

# DUST ALONG THE PATH

by Vinh Hao

## CHAPTER NINE

I had not enjoyed rice pancakes for ages and now I was consuming them with gusto, even though Don was not very good at making them. After dinner and the evening prayer, the three of us novices -- Don, Thai and myself -- were lying in our beds reading books when Monk Trung Hung knocked on the front door.

"Thai! Open the door," the monk shouted from the outside.

Thai hurriedly ran to the door.

"I told you to open the door of the west wing over there, not this one here," grumbled Monk Trung Hung as he pointed.

The front door to the monk's west wing had no lock on the outside, but was locked inside. Every time he came back from below the mount, he had to call out to those in the east wing who would go across the Buddha hall to the opposite wing and let him in, which Thai had just done.

Monk Trung Hung stepped in and looked at us with glowering eyes, as if very angry. It was understandable that given his short temper, he was bound to turn surly and impossible after a tiring prayer service session and subsequently a climb of more than two hundred steps to reach the pagoda. We did not do anything wrong to invite this anger, I thought.

He asked, "What did you all eat this evening?"

"Rice pancakes," Don replied.

"Rice pancakes? Why? Why didn't you cook rice instead of fussing around with fancy stuff like that? Such a waste of time."

"Well, once in a while it's nice to have a different dish, that's all. Since you cannot eat that kind of food, we cooked it..." Don tried to explain, but was interrupted by the monk.

"I don't care that you ate pancakes," Monk Trung Hung retorted. "I don't want any part of it. Did you go to the market to get things to serve with it?"

"Yes, we rushed to the market just long enough to buy vegetables," Don replied.

Monk Trung Hung threw Don an angry glance, then walked out. He stopped at the threshold and again directed his gaze upon Don. "You don't know how to save money. You spend it freely. Did you buy any cooking oil?"

"Cooking oil? No, I didn't. We already have oil here in the pagoda, so we didn't need to buy any."

"The oil of the pagoda isn't there for you to fry rice pancakes for your own consumption. If you wanted to have fun and spend money, why weren't you good enough to buy your own oil also?"

Don was reduced to silence. I wanted to speak out on his behalf but Monk Trung Hung had turned around and walked briefly back toward the west wing. With that

gesture of his, we concluded that the episode of the rice pancakes had ended once and for all.

When it was his turn to cook the following day, Thai discovered that the rice left over from lunch the day before had grown stale and smelled bad in the pot. Since Don had cooked that rice, Thai asked him what to do with it. The two were planning to feed the stale rice to birds and squirrels without Monk Trung Hung's knowledge, so as to avoid his endless grumbling reproach, when the monk suddenly materialized at the kitchen door. Monk Trung Hung immediately understood the subject of their discussion. Don received a heavy dose of scolding no matter how hard he tried to explain that sometimes no one had a good appetite and, therefore, all the rice was not eaten, and that the unusually hot weather had spoiled the rice faster than expected. It was at this point that the matter of rice pancakes was brought up again by the monk, who identified it as the culprit which had prevented us from eating the rice left over from lunch. The two then engaged in a sort of argument, marked by Monk Trung Hung's rather harsh words and less than polite terms of address to Don, who was only a few years younger, although he was of a lower level in religious rank. I knew that Don was trying very hard to bear the humiliation.

The matter came to a head when Don made a move to take the rice outside for the birds.

"Stop right there," the monk said. "Where are you going? Listen to me. You must eat all the stale rice. Do not give it to birds and squirrels."

Don whirled around. "What did you say? I must eat it?"

I intervened in defense of Don, but Monk Trung Hung dismissed my argument, saying it was none of my business. Don had grown speechless, choked with anger.

Monk Trung Hung gave his last warning before going back to his room "Listen, Don. I want to see you eat the spoiled rice. If you refuse, don't ever face me again."

