

# DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

## CHAPTER SEVEN

One might say it was because I remained a teenager, with the deplorably lazy mind of a person only just recovered from illness, that when placed in such a poetically beautiful environment as was Hai Duc pagoda, I easily became spoilt, allowing myself the pleasure of self-indulgence. Getting used to the relaxed routine of "convalescence", I almost lost my will to observe the disciplines and follow the schedules of daily religious training, which I had previously strictly honored. Whenever it was my turn to recite prayers, I would put on my ceremonial robe and make my appearance at the Buddha altar. But outside of conducting the prayer sessions assigned to me by the managing monk, in the confines of my own room I no longer with all my heart meditated or recited Buddha's name. To say "no longer with all my heart" meant that when I sat in meditation, I did not really attempt to concentrate all my thought on it. I made no effort to control my mind when I was conscious that it was running around, like a wild horse, aimlessly. My will power truly went haywire. Sometimes, waking up in the middle of the night, I attempted to sit silently in bed, concentrating on self-examination and self-criticism, and telling myself to get my act together. But nothing changed. When the bell was tolled to wake everybody up, I woke up as others did. But I got up simply as a matter of routine, not looking forward to meditation and recitation of prayers. And instead of taking full advantage of the quietness of early morning hours to mindfully engage in religious practice, I read books and stories, sometimes romantic novels. For a worldly person, such a way of life could be considered decent enough: he got up early to read books and novels, not to gamble or get drunk or cause others any harm. But for a monk living in a pagoda, even for a decadent one like myself, to conduct life in such a manner meant that I was gradually becoming a "no-good monk"—a term commonly-used in the parlance of pagodas and in the *Sa Di Oai Nghi*, a text on correct rules of conduct for *sramanera* novices. There is indeed no pain greater to a person than when he finds himself bogged down in the mud without having anything to cling to or grasp for support in order to pull himself out, I told myself.

Years earlier, when I had just renounced the world and was guided by my master, my heart and mind were energetically directed toward the ultimate aim of self-liberation and enlightenment. I definitely wished to become a Buddha, or if not, to be a true monk whose support for the religion would count for something. I had never imagined that I could go wrong so badly as this. I did once promise myself to overcome my weaknesses. But my will power remained feeble and I kept on indulging in complaisance and letting time go by, unconcerned.

I had had the feeling of becoming a newer person since recovering from my various sicknesses in Hoi An, especially from the moment I stepped on the bus that

brought me back to Nha Trang. But was the way I led my life now the manifestation of that new man? I really did not know why I had no energy and no determination left to resist abandonment of mind and heart to worldly temptations. Not only did I begin to try my hand at writing poetry and fiction, but I also studied music, learning how to play the flute and the guitar, and even singing. Indeed, I eagerly devoted myself to learning on my own all those hobbies of worldly adults. With regard to literature, I was engrossed in writing my first long works of prose fiction during this period of my life, and also produced a collection of over one hundred poems. When it came to guitar playing, I had someone buy me a second-hand instrument. Then I myself went downtown and bought a book entitled "Teach Yourself the Guitar" by Lan Dai and Hoang Buu, from which I managed to acquire basic music theory. In addition, I sometimes visited my parents' place for a few hours, where one of my elder brothers helped me practice playing the guitar. Thoroughly devoting myself to such practice, I soon had a good grasp of basic finger movements, and to some measure could play to accompany singing. Then I learned how to sing. I borrowed all the songbooks that my family still kept, irrespective of what kind they were. From folksongs to love songs by popular song writers—like Cung Tien, Pham Duy, Trinh Cong Son, Vu Thanh An, Tu Cong Phung, et cetera—I tried to sing them all. I learned by heart quite a number of love songs, even though my rustic heart had not learned how to beat the rhythm of love. With regard to learning how to play the flute, I bought one at a book store together with a cassette and a flute manual written by the musician Nguyen Huu Nghia. Within only a few months, I seemed to have become an "adult". Not only an adult but also an "artist". Yes, having engaged in all those things that adults enjoy, truly, I felt like a real adult, a real artist. How could one think otherwise of a man who stayed up late and got up early to write poetry and fiction, with a cup of hot black coffee at his side, of a man who played the guitar and sang alone on moonlit nights?

