

DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

CHAPTER EIGHT

A few months ago, upon learning I had completely recovered from my illness, the administrative monk had specified daily work for me to accomplish. The tasks now assigned to each monk were not the same as those given before 1975. Back then, monks in every province had concerned themselves with attending religious classes, as well as obtaining general education in secular high schools, colleges or universities. Therefore, they would have had enough spare time to perform, if need be, only some odd jobs around their pagodas which would take them fifteen minutes to half an hour per day, at most. Now, since Hai Duc Institute, as well as other institutes of Buddhist studies, had been dissolved, we had to engage in physical work more than ever before. This was by no means an indication of favorable response to the value of "good laboring" as propagated by the socialist regime. Instead, it was simply a matter of adjusting to changing circumstances. Previously, when we had spent all our time in religious studies, our masters and elder monks had completely taken care of all financial matters. Now that we did not go to classes any longer, it was only natural that we should have our share of the burden of livelihood.

The main financial resource of Hai Duc Institute was a factory which produced *vi trai*, a vegetarian seasoning sauce made from peanuts. Senior monk Thich Dong Minh was its director. The factory was the property of the local Buddhist sangha, especially established to provide financial support for various activities of Hai Duc monastery, which cost a great deal of money. Besides the vegetarian sauce, favored not only by local people in Nha Trang but also by consumers in other provinces of central Vietnam, the factory also manufactured incense sticks, candles, tea, vinegar, and bleach, each bearing Dharma-inspired names. After 1975, the factory expanded its businesses to include the production of salt, bean curd, fermented bean curd, soy paste, soy sauce, powdered detergent, soap bars, straw mats, woven baskets, and conical hats. It also planted mushrooms, black fungi, and fresh vegetables. But, truly, the major product was the sauce, which, after 1975, was commonly referred to by the general term "dipping sauce", a term making no distinction between sauce made from peanuts through a cottage industry process of boiling and neutralization with chemicals and soy bean sauce made by a traditional home-style formula of fermentation with salt.

In addition to the sauce factory, Hai Duc monastery also owned a printing shop cum bookstore named *Hoa Sen* (Lotus), managed by monk Duc Chon. The printing shop had discontinued most of its activities under the new regime. It was allowed to print trivial stuff, but not sutras and prayer books as before. In the meantime, its associated bookstore still distributed all types of already printed sutras, statuettes, and religious implements.

To avoid the possibility that the government would confiscate the factory for one

cooked-up reason or another, the senior monk director had inventoried the total value of its properties in the account books in a wise manner, and then divided it into several-hundred shares. Every monk and nun in Nha Trang, myself among them, and every veteran Buddhist worker in the factory was given a share. And since then, all monks and nuns as well as Buddhist followers, as shareholders, became employees of the sauce factory. The workers were divided into two groups: those who worked five days a week, and others who worked three or only one day and a half. The workers were paid for the hours they put in. This was, in fact, the first time in my life I worked for a wage. The wage was small, a nice sum as pocket money, but that was fine, as I did not have to worry about food and lodging.

At first, before engaging in production activities in the factory itself, I was assigned to work together with monk Minh Chieu in the garden and the field within the compound of Hai Duc monastery. Everyday, we pulled weeds, tended seedlings and young trees, cleared plots of wasteland on the slopes of the mount to plant corn and beans. We also planted green vegetables on a small fertile piece of land at the foot of the mount. Sometimes, we helped monk Hue An carry firewood from below up to the pagoda's kitchen. In other words, monk Minh Chieu and I were appointed as two permanent staff members, always there to take care of whatever needed to be done for the monastery. At times, we had to work continuously from morning until evening for several days. But sometimes we were free from work for three to four days, or only had to put in a few hours during those days.

Several months later, when the factory was in need of more workers, I was called upon to join the labor force there. I had to show up on time for daily assignments. The plus side of it was that since monks and novices took turns to undertake various tasks, each of us worked only three days a week, leaving the remaining days to our own devices. At the factory, young *sa di* novices and I were allotted miscellaneous tasks in whatever branch of production that needed an extra helping hand. Sometimes, we made soap, other times roasted salt and bean curd, or chopped firewood. Under the efficient management of the superior monk director, all workers, by turn, participated in all branches of production, before being allowed to specialize in any particular one. As a result, we were able to do work in any branch, or at least knew how to handle it when necessary.

Having worked at miscellaneous jobs for a few months, I was summoned to the director's office where I was given instructions to share bookkeeping work with his secretarial staff, monk Thong Chanh among them. My job was the lightest in the factory, including those performed by the secretarial staff. Everyday, two to four nuns, one after the next, would take charge of recording income and expenditures. At the end of each day, the nuns would calculate the total, then pass the information to me to double check and record in my own account book. At the end of each month, I would add up the amounts and report the final sum to the board of directors.

The factory, blessed with the superior monk director's management, steadily grew. Meanwhile, another financial base of the monastery, Hoa Sen printing shop cum bookstore, underwent an unexpected change of ownership. Our masters were robbed of the printing shop without knowing what to do about it. Gentle and merciful, they kept silent and let things pass.

