat from far away, Vuong Bot arrived just in time to join the banquet. Seeing that Vuong Bot was but a youngster about fifteen or sixteen years of age, Diem was disdainful of him and did not invite him to take part in the poetry writing. Subsequently, to honor other guests' recommendations, he unwillingly had paper and brush given to Vuong Bot. The young poet held the brush, and words flowed from it uninterruptedly. Whatever part he had finished writing was copied and handed to Diem by one of his subordinates. Skimming the first parts, Diem was startled with awe.

When coming to Vuong Bot's immortal stanza, Diem visibly trembled and was discouraged from showing his son-in-law's poem. The stanza read:

*When the rainbow had disappeared and the rain completely stopped
Many-colored images splendidly illuminated the sky line.
Along with crimson evening clouds flew a lonely stork
As autumn streams and the vast sky merged in silver tone.*

When monk, Tue Van, read and gave a rough translation of those four lines, especially the last two, I felt myself tremble the way Diem of Hong Chau must have trembled in that time long past.

That evening, I did not have the courage to sit as usual on the mossy stones of the veranda floor in front of the pagoda to view the lonely stork soaring over the rice fields, though I very much wanted to do that. Truly, even as I closed the door, climbed the steps in the drum tower and sat hidden from view below the four round windows, my mind still resembled a calm pond in autumn reflecting the lonely flight of a white stork along side evening clouds.

The day after, I wrote monk Tue Van a very short note.

*My respectful master,
I will not study any more. I no longer have enough strength to learn. If I can return to my studies some day, I hope you will kindly accept me as your student again. Most importantly, I beg you not to be angry with me for dropping out."*

I informed my friend and classmate, Duc, of my decision so that he would not come for the *Lankavatara* sutra lessons any longer. Without me, perhaps monk Tue Van would not want to continue teaching this class. Duc cried out. "Oh, heavens! I've got only that one hour class each week and now you've ruined it for me."

In spite of that, he still smiled his friendly smile and did not ask me the reason for my quitting. That was very much like Duc. With regard to personal matters, he would often wait for my voluntary explanation instead of bothering me with questions.

Monk Thong Chanh, who was the first to learn about this, immediately asked. "Well, what's up? It wasn't because you were not able to follow the lessons, was it? Are you feeling tired? Are you sick again?"

"No, no, I'm not. But... I feel it's somewhat wasteful to spend too much time in class and doing homework."

Monk Thong Chanh smiled, but his voice sounded sad. "It's never a waste of time to study. If you don't make efforts when you're young, you'll regret it in the future. Look at me. I'm this old, but can't do anything useful."

I looked at him and wanted to say something, but did not. Monk Thong Chanh, you're always modest and you tend to demean yourself, I thought. In fact, you yourself and your religious life are really a masterpiece. You don't need to do any other useful things through book learning.

Hearing nothing from me, monk Thong Chanh made a dismissive gesture with his hand and told me to stop talking about it for now, and to study hard when I was inspired. He was always nice, always sympathetic and kind like that towards me.

Some days later, my mother came to the pagoda to look for me. She said at once. "Monk Tue Van informed me about your dropping out of studies. He said you were intelligent and could do your lessons well, and so he could not understand your decision. He asked me to advise you to study again and not to be distracted by small things."

"I don't know why either, mother. I just feel that I can't continue to study, and so I have stopped. I don't want to study anything at this time."

Failing to persuade me, my mother left.

Half a month later, monk Tue Van went into retreat, seeing no one and not leaving his room for a whole month. And during that period, I began to read poems by many authors—from Chinese T'ang poets to the pre-1945 and contemporary Vietnamese poets. Then I attempted to write poetry myself. I thought I would be a poet and live for poetry, and that that would be enough for me. And that I would not have to study any more. Where did that foolish rashness come from? I did not know. Perhaps it was from my fun-loving and lazy innate character. Perhaps I was influenced by the very poetic character of monk Tue Van. And perhaps, also, it was because at sunset, in a distant sky, there was a little white stork flying alone, alone around high mountains, and disappearing into crimson clouds in the west.