The consequence of my obsessive interest in becoming an artist was that sentimentality and romanticism began to make their way into my creative writing. Reading some of my poems, monk Thong Chanh grew concerned.

"Why is it that the word 'darling' appears in every poem? Who is this darling or sweetheart? Do you have someone to love in the fashion of worldly boys and girls?"

I quibbled. "No, no, there's no one whatsoever. 'Darling' here is simply truth personified or concretized. *I'm looking for you, darling* only means I'm looking for the ultimate truth, that's all."

Monk Thong Chanh looked doubtful.

"The ultimate truth doesn't need to be concretized with such a suggestive term," he said. "And why must it be concretized? Truth can be correctly called truth; what's the need to call it darling or the like. That's dangerous, as it does you no good. Don't you know that terminology has its own life, because each word carries with it what it represents? When you say the word 'darling' again and again, isn't it true that a special image appears in your mind? Your truth then will come to you in the image of a female. What will you do with that truth, then?"

I smiled without saying anything in reply. Perhaps monk Thong Chanh did not remember, or did not feel as I did, that poems full of such words as truth, ideal, reason, essence, mentality, intelligence, intellectuality, knowledge, et cetera, were not poetry at all. But I also did not forget that monk Thong Chanh had often reminded me to guard

myself against women. One saying that I always remembered went something like this: "It would be wiser to roll a heated copper bar on your eyelids than conjure up evilness in your heart by glancing at a woman's beauty." I had previously treasured that advice, because I knew it came from his good intention to guide and protect an innocent and weak boy like myself. From his long experience of religious practice, having witnessed many people stumble, monk Thong Chanh did not want a well-behaved and meek adolescent like me to fall into easy traps out there. He still wanted to lead me by the arm, walking step by step cautiously and properly. But at this point in time, his advice had lost its effectiveness. I thought I had grown into an adult and, therefore, I wanted to chart my own life myself. I no longer wanted to have someone look over my shoulder and advise me, not even my own master, monk Hai Tue, who only watched me from a distance now. Perhaps the master himself clearly saw in me the sign of "becoming a man", and so he let me live my way, not getting involved as he had when I was a child.

Meanwhile, the warm relationship between monk Thong Chanh and myself continued and dragged on for a short time longer, before we began to gradually drift apart, even though we still lived in the same monastery, dined in the same dining room, and recited prayers on the same platform. All the difficulties between us stemmed from my stubbornness and my determination to be independent. Of course, I realized that if I had grown mature and acquired an independent spirit, that would have been a joy to those who had guided and taught me. But if that maturity was merely the growth of an ego, expressed in the visible physical development of a body with the passage of time, it was entirely a different matter. All the more, it was because of fascination with the illusion of maturity that I quietly cut off the long-standing relationship between monk Thong Chanh and myself. At times, I felt this was ungrateful of me. I would not have expected it from a novice like myself, who used to be well-behaved and obedient.



For several years before 1975, novice Than, from the bigger Provincial Pagoda, was one of my classmates in a beginners' class of Buddhist studies. When I was sent to the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Quang Nam, he was dispatched to the south, to the Nguyen Huong Institute of Buddhist Studies in Phan Thiet. Now that all these institutes were dissolved, we both had returned in Nha Trang, had met each other again, and had become quite close. Than had his own unique way of interpreting Zen Buddhism and understanding the teachings of the Pure Land school. He was reckless, down to earth, and did not care about public opinion. That was why, in the eyes of a lot of people, including his own master the abbot of the big pagoda, Than appeared to be the wildest and most unruly among *sramanera* novices in Nha Trang. I thought that judgment was unfair because, in my opinion, he was a straightforward person, most sincere and loyal to his friends.

In the Provincial Pagoda, besides Than, there lived another novice named My. He was usually referred to as "black My" to be distinguished from another novice of the same name who had lighter complexion and hence was called "white My". Black My came to Nha Trang from Saigon after 1975. During my visits with Than, I got to know Black My and we also became friends. Thus, from Hai Duc monastery, Provincial Pagoda, and Linh Phong pagoda, a group of four friends was formed, counting in order of

age: Duc, Black My, Than, and I. Duc and My were of the same age, four years older than Than, who himself was two years my senior.