The Hoa Sen Print Shop was located on Doc Lap Street, the main thoroughfare in

Nha Trang. It was set up in the early 1960s to provide financial support to Hai Duc monastery and to fund its enterprise of printing prayer books. Before 1975, it was run by monk Duc Chon. After that, he continued to manage it for awhile before resigning from the post and moving to Saigon. The monastery then entrusted it to monk Thanh Huong. Soon, because of some personal difficult circumstances, monk Thanh Huong had to return to worldly life, leaving the printing shop to a lay Buddhist woman named Thu to take care of temporarily. Ms. Thu was merely a person hired by the printing shop as a salesgirl. I did not know whether she was really a Buddhist believer or not, and had no idea who introduced her to the shop. One could only see that after she had, on her own, without any invitation, blatantly assumed the position of owner of the Hoa Sen printing shop and bookstore, she seemingly did not wish to see any monks or nuns appear at the place any longer, even when they came to buy prayers books from her. She received them in an unpleasant manner, and charged them high prices, even higher than those set at regular bookstores. Perhaps the monastery had tried to retain the printing shop, but given the rather lax control of it on both the administrative and financial levels, even before 1975, the monastery had effectively no recourse now but to resign itself to Ms. Thu's manipulative appropriation of it. The Hoa Sen printing shop which had been with the monastery for several decades became semi-officially Ms. Thu's operation. Incidents of wickedness like this formed the very image of utter disorder in the new society, which affected the lives of the monks and novices on the mount. Why was it that all these occurrences transpired fast and thick during the first few years under the new government? *Tinh Nghiiep Duong* became Mr. Diep's house, Hoa Sen printing shop turned into Ms. Thu's business, and then the new row of rooms for monks ended up being a police station or an army post! It would seem apparent that only during a time when basic moral values were no longer honored that blatant robbery and illegitimate appropriation of properties became a matter of routine.

I was also aware that many people down below the mount, and all over this country for that matter, had suffered and were suffering from greater material losses than what the monastery had experienced. All the same, sadness arose within me. My sadness was not the same as that of worldly people, perhaps, partly because I did not have any material possessions to lose, and partly because the pagoda had taught me the spirit of detachment which enabled me to calmly accept gain or loss, success or failure, prosperity or decline in life. It was, indeed, not grief or pain about loss of possessions, but fear and anxiety over a vision of darkness that was enveloping my whole native land.

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It was a Sunday morning. Not having to work, I sat by my window looking down from the mount, my heart filled with melancholy and bewilderment. Perhaps master Tue Van's departure from the monastery two days ago still affected me emotionally, but that fact itself, at the same time, triggered in my mind beautiful images from pages of history long since past. Indeed, when social reality proved beyond doubt that society was utterly in turmoil, leading with certainty to impasse and pain for the people, it was time for socially concerned intellectuals to commit themselves to a mission. History showed that numerous times in the past when the country was in peril, many monks temporarily took off their religious robes and put on battle armor to engage in warfare to save innocent

lives, and then, when peace again prevailed, the masters removed their armor and returned to their monasteries for a life of simplicity and self-liberation. The most typical example was Venerable Tue Trung Thuong Si, who lived during the Tran Dynasty of the 15th century. Inside the monastery, he lit the candle of enlightenment, cultivated religious virtues, and lived his life as a humble monk in leisure and quietude. When the Mongols invaded the country, he left the monastery and joined those at the battlefield. He exhibited mastery over the majestic art of war as an excellent general of the Dai Viet people, sending fear into the hearts of the Mongols. I wondered if by some incidental turn of history, the departure of master Tue Van had rekindled that traditional and noble image.

No one knew where master Tue Van had gone. He had had the habit of closing his door when in meditation, not communicating with anyone for a time. Therefore, it was virtually impossible to tell when he had taken leave of us. The whole monastery was agitated, then the whole town was in puzzlement. But most devastated were the policemen whose duty was to check on daily activities and movements of all members of Hai Duc monastery, especially on monk Tue Van, a pre-eminent genius known and respected by Buddhists all over the country. The police summoned the administrative monk and even my own master—who was then head of the monastery—to the city police station for several days, where the two were interrogated, forced to write self-criticism and declarations of facts. Policemen also made frequent trips up to the monastery, any time of the day, to search, ask questions, and check out everything and everyone. It was not until nearly half a month later that a letter sent by master Tue Van from Thailand arrived, which clearly informed us that he had left the country. Subsequently, the police stopped summoning my master to the police station for further questioning. They kept master Tue Van's letter for their dossier, after having condemned him as "a traitor who fled abroad".

We thought we would be left alone after the matter of master Tue Van had been settled, but unexpectedly we received disheartening news through a reliable lay Buddhist who was in close association with the monastery. The news revealed that the government was about to launch a program "to abolish depraved culture" or "to abolish the culture of the pro-American puppet government". While in Hoi An, I had heard this program mentioned by novice Nang, but only now did I know it was soon to happen in Nha Trang. During a meal, my own master reminded all residents of the monastery that everyone had to automatically tear up and burn books and other printed materials which might be considered subversive by the state. The monastery library which had been managed by monk Tue Van was now the responsibility of two other monks whose rooms were close to it. We were told that the cultural committee of the city, together with the district police, would search and examine thoroughly all books and periodicals found in the whole monastery, not only in the library but also in every resident's private room.