We all knew what he meant by the phrase "don't ever face me again". Perhaps that was the most courteous and most modest expression that Monk Trung Hung could come up with in lieu of saying: "you will be kicked out of the pagoda". Before 1975, we *sa di* novices, or *sramanera*, who accepted the ten basic precepts, could ask permission to move to a more suitable pagoda, especially when we did not commit any grave mistake in relation to the abbot or the sangha. It was not rare to see a *sa di* dismissed from a pagoda. But he could apply to be admitted to any other temple and taught by another monk. Outside of that, he could also seek admission to a monastery or institute of Buddhist studies where there were many monks and novices. On the other hand, it rarely happened that a monastic member was expelled by a local or central sangha. Moreover, since Vietnamese Buddhist sanghas did not have absolute power, such expelling only had a limited effect -- given that, at our young age, being driven out of a pagoda was nothing to worry about. We *sa di* novices could even build for ourselves a thatched hut, since we did not have to live in an established pagoda. The pursuit of religious training to achieve self-liberation had nothing to do with a big or small brick or thatched pagoda. Since 1975, quite a number of young monks and novices of our age group, for one reason or another, had gone to new economic zones or cleared wasteland for cultivation so as to support themselves in their studies. Their thatched huts scattered over various mountains had no outward appearance of a pagoda at all. But no one could deny the religious status and position of the owners who lived within them. However, when one religious person

wanted to have a thatched hut on a piece of cleared land, he had to prepare himself for every contingency, in particular the matter of whether he would be granted legal residency by the local authorities. For every citizen under the communist regime, having his name entered in an official household registration list was like possessing a life-saving amulet. Don had his listed in the household book of Linh Phong pagoda. It would be quite a bit of trouble for him were he evicted and his name crossed out of the register by Monk Trung Hung, the pagoda's abbot. It would appear that the monk was well aware of this vulnerability on the part of Don.

The command coupled with the threat by Monk Trung Hung froze Don in his seat. His face pathetically clouded, he said nothing. His heavy set shoulders and strong muscles inspired awe in others, but in truth he was like a lump of earth, soft and harmless. Sometimes, he turned a little stubborn and rather quarrelsome, but soon after would calm down and return to his normal lump-of-earth manner.

After a long silence, apparently waiting for the anger and resentment in his heart to subside completely, Don got up and transferred the stale rice from the pot to a bamboo woven basket, which he then placed in a larger basin. Silently, he carried the assemblage to the back of the kitchen where a water tank was located.

I followed him, and asked, "What are you doing?"

"Washing it," he replied curtly.

"Washing the cooked rice? What for?"

"To make it less gluey, then drain it well before frying it to eat."

Hearing that, I felt a tightness in my throat. I imagined perhaps that a moment ago he had been sitting still to think of his own worldly family hundreds of miles away in Hue, who were full of love and care for him. Young monks and novices often found themselves in such a state of mind whenever they were very sick or ill-treated by others. Once, Don had told me that, since he always thought it would be easier for him to pursue religious training if he lived far away from his family, upon having to leave the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Phan Thiet, which was closed down after 1975, he had decided to stop in Nha Trang on his way north, whereupon he had asked to be admitted to Linh Phong pagoda. It was not as if he did not have a place to live in Hue.

Watching him bend his head over the task of washing the stale rice, his face pale, and tears in his eyes, unexpectedly in my heart arose an immense feeling of compassion. At the same time, a pure and noble sense of faith flared brightly in me like a stream of light which in a brief instant overflowed the space, or like a powerful song expectorated in a shout pierced layers of clouds shrouding the top of a mountain. I thought of four lines of verse in the long poem entitled "Song of Enlightenment" by Chinese Zen master Yung Chia, which had been rendered into Vietnamese by Truc Thien as *Chung Dao Ca*. I recited them for Don:

*In mindfulness you walk, in meditation you sit,  
Finding quietude, whether you speak or utter no word, move or stay still,  
And, confronting a sharp weapon, serenity.  
Even poison cannot make you anxious.*

Don looked up at me, then laughed. "This is not poison by any means. I won't die eating it, but it's so sickening just to think about it that it makes me shiver."

I sat down by his side and said, "Just recite a paragraph of *Bat Nha Tam Kinh*, the condensed version of the *Pan-jo Ching* sutra, before eating the rice. More properly, one should apply the method of non-discrimination. But I don't think you need to go that far in this case. You only need to read the sutra mindfully, and contemplate its deep meaning.