Just as the saying goes, "Birds of a feather flock together", when I fell to the bottom of "dissoluteness" during this period of my life, I naturally became very compatible with those characters like my new friends who stood out because of their rather free-wheeling lifestyle. However, I had to admit that among the four, Duc was closest to me because we both felt regret and pain about our unbecoming conduct. We both did whatever was done by the other two: weight lifting, swimming, reading romantic novels and cloak-and-sword stories, and such. But Duc and I once in a while restrained ourselves, reminding each other of religious studies and discussing Buddhist doctrine, whereas the other two novices did not seem to care. They never repented for what they were doing. And while those two always proved to be experienced and quick-minded, demonstrated themselves able to adapt to any difficult circumstance in both religious and worldly existence, Duc and I remained naive novices who enjoyed diversions but knew when to stop, never completely abandoning ourselves to our wayward conduct.



It was quite beyond imagination to see a group of city policemen coming up to inform my primary master, monk Hai Tue, of their unilateral decision to temporarily borrow for their own use the newly-built row of rooms reserved for monks. These new rooms were situated on top of Trai Thuy hill, the very top, where the great bell of the pagoda was placed.

I did not know if the police also clearly explained to my master the reason why. But whispers were heard that under the pretext of using that row of rooms as a post from which to oversee the city, the police actually wanted to stay close in order to keep an eye on the monastery. Hai Duc Institute, previously housed in the monastery, had been well-known for having trained several generations of talented members of the Buddhist *sangha*. Now, even though the Institute had been dissolved, quite a number of young monks remained. Over twenty monks gathered in a single place seemed to the government to spell trouble.

Of course, my master could not say anything to refuse, as the decision had already been made by the police authority. All he could do was report the fait accompli to venerable and superior monks, leaders of the provincial *sangha*. When the news reached young members of the monastery, their displeasure was palpable. Everyone seemed to blame my master for not having the courage to express his protest to the city police, who had shamelessly appropriated that part of the monastery. I was among the discontented ones. With youthful temperament and energy, I could not understand that there were problems that could not be solved by vehement opposition and protest. It also did not occur to me that the first few years of Communist control of the south was not the time for people, including monks and priests of all religions, to engage in frank discussion with state officials. People were supposed to have the obligation to obey and follow commands issued by the state. I found all that quite absurd, and what I found absurd was not acceptable to me. So—more or less—in my heart appeared something like disrespect for my own master.

This negative sentiment was taboo in the tradition of Buddhist training. When a

disciple loses all or some of his respect and trust for his master, it does not necessarily signify that he will never succeed in his religious training, but he will have to move toward the goal by himself, with consequent unsteady steps. Being near or far, a master remains a very strong symbol, a necessary spiritual support for his disciples. To make good progress in order to attain the Way, a disciple should go beyond his master, but should never knock him down. Contempt and disrespect are termites which gradually drill holes in and finally destroy the disciple's faith and will power, without his being aware of the piles of sawdust accumulating around his feet.

In the next few days, the monks from the expropriated row of rooms had to move to lodgings down the hill. In fact, the large dining room of the monastery was divided into two parts: the front half served as a dining room; the rear half was turned into monks' quarters. About two weeks later, the police came to take up residence in the vacated rooms. Monks and policemen lived side by side on the same hill. Or, it might more metaphorically be said, Buddha and the Devils' Prince leaned against each other on the same sacred platform. But, by whatever way this event was poeticized, one could not eliminate the sad reality that half of the most spiritually evocative portion of Trai Thuy hill had been forcefully taken, raped. Yes, it certainly would require such a crude term to precisely express the involved encroachment of vulgarity upon innocence and purity. Trai Thuy hill, for decades having been no less than an environmental ambience of Zen, was now intruded upon by those worldly people whose hearts were most absent of goodwill. We could no longer freely go for a stroll on the hilltop. The path from the monastery to the great statue of Sakyamuni in the Provincial Pagoda was blocked.

Do we have anything left to lose? I asked myself while walking on the Sunset Path, and had a feeling that I was being watched by someone from the row of rooms above.