Upon learning the news, a few monks expressed their opinion to the administrative monk. "There is no reason why we need to burn books and periodicals in advance. Let them come and check, and let them confiscate what they want to, and whatever passes their censure we will keep. Why should we burn or tear them all up when we don't know anything about the types of publication they want to eliminate? How can we tell what is decent and what is not in their eyes?"

All the same, the monastery still gave instructions that we retain only prayer

books and research books on Buddhism, or books published by the socialist government if we had any. Other than that, all secular books and periodicals produced under the former southern regime were to be committed to the fire even before the police came. The instructions were such because, as emphasized by the administrative monk, the order not to keep decadent books and periodicals had been issued right after liberation; it was not something new. Therefore, whoever still attempted to keep them would be considered a criminal and would be arrested immediately. It was not simply a matter of confiscation of offensive publications.

There had never before been any news that gave me gooseflesh like this. I tried to visualize a scene in which a group of communist youths enthusiastically went from house to house, scooping up all books and periodicals, piling them up on a street corner, then setting them on fire; or, giving themselves airs, these youngsters lectured, questioned, and condemned those whose love of books made them conceal some in their house. There could be no scene more barbaric, more anti-culture, or more uncivilized than that. Was I to witness this old practice of the brutal Chinese Emperor Tan Thuy Hoang of more than two thousand years ago being re-enacted by these contemporary people who claimed to be civilized and progressive?

When superior monk Thien Sieu, Director of the defunct Hai Duc Higher Institute of Buddhist Studies, together with two monk librarians undertook the task of selecting books to burn, I did not have enough courage to assist them as requested. I avoided it, going instead to the Provincial Pagoda to visit a few novices there. The director then had novice Phuong and a younger novice named Dang carry jute bags full of books to the kitchen where they threw the books one by one into the huge stove that had been designed to swallow all at one time logs of firewood as big as one's thighs. One round after another, on each round two bags were used to transport books to the fire. All works written over the centuries from heart and mind by philosophers, thinkers, historians, scholars, famous writers of the world turned to ashes in just a few hours. When novice Phuong recounted the episode to me, I felt tears welling in my eyes. I had no regret at having left my books behind for novice Tuu in Hoi An, for Tuu loved books and treasured them as I did. But in this case, though the destroyed books were not mine, I felt pain for them. For days afterward, the image of books turning into flames kept recurring in my mind's eye. Those flames also burned my inmost feelings, and seemed to ignite some kind of fire in me which aroused my temper. There were times when, in the privacy of my room, while sitting still at my desk, I suddenly found my hands clenching into fists as if they wanted to crush something. But immediately I recovered myself as if awakening from a dream. I was keenly aware that since coming back to Nha Trang, or more precisely since the country came under a new regime, my personality had changed a lot. My previously inherent soft-mannered and light-headed nature—like that of a girl, as my master had often critically remarked—now seemed to have gradually turned into a sweltering abyss of internal fire, making me prone to irritation and discontent. I stroked my face, poured a glass of cold water, then drank a mouthful while reciting the Buddha's name.

How disgusting a circumstance. No one would want to change their disposition like this, especially from being well-behaved and good-natured into stubborn and fierce. A monk who is fierce and full of anger and hatred cannot be forgiven and accepted by even the most generous person, I was taught. Perhaps in the eyes of others, I was still a

mild person, not having caused any harm to others, not having disturbed anyone. But only I myself could see inside me a disturbing potential force which, if an occasion arose for it to freely break out, no one would be able to tolerate it. Fortunately enough, I needed only to recite Buddha's name to suppress that violent potential.

Less than a week later, precisely on Sunday, without warning, the police together with the city board of culture came up to the monastery to search and make a list of extant books and periodicals. I was absent at the time. Upon my return, I was told that the police force had checked every room thoroughly, confiscated a number of books from the library—books of research on literature which the monks in charge had thought "harmless" and therefore made no attempt to hide away. A few publications found in individual residents' rooms were also seized. My room had escaped the search, probably because no one among the search party had thought it was a private room. But even if they had entered my room, they would not have found anything worthy of their attention besides a few dictionaries. I was careful to display Classical Chinese-Vietnamese dictionary and dictionary of *nom* or Vietnamese demotic scrip only, whereas English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-English dictionaries I had put out of sight as the new government still exhorted anti-American sentiment. I had imitated Phuong, my senior novice brother, to disperse and wrap all my books in small plastic bags which I then placed in the overhead gutter along the side of the main hall.

When reading and keeping good books is considered a crime, is there an implication that the opposite, the most depraved and immoral things, will be encouraged instead, I asked myself. In this country, in this life, where can be found the borderline between truth and falsehood, good and evil, beauty and ugliness?



Before joining the religious life, I had had many classmates, but they were not truly my close friends. Therefore, since my return to Nha Trang, I had made no effort to locate any of them, and none of them knew I was back, so they could not pay me a visit. It might be said that when I renounced the world, not only did I sever almost all of the relationship with my family, but I also cut off connection with my worldly friends and acquaintances.