"You know, there is a part in *Chung Dao Ca*, Song of Enlightenment, which says that the person who does us harm, or abuses, slanders, disparages us, is actually our teacher. This teacher gives us a lesson in endurance of indignities. We must receive harsh treatment in the same way we drink holy water. Instead of resenting the teacher, we must respectfully show our gratitude to him. Of course, you have read *Chung Dao Ca*. I only want to remind you of it. We must learn the virtue of resignation and endurance, especially in this pagoda, otherwise we won't be able to bear the dark side of it."

The meal prepared by Thai was being served. It was a simple meal, consisting of stewed tofu and morning glory soup. Since there were only the four of us in the pagoda, we all sat at the same table on which were set a tray for Monk Trung Hung and another one for us three novices. An additional item in our tray was a container of fried stale rice.

As he sat down, the monk glanced over at our tray and said, "Let Don alone eat the fried rice. I don't force you two, Khang and Thai, to eat it."

"Of course, I will eat it myself. I didn't ask anyone to help me finish it," mumbled Don as he transferred the rice to his own rice bowl.

I reached out and pulled the container toward me. Don tried to yank it back, but I had already taken hold of it, and served myself a bowl. Even so, it appeared that the remainder of the rice could fill two more rice bowls.

Monk Trung Hung said, "I already told you to let Don eat it by himself."

"He won't be able to eat it all. I would like to share it with him," I replied.

The monk threw me an angry glance and then dismissed the subject. "Do what you like, I don't care."

I poured some soy sauce over the rice and began to eat it. Though it had been washed, the rice still tasted gluey and, of course, sourly stale, as it had begun to ferment. It was very hard to swallow. While concentrating on reciting to myself the *Bat Nha* sutra, I shoved the rice into my mouth, perfunctorily chewed it a couple of times, then quickly swallowed it, allowing my sense of taste no time to register sensations, rendering it heedless and indifferent like water flowing over hill and dale, like clouds floating over mountains.

Don quietly made a wry face when swallowing the stale, sour rice. When he chanced to look at me, he laughed and whispered, "You said just a while ago that we only need to recite a part of the *Bat Nha* sutra. Is it the part which says: *All phenomena are defined by emptiness. They are neither created nor annihilated. They are neither impure nor pure. They neither increase nor decrease?*" He quoted the lines in Sino-Vietnamese.

I had just nodded my head in agreement when Monk Trung Hung scolded us. "Don't talk during mealtime. If you want to discuss something, do so out there in the street."

Having finished our first small bowls, Don and I shared the rest of the fried rice. After the second bowl, we lost our appetite for the rice freshly cooked by Thai.



Keeping in mind the idea of considering adversities as saviors, as teachers, and also as trials necessary for my progress in religious training, in the next few days I was able easily to accept the dull life full of antiquated rules at Linh Phong pagoda. I also found no difficulty in accommodating Monk Trung Hung's ideas and moods. Don and I often accompanied the monk to ceremonial prayers in the homes of Buddhist believers, which included the blessing ceremony, *cau an*; the prayer service for suffering souls, *cau sieu*; the funeral ceremony; and so on. Monk Trung Hung never refused to offer prayer services in Nha Trang whenever he was asked. When only a couple of services were to be done, he would take Don and me along to share with him the task of chanting prayers. If more prayer services happened to be scheduled during the same period of time, he would assign each of us to each of them, thus not letting go of any source of income for the pagoda. Don and I were well-versed in Hue-style rituals, and we also had strong and clear voices, all of which pleased the monk. It happened sometimes that within the course of a day, he dragged both of us along to three or four prayer services, starting early in the morning and ending late in the evening. Novice Thai alone was assigned to stay at the pagoda to sound the bell and chant daily prayers.