I no longer had any desire to leave my room. I stayed in most of the time, writing prose and poetry, playing the guitar and singing by myself. If I went out, this was no more than to seek the company of Duc, My, and Than, with whom I engaged in casual conversation, a way of distracting myself from thoughts of the dark cloud covering the hitherto airy harmoniousness of Hai Duc monastery's pleasant life.



I was told by Duc to be present at Linh Phong pagoda on the day monk Trung Hung, in the capacity of head of the pagoda, was to take its residence register, as well as background declarations by every resident, to the Phuoc Binh quarter offices. It was hoped that the police of the quarter would certify the newly revised register of the pagoda. It was also speculated that the police might require those temporary residents who had applied for permanent residence to present themselves for an interview at the quarter offices, so that legality of their residency could be considered. The Phuoc Binh quarter offices were right below the mount and could be seen from the three-entrance gate of Linh Phong pagoda. Therefore, all Duc and I needed to do was sit on the steps in front of the gate and wait. If monk Trung Hung came out of the offices and waved to us, we would go down the mount and join him to face the police. After an hour, monk Trung Hung emerged from the place, but did not wave or call out to us at all. He walked up the mount and entered the pagoda. So, the new residence register had been secured. Duc

and I now had our names listed as permanent residents of Linh Phong pagoda.

As I was about to turn around to go back to Hai Duc monastery, monk Trung Hung summoned both Duc and me to the living room. "Listen," he said, "now you are settled. Take care to study and practice the religion seriously. If you need to be away from Nha Trang for any reason, you'll have to let me know and also apply for a travel pass from the police before you go. Don't ever think you can freely travel around because you have secured residency here. It's all legitimate for Duc. But as for you, Khang, you live in Hai Duc pagoda but your name is registered here, that's not exactly proper. What if the police came to check on the pagoda in the middle of the night and did not find you? What shall I tell them? I'll have to discuss this matter with your own master one of these days."

Respectfully I said, "Master, if the police ask about it, please tell them that I'm convalescing and studying at Hai Duc pagoda. Since the two pagodas are on the same mount, belonging to the same quarter, I don't think they would make an issue of it."

"That's easy for you to say. I'm afraid it's not that simple."

During the afternoon meal in the dining room of Hai Duc monastery, the matter of new residence registration was discussed among the monks. Everyone seemed to agree that the state had this done not simply for census purposes, but chiefly as a means to stop or reduce people's movements, so as to block communication among different localities. Such communication of information was deemed unfavorable to the state's one-sided propaganda policy. To control residence registers was also a method of eliminating anti-government elements, both local and overseas, who could infiltrate and hide in private houses. Moreover, the policy of strictly enforcing residence registration would facilitate control by the state over people's food provisions. The essential need of food and clothing—gratified on the basis of legal residency—would be used to command, oppress, reward, and punish people in accordance with ends and means defined by the Party and the state.

I was enlightened by this discussion. For a long time my bookish knowledge had been limited to subjects in the fields of literature, philosophy, Zen, and Oriental religious studies. Therefore, I could not readily comprehend meanings underlying political matters, even though in this area of life there were facts which were very real, very basic, and easy to grasp, such as the matter of control through residence registration. This matter was by no means difficult to understand in comparison to issues in religious studies and philosophy. Suddenly it dawned on me that since the communists took control of the whole country, young Buddhist monks including myself, of simple and idealistic heart and mind, all had been crudely brought down to earth, had become involved in petty worldly matters. Without quite meaning to, I began to pay attention to current events, to ordinary activities of worldly people, and to the government's doings. Is it only natural that one starts paying attention to life circumstances when one becomes a young man? I wondered. Or is it a fact that hard-life circumstances, in particular, force youths from all social strata to abandon their dreams and aspirations, and confront the miserable real-life conditions faced by people around them?