Voluntarily living under the monastery's rules and regulations, I had completely forgotten that I still had friends in the secular world, all living below the mount. When we had attended the same classes, we were young birds that knew only how to sing, and we learned what the adults taught and advised us. Now, as we all began to grow up and wished to contribute to life what we could, the country was in different circumstances. And in this new environment, there was no room for our contribution, or, if there were, what was considered our contribution would have been no other than our docile submission. After many years away from my hometown, I had no idea what had become of my old school fellows. Were they pursuing higher education at universities? Were they throwing themselves into a life of pure physical labor—which the new government so falsely and ironically proclaimed an honorable act, a glorious act? Had they become cadres, policemen, soldiers like monk Thien Phuoc and novices Sang and Tan, or were they classified as elements that the government eliminated from the book of existence?

My puzzlement was in a way resolved one early morning when novice Dang told

me that some young man had arrived looking for me. While waiting, he had walked around the monastery, then settled himself on a flight of steps near the kitchen. I went to meet my visitor who turned out to be an old acquaintance named Duc.

When a child, Duc had had the habit of twisting his neck every few minutes, once to the right, then once to the left, making his bones crack, very much like the way adults exercise to strengthen their cervical spine. Because of that habit, someone mischievously nicknamed him “Duc co”—literally, Duc-the-neck. It sounded an apt enough nickname, if one did not immediately recall the most common Vietnamese form of word play and find it off color. In a sort of spoonerism where the vowel sounds of two or more words exchange their places, his nickname in such a reversed order, “Do Cuc”, came to mean “throwing shit away”. Sometime later, no one knew how, he had rid himself of that long-standing habit and consequently of his naughty nickname. Then he managed to earn himself a new nickname: “Duc troc”—Duc-the-shaven-head. Whimsically, perhaps, he had had his head shaven, though this act had absolutely no connection with the head shave given to monks in pagodas. Duc was a former classmate of mine at the secular Vo Tanh High School. I had never called him by his second nickname, even though he himself seemed to enjoy being referred to by that name, probably because in some fashion it evoked to him his arrogant and devil-may-care attitude towards life.

Duc now was attired in slovenly fashion. Almost all the buttons were gone from his dirty shirt; his khaki pants had changed to an unnamable color; his trouser cuffs were torn to shreds exposing two feet covered with dust and stains. Duc's face was grimy, and he appeared haggard and tired. His disheveled hair was so filthy that I had the impression it was a good breeding ground for head lice. Those who had known him would have thought this was the best time for him to shave his head. But standing in front of me was a Duc with hair like a crow's nest, not the hairless Duc of yesteryear. Nonetheless, I had no trouble recognizing that bony face adorned with a high-bridge nose like an imposing mountain range standing out between the big orbits under the thick eyebrows. I recognized him more readily than he did me. This was only to be expected, as we had met each other only once since I had renounced the world, more than seven years ago when I was but a little novice with a tuft of hair on top of my head. Now my tuft of hair had gone, while Duc had not much changed his physical appearance.

"Is that you, Duc?" I greeted.

"Ah, Khang, Duc here." Happily, Duc stood up and shook my hand.

I invited him to my room. Duc did not say much about what had happened with him since 1972 when he had come to Hai Duc monastery to say goodbye to me before my departure to Hoi An. Through him, though, I learned a little about the circumstances of a few former classmates. After responding to some questions, Duc tiredly lay down on my divan and went to sleep. I suspected that he had just suffered a shock of some sort from which he had not recovered. It seemed that he sought me out not particularly to confide in me, only to find a peaceful corner to rest. Respecting his privacy, I left him alone in his sleep. Gently closing the door behind me, I went for lunch. On the way back to the room, I brought a tray of food for Duc. Awakened, he ate the meal, then went back to sleep. In the afternoon, Duc took leave. A few days later, he again came to the monastery to see me. Like the last time, when we were together he had nothing much to say before again lying down to sleep. However, upon awakening this time, Duc began to talk. He told me of his membership in a group engaged in political activities. The

group—consisting mostly of college professors, their students, and twelfth-graders—was recently broken up. Almost all members were arrested. Duc did not tell me how he had escaped detention. Listening to his story, I felt arise in me a powerful sense of purpose. As if it was a matter of course, I was convinced that the activities which Duc and his group had attempted to undertake were exactly what I had been thinking about and searching for without being able to identify.

Full of the enthusiasm of youth, I asked Duc without reserve, "So, is there any other group like this which is still active?"

My question, I immediately considered, might seem naive, even stupid, to Duc. Under the new regime, it would not do for two young men to throw that kind of question at each other, even if they were good friends, let alone between Duc and I, who were not really close and had not seen each other for many years. However, Duc seemed to trust my sincere wish to know for my own sake, and not for the purpose of reporting to the police, for he replied at once.

"Of course there are other such groups. But, Khang, you shouldn't get involved in them. I mean to say... those organizations are not worth giving much consideration."

Even as he advised me to stay away from political activities, when leaving, Duc quietly left behind on my desk a book titled "The Prince" by Machiavelli, translated into Vietnamese by Phan Huy Chiem from a French version. At first, I thought he simply had forgotten to take it with him. However, since Duc never came back after that, I assumed he had intended to leave it as a present.