It was during my numerous trips all over Nha Trang to perform ceremonial prayers that I had the occasion to find out more about real life under the new regime. In any one of the major ceremonies at the pagoda, there might be hundreds of Buddhist believers present. But those hundreds of people were there simply to participate in chanting sutras, not to open their hearts, confide their feelings, or make revelations concerning their living circumstances. Only when inside the house of one of them to offer prayer services did a monk actually listen to and see the enfolding of worldly life, real life. A few families did not voice any lament or complaint. Nonetheless, their obviously low standard of living and their spiritual agony was betrayed by the level of their expenditures and preparation for a funeral or a special prayer session. Numerous books and newspapers discussing communism could not capture a fraction of what one gathered from a day, even an hour living under this communist regime, seeing the real social circumstance revealed in a meal, in every fragment of conversation among members of a family. And even what I myself had learned about the new regime -- through my days at Long Tuyen pagoda in Hoi An and at the Hai Duc monastery; through the actions of the state in occupying a part of our pagoda in order to keep an eye on its monks; in forcing monks to enter military service; in burning books and journals; in sending officers and civil servants of the previous regime to re-education camps; in appropriating citizens' private residences -- was merely a tiny portion of the whole picture of real life in Vietnamese society these days. You had only to look at faces encountered in the street, forever imprinted with worry, and you would know of the dark reality lying underneath surface pretense. People around me could no longer laugh. They could not even smile the accustomed greeting smile. Everyone walked with his head bowed, as if bearing a heavy burden on his shoulder or his back. Except for an inkling of the reasons existing in multiple connections that brought this tragic situation to my homeland, given the shallow knowledge of an eighteen-year-old youth, I could not understand it all, save for the reality slapping me in the face: the communists were in control. In any event, I had a premonition that my people were being drawn gradually into disaster. It would be the most terrible, most horrific disaster where any sense of

morality, all faith and noble aspirations, and even the most common notion of truth, goodness and beauty would be removed and thrown away like banana peels cast into the dirt, leaving behind nothing but man stunted, man-machines with empty brains and soulless hearts.

In this state of affairs, there arose the phenomenon of people fleeing the country -- referred to by the new government as "crossing the sea", "crossing the border" -- which was condemned as an act of treason to the homeland. At first, the movement seemed to be confined to those who were rich and to Chinese residents who were semi-officially entitled to leave. But, with time, it turned out to be a popular choice and increasingly became the common dream of those who loved freedom, who wanted to find a way to save the country, as well as those who wished to live in peace, to experience prosperity in civilized and free countries where they could easily find many opportunities to improve their lot. Eventually, virtually anybody could flee across borders, provided they had some money to contribute to the escape preparations, one person buying provisions while another gasoline, and others building a boat or a junk. A few penniless people were also allowed to board a boat, if they happened to possess a sea chart, a maritime compass, or simple binoculars. Naval navigators were given priority, being invited to join the fleeing group for free in exchange for their skills in steering the boat. Later on, just by falsely claiming to be navigators, or sailors of the former regime's navy, some individuals would be trusted with the task of navigating a boat on its sea-going journey.

Indeed, the dream of freedom created one of the most alluring, if not the most important, movements in the history of this nation. It attracted numerous people, including communist cadres and soldiers. Even if they chose not to flee, communist cadres were nonetheless carried away by the movement, albeit in a different fashion. They took full advantage of it by practicing illegal maneuvers and operations: charging a fee for the use of a seashore area where a boat could come in to collect escapees, issuing false documents like fishing licenses, sea-going permits, exit visas, and so on. There were quite a lot of ways for them to extract money from those who were desperate to flee abroad. Against the sharp contrast between a starving society and the vision of freedom and prosperity in foreign lands, a number of persons invented quite elaborate schemes of deception with the ultimate aim of earning a lot of money or simply getting onboard a boat, while paying no mind to questions of morality or public opinion. It was not hard to find victims for such schemes: under comic circumstances, during this frenzy period of the movement, Don and I were counted among them.