Returning to the very concrete matter of residence registration, it would seem that my application to be admitted to domicile in Linh Phong pagoda was not different from *asking* to be imprisoned under the tight supervision and control of the state. And this applied not only to myself, but also to the whole population of the country. Not having

one's name officially entered into a domicile register meant that one could not buy foodstuff, that one was not a legal resident and therefore would not be given a certificate of citizenship, which was another name for an identification card. And without this card, one might be arrested in the streets, in one's house, or in one's pagoda—if the police happened to check one's identity. Therefore, even understanding that officially registering one's name in a domicile was resigning oneself to placing one's life under strict control, one had no alternative, one did what was required. It was better to be controlled by the state than to have no access to food and to live in constant fear of being arrested any time for lack of legal identification. Indeed, in the newly organized society, those of no legitimate residence who had no certificate of citizenship were regarded as reactionaries, suspected as remnants of the defeated army or spies planted by foreign powers in the past or recently. Those alleged offences, even before they were proven true or false, were enough to send a suspect to prison forever.

However, the new round of domicile registration in this year of 1976 was also done for a highly urgent reason, which the state had to take care of as soon as possible. It was no other than the business of drafting young men and women into the army, euphemistically rendered in current language as registration for military service, for the purpose of fulfilling international obligations in Kampuchea against Chinese invasion, which the state dubbed as "Beijing expansionism" or "Chinese hegemony".

About a month after the new round of residence registration, all young people from eighteen to twenty-five years of age had to present themselves at local government offices to attend classes on the policy of "military service". An invitation was sent to every individual of that age group in every household. Young monks in pagodas were no exceptions. They also received summons to report for the same classes and to register for military service. There were more than ten people at Hai Duc monastery who were in the age group destined for military service. Six others were counted in the neighboring Long Son and Phuoc Dien pagodas. Because Duc and I were listed as permanent residents in its residence register, Linh Phong pagoda boasted two eligible members. Military service became a subject of endless discussion in Nha Trang. The news that young monks were also required for military service caused considerable stir among Buddhist followers who frequented these pagodas. While registration for military service was limited to young people from eighteen to twenty-five, classes on military service policy were designed for a larger population group, including those from twenty-six to thirty-five years old. The result was that almost all residents of Hai Duc monastery had to attend those classes. It was utterly incredible that military policy of the new government was to be uniformly applied, making no exception for monks and priests of various religions. And it was also curious that all young people of the designated age groups, once having received an invitation, immediately presented themselves as asked—no one absent, no one late. Was this because, in the very first days under the new regime, they had witnessed and been haunted in their innermost hearts by the harshness and crude unfeeling attitude of a government which came to power purportedly in the name of the peasantry? This government had been known for conducting sessions of public persecution of parents by their own children, for its forceful interrogation and imprisonment of rich and influential people arbitrarily classified as "exploitative landlords", and for cutting off the heads or burying alive patriotic people who were not on their side, who did not share their political viewpoint.

Attending the required classes was actually no more than receiving prepared information and notices. Then everyone was to go home and write a so-called "input report", summarizing what she or he had heard, possibly adding her or his own opinion with regard to the matter of military service.

After having submitted our "input report on the matter of military service, required for the prevention of Beijing's expansionism, which threatens to invade our country", we young people were asked to undergo a health examination. An examination center had been quickly set up in a row of rooms temporarily appropriated from Vinh Son school. It was entrusted to the hands of a group of amateur nurses (medical workers not having undergone any professional training) in collaboration with the city's military Command Committee. From among more than twenty young monks and novices belonging to Hai Duc monastery and neighboring pagodas, only two were qualified for Group A, which group consisted of people deemed strong and healthy enough to join the army. Those two were My and myself. But since he was already twenty-four, in the end My was certified as a reservist, that is, Class II. The state had no immediate demand for men of his age. Instead, the state was in need of younger persons, at most eighteen to twenty. Thus, I was the only one entered in the list of "certified successful candidates for military service, Class I".

Since receiving the certificate of qualification for military service, I could feel compassion and sympathy directed toward me by people in Hai Duc monastery, by fellow novices and monks from other pagodas, as well as lay Buddhist believers. Monk Thong Chanh, ignoring the fact that for several days I had avoided talking with him, came to my room for a visit and consoled me. Like everyone else, he certainly considered that if worldly young people of my age would want to flee from military conscription, a religious person like myself, who had renounced the world since childhood, could not have been pleased with being forced to wield a firearm. As for me, I was not as distressed and desperate as everyone thought. Of course, I was neither pleased nor willing to commit myself to military service. But I could say that at least I had prepared myself in advance to accept calmly whatever adversity came my way. Who could tell if this was not one of the difficult but valuable trials in my religious life? Wasn't it said in *Luan Bao Vuong Tam Muoi* that one must learn to accept such a trial, such an adversity, before one could go through it and overcome it? Therefore, when someone suggested that I flee, I only smiled and shook my head. I did not need to avoid any adversity! I believed that the immediate trial confronting me—through the agency of fire and bullets, on the thin line of fear walking between life and death—would strengthen my power of will, my compassionate heart. I was ready to accept it.