I was not sure if Duc was trying to tell me something or was offering me some sort of advise with this bible of Western politicians. In the evening, I attempted to read the preface by Raymond Aaron. The work itself appeared truly difficult for me to digest. After having read the preface, I put the book away on a shelf, and never touched it again. Regardless of the content of the book—and I could have nothing to say about that, not having read on—its title and genre at that moment aroused insufficient interest in my simple soul to urge me to read it. Had Duc brought me a book of poems, certainly I would have read it with passion. Even if, full of enthusiasm, I had wanted to do something, or to get involved in an organization, in order to contribute something to the country, my heart and mind was not ready for that type of dry-style political book. It was also possible that I could not see the connection between "The Prince" and political attitudes and actions of patriotic scholars who wanted to start a revolution. In my consciousness, or in the realm of my emotions, I only felt that if an anti-government organization arose because of genuine love and concern for the country, I would be ready to join, if there was no requirement that I equip myself with ideas, concepts, or knowledge of politics.

Because Duc never came back for another visit, my initial notion of a struggle, as well as my enthusiasm for a "revolution", gradually subsided. Even so, I was aware that ever since the country came under the control of a different political regime, there had appeared big changes within me. Starting from the peaceful life of a novice and pupil, one who knew nothing other than learning and always steeling the will through prayers and meditation, I now could already consider throwing myself into some political organization to work for the welfare of the people. To my thinking, such a commitment was no different from one's noble duty to eliminate bad and evil things, just as I had learned from senior monks to hold a broom and sweep away the litter and fallen yellow

leaves that defaced the pagoda's front yard every morning.



Hot, upsetting news was brought from Saigon—officially referred to by its new name Ho Chi Minh City—monk Tue Van had been arrested and put in the prison on Phan Dang Luu Street, a notorious prison run by the municipal police. This indicated that the letter previously sent from Thailand bearing his signature was merely a ruse. The letter was meant to mislead those policemen who kept a close watch on him. In Saigon, before being caught, monk Tue Van had collaborated with a number of people to establish some sort of political organization. The information related to us was not a detailed account. Superior monk Dong Minh, director of the factory, on his way back to Nha Trang from Saigon was detained and kept for awhile by the police at a place called Ham Tan. From his account, all the pagodas in Saigon were caught in a very tense atmosphere. Monks being jailed was nothing unusual under this regime. But this time such events very much affected me. Perhaps this was partially because both the superior monk and monk Tue Van were rather close to me, at least in so far as we lived in the same pagoda and worked in the same factory.

On the other hand, the fact that monk Tue Van had gone to Saigon to participate in political activities enhanced my confidence that the notion I once had of joining a political organization was really sensible and worthy. These events proved that it was not a matter of course that when reaching adolescence one would become ebullient, suddenly thinking of challenges and competition, wanting to publicly apply ones talent and strength. There was in this case a legitimate reason for my wish to become socially engaged. Perhaps it was premature to discuss the fundamental causes of what had transpired in our society. But one could look and talk about what was clear to the naked eye: the agony and suffering borne by the Vietnamese people was an unacceptable reality which needed to be rectified, changed, or eliminated.

My thoughts often ran in such a dark way, but then I would bow my head and continue with resignation to live the mundane monastic life—as I saw no alternative. The organization of professors and students which Duc had joined was no more. Monk Tue Van was imprisoned barely a year after he had left our monastery. It would seem that the time was not quite right, or that present political organizations were not strong enough to draw people to them.

The atmosphere in the pagodas in Nha Trang, particularly in Hai Duc monastery, grew more and more oppressive. The police had left the new rows of rooms previously inhabited by monks, but they had transferred them over to soldiers. The soldiers were more agreeable. They seemed to pay no attention to what went on in the pagoda, which was quite the opposite of what the policemen had done before them. Nonetheless, their presence was not so different in nature: it was still a form of perverse usurpation which deprived us of all joy and comfort. I could only find solace in frequenting Dien Tho pagoda in Dien Khanh District, which was nearly ten kilometers from Hai Duc monastery. It would take about five minutes to descend the mount and reach the main avenue from where I could catch a three-wheeled vehicle which would deposit me at Dien Tho pagoda in half an hour. However, I usually preferred to ride my bicycle there, which made the trip more enjoyable.

Dien Tho pagoda was considered as the central temple of the Buddhist association in Dien Khanh District. In fact, it was customarily referred to as the District pagoda. Being in the countryside, the atmosphere at this pagoda was not as tense as that in Nha Trang. It was also blessed with a large front yard full of big and tall trees casting cool shadows, which added to its charm. Officially, my own master, Hai Tue, was the abbot of this pagoda. But practically, it was placed in the hands of a senior novice named Quyet who was very competent. By himself, he took care of all that needed to be done around the pagoda. At first, I had accompanied my master to Dien Tho only to help Quyet get it ready for Tet celebrations. But later on, many times my master also requested my company and my assistance in conducting confessional services for Buddhist believers in Dien Khanh district. My more frequent appearances helped make Quyet and me grow much closer. Several times, not waiting until a ceremony was called for, I would ride a bicycle to Dien Tho pagoda and stay for a visit with Quyet for several days. But the visit I enjoyed most each year was the three days of Tet. Two older novices from my monastery usually joined Quyet and me. This was the only time in the year when we monk brothers had a chance to pray, talk, exchange ideas, and learn to know more about one another.