One afternoon, there was a visitor from Saigon. The young man was named Tam. Born in Hue, he was about twenty-four years old. I did not know who had referred him to Linh Phong pagoda. Tam came up the mount and entered the pagoda to see Monk Trung Hung, from whom he asked permission to stay the night. On the basis that Tam had neither adequate identification documents nor a travel pass, the monk denied his request, but invited him to share dinner with us. Before leaving, on his own initiative, Tam tried to get acquainted with Don and I. He asked us to go outside and sit on the steps in front of the pagoda to have a pleasant chat. Only then did he introduce himself as a former *thi gia*, a type of assistant, to Superior Monk Gia Lam (also known as Ven. Thich Tri Thu, a high monk of great virtue, quite well-known in the country). In actuality, a *thi gia* is not at all an important person at a pagoda, whose role is to serve food and drink and to clean the room for a monk who is usually an old abbot. But by

calling himself a *thi gia* of Superior Monk Gia Lam, Tam gained some trust from people like us. No longer in a monk's habit, he told us that he had returned to worldly life about half a year ago to make arrangements to flee the country for another horizon. From his account, we learned that his adoptive mother's family in Saigon wanted to organize a getaway trip across the sea, regardless of how much gold it would cost. Tam had come to Nha Trang to find a suitable channel for the family to accomplish that goal. If and when a good boat and a secure embarking shore area were found, Tam would bring the whole family of his adoptive mother to Nha Trang from where they would depart. The family would pay all the expenses.

"Do you know anyone in the two fishing villages Ha Ra and Xom Bong near Nha Trang?" Tam asked.

Don shook his head while I thought about it.

Tam continued, "If you can introduce me to someone who owns a fishing boat, in Nha Trang or in any coastal area nearby, I will let you two join the voyage for free."

Upon hearing that, the dream of fleeing grew rapidly in me. I had not expected that the whole affair could be as simple as that. And all it took for you to become one of the boat people was your knowledge of someone who had a boat and your introduction of him to the one who had the money! You did not have to have a set of binoculars which was rare and expensive. Nor a maritime compass or a sea chart, both essential tools for navigation, on which you had never laid eyes in your life. You did not have to be a navigator. Nor a helmsman. Nor a former member of the former navy -- even one who had never been onboard a ship. You did not have to possess a lot of money or gold -- the condition which a mountain monk like me could never meet. Nor to be a real Chinese resident. Nor to get a false marriage license with a Chinese girl.

Though feeling excited, I said nothing.

Don voiced his thoughts. "It makes sense for you and Khang to go to another country. But what's the use for me to go when I don't speak English and can only mutter a few French words."

Tam turned to me and asked. "How about you? Do you speak English pretty well?"

"No. I did not study it much. Just a little."

"Is that so? You two don't need to worry about it. I will teach you English when we reach America. Before 1975, I studied at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Saigon. I began to tutor in English when I was just sixteen or seventeen," Tam boasted.

He stopped for a moment then continued. "And if you don't have any relatives abroad, I'll be able to help you there. My adoptive father formerly worked for the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington. He now lives in the U.S. He can sponsor many people, so don't worry. It's better to go to the U.S. and continue your religious studies there, instead of staying with these communists, isn't that right? Besides, it's not required that you know foreign languages before you go abroad. Quite a lot of uneducated people have gone to America. Even fishermen have made it, so why not educated people like ourselves?"

Don seemed convinced. He could not contain his enthusiasm. "So, what exactly do you want us to do for our contribution?" he asked. "Say it again. We just have to locate someone who's got a boat, that's it?"

"Yes, that's right. Find someone who owns a boat. But he must be trustworthy, which means you have to have known him in some way. Then, if you know any families who have money and want to go, you introduce them to me. The greater the number of passengers, the lesser the financial burden my adoptive mother's family has to bear. Moreover, it costs me a lot for every trip from Saigon to Nha Trang, as I have to pay for transportation, food, and lodging. I can't easily pay for all that. I don't want to take any money from my adoptive mother. I just want to wait until I have arranged everything before I ask her to buy provisions and pay the fee for a shore area, and so on. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Don and I nodded our heads repeatedly to show that we had understood. But in fact we did not know exactly what Tam meant. After a long silence, sensing that we did not really grasp the message, Tam elaborated further.