On summer mornings, the surface of the ocean in Nha Trang was still as a pond in autumn, waveless. Only at high noon did the swells roll in without interruption, splashing onto the shore in frothy white bands like fragments of thin clouds falling from the sky, white bands of bubbles seen one instant, absent the next, leaving no discernible marks on the immense surface of the sea.

My three friends Duc, My, and Than, and myself reached the beach when the sun was high above the highest island on the open sea. Since becoming a Buddhist

ecclesiastic, I had rarely gone swimming in the sea. Monks and novices, who had lived in pagodas for many years, were accustomed to dressing discreetly—in both formal and informal attire uniformly worn by members of the *sangha*, which outfits were all long, loose fitting, fully covering their bodies. As such, they would feel uncomfortable, if not altogether embarrassed, when exposing a part of their arms to strangers, let alone wearing only shorts to bathe in public. Previously, before 1975, I had gone swimming a few times at Dai harbor in Hoi An with my fellow novices. That beach was not frequented by many people, as was Nha Trang beach, and I was only a kid then; but all the same, I had been shy and hesitant to be seen half-naked. However, since I had become friends with Than and My, I had learned to get used to the idea of going for a swim at the crowded beach, even during peak hours.

Even so, when on the beach, I still grew red in the face, and walked furtively like a thief, having the impression that all eyes were upon me. Once I managed to reach the water, I quickly swam after my friends toward the high sea where no other human being was seen, where only once in a while a boat sailed by. We always stopped about a quarter of the way to the biggest island in the high seas off Nha Trang. It was said that, previously, the Americans had established the television station for Nha Trang on top of this island. Looking back toward the beach from where we were, we could no longer make out human figures. They must have been about two kilometers away. Hundreds of swimmers had been reduced to tiny dots glued together or scattered over the yellow stretch of sand that stood out in sharp relief by the edge of the dark blue ocean. The atmosphere in the open sea was very calm. Waves undulated so gently that they emitted no sound. We floated on our backs, looking up at the blue sky with white clouds drifting across it. If the pleasure of reading gives one greater knowledge, the pleasure of lying on ones back on the surface of the open sea gazing at the sky and clouds, I considered, serves to lift ones heart and mind to unimaginable heights in the universe. A feeling impressed on me that I myself was drifting along with the clouds, not floating on the ocean's surface. I did not feel myself tiny and humble in the immensity of sky and the water; instead, I derived great pleasure in immersing myself in that immensity, and thereby identifying with it. Moreover, at times I felt the boundless sky and the immense ocean themselves to be immersed in my soul, flowing into myself—not the other way around.

On that particular morning, Duc and My took their leave early while Than and I were still floating out there in the high seas. Later, while swimming back to shore, we both noticed something unusual about the beach. Normally, even up to eleven o'clock, a large number of people were still seen hanging around. But today, for some unknown reason, they had all gone, leaving the beach empty. Even before we had a chance to dry ourselves, we saw two policemen coming down from the asphalt avenue that ran along the beach. One of them jerked up his chin at us, "What are you two doing here?"

"Swimming. What else?" Than retorted.

"Show us your ID cards."

Than and I extracted documents from our pockets. Each of us had a receipt for citizenship certification, not a certified identity card. The receipts bore no photos. It was inevitable that the two policemen looked at us suspiciously. They went on with their questioning. "Have you got any other papers? Do you have registration papers for military service?"