Among my own master's disciples, I was considered most well-versed in the art of chanting prayers precisely in the Hue fashion, which requires knowledge of a variety of melodies. Therefore, every time a big ceremony was held at Dien Tho temple, or prayer services were requested, my master always had me accompany him.

I was not sure if he simply wanted to know where my heart lay, or if there was some ulterior motive, when he said to me one day, laughing gently, "Some day, I think you will be able to replace me as abbot of Dien Tho temple."

In truth, the thought of becoming the abbot of a pagoda had never entered my mind. It seemed that all young novices and monks of my age group felt the same about this matter. We entered monkhood to search for something else, not entertaining the dream of becoming an abbot or the head of a monastery. That was not to say that we thought lightly of the responsibility held by an abbot or a monastery head, rather, at least in my case, it was because the involved responsibilities entailed a lot of ties which I did not think would fit my mental disposition and preferences. Moreover, it seemed that before giving that suggestion, my master had only looked at my ability, in comparison to that of my elder fellow-disciplines, to conduct ceremonies, a skill involving knowledge of rites and rituals which is essential to management a pagoda. That was really nothing to be proud of. If his suggestion that I become an abbot was based on his evaluation of my ability to follow rituals, it was tantamount to saying that I was well-suited to the role of a shaman offering nothing but prayer services at people's homes. Those shamans in the countryside could fulfill this role easily. Perhaps I had misunderstood my master's good intentions, but, in any event, becoming an abbot was not an aspiration that could capture my allegiance at this stage in life.

"Master," I said, "how about Quyet, Hai, or Phuong? Moreover, I am afraid that I cannot stay in one place for long."

"Do you plan to lead the life of a wandering monk?" the master asked.

I smiled and said nothing. I thought my master must have known that I never aspired to become the abbot of a pagoda. And how could I forget his enduring dream, which had affected me since I was a child: the dream embodied in the immortal verse of

poet Huyen Khong, which my master posted on the wall by his desk: *Over four corners of the world wander a priest's imprints*. My master had been stuck all his life with ceremonial services and management of a monastery which confined him to one place, and I did not see why he should have wanted me to follow in his footsteps. Or, did he actually see that only such a restricted mode of life would keep me constant on the religious path? I was puzzled. Believing that my master had long guided each of us, his disciplines, on the basis of our respective personal characters, I wondered whether he had foreseen that I would only succeed, or at least remain in monastic life, if I was to become an abbot, a head of a monastery, staying put in one place to guide Buddhist believers. Unsure, I said nothing.

My master continued. "It seems that under the current political regime it's difficult for us to go preaching at different places far and wide, don't you think? Everybody has to stay exactly where he lives. Residence registration chains our legs to one locality. By the way, it will be good if you are allowed to be listed in the residence registration book of this pagoda. Life here is more pleasant than in Nha Trang, isn't it? Let me check and see if it can be arranged for you to be a resident here."

I said at once, "Please, master, that's not necessary. I have got used to living in Hai Duc monastery. Moreover, I am already listed as a legal resident of Linh Phong pagoda."

The master had let it pass. Never again did he mention the matter of my residing at Dien Tho pagoda or my future as an abbot. Perhaps I had misinterpreted his thought. Nonetheless, after that conversation my troublesome mind instilled in me the feeling that maybe my master did not want to see me live at the monastery. I recalled that when I was still a little novice, my master had once sent me to live in Linh Phong pagoda, then later had dispatched me to far away Hoi An to study. And this time he had suggested that I leave Hai Duc monastery and live in Dien Khanh District. I had no idea what he had in mind. Did he truly judge that I was the one disciple who had to be away from him if I hoped to become a grown-up?

That question had not faded out in my mind when one day, after dinner, the master summoned me to his room. "Listen," he said, "this morning monk Trung Hung of Linh Phong pagoda came to talk to me. He said the situation was getting very tense now. Last night the police came to check on the pagoda. They asked about you and told monk Trung Hung to call you back to live there permanently. You can't continue to be absent from that pagoda. If you want to stay here, you will have to ask permission from the police there. Otherwise, monk Trung Hung will cross out your name in the residence register. It has been necessary to bring this to your attention. Can you find a way to take care of this matter?"

I said at once. "Master, it's no problem at all. If that is what monk Trung Hung wants, I will move back there."

"Yes, you'd better go back there or you'll be in trouble with the authorities and monk Trung Hung will be forced to remove your name from the book. You must move there, but of course you can come back here whenever there is something that needs to be done. Leave your room and personal things as they are, so that you can come back here to rest when you wish. Just take the essentials with you. There is only a short distance between the two pagodas, you can easily move back and forth."

"Yes, Master," I replied. Now it's truly become a vicious circle, I thought to

myself. I can't get away from my karma: in the end I am to return to monk Trung Hung.