"Listen, give me in advance whatever money you have, so I can take buses and trains to travel around and take care of our boat trip together. I am going to Saigon tomorrow to ask my adoptive mother to advance a few liangs of gold, so we can give the boat owner confidence when we talk to him. While I am in Saigon, you two have to look for a boat around here. When back here again, I will go with you to talk to the boat owner. But to flee across the border is a very dangerous business, so don't tell anyone. The police will arrest you if they hear about this, and you will be in prison for the rest of your lives. Don't even tell Monk Trung Hung about it. He looks impossible and conservative; he certainly wouldn't want you to flee the country. When you have found a boat, start collecting some money for yourselves, selling whatever you have got that can be sold. When I arrive back here, it will be close to the day we depart. Even though the family in Saigon will make arrangements for everything, we'd better have some money with us so as not to go empty-handed."

Tam's explanation was so clear and reasonable that it left me with no doubt in my mind. I nodded my assent. "Let me go to my room to see how much money I've got."

Don, far more advanced than I in being naively trustful, followed me without any hesitation. He said to Tam, "Please wait out here, brother Tam. Khang and I will be back soon."

We gathered together all the money we could find in our pockets and drawers. It consisted of what we had not spent from our last month's salaries, in addition to a small amount sent to Don by his family. The total was about a thousand piastres. My portion was smaller because I worked fewer hours and bought more books than Don did. One thousand piastres was quite a lot for us -- my monthly salary was five hundred piastres -- but it was obviously an insignificant amount when you thought of a trip across the sea. To be able to go on board at such a small cost was indeed a lucky golden chance. We gave the money to Tam.

Don said apologetically, "That's all we have now. We were not prepared for this. When you come next time, we may have more."

Tam took the money, briefly glanced at it, looked vaguely up to the sky and down to the ground, then said in a voice touched with feeling, "Of course, monks like you can't have much money. I know it because I used to live at a pagoda. We are truly proletarian. I really feel terrible taking your money. But it can't be helped. We must share with one another this kind of incidental money for now. It won't be worth anything once you are

abroad to pursue your religious training. I have been miserable as a dog for days without food and refreshment, while trying to make the necessary arrangements."

Tam cleared his throat as if tuning up, then continued. "Seeing you are sincere and deserve my confidence, I want to tell you the truth. Actually, I've already got a boat trip arranged, but I am so pressed for time, as it will leave in a week or ten days. I am afraid my adoptive mother won't be ready for it when I go to Saigon and tell her. That's why I told you to find another boat, just to be on the safe side. If she can make it here in time, I will tell her to let you go along. But if she can't... well, I will go with you first, and let her wait for another trip."

Don interrupted. "That doesn't sound right. What if she does not know how to find a way to go?"

"Phew, don't worry about it. She has money and so will be able to flee sooner or later. It's only difficult for us because we are penniless. Really, we have to seize a lucky opportunity when it presents itself. So, this is what I think: if my adoptive mother can't come here in time for this trip, I will ask her to give me some gold to pay for my trip. And as for you two, do your best to collect enough money for your fares. If you don't have enough, I will help you with the remaining amount needed."

I asked, "How much must each of us have?"

"Three bars of gold for each person," Tam replied.

Don burst out laughing and said, "Where in the world can Khang and I get all that?"

"How big are three bars?" I asked.

"That's three liangs," Don explained. "The money that we pooled together just now is equivalent to about one percent of a liang. It's absolutely impossible for the two of us to get our hands on six bars of gold."

Tam cut in. "What I told you is the standard fee that a customer who wants to go must pay. Of course, I know you two monks can't obtain gold as other people can. But as the organizer of the trip, I can negotiate to have the fee reduced for you, provided that you do your best to gather whatever you can. Whatever you can come up with will be fine. I will talk to them, and I am sure I can fix it for you. Oh, by the way, can't you ask your families for some? Where do your families live?"

Don looked at me. As I kept silent, he felt obliged to answer Tam. "My family is in Hue, and Khang's lives here in this town. But...we must help ourselves if we want to go. We can't bother our families. Times are hard for every family these days."

"Of course everyone is having a difficult time," Tam said. "But hearing that you want to go abroad, I am sure your families will try to scrape up some money for you. Who wouldn't want to see their children study overseas and have a good life? Don't you agree? Is your house nearby, Khang?"