We showed them what they wanted to see. Both Than and I had full documentation certifying that we were reservists, Class II. The week before, while I had been ready to join the army if I was called, a policeman came to fully investigate my family background. Learning that my father had been a high-ranking civil servant working for the Government of South Vietnam before 1975, the authorities did not want to draft me any more, grouping me instead in Class II as a reservist. The matter could be viewed in an optimistic light: even as my father was rejected and considered an enemy by the new government, it was exactly his past that unwittingly protected me and my immediate elder brother from being drafted into the communist army. On the other hand, if military service was considered as one of the trials in my religious life, then truly I had lost a chance to prove myself. I did not know if I could achieve anything great and significant when life presented me always with peace and security, with luck, with no adversity. I had questioned myself about this many times.

"Are you monks? What kind of garment is it that you wear?" With the tips of two fingers, the same policeman picked up Than's tunic.

"Yes, we are Buddhist monks."

"Where's your pagoda? Where has your abbot gone to leave you two playing around like this?"

"We've been out to do exercise for our health. Do you call that playing around?" Than replied.

Seeing that Than was not one to be bullied easily, the policeman gave him a dark look, then lowered his voice. "All right, please go back to your pagoda. We have orders to clear this beach area."

Indeed, when reaching the avenue, we observed that pedestrians and vehicles were stopped, questioned, and directed away from the beach.

"Maybe they're rounding up young people for the army?" I whispered to Than.

"No, I don't think so. Either one of their high-ranking officers is coming for his rest and relaxation here, or... they are clearing the shore for the Chinese to leave the country semi-officially."

"What do you mean?"

"People say that when pre-appointed boats land here, those Chinese who have paid enough gold and obtained legal documents will be allowed by the police to come and get on board. The boats are free to go wherever they plan to go, as long as they leave the country."

"Big boats?"

"Just standard ones. I understand that on recent trips, about five hundred to six hundred people were tightly packed together on each boat, sardines in a can."

"How come you know all this so well?" I inquired.

"Because some Chinese Buddhists known to our pagoda went away like that."

"Where were they going?"

"Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia, Japan... anywhere."

"Does it mean they will be allowed by those countries to enter and stay?"

"Of course. That's why many people have paid gold to this government for permission to leave. Allowing this, the government benefits in two ways: one, by reducing the number of Chinese residents and thereby reducing the likelihood of spies being successfully planted by Beijing; and two, by gathering up gold. Do you know that

each person who wants to leave must hand in ten liangs of gold?"

"Even so, people are still trying to gather together enough gold to leave, eh?" I questioned.

"Of course they are. Living abroad, they will be able to have greater freedom. Didn't Uncle Ho, himself, say: 'Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom'? You know, not only Chinese, but also many of our Vietnamese compatriots, are leaving. I've heard that some of these Vietnamese applied for marriage licenses linking them with poor Chinese so that they could accompany their Chinese spouses overseas. Others bribed the police to issue false documents, certifying that they were Chinese; then they needed only to pay gold to the police in order to get on a boat."

"That's terrible! So dear is the price of freedom."

"Do you want to leave?" Than suddenly asked me.

"Me? I don't know. I've had no knowledge of this business of leaving, so naturally I haven't thought about it one way or the other. Now that I know, even if I want to leave, I won't be able to. Where do I find gold? You and I have no means to meet the requirements. Moreover..."

"Of course we have the means. Listen, look for a Chinese girl of a rather well-to-do family and marry her, then you will be able go overseas. Ha, ha."

Even though the exchange between us was no more than banter, it occupied my mind for many days. My thought was not centered on the ruse of depending upon a marriage of convenience with a Chinese girl as a means to escape to another country. The sort of decadent romanticism I had developed, even if transferred to worldly life, would not allow me to adopt a realistic solution of such vulgar fashion. Rather, I was actually preoccupied with the meaning of freedom, with the thought of a boat sailing toward the high seas and landing on the shore of another country where a new life would begin.

There is always a way out of every destitute situation, I thought. It is only when in the thick of adversity that one can locate the most suitable way to escape from it. To look for a way out is the same as to flee. And certainly there is no flight to be proud of, or worthy of praise. However, in the present situation, people could not afford to consider their pride; they simply wanted to run away from unbearable and unmanageable circumstances. And surely they could not have felt shame and humiliation in the act of fleeing from adversities they knew they could not overcome. In the act of fleeing adversity, a way out showed itself—freedom opened its arms.

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