The very next day, I packed the mosquito net and blanket, my clothes and some of my books to take along to Linh Phong pagoda. The flute and the guitar I left behind in my room, as I was told by novice Duc that monk Trung Hung had smashed up his flute. Even though I never dreamed of playing the guitar or the flute openly in the presence of my master or other senior monks in Hai Duc monastery, I considered that it was better to store those musical instruments in my own room there, rather than to take them to Linh Phong pagoda and submit them to monk Trung Hung.

Having finished the packing, I lingeringly sat in my room for a while. There came a feeling of sadness coupled with something akin to elation. Naturally, I felt sad having to leave the beautiful environment of Hai Duc monastery. The feeling of elation came with the thought that the move to Linh Phong pagoda this time would probably be a good chance for me to renew the serious life of abstinence and virtue which I had somewhat neglected for almost a year. Pressing my lips together, I told myself that from now on I would strive to recapture what I had lost.

Then, happily, I set out. This time I went alone, without monk Thong Chanh's escort and recommendation, as my close relationship with the monk had been severed during the time I lost myself in self-indulgence.

Seeing me again, novice Duc was very happy. He slapped me on the shoulder and said. "Oh, it's good to have you here. From now on, with your help at prayer services, I will no longer be exhausted with chanting."

I simply smiled in reply. His cheerful greeting revealed to a certain extent how depressing life was at Linh Phong pagoda.

I entered the living room and greeted monk Trung Hung who cautioned me at once. "Your master has sent you to my care. From now on, do whatever the other novices here do. The three of you must take turns to chant prayers, strike the bell, clean the pagoda, and prepare meals. The food is simple and poor here. We are monks after all, so we eat whatever we get. You won't have much to enjoy as you did in the monastery. Like in every pagoda, you will have your own bed, but you won't have a private room like the one you are used to in Hai Duc monastery. The three of you live in the east wing over there. You all go to bed at a precise time, and get up on time for the midnight prayers. If you are ready to accommodate these rules, you can stay on. If not, let me know, so that I can work out something."

"Yes, of course it is fine," I replied. "Daily activities are the same in every pagoda. The only difference, as I see it, is simply in size, one pagoda big while another small."

"Speaking of a small pagoda? Of course this pagoda is smaller than the monastery. Well, is this too small for you to live in? Do you want the high sky and an immense ocean where you can be completely free to do whatever you please?"

I kept silent. This is going to be the second course on enduring indignities, offered at the same small school I had known in the past, I thought. But this time, I am determined to fulfill my duty, which duty is not only to better myself, but also to change this fastidious conservative monk as well, I promised myself.

The thought made my heart feel more at ease. Immediately changing my attitude, I smiled and politely expressed myself. "I have come to depend on you for guidance in my studies, just as the other novices do. I don't dare to demand a large room or to

complain about a small place. I will closely follow your instructions. Please advise me when I do something wrong."

Upon my words, monk Trung Hung seemed to calm down. He asked novice Duc to show me to the east wing where I could park my luggage. Once we reached there, Duc turned around to look at me. "What in the world has made you come here instead of staying back there?" he asked. "You've decided to come just as I am planning to leave this place."

"Are you planning to move to another pagoda? What will happen, then, to the matter of your legal domicile?"

"Hush. Watch out, or he will know. I can only leave here after having arranged the residence registration matter elsewhere. For now, I must resign myself to staying here temporarily. But to tell the truth, I am so tired of living in this place. I am afraid you won't be able to stand it after being used to the atmosphere of the monastery over there."

"Is it that bad? I am very good at enduring hardship and pain. Moreover, just a glance told me that the pagoda has changed a lot, with much progress. Maybe it won't be so bad. We can find running water and electricity here, and an adequate number of rooms for monks and novices. The conditions here are far more comfortable than those at pagodas in the countryside."

Duc shook his head slowly. "The issue is not whether you can put up with hardship or whether there are basic facilities, but it is... well, it's no point telling you now. You stay here for a few days, then you will find out for yourself. Hey, I just remembered, you told me you used to live here, isn't it right?"

"Yes, that's right. But I don't remember much about it. On second thought, I do remember something. I remember that monk Trung Hung seemed to be a rather difficult person."

Duc burst out laughing. "It's quite enough to remember that much. It's such a small thing, right? But so many other things may originate from it."

"I know that," I said. "In fact I realized it well after the few times meeting with him with regard to the matter of my residence registration. But I still hope that if we talk with him often and express our opinion on things, perhaps he will change gradually."

"Are you kidding? You hope to change him? No way. It's he, himself, who wants to change us. In his eyes, we forever remain little novices."

"That's okay. Isn't it pleasant to be a novice forever?"

"But a novice has to... well, it's no use talking about it. It's time to cook, so I have to go to the kitchen now. It's my turn today. Tomorrow is novice Thai's turn. Now that you are here, it will be your turn after that. You can prepare a meal, can't you?"

"Yes, I can," I said. "Only I am afraid I am not very good at it. I won't have any problem cooking a simple meal."

"Meals here are simple, nothing complicated about them. Listen here, you can season the dishes with a little salt or sugar, never use monosodium glutamate, MSG. When frying, just use a little oil for show; or to say it exactly, we fry foods with water, not with oil. That's true. We pour in some water so that the pan won't scorch, then add salt. That's all."