I said firmly. "I am not used to asking my family for money. It's not simply because they are in difficulty these days. Even years before 1975, I never wanted to accept money that my family sent me on their own initiative, let alone asking them for it. As for fleeing abroad, if I am given a good opportunity, I will go; if not, I won't bother. I am not so crazy about it to the extent that I must cause my family more trouble than they already have, or entreat favors of another."

Don joined me. "Yes, that's right. If it requires three liangs for each person, we don't have to waste our breath discussing it. Khang and I certainly can't manage.

Moreover, since this is pressing close, we'd better think of another trip. As you said awhile ago, Khang and I are to look for a boat and you will organize the rest. That will be easier for us to try."

"You make it sound so simple and easy," Tam protested. "In reality, when you dream of fleeing you must seize a possible opportunity right away. How can you tell which trip is good and which is bad to choose? You must take whichever trip that presents itself first."

"But this can't be seen as an opportunity for us," Don argued. He paused then continued in a rather sad tone of voice. "When you don't have enough money to pay your way, how much of a chance do you have? And talking about the dream of fleeing? That dream just came to us when you mentioned that it's possible to go without paying much, and that we only need to find a boat. Up until now, we have never dreamed of crossing the border, and always thought it was other people's business."

"I was trying to say that you should try your best to gather as much money as you can," replied Tam, changing his tune. "I will make up the remainder of the required amount, or try to negotiate with them on your behalf. We must consider one another as brothers, and we will depart together, if it's possible. If not, we will stay behind together. So I will take care of my part of the deal, and you yours. Just prepare yourselves beforehand, save whatever you have, and sell whatever can be sold. Just put together the money available to you and keep it ready. When I come and tell you it's time to go, you will have got yourselves ready and won't be beside yourselves with worry. I promise I will arrange things for both of you."

So saying, Tam bid goodbye to us and went to the railway station.

When we were back inside the pagoda, Monk Trung Hung stopped us. "Where have you been?" he inquired. "You had a talk with Tam, didn't you?"

"Well, he told us about various pagodas in Saigon," replied Don evasively.

"That guy Tam is not a trustworthy type," the monk warned us. "At first glance, he looks tall and properly handsome. But his slit eyes don't stay long on one spot, glancing left and right, up and down, constantly. And he talks non-stop, licking his lips often. All those manners show that he is not an honest person. Simply by looking at his face, I saw at once that he has the mark of a caddish fellow. Be wise and don't befriend him."

In spite of Monk Trung Hung's admonition, we proceeded with our preparations. I drew up a plan to continue with religious training, to work, and to progress on the path to Buddha's land after reaching a foreign soil. I shared my vision with Don and it soon became his obsessive dream.

Indeed, that dream obscured our judgment. In the following week, we earnestly collected all our meager property, and waited for Tam. Our capital was not much to speak of. It consisted of the salaries we had just received for this month's work in addition to what I got from selling my guitar and the amount Don made from selling his new bicycle -- the bicycle he said his family in Hue had helped him purchase. The total could buy us only a little more than 30% of a liang of gold, so Don informed me.

Also during the week, I went around to visit my old friends in the areas around Ha Ra and Xom Bong bridges, as well as all other friends I could find in Nha Trang, from whom I hoped to get some clue as to where I could locate people who owned boats. I even made it as far as Van Gia, an area a long way out of town, where I looked up fellow

monks at Linh Son and Giac Hai pagodas and asked for their help. Those at Linh Son temple promised to introduce me to some boat owners living in the fishing village nearby. They also said that they would mention my name if a fleeing boat needed to have on board a Buddhist monk to pray for their safety and help avert Thai pirates lurking along their path to freedom. Thai pirates were actually common fishermen who fished in troubled waters, attacking and robbing unprotected boat people. It was said that these robbers on the high seas, most of them Buddhists, when seeing a Buddhist monk in a fleeing boat, would not dare attack it -- and sometimes even offered their help instead. From this information, I realized that a penniless Buddhist monastic person like myself was also of great value to an escaping boat, just like a navigator or a helmsman. It seemed that many boat people had not invited Buddhist monks to come along, as they thought monks did not need to flee the country. One tended to assume that monks were content to live wherever they were, that they did not have to scramble to go abroad in order to join a resistance movement, or to make a fortune, or to indulge themselves in whatever an advanced civilization had to offer.