"How strange! Oh, I know, the pagoda is too poor to buy oil and MSG, right? It's also true that those things have become rare since 1975."

"It's not that at all. Even though monk Trung Hung has never spent any money on cooking oil and MSG, Buddhist believers have donated plenty enough of them to fill up the storage facility down the mount. The monk does not allow us to use them. Only on ceremonial occasions, when lay Buddhists come to cook and prepare offerings, does he pour oil into a little bottle and tear off and fold a small piece of paper to hold a tiny amount of MSG for them to use."

"What a horror! Why does he have to economize so much?"

"I don't know. But anyway, the female lay Buddhists who assume the responsibility of preparing offering meals always bring along additional cooking oil and MSG, so that they didn't have to bother the abbot with the task of portioning oil and seasoning powder. Many people are not aware of the real situation, so they donate a big tank of oil and kilos of MSG. But still, he refuses to let us use them."

"So, those things are kept in the storage building, right?" I asked. "Let me get some and use them, and see what he has to say."

"Shhh. Do you think you alone dare to say something about it, while I've been quiet about it all this time? No way! To tell the truth, vegetarian dishes cooked without oil and MSG taste disgustingly bland. I kept grumbling over it, but he said that he had some stomach trouble which prevented him from eating fried food seasoned with MSG. So what can you do? How can we cook the food the way we want and let him refrain from eating it? But even if we chose to do that, it wouldn't be easy. We can get cooking oil sometimes when he goes out, as there is a big tank of it in the storage room. But there's no way to get our hands on MSG, because he keeps it in his own locked closet. You know, the closet where he stores his valuable things."

"How strange! He has health problems, but the novices don't. So why must he impose the same diet on everybody else, abstaining from oil and MSG?"

"That's exactly what I said to him. But nothing has changed. He is now the abbot and head of the pagoda residence. If we kept on arguing and complaining, he would drive us out of this place, and there is no use for that. Novice Thai and I have been threatened with discharge from this pagoda several times."

"Really..."

Right at that moment, monk Trung Hung came in from the west wing. He said, "I won't have dinner here. I have to conduct a prayer service and won't come back until late in the evening. You all cook and eat together, and don't save anything for me. Khang, you must take turns with the others to prepare meals, do you hear?"

After this short instruction, he descended the mount.

Duc pulled me along toward the kitchen. "Since the abbot is not here this afternoon to watch over our shoulders, let me treat you to *banh xeo*, rice flour pancake folded over vegetarian filling."

"You know how to make *banh xeo*?"

"Certainly. It's quite easy to make. Let's run to the market soon to buy some rice flour, fried tofu, mushrooms, bean sprouts and leeks, and with all that we will have delicious *banh xeo*. This is my treat to welcome you to your new pagoda... oh, rather, to your old pagoda..."

"—in order to learn the lesson of enduring all indignities," I completed his sentence.

"The lesson of enduring all indignities, you say? I hope you can learn that lesson."

I, myself, can't, and I may have to leave it incomplete one of these days. You'll replace me, won't you?"

Duc's voice seemed tinted with bitterness. I felt sorry for him. Being a young member of the sangha who was studying at a Buddhist institute with high hopes, in the new society he had to huddle in this forgotten corner to re-learn the elementary lessons he had learned as a little novice. Feeling pity for him was the same as feeling pity for my own fate. I felt immensely sad. But I also told myself that I ought to overcome all trials awaiting me. Having official training or not, the path of a monk is always toward self liberation and enlightenment, I reminded myself. Social circumstances change all the time but that purpose remains the same, the ultimate purpose that has no connection with any schooling programs. Who knows, I might find what I was looking for by disciplining myself to co-exist with this extremely conservative monk!

"Oh, Duc, I forgot to ask you... where the toilet is. I lived here for a time when I was little, but now I can't recall where it is."

"The toilet? Hah, hah, toilet? Such a strange word that I seem to hear for the first time. No one uses that word around here. What sort of thing is that?"

"Stop kidding. I really want to know. Where is it? Is it behind the kitchen? Ah, I just remember, when I lived here long ago... it seems we had to take a hoe to the rear of the mount... No, that's not it. There was a winding trail leading to a big hole with a plank placed across it. Oh dear, I'll have to face that hell hole over and over again!"

Duc burst out laughing. He laughed until tears streamed down his cheeks. Many years had passed and Linh Phong pagoda still had not been blessed with a toilet. Neither was there a bathroom. Through so many ups and downs of history (almost two hundred years since the pagoda had been established), Linh Phong pagoda persisted in not having a toilet and a bathroom built. Consequently, we had to take a bath at night, standing at the edge of the mount, pouring cold water over our bodies and shivering in the wind. Duc told me that monk Trung Hung had more than enough money to have a toilet and a bathroom built, but he did not consider it and never explained his decision on the matter. And that was why for years, abbots and monks and pilgrims from everywhere, all alike, had had to go to the rear of the mount where there was a big hole with a plank lying across it. One would be afraid of falling down into the hole if one closed one's eyes. But if one kept one's eyes open, of course, one could not help but see, alas, a whole slimy, filthy hell populated with a myriad of living things wriggling and squirming around.