As expected, exactly a week later Tam reappeared. This time he seemed to be in quite a big rush. He asked us to hand our money over to him immediately so that he could proceed to talk to people involved in the preparation of the trip. If everything was in order, he was to come back and tell us to prepare to leave; if not, he would return the money to us for safe keeping, and we were to wait for another journey.

"I am carrying some gold here," Tam said, patting around the waistband of his trousers a few times to indicate its location. "Where's yours?"

Don removed a bag of cash from a big pocket of his frock and handed it to Tam. "We have not had the time to buy gold, only managed to collect our money. That's all we have. But we really tried our best."

Tam took the bag, not bothering to count what was in it. He stuck it inside his waistband. "Perhaps we will depart around midnight. Now, I am going to talk with them. If it's okay, I will come back to let you know at once. Don't go to sleep tonight; otherwise, I will waste time knocking on your door."

Tam left the mount carrying the small bag of money which held a world of hope for the two of us. As instructed by him, we stayed up all through the night. The view of hills and mountains luminous in the moonlight aroused in my heart a feeling of discomposure, as though I was definitely going to leave my country in the next few hours.

Don suddenly broke the silence. "Listen, Khang, if they agree to take only one of us, you go ahead. I am willing to stay behind. I think you will have a better life, and do better than I, in a foreign country. Moreover, one of your sisters lives in America, and you also know a lot of monks and have friends out there. As for me, I have no relatives and know no monks abroad."

"No, in case there is only room for one of us, you then should go. You don't have to have relatives or friends abroad. If other people can make it, so can you. If I am able to go overseas, I don't intend to depend at all on my sister or friends. So, I won't be any different from you. Once you are over there, get in touch with Vietnamese pagodas in France, in America, or in any other country. I believe those pagodas will help you. So don't worry. I think you'd better go first if this opportunity is meant for only one of us.

Since I know a lot of people in Nha Trang, I am in a better position to find a way to go later. As you know, a few monks in Van Gia promised to help me."

We discussed it like that only to prepare ourselves for every contingency, but we truly hoped both of us would be able to go together. When Don had accepted my arguments, we had nothing more to say. From the steps in front of the pagoda, we silently looked down to the road below the mount. Traffic was thin. Occasionally, a cyclo wearily passed by. We sat there for quite a long time. Don smoked many cigarettes. The cold touch of night dew carried by a gentle breeze made me shiver.

Then the cocks crowed and the train whistled and rumbled past the mount. Vehicles again grew to great numbers. The sun rose. Tam had taken away with him our hope of going abroad, and he never returned. Don and I did not have to yield to each other the privilege of getting on the boat that never was.

Some time later, a monk from Saigon stopped by Hai Duc monastery. From him I learned the story of Tam. In actuality, Tam's adoptive mother was a widow who loved Tam as a young lover, not as a son. But, somehow, in the end, she had given her own daughter to him in marriage. Apparently, in the name of the *thi gia* to the well-known superior monk, Tam had cheated countless monks and other faithful Buddhists in Saigon. When no longer able to fool people in that city with his deceitful scheme of border crossing, Tam went to Hue, then Da Nang, then Nha Trang to look for new targets. Eventually, Tam stopped his swindling, and crossed the sea with his wife's family to arrive in Japan. I told myself that a person with so many deceitful fictional inventions like Tam could adjust himself very well to the competitive life of a civilized society. On the other hand, what would naive souls like Don and I go abroad for? People slow and not alert, like us, were not only useless for a Western society, but also might hinder its progress. We might as well resign ourselves to being monks isolated on a mount, all day long loudly reciting sutras and learning the virtue of tolerance in the shadow of a conservative master from the capital of a feudal past. Perhaps it was the best environment to help us keep up our religious virtue. And instead of going to India to venerate and worship Buddha's relics, it would do for us to reach Buddha's land right here in our hearts.

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